

COMMENT: Time flies, and so do we. Finally, 20 years after *The Mage Unbound*, another Arthurian story. Since the legends are not subject to copyright, this story is mine. My take on the legend of the Fisher King. There have been (and will be) many other versions, all equally valid.

RATING: Free for all.

FEEDBACK: Always welcome at the address given on my main page (<http://hem.bredband.net/MsFanfic> in case that's not where you found this story).

SUMMARY: The same as usual for this legend. Actually, the title says it all.

Sir Gawain at the Fisher King's Castle

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as told by Eva A Enblom

Sir Gawain was on his way home, back to Camelot. His adventures this time had largely gone well enough, except for a slight mishap: his favourite steed, the Otherworldly war horse Gringolet of the white fell and the red ears - much like the Hunter's hounds - had thrown a shoe. Gringolet being originally of the Otherworld, no common horse shoe would fit; they were all too heavy, and even the ones most finely wrought were too clumsy. Gringolet was big, as befitted a war horse, but he needed light shoes in order to move as nimbly as he was wont. And the only one who could make the proper kind of shoes, was Gofannon himself.

Gofannon's smithy was in Ireland, so that seemed to be the most likely place to find him. Realizing that this would call for another quest and an adventure all by itself, Gawain, heavy-hearted, decided that he'd have to leave Gringolet behind for now, and take another horse the last few days' ride to Camelot. His brothers were waiting for him for some special reason that they had not revealed, and he had given them his word that he would be back this month. Going in search of the god first, might well turn him into an oath-breaker.

So Gawain had struck a bargain. In a small, sleepy village that seemed to have been at peace for a long time, he found his hostler for the night to be an honest man, so he made a deal with him, that the man would look after Gringolet and lend Gawain a horse from his own stable, until Gawain could return for his own steed. The hostler, a big, balding man with a good-natured countenance, had listened to the proposal, finished pouring beer for a company of four tradesmen, wiped his hands on his brown leather apron, and looked thoughtfully at Sir Gawain. He saw a tall young man - they were always young, the knights, weren't they ... didn't live long of course - dressed mostly in green, with long, blond hair somewhat fastidiously coiffed, and sincere blue eyes. He looked honourable to be sure, but one never knew with the aristocracy.

"I take it you will want my best horse then", he said, resignedly. He had dealt with knights before.

"That seems only fair", Gawain agreed. The man looked intelligent enough to catch his drift, so he did not bring up the matter of equine hostages.

"Well", said the hostler, "Then so you shall, but I'm warning you, you might not think so at first."

The brown, black-maned mare did indeed look more like a plowhorse than the war kind, though the hostler assured Gawain that she was both trained for, and tested in battle. "Her name is Temperance", he said. "Temper for short."

"A strange abbreviation for such a name", Gawain ventured.

To which the answer was simply, "No." With no elaboration.

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It did not take Gawain long to give the hostler right. The mare was something of a handful, even for a trained and experienced knight. She seemed to have her own views and plans concerning just about everything, especially which route to take. Whenever Gawain asserted his will, she would glare balefully at him and bare her teeth. The moment his attention was off her, she would stray from the path and head for the woods, and she enjoyed a rest by a clear stream far too much and was decidedly unwilling to resume their journey. Not for the first time, Gawain wondered if this really was the best horse the hostler had in his keeping. If so, then it remained to be seen in what way she was the best.

Still, he did cover ground while getting to know her, though maybe not always the ground he had planned for. She had to have taken an off-road somewhere, however much he tried to keep an eye on her, for the landscape was changing around them, in a way he could not recall having seen on his way out. Leaved trees were losing their foliage, eventually standing about as naked as ever in winter. Pines, firs and junipers were taking on a brown hue, as if scorched by the sun, and at ground level nothing grew except lichens and a few bloated toadstools. It was as if some evil wizard had cast a spell of poison over the land, and Gawain was finding himself more and more depressed by the state of the countryside he was passing through.

Towards the evening of the ninth day after the horse exchange, the mare suddenly reared for no obvious reason, nearly throwing Gawain off, but as he had been expecting something like that for a while, he managed to stay on. He could see nothing that could have spooked the horse, and yet her action did not appear to have anything to do with him this time - she had shied as if something had got in her way. When he tried to coax her onward, she planted all four legs in the ground like a mule, and just stood, head bowed down.

