



The Green Knight

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Danish

Intermediate
23 min read

There lived once a king and queen who had an only daughter, a charming and beautiful girl, dearer to them than anything else in the world. When the princess was twelve years old the queen fell sick, and nothing that could be done for her was of any use. All the doctors in the kingdom did their best to cure her, but in spite of their efforts she grew worse and worse. As she was about to die, she sent for the king and said to him:

‘Promise me that whatever our daughter asks, you will do, no matter whether you wish to or not.’

The king at first hesitated, but as she added:

‘Unless you promise this I cannot die in peace,’ he at length did as she desired, and gave the promise, after which she became quite happy and died.

It happened that near the king’s palace lived a noble lady, whose little girl was of about the same age as the princess, and the two children were always together. After the queen’s death .the princess begged that this lady should come to live with her in the palace. The king was not quite pleased with this arrangement, for he distrusted the lady; but the princess wished so much for it that he did not like to refuse.

‘I am lonely, father,’ she said, ‘and all the beautiful presents you give me cannot make up to me for the loss of my mother. If this lady comes to live here I shall almost feel as if the queen had come back to me.’

So a magnificent suite of rooms was prepared and set aside for the new-comers and the little princess was wild

with joy at the thought of having her friends so near her. The lady and her daughter arrived, and for a long time all went well. They were very kind to the motherless princess, and she almost began to forget how dull she had been before they came. Then, one day, as she and the other girl were playing together in the gardens of the palace, the lady came to them, dressed for a journey, and kissed the princess tenderly, saying:

‘Farewell, my child; my daughter and I must leave you and go far away.’

The poor princess began to cry bitterly. ‘Oh ! you must not leave me ! ‘ she sobbed. ‘What shall I do without you ? Please, oh ! please stay.’

The lady shook her head.

‘It almost breaks my heart to go, dear child,’ she said, ‘but, alas ! it must be.’

‘Is there nothing that can keep you here ?’ asked the princess.

‘Only one thing,’ answered the lady, ‘and as that is impossible, we will not speak of it.’

‘Nothing is impossible,’ persisted the princess. ‘Tell me what it is, and it shall be done.’

So at last her friend told her.

‘If the king, your father, would make me his queen I would stay,’ she said; ‘but that he would never do.’

‘Oh, yes ! that is easy enough !’ cried the princess, delighted to think that, after all, they need not be parted. And she ran off to find her father, and beg him to marry the lady at once. He had done everything she asked, and she was quite certain he would do it.

‘What is it, my daughter ?’ he asked, when he saw her. ‘You have been crying — are you not happy ?’

‘Father,’ she said, ‘I have come to ask you to marry the countess’ — (for that was the lady’s real title) — ‘if you do not she will leave us, and then I shall be as lonely as before. You have never refused me what I have asked before, do not refuse me now.’

The king turned quite pale when he heard this. He did not like the countess, and so, of course, he did not wish to marry her; besides, he still loved his dead wife.

‘No that I cannot do, my child,’ he said at last.

At these words the princess began to cry once more, and the tears ran down her cheeks so fast, and she sobbed so bitterly, that her father felt quite miserable too. He remembered the promise he had given always to do what his daughter asked him, and in the end he gave way, and promised to marry the countess. The princess at once was all smiles, and ran away to tell the good news.

Soon after, the wedding was celebrated with great festivities, and the countess became queen; but, in spite of all the joy and merriment that filled the palace, the king looked pale and sad, for he was certain that ill would come of the marriage. Sure enough, in a very short time the queen’s manner towards the princess began to change. She was jealous of her because she, instead of her own daughter, was heir to the throne, and very soon she could no longer hide her thoughts. Instead of speaking kindly and lovingly as before, her words became rough and cruel, and once or twice she even slapped the princess’s face.

The king was very unhappy at seeing his dearly loved daughter suffer, and at last she became so wretched that he could no longer bear it. Calling her to him one day he said:

‘My daughter, you are no longer merry as you should be, and I fear that it is the fault of your step-mother. It will be better for you to live with her no longer; therefore I have built you a castle on the island in the lake, and that is to be your home in future. There you can do just as you like, and your step-mother will never enter it.’

The princess was delighted to hear this, and still more pleased when she saw the castle, which was full of beautiful things, and had a great number of windows looking out on the lovely blue water. There was a boat in which she might row herself about, and a garden where she could walk whenever she wished without fear of meeting the unkind queen; and the king promised to visit her every day.

