

Dame Ragnell
An Authurian Legend¹ Retold
by May Cotton © 2025

This is not how the story was told to me, not exactly, but it is the way that I tell it to you, because I have need of making you see it more clearly than I saw it at first. And so I will embellish the setting a bit, perhaps the tapestry, the smoothness of skin, the odor of gall. Allow me this, if you will, for I am a storyteller, and it is in the embellishment of the truth that I find much pleasure.

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It begins there in the woods. You see them. Those woods over there beyond the towers of Avalon. They are a dark and dreary woods. They have been feared by the people of Avalon since the beginning of time. Well, no, that's probably an exaggeration. The woods have only been feared by the people since Avalon began, and that's not *such* a very long time, only a few centuries, so you see the woods may not always have been quite so fearsome, but really, that's not my point. My point is that the woods are where the story begins. There in the woods. On the road, narrow though it is, where Arthur is chasing the boar that he has just wounded with his spear.

Into the thicket, the boar flees, squealing and scrambling, trying to flee the pain of its bleeding side. Arthur pulls up his horse against the wall of brambles, knowing that the mortally wounded squealing creature will suffer if he cannot catch it and dispatch it from its life. Arthur is honorable in his treatment of animals, just as he is honorable in his treatment of his people. For he too, though he is King, is a Knight of the Round Table, and he must always do the honorable thing. In this case the honorable thing requires that Arthur abandon his horse, his armor, his shield, his sword. The opening in the thicket where the boar has gone is so small that wearing only his thin undershirt and leggings, Arthur squeezes through the brambles, emerges bleeding from a dozen small but painful cuts, and follows the boar to the foot of the tree where it has collapsed. Wielding the only weapon he has brought into the thicket with him, his Croilian dagger, he leaps at the boar and slashes its throat to put it out of its misery.

Now this is not part of the original story I was told, but I was there when it happened, so I can add this in good faith. How is that I was there, you ask? Well that I cannot tell you just yet, for that would prejudice your view of the story. So you must trust that I know what I am

¹Based loosely on *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table: Retold Out of the Old Romances* by Roger Lancelyn Green, with illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley. A Borzoi Book published by Alfred A Knopf, Inc. © 1953 by Roger Lancelyn Green.

talking about because I was there, I was part of it. I saw it happen. I participated. I'll tell you later which one of the characters I was. But for now trust me when I say that I was there.

Just beyond the tree was a clearing, and it was into this clearing that Arthur dragged the dead boar. Just as he could not let the creature die in agony, his code of honor required that he could not waste the meat that he had just killed. Dragging the boar up onto a rock where its head would hang lower than its body, in order for the blood to drain completely, Arthur slit the animal's throat and began to skin the carcass. He paused once or twice to gaze around him at the clearing, contemplating the hanging vines, picturing in his mind how he would use them to hang the carcass so it would be out of reach of scavengers while he went back to camp to get Gawain to help him carry the meat through the thicket. Or perhaps he could find a better way around once he got back to his horse. In his hurry to spare the agony of his prey, he had not bothered to look for another way in. He had simply followed the boar.

Now as he worked skinning and cutting vines and hanging the carcass in the trees, Arthur thought about the parts of the forest he knew which surrounded this part of Camelot's hunting ground. It was quiet in the trees, and Arthur savored the peacefulness of being alone for a change. It was so rare for a king to find time to be alone. It was considered too dangerous, and so Arthur was rarely alone except in his bed at night. It was fabulous to be in the woods, breathing in the fresh clean air of spring, savoring the fragrance of the pink lilies growing along the edges of the clearing. Once or twice Arthur thought he caught an inkling of movement within the deep shadows of the forest around him, but when he stopped his work to study the silent depths of the forest, he saw nothing at all.