Gawain spoke entreatingly to her, but she was not listening. And when he looked up from her stubbornly bent neck, everything before him had changed. He was at the end of a lowered drawbridge, which led across a wide moat, almost a river, to a splendid but silent castle. "Either I am mad, or this place is enchanted", Gawain muttered. Then he remembered his horse's strange behaviour. "So you can see enchantments?" he asked, scratching her mane. "That certainly is a useful knack. Perhaps you are the best the

hostler had, after all." He looked toward the entrance to the castle, but nothing stirred there. "Well", he said, "we can't simply pass up a possible adventure, can we?" He tried again to urge the horse forward, over the bridge, and this time, to his great surprise, she complied without objection.

Gawain and his wayward horse traversed the drawbridge without incident, without anyone even hailing them or appearing at all, for that matter. The portcullis was raised, and they entered the courtyard, where likewise no one appeared to greet or rebuke them, for all the mare's loudly clattering hooves on the flagstones. At the far end of the yard, a staircase led upwards to what had to be the nether regions of the living quarters of the castle, and Gawain dismounted, stabling his horse in one of the empty stables which egged the courtyard. There was water and hay aplenty, but no stable hand, and after rubbing her down himself - which she did not really need, since they had not made much haste - Gawain left her and went to explore the castle. She did not seem displeased to be left to her own devices for a while - she probably appreciated a rest from his demands which she did not often see fit to agree to. Gawain rather suspected that she saw it as her task to train her riders, rather than allowing herself to be trained.

A fleeting thought occurred to him, probably brought on by the eerie atmosphere of the empty, enchanted castle. What if his horse were an enchanted princess? That certainly would explain her haughtiness ... but if so, what would he have to do to bring her out of the spell put on her? Much as he appreciated horses, he'd rather not go so far as to kiss them. Shaking his head at these lunacies, he turned his back on her, and made for the staircase.

He looked around briefly for a more stately entrance, but the single, narrow staircase was all that was in evidence, so he began climbing it. As he had expected, it took him to the kitchen, full of pots and pans which looked like they had not been used for ages, an empty scullery and a likewise empty larder. The inner door was open, and he emerged in the entrance hall, wide and high-ceilinged, with a floor inlaid with a Roman-style mosaic showing not so much a Roman scene as one of Cú Chulainn's battles. Perhaps the patron had commissioned Hercules, but the hurling stick was unmistakable, to those would recognize such an object. The Norsemen of the Orkneys did not practice hurling, but Gawain had travelled far and wide since he left his homeland for Camelot, and he knew well the sport favoured by the Irish.

Quite convinced now that the castle was really abandoned, Gawain boldly opened doors and gazed into chambers and servants' quarters. On all the first floor there was not a soul - human or otherwise - and yet everything was in order as if only packed away for the moment, for a brief journey perhaps. Tables were empty and tools cleaned and stashed, but the beds were made up and covered with finely embroidered counterpanes, not dust covers. In a storage room close by the kitchen entrance, he found fishing tackle, also neatly rolled up and tucked away, and some angling rods which actually looked as though they had been recently used, for two of them were still wet as if sprayed by water from a large, diving fish, and one of the lines had snapped, which indicated that the angler had not had much success. Perhaps that was when he had picked up the other rod to try his luck with a sturdier line.

Gawain made his way to the next floor which he also found empty, but here he heard a sound, as if of bubbling water or soup. Following the sound, he came to an oaken door, heavier than any he had seen so far, yet it was not locked or barred, for it opened at his touch. Inside, a blackened cauldron was hanging over a dark and cold fireplace. The lack of a fire did not seem to affect it, for it was clearly the source of the bubbling sound. A

spear was hanging on the wall above it, its point submerged in the cauldron. Perhaps this was the reason for the bubbles, because Gawain thought he saw the occasional spark fly off the spear, as if it held lightning contained. Seeing this, he thought he had better not touch it, yet he wanted to see what was bubbling in the cauldron. But when he tried to step closer, the spear sparked again, and this time there was no mistaking the menace. The explanation for this would have to wait. Gawain withdrew, closing the oaken door behind him. He found a library and searched for a time among its tomes and scrolls for a mention of the cauldron and the spear, but none was to be found, at least not in the time he allotted his search.