For a long time she dwelt in peace, and grew more and more beautiful every day. Everyone who saw her said 'The princess is the loveliest lady in the land.' And this was told to the queen, who hated her step-daughter still more because her own daughter was ugly and stupid.

One day it was announced that a great meeting of knights and nobles was to be held in a neighbouring kingdom distant about two days' journey. There were to be all kinds of festivities, and a tournament was to be fought and a banquet held, in honour of the coming of age of the prince of the country.

The princess's father was amongst those invited, but before he set out he went to take leave of his daughter. Although she had such a beautiful home, and was no longer scolded by the queen, the poor princess was dreadfully lonely, and she told her father that it would be better if she were dead. He did his best to comfort her and promised that he would soon return. Was there anything he could do to help her ?

'Yes,' she said. 'You may greet the Green Knight from me.'

Now the king wondered a little at these words, for he had never heard of the Green Knight; but there was no time to ask questions, therefore he gave the promise, and rode off on his journey. When he came to the palace where the festivities were to take place, the first thing he did was to ask:

'Can anyone tell me where I may find the Green Knight ?'

No, they were very sorry; but none had ever heard of such a person either — certainly he was not to be found there. At this the king grew troubled, and not even the banquet or the tournament could make him feel happier.

He inquired of everyone he saw, 'Do you know the Green Knight ?' but the only answer he got was:

'No, your majesty, we have never heard of him.'

At length he began to believe that the princess was mistaken, and that there was no such person; and he started on his homeward journey sorrowfully enough, for this was the first time for many months that the princess had asked him to do anything for her and he could not do it. He thought so much about it that he did not notice the direction his horse was taking, and presently he found himself in the midst of a dense forest where he had never been before. He rode on and on, looking for the path, but as the sun began to set he realised that he was

lost. At last, to his delight, he saw a man driving some pigs, and riding up to him, he said:

'I have lost my way. Can you tell me where I am?'

'You are in the Green Knight's forest,' answered the man, 'and these are his pigs.'

At that the king's heart grew light. 'Where does the Green Knight live?' he asked.

'It is a very long way from here,' said the swineherd; 'but I will show you the path.' So he went a little farther with the king and put him on the right road, and the king bade him farewell.

Presently he came to a second forest, and there he met another swineherd driving pigs.

'Whose beasts are those, my man?' he asked.

'They are the Green Knight's,' said the man.

'And where does he live?' inquired the king.

'Oh, not far from here,' was the reply.

Then the king rode on, and about midday he reached a beautiful castle standing in the midst of the loveliest garden you can possibly imagine, where fountains played in marble basins, and peacocks walked on the smooth lawns. On the edge of a marble basin sat a young and handsome man, who was dressed from head to foot in a suit of green armour, and was feeding the goldfish which swam in the clear water.

'This must be the Green Knight,' thought the king; and going up to the young man he said courteously:

'I have come, sir, to give you my daughter's greeting. But I have wandered far, and lost my way in your forest.'

The knight looked at him for a moment as though puzzled.

'I have never met either you or your daughter,' he said at last; 'but you are very welcome all the same.' And he waved his hand towards the castle. However, the king took no notice, and told him that his daughter had sent a message to the Green Knight, and as he was the only Green Knight in the kingdom this message must be for him.

'You must pass the night with me here,' said the knight; and as the sun was already set, the king was thankful to accept the invitation. They sat down in the castle hail to a magnificent banquet, and although he had travelled much and visited many monarchs in their palaces, the king had never fared better than at the table of the Green Knight, whilst his host himself was so clever and agreeable, that he was delighted, and thought 'what a charming son-in-law this knight would make !'

Next morning, when he was about to set forth on his journey home, the Green Knight put into his hand a jewelled casket, saying:

'Will your highness graciously condescend to carry this gift to the princess, your daughter ? It contains my portrait, that when I come she may know me; for I feel certain that she is the lady I have seen night after night in a dream, and I must win her for my bride.'

The king gave the knight his blessing, and promised to take the gift to his daughter. With that he set off, and ere long reached his own country.

The princess was awaiting him anxiously when he arrived, and ran to his arms in her joy at seeing her dear father again.

'And did you see the Green Knight ?' she asked.