Nothing at all. Only the dark greens and grays of the shadowy trees. Even the bark of the trees looked gray instead of brown. He mused at the silence. There had been no call of bird or rustle of small creature in the grass since Arthur had entered the thicket. He wondered that the birds had not grown used to his presence and resumed their daily lives. Arthur, of course, was not afraid. Kings are not allowed to be afraid. It's not part of the job description. So instead Arthur was wary, and he listened intently for the missing sounds in the woods around him.

When the sense of movement came a third time, Arthur stopped his work on the boar and stepped into the middle of the clearing. He stood perfectly still, his ears alert as his eyes scanned the depths of the glade. No sound was to be heard. No bird, no insect, no rustle of leaves. Only stillness. Arthur turned slowly and silently, studying the whole of the foliage surrounding the clearing. Nothing moved, nothing but the trickle of sweat coursing down his lower back. The quiet was unnerving, and yet there seemed to be nothing there. Nothing

Arthur could see, anyway. And so he went back to the boar again, working hurriedly and intently, eager to finish the work and get back to his horse and his sword.

Suddenly, without word or warning, there was a pair of feet in his line of vision that had not been there before. He heard no approach, saw no movement, but as he slowly raised his head, taking in the tattered foot and leg wrappings, dirty tunic, and stringy blonde hair surrounding a face of quiet innocence, he thought for a moment that he was being confronted by an angel. But he saw instead it was a simple child, a large child, but a child nonetheless. Perhaps this creature was even a full grown man, if in fact it was male, for of that Arthur was unsure, but it certainly was a simple minded creature who stared intently at Arthur's boar as it licked its lips. This was not the sort of scavenger Arthur had been anticipating, but it was clear the boy (for Arthur had decided at last that it must be a boy, perhaps about 14) was hungry, and Arthur realized suddenly that he certainly was hungry himself, and being that they were in a largish clearing with a goodly amount of wood around the edges, Arthur determined to build a fire and cook a portion of the boar. Gawain and the horse could wait until he had fed both himself and this simple minded lad who stood before him.

"Are you hungry?" Arthur asked the boy, who raised big wide eyes to Arthur's and nodded solemnly. Clearly the boy was intelligent enough to understand when spoken to, so Arthur went on. "Gather some wood for a fire, and I will cook us both some meat," he suggested.

Silently the boy moved away, and silently he returned with a large armful of wood. Three times he went back into the wood, making not a sound, each time returning with as much wood as he could carry. By the time the fourth load of wood was piled with the others, Arthur had carved a large slab of meat off the boar and skewered it onto willow stakes. The boy stood patiently holding the stakes while Arthur laid the fire. Although he had brought a marvelously well chosen supply of firewood, it was evident that the simple child did not know the basics of fire building. *I wonder who cares for you,* Arthur thought as he struck his flint to spark the kindling.

Soon there was a good blaze cooking the boar meat, and Arthur was trying to talk to the boy, who obviously wanted food but not conversation. He shook his head violently at several of Arthur's well meant questions about possible family in the area who might be caring for the boy; but Arthur soon decided to leave the questioning alone lest he distress the child so much that he become violent. The boy was obviously wild, Arthur decided at last, and with that in mind, he did not let the child out of his sight.

Once the meat was cooked, Arthur watched the wild boy ravage a goodly portion with his teeth, after which he wiped his greasy hands on his thighs, swiped his mouth with the back

of his hand, smiled broadly across the fire at Arthur, and disappeared. Vanished. In a flash. Arthur was so stunned that for a moment he could not believe his eyes. Then he laughed out loud and shouted a hearty thanks to God. As devout as he was honorable, Arthur realized that he had just entertained an angel. Not only entertained him, but put him to work gathering wood for the fire! Abashed, Arthur finished his own meal, hung the remainder of the boar in the tree, kicked dirt over the fire to put it out, and set off through the thicket to retrieve his weapons and his horse.

