

from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

translated by John Gardner

He put his spurs to Gringolet,^o plunged down the path,
Shoved through the heavy thicket grown up by the woods
And rode down the steep slope to the floor of the valley;
He looked around him then—a strange, wild place,
5 And not a sign of a chapel on any side
But only steep, high banks surrounding him,
And great, rough knots of rock and rugged crags
That scraped the passing clouds, as it seemed to him.
He heaved at the heavy reins to hold back his horse
10 And squinted in every direction in search of the Chapel,
And still he saw nothing except—and this was strange—
A small green hill all alone, a sort of barrow,^o
A low, smooth bulge on the bank of the brimming creek
That flowed from the foot of a waterfall,
15 And the water in the pool was bubbling as if it were boiling.
Sir Gawain urged Gringolet on till he came to the mound
And lightly dismounted and made the reins secure
On the great, thick limb of a gnarled and ancient tree;
Then he went up to the barrow and walked all around it,
20 Wondering in his wits what on earth it might be.
It had at each end and on either side an entrance,
And patches of grass were growing all over the thing,
And all the inside was hollow—an old, old cave
Or the cleft of some ancient crag, he couldn't tell which
25 it was.
“Who, Lord!” thought the knight,
“Is *this* the fellow's place?
Here the Devil might
Recite his midnight mass.
30 “Dear God,” thought Gawain, “the place is deserted enough!
And it's ugly enough, all overgrown with weeds!
Well might it amuse that marvel of green
To do his devotions here, in his devilish way!
In my five senses I fear it's the Fiend himself

1. Gringolet: Gawain's horse.

12. barrow: grave mound.



Sir Gawain strikes off the head of

35 Who's brought me to meet him here to murder me.
 May fire and fury befall this fiendish Chapel,
 As cursed a kirk° as I ever yet came across!"
 With his helmet on his head and his lance in hand
 He leaped up onto the roof of the rock-walled room
 40 And, high on that hill, he heard, from an echoing rock
 Beyond the pool, on the hillside, a horrible noise.
Brrrack! It clattered in the cliffs as if to cleave them,
 A sound like a grindstone grinding on a scythe!°
Brrrack! It whirred and rattled like water on a mill wheel!
 45 *Brrrrrack!* It rushed and rang till your blood ran cold.
 And then: "Oh God," thought Gawain, "it grinds, I think,
 For me—a blade prepared for the blow I must take
 as my right!

50 God's will be done! But here!
 He may well get his knight,
 But still, no use in fear;
 I won't fall dead of fright!"

And then Sir Gawain roared in a ringing voice,
 "Where is the hero who swore he'd be here to meet me?
 55 Sir Gawain the Good is come to the Green Chapel!
 If any man would meet me, make it now,
 For it's now or never, I've no wish to dawdle here long."
 "Stay there!" called someone high above his head,
 "I'll pay you promptly all that I promised before."
 60 But still he went on with that whetting noise a while,
 Turning again to his grinding before he'd come down.
 At last, from a hole by a rock he came out into sight,
 Came plunging out of his den with a terrible weapon,
 A huge new Danish ax to deliver his blow with,
 65 With a vicious swine of a bit bent back to the handle,
 Filed to a razor's edge and four foot long,
 Not one inch less by the length of that gleaming lace.
 The great Green Knight was garbed as before,
 Face, legs, hair, beard, all as before but for this:
 70 That now he walked the world on his own two legs,
 The ax handle striking the stone like a walking-stave.°
 When the knight came down to the water he would not wade
 But vaulted across on his ax, then with awful strides
 Came fiercely over the field filled all around

75 with snow.
 Sir Gawain met him there
 And bowed—but none too low!
 Said the other, "I see, sweet sir,
 You go where you say you'll go!

80 "Gawain," the Green Knight said, "may God be your guard!
 You're very welcome indeed, sir, here at my place;

37. **kirk**: Scottish for "church."

43. **scythe** (*sīth*): long-handled cutting tool.



Sir Gawain, from *Le Roman de Lancelot du Lac* (detail) (c. 15th century).
 MS 805, fol. 48.

The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

71. **walking-stave** (*stāv*): staff.

You've timed your travel, my friend, as a true man should.
 You recall the terms of the contract drawn up between us:
 At this time a year ago you took your chances,
 85 And I'm pledged now, this New Year, to make you my payment.
 And here we are in this valley, all alone,
 And no man here to part us, proceed as we may;
 Heave off your helmet then, and have here your pay;
 And debate no more with me than I did then
 90 When you severed my head from my neck with a single swipe."
 "Never fear," said Gawain, "by God who gave
 Me life, I'll raise no complaint at the grimness of it;
 But take your single stroke, and I'll stand still
 And allow you to work as you like and not oppose
 95 you here."
 He bowed toward the ground
 And let his skin show clear;
 However his heart might pound,
 He would not show his fear.

