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Abstract

The knight Gawain watched as the young lady walked away again. She was fair and slight of form. There was also a wonderful shimmer of silver in the green dress she wore, but Gawain found her perplexing.

The Undiplomatic Girl

by

Ryder W. Miller

The knight Gawain watched as the young lady walked away again. She was fair and slight of form. There was also a wonderful shimmer of silver in the green dress she wore, but Gawain found her perplexing. He had faced many challenges in his day as a knight of the Round Table, many adventures, and she now offered more. He was not the best of the knights, he was not the first knight or the toughest of his brothers, but when right was on his side there were usually none who could oppose him. He would not take on Lancelot, reasoning that it would be a loss to the Round Table whether he won or lost, but he would not shy away from a battle with a barbarian or an aggressor. Things had changed for the better and he was a part of it. The Round Table was now sacrosanct, but not everybody understood what it had achieved. It was a wonderful light in what had been a dark kingdom. It had principles and it defended the weak. Kyra, the departing maiden, did not seem to always recognize this. She was searching for a knight. She also wanted to be great and change the world. Gawain thought she did not seem to notice that there were those before her who had tried. Would she build upon their gains or seek to replace them? He did not know.

There were some who were not happy with how the Round Table had changed things. The knights of King Arthur were the victors. God they said was on their side. Right was on their side. There were, however, some losers. Gawain wondered if King Arthur could offer them some succor.

Kyra wanted to belong, but she did not really approve of everything. She needed Gawain to take on a foe for her at the tournament. This woman was fair and brave, but he did not understand what had happened. The divine had interceded and Arthur was victorious, bringing peace to a riotous kingdom. She chose a man for Gawain to battle, who was a distant cousin. For Gawain, it seemed as if this was the wrong choice for a confrontation. Kyra was also not interested in him in this way. The tournaments were friendly enough, but one could inadvertently create boundaries between people at them.

Gawain was used to women not always being happy. They did not carry swords and shields. They did not joust with lances. They did get in their way when they could. A damsel in distress could be dangerous. Though he was afraid to say so, some seemed to practice at it. They wished to disturb the brotherhood of men. They saw it as a wall. It seemed at times like it was just for their own enjoyment. Gawain thought it was not fun being vulnerable. Gawain had brothers, and they were proud and dangerous. Kyra was an only daughter, and she could be fierce. Women like her were often forgiven for it. He found that he needed to choose between her and others, now distant family members. He did not know what others would think. He also wondered how his distant aunt would react. Parathena did not want family fighting. Kyra wanted Gawain to challenge Hothfer who wore brown leather. Gawain did not know him

very well, but a challenge would stir things up. He had not decided yet what to do.

He had met Kyra months back at a tournament. He did not always like those things, but one could find people they did not see very often there. They were a bit dangerous, but they did keep men fierce. He would usually lose before the final round, but he was still competitive even though he had passed two score years. Those who won were given prizes, but the goal was not to kill others. There were the great knights like Lancelot and Tristan who would usually win the day. Some considered him frumpish. He was also slow to anger, but when angry he burned like fierce coals for an interminable time.

Kyra did something that was unusual. She had asked if he needed aid and teased him when he refused. After the tournament battle he was tired and bruised. She offered to help. He would have to take a long ride back to the castle where he would take off his bloody armor himself and relax and then sleep. He was not hurt, but he was tired that day.

He did not have a wife, no prospects actually, and had become accustomed to it. His life was simple and jealousy made him hard and fierce. He did not need comforting. He was not used to it. Most women had eyes for others though, especially Lancelot. Gawain though was used to the simple life of a soldier. He was one of the brotherhood. At these tournaments he usually caroused with other soldiers.

But at this tournament they met. She seemed to be now leading him in a different direction, but with her it would be too big of a personal change.

Now before him was a lass of child rearing age. Her brown hair was tied in curls. She had thin lips and large green eyes. There was a smile on her face as she approached.

"Well fought," she said.

Gawain was surprised to find himself with a grin on his face. He did not always get this type of attention. He grew up with a bunch of brothers and in many cases the women in their circle preferred others to himself.

"Well thank you. And who might you be?"

She smiled showing uneven teeth. "Why sir, I am Kyra."