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The story being told around these days is not the way things actually happened. But let me remind you that I was there, so my account is the most accurate. According to what I heard most recently, it was there in the clearing that Arthur was confronted by the Black Knight. I can assure it didn't happen there. If Arthur had been attacked in the clearing, he would have had a fighting chance. In reality, the Black Knight confronted Arthur as he was crawling out of the thicket, on his hands and knees—head, arms and shoulders out in the sunlight, torso, arse and legs still scrambling through the brambles. It was there, in this decidedly humiliating position, that the Black Knight greeted Arthur with the tip of Arthur's own sword.

“At my mercy, king,” the evil knight spat at Arthur. “Your life is forfeit to me at last.”

“I pray you, good sir,” Arthur pleaded, “spare me. Do me the honor due a knight. We sat at table together in an earlier time. Let your memories of that time be the catalyst to find honor in your heart, and spare me this humiliation.” Arthur was very eloquent, you see, and though I am unable to reproduce his exact words— for I am a storyteller, not a recorder—so I will let you imagine how wonderfully Arthur pleaded his case with the Black Knight, until at last the knight regarded Arthur and spoke his reply.

“Very well, king, enemy of mine. I will treat you with mercy to this extent. I shall give you a riddle, and you may have one year to puzzle it out. One year from today, I shall ride into Camelot unmolested, and you will tell me the answer. If you cannot unravel the riddle, I shall kill you there, in your own castle, before all your subjects, and they shall not molest me or attempt to prevent me, because you will order that your life is mine to do with as I please.” Arthur agreed, for what could he do. It was either die now, alone and hidden in the forest where wild animals might drag his body away and Gawain would never find it and Gywnevere would never know what happened to him, or he could attempt the riddle, possibly live, and if not, then at least there would be no questions about his demise.

“Very well. Tell me the riddle.”

“This is the riddle: What do women really want?”

Arthur's face fell, the color draining away as he realized he was doomed. There could be no single answer to such a question, he was sure, and now he was facing the final year of his life. So filled was he with despair, that he did not even notice the tip of the sword bite into his neck as the Black Knight gave a playful shove before dropping the weapon at Arthur's feet and riding away in a trail of laughter.

It was there that Gawain found him—sitting in a daze on the side of the trail, his back against the brambles and a thin trail of blood trickling down his neck onto the front of his shirt.

By the time they returned to Camelot, Arthur was inconsolable. The optimistic Gawain had not been able to revive Arthur's spirits, even though he was certain the answer to the riddle could be found. "Don't you see, Arthur," Gawain argued as they rode toward the city, "Since the Black Knight called it a riddle, there has to be a single correct answer. We should not assume that the Black Knight is tricking you."

"How can there be an answer to such a question?" Arthur moaned. "Who could answer such a question? What do women really want? Do women even know?"

"We must ask, my lord," Gawain told him in that quiet, soothing voice he often used when his lord and master was downcast. "We will ask all the women in the kingdom, if we must. But we will find the answer."

Later in the royal chambers, Gwynevere offered similar advice as she cleaned the blood off the small cut Arthur's sword had inflicted on his neck. "There is an answer, I'm sure," she told him. "I don't know myself what it might be, but I feel deep in my being that there is an answer. We will seek until we find it. I am certain we will know when we hear the true answer."

But they did not. Every day at his bidding, the women of the court came before him, offering what they believed might be the answer to the riddle. And Arthur only grew more confused, for it seemed that every woman had a different answer, and every woman was certain that her answer was the universal truth. But it was not so, for every woman was also asked to evaluate the answers that had already been offered, and no matter what answer was given, there was always a woman who not only disagreed, but clearly did not want that thing which another woman had proposed as what every woman really wants.

Arthur was astounded to learn that not every woman wanted a child. Not every one wanted a man. Not every one wanted riches. Or beauty. Or favor. Or talent. Or love. Some wanted wisdom or education. It frightened him to realize that women were far more complex than he had ever imagined, and he looked at Gwynevere with a new respect.