On the next floor, Gawain found a few more empty rooms, and a tall pair of double doors, probably leading to a main hall. Quite at ease in his investigations now, he flung the doors wide - only to stare in at a long table, fully set with plates and goblets, and with a company of fifteen dinner guests. They all turned to stare back, and suddenly they were all speaking, although Gawain could have sworn he had not heard a sound until he opened the doors. He bowed deeply, apologizing for his bad manners and giving his name at once, so they would not think their castle had attracted a common looter.

An old man entered the hall from behind Gawain. He was dressed like a fisherman, and on his long, silver-hued hair was still a wide-brimmed hat, such as worn by farmers and fishermen as protection from the sun. He walked with a bad limp, and two servants were at his sides, ready to support him if need be.

"I am Pelles map Pellehan, King of this castle", he told Gawain, "and who might you be?"

"I am Gawain mac Loth, of the Orkneys", Gawain repeated, since the odd king had not been present at his former introduction of himself, "a knight of the order of the Round Table".

The old man stroked his beard thoughtfully. "One of King Loth's sons", he mused, nodding repeated times. "More than half Norse then, as I see by your colouring." He looked Gawain up and down, then added, "Which one, I wonder ... not the youngest, I warrant?"

"I am my father's eldest son", Gawain confirmed. "I hear that you know of my father?"

"I know the whole family", the old man said, "though not always for good." Gawain would have taken umbrage at that, had not the man's age and infirmity excused his ramblings. "King Loth, the Lady Morgause and - four sons, isn't it? Gawain, Agravain, Garth and Mordred." He nodded confirmation to himself, stroking his beard again.

Had the old fisherman who termed himself king, been any younger and more vigorous, Gawain would never have stood for this misrepresentation of his family, but as it was, he couldn't help smiling. "Not quite", he said. "Though your numbers are correct - four sons indeed, named Gawain, Gaheris, Agravain and Gareth. Contrary to some popular belief, Gaheris and Gareth are not the same name nor the same person. And Mordred is my mother's nephew, not her son. He is of Saxon blood on his father's side, more's the pity, which you might be able to tell by his name."

Watery blue eyes regarded him in surprise. "Saxon? How can this be?"

"Not all Saxons have always been our enemies. It is true that most of the hosts employed by the late King Vortigern in defence of the land, betrayed him and turned on him instead,

but basically, the idea was sound. The plan has been more successful in other places. Norsemen have been hired by emperors to defend their lands against Norsemen. Vortigern thought he could achieve something of the same with the Saxons. He was mistaken, as it turned out, but some of those who came over to serve, stayed in his service - at least long enough to settle and defend their new homeland."

The dotard still looked as if he suspected a scandal of some sort, but thought it better not to ask outright. "Well", he said, flinging off his hat into the hands of one of his two servants, "enough talk. I, Pelles map Pellehan, bid you welcome to my castle. Let us no longer leave these good people starving, but sit us down to dinner!"

Without the hat, he seemed considerably more kingly - though this did not last long, for as soon as he had finished his speech, he bent over double in pain, pressing one hand to his nether regions. and both servants caught his arms and held him upright.

At the head of the table, another servant hurried up with a cushion, which she placed on the empty seat there.

"Old war wound", the king explained between his teeth. "Spear through the thighs."

And presumably what lay between them. Gawain looked at him in deep sympathy, but refrained from comment.

Once they were all seated, the voices grew louder and livelier, as if in anticipation of a good meal, although Gawain had seen for himself that the kitchens were empty and unused. He was about to ask the king why his castle seemed so empty when it was obviously still lived in, but an exuberant lady next to him engaged his attention by praising the fare of this house, promising Gawain that he was in for a treat such as he had never before seen or tasted.

At that, two wonderful beings entered. First was a beautiful woman, dressed all in green, carrying the cauldron Gawain had seen in a room on the floor below. Although it was blackened with soot, none of it seemed to come off on the lady's white hands or her fine gown. Her blonde hair was piled high and held lightly with jewelled clasps, and not a hair escaped from the effort of her carrying the big cauldron. She went from one guest to the next, and each took a different meal from the cauldron and put on his or her plate.

"They all get the food they like best", Gawain's charming neighbour informed him, unbidden. "I think I'll have partridge ... no, wait, why not go for pheasant while I have the opportunity?" She laughed, like silver bells, and Gawain smiled back, politely.

He found her words to be true though; he could think of whichever food he liked, and it would appear in the cauldron held out to him. Though once he had chosen, his choice was the only thing remaining to be picked up from the vessel.