100 Quickly then the man in the green made ready,
 Grabbed up his keen-ground ax to strike Sir Gawain;
 With all the might in his body he bore it aloft
 And sharply brought it down as if to slay him;
 Had he made it fall with the force he first intended
 105 He would have stretched out the strongest man on earth.
 But Sir Gawain cast a side glance at the ax
 As it glided down to give him his Kingdom Come,^o
 And his shoulders jerked away from the iron a little,
 And the Green Knight caught the handle, holding it back,
 110 And mocked the prince with many a proud reproof:^o
 "You can't be Gawain," he said, "who's thought so good,
 A man who's never been daunted on hill or dale!
 For look how you flinch for fear before anything's felt!
 I never heard tell that Sir Gawain was ever a coward!
 115 I never moved a muscle when *you* came down;
 In Arthur's hall I never so much as winced.
 My head fell off at my feet, yet I never flickered;
 But you! You tremble at heart before you're touched!
 I'm bound to be called a better man than you, then,
 120 my lord."
 Said Gawain, "I shied once:
 No more. You have my word.
 But if my head falls to the stones
 It cannot be restored.



Sir Gawain is tempted by the lady of the castle, from an English manuscript (c. 15th century). MS Cotton Nero A.X., fol. 129. By permission of the British Library, London.

107. **his Kingdom Come:** life after death.

110. **reproof:** rebuke; scolding.

WORDS TO OWN

daunted (dɒnt'ed) *adj.*: intimidated.

The Medieval Castle

Mention the Middle Ages, and romantic images of castles immediately come to mind: fires blazing in huge stone fireplaces, merrymaking at long wooden tables laden with roasted meats and jugs of ale, candles warmly glowing in an immense hall. Are these images at all accurate, or was the medieval castle something other than our idyllic movie image?

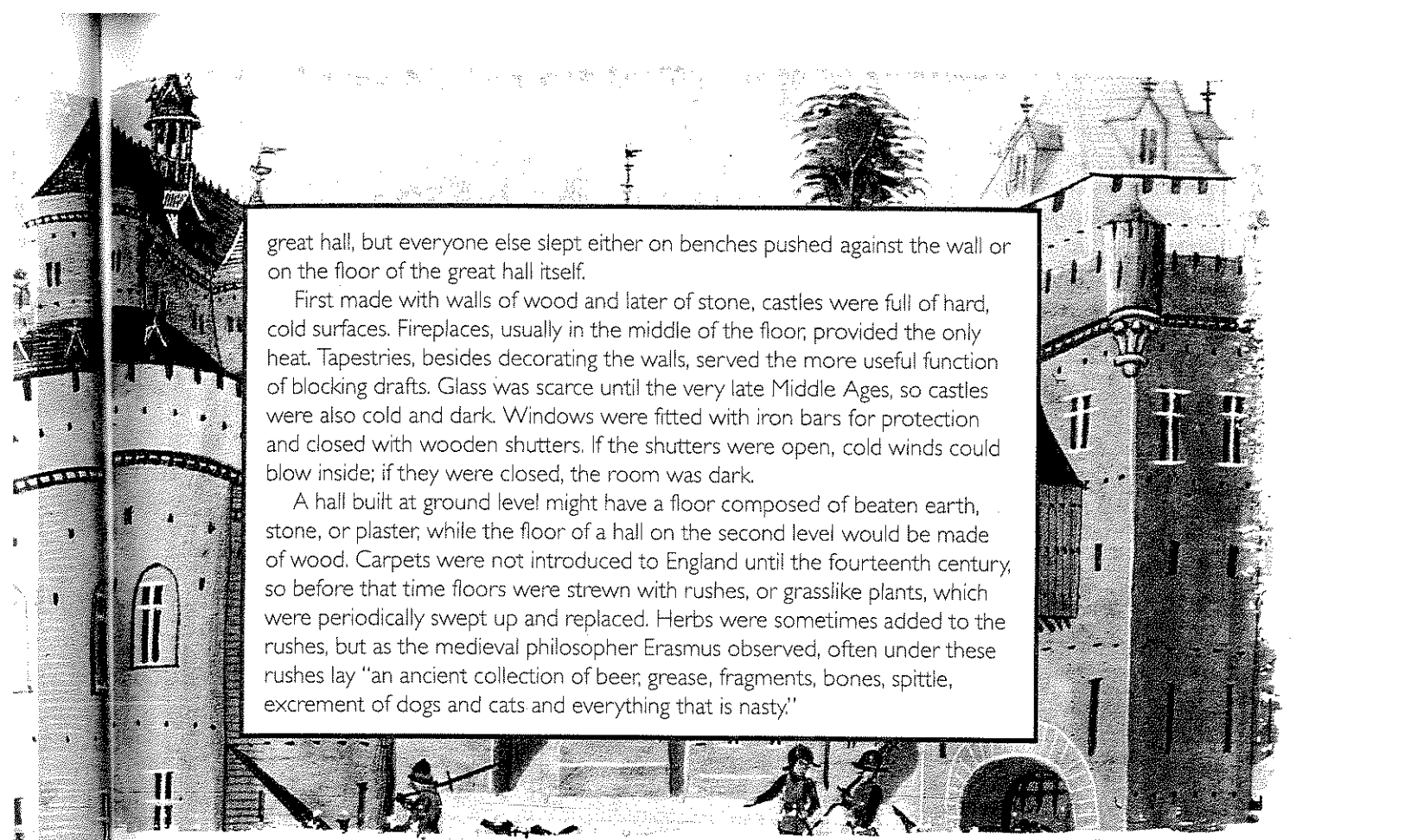
In reality, as in our imaginations, medieval castles created an imposing presence. But several design features made living conditions inside a castle communal and somewhat uncomfortable.