With each passing day, Arthur grew more discouraged. Every day he realized was one day closer to his last, and he could not bear to think of the humiliation he would suffer at the

hands of the Black Knight before the eyes of all his people. Before the eyes of Gwynevere, his wife. Before the eyes of Gawain, his best friend. Before the knights of the round table. He thought of all those poor souls in the galleys of his castle, the lowly servants, the peasants in the field, the lords in the castles in the surrounding areas. He thought he had been a good king, but he had not had a son who'd lived; when Arthur himself died, there would be no one to lead the people, no one to ward off evils like the Black Knight.

Arthur despaired of ever learning the answer to reverse this dreadful pattern that was upon them. Surely with Arthur dead, the Black Knight himself would take control of Camelot, for who would oppose the man who opposed Arthur? Who would oppose the man who came into Arthur's own home at Arthur's own invitation to slay him before the eyes of all. Would he even be allowed to die honorably? Arthur wondered. He was fully aware of the horrors to which the Black Knight exposed his victims before he killed them.

There was a story of a woman whose breasts has been cut off. There was a noble who had been publicly raped. Several had been drawn and quartered or dispatched by cutting out their hearts. The Black Knight was the most vile form of evil in the kingdom.

Arthur despaired and despaired. Then he grew guilt-ridden because despair was a mortal sin, and falling into despair, dying in despair, would further doom Arthur more than the coming end of his kingdom was doing to him now. So Arthur turned again to prayer and fasting, going daily to his knees at the altar of the Christ, because it has been proven that the Christ was the most powerful of all the Gods. Daily Arthur rose at dawn and spent an hour on his knees on the cold stone floor of the chapel. He knelt motionless, praying fervently at first, but in later months just listening, quieting his mind and heart to hear the Voice tell him what the answer might be. But nothing came. He prostrated himself, naked upon the cold stones, but still nothing came. Nothing happened. Nothing changed.

In grief he went each morning to sit with Gwynevere as she broke her fast. He would not break his until the Sabbath, finally he decided, that grief was enough. It was time to celebrate what they had, for the final few moments that they had it, for the end of his year was but three weeks away, and Arthur knew that his people would remember him with greater love if he feasted them.

And so they feasted. A greater party in all of Camelot had never been seen, for Arthur put his heart and soul into blessing his people. The kitchen workers came in with the diners and joined the festivities, the servers sat down with the nobles once the food was delivered to the tables. All were joyfully eating and drinking when the doors of the hall crashed open, and in strode the tallest, ugliest, smelliest, loathsome monstrous woman ever seen in the history of man. Nearly deafening was the silence in that first stunned moment. Then she crashed into the

hall, strode up to the king, stopping to snatch a leg of mutton from the hand of a noble, and planted her abominable self three feet from Arthur's royal self.

"Madam," Arthur managed feebly. "how may Camelot and King Arthur assist you?"

The creature belched noisily, spraying Gywnevere with spittle.

"I am Dame Ragnell," she bellowed, "and I have come to tell you the answer to the riddle."

The collective inhale from the hall was riveting. Arthur leaned forward in his chair, and gestured to the woman. "Pray, sit, Lady. Join our festivities. Tell me what boon you would have for the answer to the riddle." Arthur was no fool. He knew that an ogress would not come and give freely of anything. He knew that the price for the answer to the riddle would be high.

The hag thrust her disgusting body into the chair beside the king, scratching her genitals and taking a massive bite of mutton as she did so. She looked at the king, at the queen, at the people, taking them in with her beady green eyes, as she chewed and scratched her way up to enormous, misshapen breasts. She saw Arthur's anguish, Gywnevere's revulsion, the ranges of fear and disgust in the eyes of the people. She knew what she was to them. She knew how abhorrent she was. She turned and looked into Arthur's eyes and spoke.

"This is what I ask. Give me your best knight for my husband, and I will tell you the answer that will give you your life."

"Oh, nay," gasped Arthur, thinking of Gawain, whom he loved both as son and brother. "That is a fate worse than my own death."