'Yes,' answered the king, drawing out the casket the knight had sent, 'and he begged me to give you this that you may know him when he arrives and not mistake him for somebody else.'

When the princess saw the portrait she was delighted, and exclaimed: 'It is indeed the man whom I have seen in my dreams ! Now I shall be happy, for he and no other shall be my husband.'

Very soon after the Green Knight arrived, and he looked so handsome in his green armour, with a long green

plume in his helmet, that the princess fell still more in love with him than before, and when he saw her, and recognised her as the lady whom he had so often dreamt of, he immediately asked her to be his bride. The princess looked down and smiled as she answered him:

‘We must keep the secret from my step-mother until the wedding-day,’ said she, ‘for otherwise she will find a way to do us some evil.’

‘As you please,’ replied the prince; ‘but I must visit you daily, for I can live no longer without you ! I will come early in the morning and not leave until it is dark; thus the queen will not see me row across the lake.’

For a long time, the Green Knight visited the princess every day, and spent many hours wandering with her through the beautiful gardens where they knew the queen could not see them. But secrets, as you know, are dangerous things, and at last, one morning, a girl who was in service at the palace happened to be walking by the lake early in the morning and beheld a wonderfully handsome young man, in a beautiful suit of green satin, come down to the, edge of the lake. Not guessing that he was watched, he got into a little boat that lay moored to the bank, and rowed himself over to the island where the princess’s castle stood. The girl went home wondering who the knight could be; and as she was brushing the queen’s hair, she said to her:

‘Does your majesty know that the princess has a suitor ?’

‘Nonsense !’ replied the queen crossly. But she was dreadfully vexed at the mere idea, as her own daughter was still unmarried, and was likely to remain so, because she was so ill-tempered and stupid that no one wanted her.

‘It is true,’ persisted the girl. ‘He is dressed all in green, and is very handsome. I saw him myself, though he did not see me, and he got into a boat and rowed over to the island, and the princess was waiting for him at the castle door.’

‘I must find out what this means,’ thought the queen. But she bade her maid of honour cease chattering and mind her own business.

Early next morning the queen got up and went down to the shore of the lake, where she hid herself behind a tree. Sure enough there came a handsome knight dressed in green, just as the maid of honour had said, and he

got into a boat and rowed over to the island where the princess awaited him. The angry queen remained by the lake all day, but it was not until the evening that the knight returned, and leaping on shore, he tied the boat to its moorings and went away through the forest.

'I have caught my step-daughter nicely,' thought the queen. 'But she shall not be married before my own sweet girl. I must find a way to put a stop to this.'

Accordingly she took a poisoned nail and stuck it in the handle of the oar in such a way that the knight would be sure to scratch his hand when he picked up the oar. Then she went home laughing, very much pleased with her cleverness.

The next day the Green Knight went to visit the princess as usual; but directly he took up the oars to row over to the island he felt a sharp scratch on his hand.

'Oof! he said, dropping the oars from pain, 'what can have scratched so?' But, look as he might, only a tiny mark was to be seen.

'Well, it's strange how a nail could have come here since yesterday,' he thought. 'Still, it is not very serious, though it hurts a good deal.' And, indeed, it seemed such a little thing that he did not mention it to the princess. However, when he reached home in the evening, he felt so ill he was obliged to go to bed, with no one to attend on him except his old nurse. But of this, of course, the princess knew nothing; and the poor girl, fearing lest some evil should have befallen him, or some other maiden more beautiful than she should have stolen his heart from her, grew almost sick with waiting. Lonely indeed she was, for her father, who would have helped her, was travelling in a foreign country, and she knew not how to obtain news of her lover.

In this manner time passed away, and one day, as she sat by the open window crying and feeling very sad, a little bird came and perched on the branch of a tree that stood just underneath. It began to sing, and so beautifully that the princess was obliged to stop crying and listen to it, and very soon she found out that the bird was trying to attract her attention.

'Tu-whit, tu-whit ! your lover is sick!' it sang.

‘Alas !’ cried the princess. ‘What can I do ?’

‘Tu-whit, tu-whit ! you must go to your father’s palace !’

‘And what shall I do there ?’ she asked.

‘Tu-whit ! there you will find a snake with nine young ones.’

‘Ugh !’ answered the princess with a shiver, for she did not like snakes. But the little bird paid no heed.