The castle's basic living space was the great hall. Although withdrawing rooms were added later for privacy, initially the lord, his family, attendants, and staff *all* ate, slept, and conducted business in the great hall—the first multi-purpose room. For meals, the lord and lady of the castle usually sat on chairs, on a dais, or raised floor area, at the hall's end. The castle staff, arranged in descending rank from the dais, sat on benches at trestle tables, which could be taken down. At night the lord might sleep on a feather bed at one end of the

- 125 "But be brisk, man, by your faith, and come to the point!
Deal out my doom if you can, and do it at once,
For I'll stand for one good stroke, and I'll start no more
Until your ax has hit—and that I swear."
"Here goes, then," said the other, and heaves it aloft
130 And stands there waiting, scowling like a madman;
He swings down sharp, then suddenly stops again,
Holds back the ax with his hand before it can hurt,
And Gawain stands there stirring not even a nerve;
He stood there still as a stone or the stock of a tree
135 That's wedged in rocky ground by a hundred roots.
O, merrily then he spoke, the man in green:
"Good! You've got your heart back! Now I can hit you.
May all that glory the good King Arthur gave you
Prove efficacious now—if it ever can—
140 And save your neck." In rage Sir Gawain shouted,

WORDS TO OWN

efficacious (ef'i·kā'shəs) *adj.*: effective.



great hall, but everyone else slept either on benches pushed against the wall or on the floor of the great hall itself.

First made with walls of wood and later of stone, castles were full of hard, cold surfaces. Fireplaces, usually in the middle of the floor, provided the only heat. Tapestries, besides decorating the walls, served the more useful function of blocking drafts. Glass was scarce until the very late Middle Ages, so castles were also cold and dark. Windows were fitted with iron bars for protection and closed with wooden shutters. If the shutters were open, cold winds could blow inside; if they were closed, the room was dark.

A hall built at ground level might have a floor composed of beaten earth, stone, or plaster, while the floor of a hall on the second level would be made of wood. Carpets were not introduced to England until the fourteenth century, so before that time floors were strewn with rushes, or grasslike plants, which were periodically swept up and replaced. Herbs were sometimes added to the rushes, but as the medieval philosopher Erasmus observed, often under these rushes lay "an ancient collection of beer, grease, fragments, bones, spittle, excrement of dogs and cats and everything that is nasty."

Page from *Froissart's Chronicles* (detail).
MS Fr. 2643, fol. 226v.

© cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

"Hit me, hero! I'm right up to here with your threats!

Is it *you* that's the cringing coward after all?"

"Who!" said the man in green, "he's wrathful, too!

No pauses, then; I'll pay up my pledge at once,

145

I vow!"

He takes his stride to strike

And lifts his lip and brow;

It's not a thing Gawain can like,

For nothing can save him now!