"Nay, my lord," spoke up Gawain. He rose and came forward. "It is I who serve you, not you me. I will gladly marry this lady to save both your life and the life of our precious kingdom, which will falter without your gracious leadership."

"Oh, no, Gawain, my friend. I cannot do such a thing to you. Look at this creature. She is the most loathsome being we have ever encountered. How could you take such a woman to your bed?"

"I am a virgin, my lord. There will be no basis for comparison."

The king and knight argued briefly, while the ogress dug deeply into her nostril with a dirty finger. Arthur looked at Dame Ragnell and shuddered. She was uncourtly as well as ugly. As though reading his mind, she reached for his flagon, drained it, and belched dramatically. Tears ran down his cheeks as he embraced Gawain and declared, "My friend, you love me too much."

"Nay, my lord," Gawain demurred. "I love thee not nearly enough."

He turned to the lady, knelt on one knee, and held forth his hand. “Lady Ragnell, wilt thou marry me?” The ogress laughed and slapped her knee.

“Ey! Ey, Sir Gawain, I will.”

Arthur took a deep breath, turned to his wife, and began the practical preparations for the coming nuptials. “Gwen, my darling, will you take Lady Ragnell to the women’s quarters and find her a suitable gown?” Not giving her a chance to answer or protest, he turned to the ogress. “Lady Ragnell, would you care to bathe before the wedding?”

Ragnell smiled and nodded.

“Very well, then, shall we say at sunset in the chapel this evening?”

Ragnell nodded again, and Gawain nodded as well.

“Excellent. I shall speak to the friar.” Arthur stood then and addressed the crowd. “Good people. Our feast has become a feast of celebration, a wedding feast for the nuptials of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell. Celebrate!”

The people cheered, Ragnell rose and followed Gwynevere to the bath chambers, and Gawain looked up weakly at Arthur, standing above him as Gawain himself still knelt where he had proposed to the monster. Arthur reached down and drew Gawain to his feet.

“My friend, you do not have to do this,” he said softly.

“Nay, my lord, I must, for now my honor is at stake as well.”

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At sunset they all gathered in the chapel. It had been decorated with garlands of flowers, and Lady Ragnell had been fitted with a large flowing gown, and a veil to cover her hideous face. The friar stood at the front of the sanctuary working hard to maintain a practiced look of calm as he watched the strange couple walk slowly down the aisle.

Lady Ragnell dwarfed the brave Gawain, his hand shockingly small as it held her enormous paw. There had been no gloves large enough, nor had they found any shoes, so the quickly made gown did not disguise her huge bare feet and hands. Yet she held her fingers delicately so as not to claw Gawain’s hand, and as she strode forward on her calloused soles, she made nary a sound. It was clear to all that Ragnell truly was a lady in spite of her hideous appearance.

Gwynevere and Arthur themselves stood behind the bridal couple. The king had not wanted to force anyone else to witness the vows, as he himself felt so dreadfully uncomfortable with the way the events were proceeding. He continued to chastise himself for Gawain agreeing to marry this creature, even though he knew it indeed was Gawain’s choice, not his own.

When they reached the steps at the front of the altar, Gawain climbed up to the level of the priest while Ragnell remained on the chapel floor. In this odd configuration, Gawain appeared to be just a hair taller than his bride, and when he turned to face her, he was facing the whole of the congregation while she continued with her back to them. Even with her back turned, her voice rang through the building when she said “I do.” At the end of the ceremony, the friar skipped the suggestion that Gawain kiss his bride, not wanting to embarrass the brave knight any further. Instead he encouraged the couple to join hands and hasten to the festivities awaiting them.

I shall not bore you with descriptions of the great hall and the lavish spread the kitchen had created. Suffice it to say it was a party far more magnificent than the one Ragnell had interrupted when she came demanding marriage in exchange for the answer to the riddle. The feasting went on through the night and into the wee hours of the morning, but the newly married couple had slipped away to the bridal chamber.