‘Put them in a basket and go to the Green Knight’s palace,’ said she.

‘And what am I to do with them when I get there ?’ she cried, blushing all over, though there was no one to see her but the bird.

‘Dress yourself as a kitchen-maid and ask for a place. Tu-whit ! Then you must make soup out of the snakes. Give it three times to the knight and he will be cured. Tu-whit !’

‘But what has made him ill ?’ asked the princess. The bird, however, had flown away, and there was nothing for it but to go to her father’s palace and look for the snakes. When she came there she found the mother snake with the nine little snakes all curled up so that you could hardly tell their heads from their tails. The princess did not like having to touch them, but when the old snake had wriggled out of the nest to bask a little in the sun, she picked up the young ones and put them in a basket as the bird had told her, and ran off to find the Green Knight’s castle. All day she walked along, sometimes stopping to pick the wild berries, or to gather a nosegay; but though she rested now and then, she would not lie down to sleep before she reached the castle. At last she came in sight of it, and just then she met a girl driving a flock of geese.

‘Good day!’ said the princess; ‘can you tell me if this is the castle of the Green Knight ?’

‘Yes, that it is,’ answered the goose-girl, ‘for I am driving his geese. But the Green Knight is very ill, and they say that unless he can be cured within three days he will surely die.’

At this news the princess grew as white as death. The ground seemed to spin round, and she closed her hand tight on a bush that was standing beside her. By — and — by, with a great effort, she recovered herself and said

to the goose-girl:

‘Would you like to have a fine silk dress to wear?’

The goose-girl’s eyes glistened.

‘Yes, that I would!’ answered she.

‘Then take off your dress and give it to me, and I will give you mine,’ said the princess.

The girl could scarcely believe her ears, but the princess was already unfastening her beautiful silk dress, and taking off her silk stockings and pretty red shoes; and the goose-girl lost no time in slipping out of her rough linen skirt and tunic. Then the princess put on the other’s rags and let down her hair, and went to the kitchen to ask for a place.

‘Do you want a kitchen-maid?’ she said.

‘Yes, we do,’ answered the cook, who was too busy to ask the new-come many questions.

The following day, after a good night’s rest, the princess set about her new duties. The other servants were speaking of their master, and saying to each other how ill he was, and that unless he could be cured within three days he would surely die.

The princess thought of the snakes, and the bird’s advice, and lifting her head from the pots and pans she was scouring, she said: ‘I know how to make a soup that has such a wonderful power that whoever tastes it is sure to be cured, whatever his illness may be. As the doctors cannot cure your master shall I try?’

At first they all laughed at her.

‘What! a scullion cure the knight when the best physicians in the kingdom have failed?’

But at last, just because all the physicians had failed, they decided that it would do no harm to try; and she ran off joyfully to fetch her basket of snakes and make them into broth. When this was ready she carried some to the knight’s room and entered it boldly, pushing aside all the learned doctors who stood beside his bed. The poor knight was too ill to know her, besides, she was so ragged and dirty that he would not have been likely to

do so had he been well; but when he had taken the soup he was so much better that he was able to sit up.

The next day he had some more, and then he was able to dress himself.

‘That is certainly wonderful soup !’ said the cook.

The third day, after he had eaten his soup, the knight was quite well again.

‘Who are you ?’ he asked the girl; ‘was it you who made this soup that has cured me ?’

‘Yes,’ answered the princess.

‘Choose, then, whatever you wish as a reward,’ said the knight, ‘and you shall have it.’

‘I would be your bride !’ said the princess.

The knight frowned in surprise at such boldness, and shook his head.

‘That is the one thing I cannot grant,’ he said, ‘for I am pledged to marry the most beautiful princess in the world. Choose again.’

Then the princess ran away and washed herself and mended her rags, and when she returned the Green Knight recognised her at once.

You can think what a joyful meeting that was !

Soon after, they were married with great splendour. All the knights and princes in the kingdom were summoned to the wedding, and the princess wore a dress that shone like the sun, so that no one had ever beheld a more gorgeous sight. The princess’s father, of course, was present, but the wicked queen and her daughter were driven out of the country, and as nobody has seen them since, very likely they were eaten by wild beasts in the forest. But the bride and bridegroom were so happy that they forgot all about them, and they lived with the old king till he died, when they succeeded him.

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