150 He raises that ax up lightly and flashes it down,

And that blinding bit bites in at the knight's bare neck—

But hard as he hammered it down, it hurt him no more

Than to nick the nape of his neck, so it split the skin;

The sharp blade slit to the flesh through the shiny hide,

155 And red blood shot to his shoulders and spattered the ground.

And when Gawain saw his blood where it blinked in the snow

He sprang from the man with a leap to the length of a spear;

He snatched up his helmet swiftly and slapped it on,

Shifted his shield into place with a jerk of his shoulders,

160 And snapped his sword out faster than sight; said boldly—
 And, mortal born of his mother that he was,
 There was never on earth a man so happy by half—
 “No more strokes, my friend; you’ve had your swing!
 I’ve stood one swipe of your ax without resistance;
 165 If you offer me any more, I’ll repay you at once
 With all the force and fire I’ve got—as you

will see.

I take one stroke, that’s all,
 For that was the compact we
 170 Arranged in Arthur’s hall;
 But now, no more for me!”

The Green Knight remained where he stood, relaxing on his ax—
 Settled the shaft on the rocks and leaned on the sharp end—
 And studied the young man standing there, shoulders hunched,
 175 And considered that staunch^o and doughty^o stance he took,
 Undaunted yet, and in his heart he liked it;
 And then he said merrily, with a mighty voice—
 With a roar like rushing wind he reproved the knight—
 “Here, don’t be such an ogre on your ground!

175. **staunch** (stōnch): steadfast.
doughty (dout’ē): courageous.

180 Nobody here has behaved with bad manners toward you
 Or done a thing except as the contract said.
 I owed you a stroke, and I’ve struck; consider yourself
 Well paid. And now I release you from all further duties.
 If I’d cared to hustle, it may be, perchance, that I might
 185 Have hit somewhat harder, and then you might well be cross!
 The first time I lifted my ax it was lighthearted sport,
 I merely feinted and made no mark, as was right,
 For you kept our pact of the first night with honor
 And abided by your word and held yourself true to me,
 190 Giving me all you owed as a good man should.
 — I feinted a second time, friend, for the morning
 You kissed my pretty wife twice and returned me the kisses;
 And so for the first two days, mere feints, nothing more

severe.

195 A man who’s true to his word,
 There’s nothing he needs to fear;
 You failed me, though, on the third
 Exchange, so I’ve tapped you here.

“That sash you wear by your scabbard^o belongs to me;
 200 My own wife gave it to you, as I ought to know.
 I know, too, of your kisses and all your words
 And my wife’s advances, for I myself arranged them.

199. **scabbard** (skab’ərd): case that holds the blade of a sword.

WORDS TO OWN

feinted (fānt’id) v.: pretended to strike.

It was I who sent her to test you. I'm convinced
 You're the finest man that ever walked this earth.
 205 As a pearl is of greater price than dry white peas,
 So Gawain indeed stands out above all other knights.
 But you lacked a little, sir; you were less than loyal;
 But since it was not for the sash itself or for lust
 But because you loved your life, I blame you less."
 210 Sir Gawain stood in a study° a long, long while,
 So miserable with disgrace that he wept within,
 And all the blood of his chest went up to his face
 And he shrank away in shame from the man's gentle words.
 The first words Gawain could find to say were these:

210. **stood in a study:** stood thinking deeply.

215 "Cursed be cowardice and covetousness both,
 Villainy and vice that destroy all virtue!"
 He caught at the knots of the girdle° and loosened them
 And fiercely flung the sash at the Green Knight.
 "There, there's my fault! The foul fiend vex it!
 220 Foolish cowardice taught me, from fear of your stroke,
 To bargain, covetous, and abandon my kind,
 The selflessness and loyalty suitable in knights;
 Here I stand, faulty and false, much as I've feared them,
 Both of them, untruth and treachery; may they see sorrow
 225 and care!

217. **girdle:** sash.

I can't deny my guilt;
 My works shine none too fair!
 Give me your good will
 And henceforth I'll beware."

230 At that, the Green Knight laughed, saying graciously,
 "Whatever harm I've had, I hold it amended
 Since now you're confessed so clean, acknowledging sins
 And bearing the plain penance of my point;
 I consider you polished as white and as perfectly clean
 235 As if you had never fallen since first you were born.
 And I give you, sir, this gold-embroidered girdle,
 For the cloth is as green as my gown. Sir Gawain, think
 On this when you go forth among great princes;
 Remember our struggle here; recall to your mind
 240 This rich token. Remember the Green Chapel.
 And now, come on, let's both go back to my castle
 And finish the New Year's revels with feasting and joy,
 not strife,

245 I beg you," said the lord,
 And said, "As for my wife,
 She'll be your friend, no more
 A threat against your life."



Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (1952)
 by Dorothea Braby. Golden Cockerel
 Press.

Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New
 York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden
 Foundations.

The Death of Arthur

from *Le Morte Darthur*

Sir Thomas Malory

So upon Trinity Sunday at night king Arthur dreamed a wonderful dream. And in his dream him seemed that he saw upon a chafflet¹ a chair, and the chair was fast to a wheel, and thereupon sat king Arthur in the richest cloth of gold that might be made. And the king thought there was under him, far from him, an hideous deep black water, and therein was all manner of serpents and worms and wild beasts foul and horrible. And suddenly the king thought that the wheel turned up-so-down, and he fell among the serpents, and every beast took him by a limb. And then the king cried as he lay in his bed, "Help! help!" and then knights, squires and yeomen awaked the king, and then he was so amazed that he wist not where he was.

And then so he awaked until it was nigh day, and then he fell on slumbering again, not sleeping nor thoroughly waking. So the king seemed verily that there came sir Gawain unto him with a number of fair ladies with him. So when king Arthur saw him he said, "Welcome, my sister's son, I weened ye had been dead! And now I see thee on live, much am I beholden unto Almighty Jesu. Ah, fair nephew, what been these ladies that hither be come with you?"

"Sir," said sir Gawain, "all these be ladies for whom I have foughten for, when I was man living. And all these are tho² that I did battle for in righteous quarrels, and God hath given them that grace at their great prayer, because I did battle for them for their right, that they should bring me hither unto you. Thus much hath given me leave God for to warn you of your death: for and ye fight as to-morn³ with sir Mordred, as ye both have assigned, doubt ye not ye shall be slain, and the most party of your people on both parties.⁴ And for the great grace and goodness that Almighty

Jesu hath unto you, and for pity of you and many mo⁵ other good men there shall be slain, God hath sent me to you of his special grace to give you warning that in no wise ye do battle as to-morn, but that ye take a treatise⁶ for a month day. And proffer you largely,⁷ so that to-morn ye put in a delay. For within a month shall come sir Lancelot with all his noble knights, and rescue you worshipfully and slay sir Mordred and all that ever will hold with him."

Then sir Gawain and all the ladies vanished, and anon the king called upon his knights, squires, and yeomen, and charged them wightly⁸ to fetch his noble lords and wise bishops unto him. And when they were come the king told them of his avision,⁹ that sir Gawain had told him and warned him that and¹⁰ he fought on the morn, he should be slain. Then the king commanded sir Lucan the Butler and his brother sir Bedivere the Bold, with two bishops with them, and charged them in any wise to take a treatise for a month day with sir Mordred: "And spare not. Proffer him lands and goods as much as ye think reasonable."

So then they departed and came to sir Mordred where he had a grim host of an hundred thousand men, and there they entreated sir Mordred long time. And at the last sir Mordred was agreed for to have Cornwall and Kent by king Arthur's days; and after that all England, after the days of king Arthur.

Then were they condescend¹¹ that king Arthur and sir Mordred should meet betwixt both their hosts, and every of them should bring fourteen persons. And so they came with this word unto Arthur. Then said he, "I am glad that this is done." And so he went into the field.

1. **chafflet:** scaffold.

2. **tho:** those.

3. **for . . . to-morn:** if you fight tomorrow.

4. **most . . . parties:** most part of your people on both sides.

5. **mo:** more.

6. **treatise:** treaty or truce.

7. **proffer you largely:** make generous offers.

8. **wightly:** quickly.

9. **avision:** dream.

10. **and:** if.

11. **condescend:** agreed.

And when king Arthur should depart he warned all his host that and they see any sword drawn, "look ye come on fiercely and slay that traitor, sir Mordred, for I in no wise trust him." In like wise sir Mordred warned his host "that and ye see any manner of sword drawn, look that ye come on fiercely and so slay all that ever before you standeth, for in no wise I will not trust for this treatise." And in the same wise said sir Mordred unto his host: "for I know well my father will be avenged upon me."

And so they met as their appointment was, and were agreed and accorded thoroughly. And wine was fetched, and they drank together. Right so came out an adder of a little heath bush, and it stung a knight in the foot. And so when the knight felt him so stung, he looked down and saw the adder; and anon he drew his sword to slay the adder, and thought none other harm. And when the host on both parties saw that sword drawn, then they blew bemes,¹² trumpets and horns, and shouted grimly, and so both hosts dressed them¹³ together. And king Arthur took his horse and said, "Alas, this unhappy day!" and so rode to his party, and sir Mordred in like wise.