There Ragnell removed her veil and gown and stood before Gawain in all her horrifying naked glory.

“Now, my husband,” she said to him, “you must kiss me so we can consummate our marriage.”

Gawain moved close to her, his face pale. But in her eyes he saw a deep sorrow that gave him the courage to set his lips against hers and perform the kiss. He was so overcome with emotion that he turned away from her quickly, his face in his hands. He did not know exactly what it was he was feeling, but he found himself suppressing a sob.

“Gawain!” said a soft melodious voice behind him. “My sweet lord Gawain!”

The knight turned then and gasped. Before him stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, tall and slender with luscious brown curls driving down over her shoulders, covering her nakedness.

“Who are you?!” Gawain cried out. “Where is my wife?”

“I am your wife,” she replied. “I am the Lady Ragnell.”

“How can this be?” asked the startled knight.

“I was enchanted by the wicked Morgain le Fay, as was my brother, whom you know as the Black Knight.”

Gawain rushed to the lady and embraced her, then lifted the veil from the floor and draped it around her lest she be embarrassed by her lack of clothing. He led her to the couch across the room and sank down with her, holding her beautifully soft slender hands. He pulled her into a proper kiss which caused them both to sigh with pleasure. Then Ragnell pulled away and said, “There is more I need to tell you.

“You see, when Morgain cursed me, she told me marriage’s kiss would only free me for 12 hours each day. So you must decide whether I am to be as beautiful as I am now during the daylight or at night. Will you want me to be seen at Court as my true self and have me be the horrid ogre in your bed at night, or would you prefer to have me be ugly at Court and beautiful when I lie in your arms in the dark?”

“Oh my dear wife, I cannot make that choice for you,” Gawain replied. “It is you who must decide. It is you who must live with the remaining curse. I will love you truly either way, but I cannot bear the thought of how miserable you would be without friends and companionship when I am away engaging in the tasks set for me by the king. I can see how loathsome others think you, and I think it will cause you much suffering. But I will not choose for you. You must choose for yourself.”

Ragnell threw herself into his arms and wept. “Of my noble and unselfish husband. By making your choice, to leave the choice to me, you have undone the rest of the enchantment. With the curse gone, I can always be as you see me now and all the world will see.”

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Gawain woke early and gazed upon his beautiful bride as she slept peacefully in the ray of sunshine beaming across the bed. Her soft sable hair was strewn upon the pillow like a halo, her bare arms laid across her chest as it gently rose and fell. After a few minutes of sheer bliss, Gawain eased out of the bed and pulled on his clothes before creeping out of the room and gently shutting the door.

Once in the hallway, he headed toward the women’s quarters, where he knocked at the door of the ladies in waiting. A bleary-eyed blonde opened the door and immediately recoiled from the sight of Gawain. None of the ladies had been willing to assist Dame Ragnell the previous day, and Queen Gwynevere alone had helped the monster dress. Now Gawain was clearly looking for someone else to assist his bride.

Ever the gentleman, the knight courteously requested the assistance of one of the ladies. “Please,” he queried, “my bride has nothing to wear today, for the wedding gown is vastly inappropriate. Can someone come and assist her?” The blonde drew back and surveyed the room, where all the ladies were now sitting up in their beds.

“Sir Gawain requires assistance for his bride,” she called out. “Who will accept this challenge?” No one volunteered, so the ladies drew lots, and it fell on Selina to become Ragnell’s maid. The girl was not happy, but she knew her place. One did not refuse a knight.

“Give me a few minutes to ready myself, kind sir, and I shall be at your door soon.” The maid curtsied and closed the door as Gawain bowed his thanks.

Ten minutes later, Selina knocked quietly at Gawain's chamber door. He drew her into the room with a finger to his lips, indicating she should refrain from making any noise. Then he led her to the bed where she beheld the beautiful sleeping Ragnell. Selina threw her hands over her mouth to keep from gasping aloud, her eyes wide as she took in the changed lady. Following Gawain's lead, they removed themselves from the chamber and whispered quietly about what Ragnell's needs would be. Selina had seen the arms outside the covers and recognized just how tiny the ogress had become.