When they had all chosen and received their food, a radiant youth came riding into the hall, which only a moment ago had not seemed large enough for a horse. The rider's face was so bright that no one could look directly upon it, though Gawain came closest. For a moment, he felt imbued with new strength, such as he otherwise felt only in the mornings, before the hour of noon. He saw now that the young man was holding the spear which had been dipping into the cauldron before, and he was giving it a twirl over the heads of the dinner guests. The spear sparked once, then started to glow intensely red at the point.

The maid with the cauldron was on the other side of the table, but the youth reached out with a long arm and managed to plunge the head of the spear into the cauldron, dousing the glow of the point. At once, the lights in the hall seemed to dim a little, and Gawain felt the new, unexpected strength leaving him. He now felt as tired as he normally did around dinner time. When he looked up, the youth was gone and the hall was lit only by candles after all, but the maid remained, and she was now pouring wine from the cauldron into each goblet on the table. Though hot meat had recently been plucked sizzling from the cauldron, the wine now seemed perfectly tempered, and those who thought of it found that they could choose their vintage.

On Gawain's other side, the one not occupied by the chatty lady, was the king, and for a time he and Gawain engaged in polite conversation, but the king was clearly suffering from his old wound, and found pleasant speech difficult. After a time, a bard stood up from his place at the table and started regaling the company with tales of ancient and latterday heroes - some exploits apparently achieved by the old king, in his youth. This gave the old man some relief, and he gratefully leant back in his seat, closing his eyes in relaxation if not yet in sleep.

Gawain for his part was feeling more and more tired, and as the hour drew near to midnight and the king had already withdrawn, he found an opportunity to do so himself. The green-clad maiden saw him up to a lavish guest chamber, leaving her candle on the mantelpiece before saying goodnight. She had set her cauldron aside long ago - probably in the room where Gawain had first seen it.

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The first rays of the sun awakened Gawain, but he remained still for a moment, feeling his strength increase by the minute, as he knew it would, until the hour of noon. He relished the feeling, and only gradually did he become aware that something was wrong. He was not in the comfortable bed he had been given in the castle last night. And he seemed to be fully clothed, despite remembering clearly that he had taken most of his clothes off, as soon as the maiden was out the door. He could even feel his sword at his side - whatever else he might have forgotten to remove, he certainly wouldn't have left his sword on. Close by, to be sure, in case everything was not as peaceful as it seemed, but he would not have slept with it on. He opened his eyes - only to gaze straight up into a pair of dark brown ones, His wayward horse stood over him, regarding him as if she wondered when he would decide to wake up. As their eyes met, she neighed happily, and he almost had a feeling she had been a little worried.

He stood, and found himself in the brown, drought-stricken field where his horse had first shied before something visible only to her. She did not appear to see anything out of the ordinary now, but had calmly resumed her grazing, as soon as she had made sure he was awake. He looked around, but of the castle and its drawbridge there was no trace. A slow and shallow stream was winding through the barren landscape. Could he have taken that for a moat? Had he dreamt? He would not have minded a breakfast, yet he was not starved but felt as if he had eaten well last night. He cast about for some more definite sign than that, but found none. Perhaps it had all been a dream after all. Then, just as he was about to mount, something fell, to bounce lightly on the ground. He bent down and picked up a small hair-clip, set with tiny, green emeralds. Apparently it had been tucked inside the green baldric he always wore these days. He knew he had last seen it in the hair of the maiden who had been carrying the cauldron. Unless that was a dream too ... but if so,

whence did it come? He looked up again, but there was no one around to return it to. Nonetheless, he vowed to the empty air and the blighted land that he would keep the ornament safe, and if he ever met the maiden again, he would be sure to return it to her. He fastened it to his baldric so he would not forget.

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When he returned to Camelot, there was much rejoicing among his brothers that he was so prompt, because their mother was come to visit with her half-brother, King Arthur himself, and as her birthday was falling within the time of her stay, they had planned a lavish celebration for her, and most of the court was in on the idea. They had said nothing to Gawain earlier, as they had not been sure they would have enough support for their plan when the time came. His horse was also given a resounding welcome, as most of his fellow knights found her amusing, and the ladies of the court even thought her endearing. The festivities went on for several days, during which time Gawain had no time to do anything more for poor Gringolet, waiting back in the hostler's stable. However, he was often asked to tell of his adventures, and this he did, often and gladly, showing them all the little jewelled clasp that he had found the morning after his presumed stay in the unknown castle. When Arthur heard about it, he said it was a mighty strange tale, with many riddles left unanswered, and he advised Gawain to ask Merlin about it, for if anyone should know about these things, it was the wisest man at the court.