And never since was there never seen a more dolefuller battle in no Christian land, for there was but rushing and riding, foining¹⁴ and striking, and many a grim word was there spoken of either to other, and many a deadly stroke. But ever king Arthur rode throughout the battle¹⁵ of sir Mordred many times and did full nobly, as a noble king should do, and at all times he fainted never. And sir Mordred did his devoir¹⁶ that day and put himself in great peril.

And thus they fought all the long day, and never stunted till the noble knights were laid to the cold earth. And ever they fought still till it was near night, and by then was there an hundred thousand laid dead upon the earth. Then was king Arthur wood wroth¹⁷ out of measure, when he saw his people so slain from him. And so he looked about him and could see no mo of all his host and good

knights left, no mo on live but two knights: t'one was sir Lucan de Butler and his brother sir Bedivere; and yet they were full sore wounded.

"Jesu mercy!" said the king, "where are all my noble knights become? Alas, that ever I should see this doleful day! For now," said king Arthur, "I am come to mine end. But would to God," said he, "that I wist now where were that traitor sir Mordred that hath caused all this mischief."

Then king Arthur looked about and was ware where stood sir Mordred leaning upon his sword among a great heap of dead men. "Now, give me my spear," said king Arthur unto sir Lucan, "for yonder I have espied the traitor that all this woe hath wrought."

"Sir, let him be," said sir Lucan, "for he is unhappy.¹⁸ And if ye pass this unhappy day ye shall be right well revenged upon him. Good lord, remember ye of your night's dream and what the spirit of sir Gawain told you to-night, and yet God of His great goodness hath preserved you hitherto. And for God's sake, my lord, leave off this, for, blessed be God, ye have won the field. For yet we been here three on live, and with Sir Mordred is not one of live. And therefore if ye leave off now, this wicked day of Destiny is past!"

"Now tide¹⁹ me death, tide me life," said the king, "now I see him yonder alone, he shall never escape mine hands! For at a better avail shall I never have him."

"God speed you well!" said sir Bedivere.

Then the king got his spear in both his hands, and ran toward sir Mordred, crying and saying, "Traitor, now is thy death-day come!"

And when sir Mordred saw king Arthur he ran until him with his sword drawn in his hand, and there king Arthur smote sir Mordred under the shield, with a foin of his spear, throughout the body more than a fathom. And when sir Mordred felt that he had his death's wound he thrust himself with the might that he had up to the burr of king Arthur's spear, and right so he smote his father, king Arthur, with his sword holding in both his hands, upon the side of the head, that the sword pierced the helmet and the tay²⁰ of the

12. **bemes:** bugles.

13. **dressed them:** prepared to come.

14. **foining:** lunging.

15. **battle:** battalion.

16. **devoir:** knightly duty.

17. **wood wroth:** mad with rage.

18. **unhappy:** unlucky for you.

19. **tide:** betide.

20. **tay:** edge.

brain. And therewith Mordred dashed down stark dead to the earth.

And noble king Arthur fell in a swough to the earth, and there he swooned oftentimes, and sir Lucan and sir Bedivere oft-times hove him up. And so weakly betwixt them they led him to a little chapel not far from the sea, and when the king was there, him thought him reasonably eased.

Then heard they people cry in the field. "Now go thou, sir Lucan" said the king, "and do me to wit²¹ what betokens that noise in the field." So sir Lucan departed, for he was grievously wounded in many places. And so as he yode²² he saw and hearkened by the moonlight how that pillers²³ and robbers were come into the field to pill and to rob many a full noble knight of brooches and bees²⁴ and of many a good ring and many a rich jewel. And who that were not dead all out, there they slew them for their harness and their riches.

When sir Lucan understood this work he came to the king as soon as he might, and told him all what he had heard and seen. "Therefore by my rede,"²⁵ said sir Lucan, "it is best that we bring you to some town."

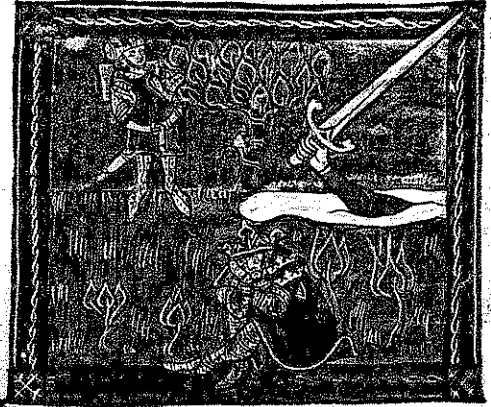
"I would it were so," said the king, "but I may not stand, my head works so. Ah, sir Lancelot!" said king Arthur, "this day have I sore missed thee! And alas, that ever I was against thee! For now have I my death, whereof sir Gawain me warned in my dream."