"How tall is she, my lord," Selina whispered, and Gawain gestured to indicate Ragnell was roughly half a foot taller than Selina. "Very good, sir. I shall return in a short while with a hopefully suitable wardrobe." After promising not to reveal Ragnell's change in appearance, the maid hurried to the room where a series of armoires held various sizes of garments.

Choosing one, Selina searched through the armoires until she found the dress she was looking for. She had tried it on herself a few months back, imagining what it would be like to wear such a beautiful gown. Certain it was the right one, she gathered it into her arms, along with the appropriate petticoats and undergarments, stockings and shoes, and returned to Gawain's chamber.

The lady was now awake, and delighted to learn Gawain had secured assistance from such an astute maid. "Wilt thou bathe, m'lady," Selina asked, but Ragnell demurred, having bathed the previous day.

Gawain had stepped out while the two women went about their business, and when he returned he found his new wife resplendent in the yellow gown Selina had chosen for her. The beautiful brown hair had been swept up and back to show off Ragnell's lovely neck and face, and somewhere Selina had secured earrings and a choker to finish the look.

Gawain offered his arm, and together he and Ragnell descended the stairway into the main hall. The room grew silent as more and more of the breakfasters turned to look at the radiant couple. Noticing the lack of commotion, Arthur rose from his seat to determine what might have gone amiss. Instead of seeing trouble, he saw the newly married couple approaching him.

Gawain bowed deeply while Ragnell shyly looked up at Arthur and Gwynevere. "My lord," the knight stated, "I wish to present my no-longer-enchanted wife, Dame Ragnell." Arthur gasped and nearly dropped the flagon in his hand. Catching himself, he nodded and received her elegant curtsy with pleasure.

"Lady Ragnell," he responded, "you are welcome indeed. Pray tell what has occurred that you are now transformed."

“Of course, my lord,” she replied. “If I may but break my fast first, then you shall have the full tale as well as the answer to the riddle. But I must tell it only to you, so the Black Knight does not realize it came from me and use that as a loophole to trap you further.”

Following the meal, in which Ragnell ate as delicately as would be expected from a well schooled lady, the king took her aside to his private office and listened to her story.

“My father lay dying,” she began, “when we were visited by a sorceress who claimed she could heal him. She was very convincing, so we allowed her into his chamber. I will not bore you with all the details, but in the end, my father was dead, my brother had been transformed into the Black Knight, and I was changed into the monster you saw yesterday. It was Gawain’s wise choices that freed me from the curse, but my brother can only be cured by the answer to his riddle.” With that she motioned Arthur to lean towards her so she could whisper in his ear.

Arthur’s eyebrows rose as he learned what it was that women really want, and then he thanked Ragnell and bade her hide herself when the Black Knight was due to arrive.

* * *

Yes, I know. You want to know the answer to the riddle. But first I must tell you who I am, because otherwise you will not understand why I know the answer and how it came to be that I could be present for all the parts of my story. You see, this *is* my story, for I, Dame Ragnell, was there for all the events. I was the boy Arthur fed in the clearing. I was hovering above the hedge as Arthur crawled out and was accosted by my brother. I was there in the castle, disguised as Arthur’s dog, running here and there as he queried the women for their answers to the riddle. I laid beside him in the chapel as he prostrated himself before his god, begging for an answer. I had only to slip outside and transform once again to become the monster Morgain had changed me into so I could confront Arthur as the Ogre.

You see, when Morgain cast her terrible curse on me, she did not know that I was a sorceress in my own right and could shape shift out of the ogre when she was no longer present. But she was far more powerful than me, so I could not remove the curse alone.