So, as soon as the festivities were over, and the Lady Morgause, much cheered by all the attention paid to her, had left on her journey homeward to the North and her waiting husband, Gawain went to see Merlin. He was admitted at once, but then had to wait while the wise man finished making notes on a chart of the common constellations, muttering the while. Once finished, he straightened, and Gawain was surprised as always, at how tall and straight the old wizard still was, at an age when a slight stoop would have been fully understandable. Nor only that - the man must be fast approaching his three-score years, yet his hair was still black as night, with nary a white straw in it.

As if he had felt Gawain's scrutiny, the wise man turned and fixed his deep blue gaze on his visitor. "Now tell me in your own words", he said, "what it was you saw at the castle."

"I had thought you'd have heard", Gawain said. "It's all over the palace by now."

"I have heard both hearsay and conjecture", Merlin affirmed, "but I need to hear it from you who were there."

So Gawain once more launched into his story. Of the castle and drawbridge that just appeared (and then vanished at the end of the tale), of the empty rooms, the cauldron and the spear - here Merlin nodded as if in recognition - of the old fisher king and his banquet where everyone was served the food of his choice - and the wine too, if one thought of it. Of the maiden and the youth, and finally of the hair clip the maiden had left with Gawain.

Merlin did not ask to see it, yet Gawain showed it to him, as proof that he was not spinning yarns, incredible though his adventure may have sounded.

"And where would you say this castle stands - when it stands?" Merlin asked.

Gawain thought for a moment. "I don't rightly know. You see, my horse ..." and he told Merlin all about the wayward mare as well, and how she chose her own path more often

than not, unless forcibly hindered.

Merlin heard him out, then said, "I meant - can you describe the surroundings?"

"Barren", Gawain remembered. "Terribly barren, as if drought and floods had both blighted it - or an evil ... witch had put a spell upon it. Nothing grew around the castle, not even grass. The ground was dry and cracked, the trees without leaves as in the middle of winter. I saw no farms and no cattle - I do believe most of the king's subjects had been forced to leave and seek their livelihood elsewhere.

Merlin nodded. "That stands to reason, doesn't it? You told me the king was wounded in his privates."

"So he was, poor man", Gawain acknowledged. "His wound seemed to plague him greatly, for he could hardly walk, and he sat at table on a pillow, yet he was fond of fishing and managed to set out in a boat each day the weather would allow, so he said. He rarely caught anything, there not being much fish any more, yet I saw evidence that a great one had been hooked but escaped with half the line.

"He openly referred to his difficulties, and yet you never asked him about their nature?" Merlin said, somewhat reproachfully.

"He told me in so many words", Gawain said. "*An old war wound*, he said. *Spear through the thighs*. There was no need to ask anything further."

Merlin looked sharply at him. "I think you were put to a test, Sir Gawain. And I'm afraid you failed it."

"How so?" Gawain asked, appalled at the idea that he should have - unknowing - failed a test he was not even aware of.

"Was the land still barren as you left the next morning?"

"Of course. It's not as if it was likely to change any time soon." Gawain paused briefly. "Given the condition of its king."

"Whom you might have cured and did not", Merlin reproached him bluntly.

Gawain stared at him. "I? How could I have cured the king? He had been ailing for a long time. Many had tried - he had received the best ointments in the world, apparently to little avail."

"You should have asked what ailed him."

"Certainly not!" Gawain protested hotly. "That would have been a grave discourtesy. The nature of his wound was well known to all, and he had just told me about it. To ask what ailed him would have been not only discourteous, but insensitive, aye, downright cruel!"

Merlin's deep blue gaze was still fixed on him. Gawain was beginning to feel uncomfortable. But - he was in the right, was he not? He never could have mocked his host's suffering in such a despicable way. Ask what ailed him, indeed!

Merlin finally turned away, making a last, casual remark. "Perhaps it wasn't his wound as ailed him."

Gawain just stared. "How do you mean? If his wound was not what ailed him, then what in all the world could have plagued him more?"

And Merlin smiled, which was a rare thing. "That, we shall in all likelihood never know", he said. "After all - you did not ask."

*** The End ***

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