Then sir Lucan took up the king t'one party and sir Bedivere the other party. And in the lifting up the king swooned, and in the lifting sir Lucan fell in a swoon, that part of his guts fell out of his body, and therewith the noble knight his heart burst. And when the king awoke he beheld sir Lucan, how he lay foaming at the mouth and part of his guts lay at his feet.

"Alas," said the king, "this is to me a full heavy sight, to see this noble duke so die for my sake, for he would have holpen me that had more need of help than I! Alas, that he would not complain him, for his heart was so set to help me. Now Jesu have mercy upon his soul!"

21. **do me to wit:** let me know.
 22. **yode:** walked.
 23. **pillers:** plunderers.
 24. **bees:** bracelets.
 25. **rede:** advice.

va ele pas perdue. En li q' gyles ve
 gaudit le main qui estoit hors du
 lac qui puis le pre le roy artu.



Quant gyles voit que
 faire li couient. si ve
 uient arriere la ou le
 pre estoit si la prent & la recomē
 ce a regarder & a plaindre mlt
 durement & dit tot en plozant.
 ha! espee loine & tele plus que nu
 le autre tant est gns damases
 de vos. quant n' ne chas es mais

British Art Library, London.

Bedivere returning Excalibur to the lake upon the death of Arthur, from *Roman du Saint Graal* (early 14th century). Add. 10294 fol. 94.

Then sir Bedivere wept for the death of his brother.

"Now leave this mourning and weeping, gentle knight," said the king, "for all this will not avail me. For wit thou well, and I might live myself, the death of sir Lucan would grieve me evermore. But my time hieth fast," said the king. "Therefore," said king Arthur unto sir Bedivere, "take thou here Excaliber,²⁶ my good sword, and go with it to yonder water's side. And when thou comest there, I charge thee throw my sword in that water, and come again and tell me what thou seest there."

"My lord," said sir Bedivere, "your commandment shall be done, and lightly²⁷ bring you word again." So sir Bedivere departed. And by the way

26. **Excaliber:** Arthur's sword, given to him by the mysterious Lady of the Lake.
 27. **lightly:** quickly.

he beheld that noble sword, and the pommel and the haft was all precious stones. And then he said to himself, "If I throw this rich sword in the water, thereof shall never come good, but harm and loss." And then sir Bedivere hid Excaliber under a tree. And so as soon as he might he came again unto the king and said he had been at the water and had thrown the sword into the water.

"What saw thou there?" said the king.

"Sir," he said, "I saw nothing but waves and winds."

"That is untruly said of thee," said the king, "and therefore go thou lightly again, and do my commandment. As thou art to me lief²⁸ and dear, spare not, but throw it in."

Then sir Bedivere returned again and took the sword in his hand; and yet him thought sin and shame to throw away that noble sword. And so eft²⁹ he hid the sword and returned again and told the king that he had been at the water and done his commandment.

"What sawest thou there?" said the king.

"Sir," he said, "I saw nothing but waters wap and waves wan."

"Ah, traitor unto me and untrue," said king Arthur, "now hast thou betrayed me twice! Who would ween that thou that hast been to me so lief and dear, and also named so noble a knight, that thou would betray me for the riches of this sword? But now go again lightly; for thy long tarrying putteth me in great jeopardy of my life, for I have taken cold. And but if thou do now as I bid thee, if ever I may see thee, I shall slay thee mine own hands, for thou wouldst for my rich sword see me dead."

Then sir Bedivere departed and went to the sword and lightly took it up, and so he went unto the water's side. And there he bound the girdle about the hilts, and threw the sword as far into the water as he might. And there came an arm and an hand above the water, and took it and cleight it, and shook it thrice and brandished, and then vanished with the sword into the water.

So sir Bedivere came again to the king and told him what he saw. "Alas," said the king, "help me hence, for I dread me I have tarried over long."

28. **lief**: beloved.

29. **eft**: again.

Then sir Bedivere took the king upon his back and so went with him to the water's side. And when they were there, even fast by the bank hoved a little barge with many fair ladies in it, and among them all was a queen, and all they had black hoods. And all they wept and shrieked when they saw king Arthur.