Arthur was correct when he realized he had entertained an angel, for I am not fully human, and when I depart this earth at last, I will have borne and left behind Gawain’s son. Our son will be called Percival, and he is destined to become the purest knight ever to sit at the Round Table.

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But back to the story. Two days hence the Black Knight came calling, just as he said he would. It had been exactly one year since he confronted Arthur and offered to spare his life if he could answer the riddle. Being every bit as crass as I had been, he rode his big horse right into the hall and up to the throne where Arthur sat waiting. Excalibur lay across Arthur's knees, but he made no move to pick it up.

Arthur did not yet know who the Black Knight really was. I had told the king the Black Knight was my brother, but I did not reveal his name. Arthur knew only that he was a former Knight of the Round Table, but when I said it was Morgain who had enchanted us, the king grew enraged. He made all kinds of vile statements about the half-sister he had hated, indicating his hatred had only increased since she had tricked him into siring the dreadful Mordred on her. In the course of his rantings, I learned the poor man had never sired a child on anyone else, neither Gwynevere nor one of the many servants he had taken to bed. We all knew how evil Morgain was, and I couldn't help but wonder whether she had spelled Arthur as well, causing him to become infertile.

When the Black Knight confronted the king, Arthur seemed unusually calm, and I think my brother was thrown by this attitude. He sputtered and gestured before climbing down from his horse to stride forward and relieve Arthur of the sword. Pointing it at the king's throat, the Black Knight demanded Arthur answer the riddle.

"What do women really want?" my brother roared in a loud voice. He seemed to want everyone in the audience to hear his demand.

Arthur smiled. "How many answers am I allowed to give?" he asked, pulling out a scroll and allowing it to furl open. It landed on his knees then rolled out down the dias stairs and onto the chamber floor. The Black Knight raised his eyebrows and then roared with laughter.

"Surely you jest, king. How many answers do you have there?"

Arthur, who counted them up, responded, "Two hundred forty-seven."

My brother roared with laughter again, then called for a chair. As he sat, he laid Excalibur across his own knees. "You may read them all if you like, but only the correct answer shall free you from your pledge."

So Arthur began reading, and after each item, the knight laughed, "No!"

Soon there was need for beverages to be served as the king's voice grew hoarse. My brother continued to laugh at each entry on Arthur's long list, and before long, he needed a drink as well.

The reading continued into the afternoon.

“Number 200. Beautiful gowns. Number 201. Beautiful shoes. Number 202. A voluptuous body. Number 203. A servant to do my chores. Number 204. A house full of children. Number 205. No children!” They both laughed at that and each took another sip of ale.

“Number 242. No more wars. Number 243. No abuse from husbands. Number 244. No rape. Number 245. An end to poverty. Number 246. No more suffering.”

The Black Knight nodded his head and said, “Ah, the answers grow more noble.”

As Arthur reached the end of the list, he paused. Then he looked up at the knight and smiled. “This is the last one, number 247, and this the one I believe *you* really want.”

“Ah ha!” laughed the knight. “We shall see if you are correct.” He took a deep swig from his flagon and raised the sword.

“Number 247. What women desire most in the world, what they really want, is to rule over men; they want to be in charge.”

My brother rose with a great cry and Excalibur crashed to the floor. The guise of Black Knight fell away and he stood before his king in tattered rags, all that was left of the garb he had worn when Morgain enchanted him.

“Gromer!” cried Arthur. “I wondered what had become of you. Draw near and let me embrace you, for I have greatly missed your presence at the Round Table.”

Sir Gromer stepped forward and sank to his knees. “I am unworthy, my lord King,” he whispered. “I have betrayed you and the other knights, even though it was not my desire to do so. Take up your sword and kill me now, so I will not be shamed further.”

Instead Arthur called for a cloak to cover the poor man, and bade my brother forgive himself. “We must find and kill Morgain, not you,” the king assured Gromer. “But first let us rejoice that we now know what women really want. And since we know, we can do all in our power to prevent it.”

So now you know why men continue to rule over women to this very day.