"Now put me into that barge," said the king. And so he did softly, and there received him three ladies with great mourning. And so they set them down, and in one of their laps king Arthur laid his head.

And then the queen said, "Ah, my dear brother, why have ye tarried so long from me? Alas, this wound on your head hath caught over much cold!" And anon they rowed fromward the land, and sir Bedivere beheld all tho ladies go froward him. Then sir Bedivere cried and said,

"Ah, my lord Arthur, what shall become of me, now ye go from me and leave me here alone among mine enemies?"

"Comfort thyself," said the king, "and do as well as thou mayest, for in me is no trust for to trust in. For I must into the vale of Avilion³⁰ to heal me of my grievous wound. And if thou hear nevermore of me, pray for my soul!"

But ever the queen and ladies wept and shrieked that it was pity to hear. And as soon as sir Bedivere had lost the sight of the barge he wept and wailed, and so took³¹ the forest and went all that night.

And in the morning he was ware, betwixt two holts hoar,³² of a chapel and an hermitage. Then was sir Bedivere fain, and thither he went, and when he came into the chapel he saw where lay an hermit groveling on all fours, fast thereby a tomb was new graven. When the hermit saw sir Bedivere he knew him well, for he was but little tofore Bishop of Canterbury that sir Mordred flemed.³³

"Sir," said sir Bedivere, "what man is there here interred that ye pray so fast for?"

"Fair son," said the hermit, "I wot not verily but by deeming. But this same night, at midnight,

30. **Avilion**: legendary island, sometimes identified with the earthly Paradise.

31. **took**: took to.

32. **holts hoar**: old thickets.

33. **flemed**: banished.

here came a number of ladies and brought here a dead corpse and prayed me to inter him. And here they offered an hundred tapers, and they gave me a thousand besants.³⁴

"Alas," said sir Bedivere, "that was my lord king Arthur, which lieth here graven in this chapel." Then sir Bedivere swooned. And when he awoke he prayed the hermit that he might abide with him still, there to live with fasting and prayers: "For from hence will I never go," said sir Bedivere, "by my will, but all the days of my life here to pray for my lord Arthur."

"Sir, ye are welcome to me," said the hermit, "for I know you better than ye ween that I do: for ye are sir Bedivere the Bold, and the full noble duke sir Lucan de Butler was your brother." Then sir Bedivere told the hermit all as ye have heard tofore, and so he beleft with the hermit that was beforehand Bishop of Canterbury. And there sir Bedivere put upon him poor clothes, and served the hermit full lowly in fasting and in prayers.

Thus of Arthur I find no more written in books that been authorized, nother more of the very certainty of his death heard I never read. But thus was he led away in a ship wherein were three queens; that one was king Arthur sister, queen Morgan le Fay, the tother was queen of North Wales, and the third was the queen of the Waste

34. **besants:** *bezants*, gold coins of Byzantium.



Lands. Also there was dame Ninive, the chief lady of the lake, which had wedded sir Pelleas, the good knight; and this lady had done much for king Arthur. And this dame Ninive would never suffer sir Pelleas to be in no place where he should be in danger of his life, and so he lived unto the uttermost of his days with her in great rest.

Now more of the death of king Arthur could I never find, but that these ladies brought him to his grave, and such one was interred there which the hermit bore witness that sometime was Bishop of Canterbury. But yet the hermit knew not in certain that he was verily the body of king Arthur; for this tale sir Bedivere, a knight of the Table Round, made it to be written.

Yet some men say in many parts of England that king Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place. And men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the Holy Cross.³⁵ Yet I will not say that it shall be so, but rather I would say: here in this world he changed his life. And many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse:

HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS.³⁶

And thus leave I here sir Bedivere with the hermit that dwelled that time in a chapel besides Glastonbury, and there was his hermitage. And so they lived in prayers and fastings and great abstinence.

And when queen Guenevere understood that king Arthur was dead and all the noble knights, sir Mordred and all the remnant, then she stole away with five ladies with her, and so she went to Amesbury. And there she let make herself a nun, and weared white clothes and black, and great penance she took upon her, as ever did sinful woman in this land. And never creature could make her merry, but ever she lived in fasting, prayers, and alms-deeds, that all manner of people marvelled how virtuously she was changed.

35. **Holy Cross:** cross on which Jesus was crucified.

36. Latin for "Here lies Arthur, the once and future king."

Head of a Woman (c. 1450) by Pesellino.

Board of Trustees of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).