"Do I know of you?"

"I am not of noble birth, but my father is a Blacksmith and we serve the Round Table."

"Yes, I know of the Blacksmith. I remember seeing you as a child."

"Yes, and I remember some of your visits."

"Fine swords and armor he can produce."

This maiden must be almost a score younger than him Gawain realized. The Blacksmiths were usually of a loyal sort. Here was a girl who might not know her way.

"I wish that I could take one up myself."

"Not such a worthy goal."

"You would be different if you were not able to carry one."

"Having a sword brings to one responsibilities and burdens."

"It seems like so much fun."

"At times," said Gawain.

"Is there a matter for which you need assistance? Are you not spoken for?"

"I have not found the right one yet."

"Is this something you need the help of another than your father for?"

"He is too old."

"Did you seek a champion?"

"Yes," said Kyra. "I thought I had found one. That is where this tale begins."

This seemed like it was going to be more than he had bargained for. He was not accustomed to comforting. His brothers were stoic and as a group others knew to keep out of their way. They, however, could scare a

lass off. This woman was a child of a blacksmith and had clearly seen his like before. Her mind might be hard like a blade.

"I had met one that I approved of, but things went adrift."

"Adrift? And who might this be? What was his offense?"

"Hothfer was a fine-looking knight. He was a strong soldier..."

"My kinsman Hothfer? He is distant, but I know of him and my distant aunt Parathena."

"I did not know you were related."

"He is a distant nephew. An able soldier. I have not heard of any disloyalty from him," said Gawain.

"He can stand to learn some more about women."

"Can't all us men," said Gawain with a smile. He thought of some of his and his brothers' romantic escapades.

"You wrong me, sir. He wronged me and I wish to teach him a lesson!"

"It is wiser in matters of love, that between men and women, to seek also succor."

"Hothfer might be a loyal knight, but like many he is not suited for marriage and children."

"Quite a charge Kyra! Do tell me more of what transpired if you can? It seems as if this is a matter that is best kept between lovers."

"It never got that far."

"We speak too much now. You still have anger and he is a kinsman. Best to discuss this again next time," said Gawain.

"It might be a long time before we speak again."

"Yes. I hope though that you are not angry next time."

"I would rather not wait."

"I will take up your charge, but you must wait until the fires cool down. You ask me to confront a relative. Though distant, he is still kin."

"When will we talk next?"

"At the next tournament. I will hear your charge there if you still wish to make it. You have your opportunity to make peace with Hothfer before then. I am tired now and must go," said Gawain.

Kyra glared at him, but then her disposition changed. "I am likely to still be angry then," she said.

"We will see then," said Gawain with weariness.

It was a common practice for damsels to seek help. It was also something that Gawain was willing to do. But he did not know much about Hothfer and expected that he might be guilty of the same faults. He had covered for his brothers before, but they tried to respect women when they challenged them. They sought to be reformed men. It was sad though this animosity which did not always seem to have a recognizable source. There were some women who were dead set against men. They blamed them for the ills of the world. They also set men against each other. Some men might even argue that they brought out the worst in them.

Gawain had seen what they had done to his brothers and realized that there needed to be a brotherhood between men. It was necessary for there to be a military that could defend the country. But there were also some men who needed to be stopped. There were men with barbaric rituals and traditions elsewhere. Most women were not born in positions where they could rule. It fell upon the shoulders of men who had the power and therefore the responsibility. He did not want Kyra to make divisions between the Round Table and others. They needed allies elsewhere, but they also had rights to uphold.

He hoped that Kyra would cool down before the next tournament. He hoped that they could resolve their differences. On the day of the next tournament he could

challenge Hothfer himself. It would be best to keep it between themselves. He could humiliate Hothfer himself there. That might be enough for Kyra. It was hard to know yet what to do or what had transpired. He would decide then. Some women were willing to forgive an offense, but some were too grave to forgive. Women, he learned, also had their rules. He also had to think of Parathena and her kin who might distance themselves from him and his brothers and also the Round Table. Maybe there was a way to offer largesse and succor instead.

He would consult his brothers who might help find a remedy to this problem. He hoped that there would be forgiveness in the meantime. For now he would go back to his abode and take a well-needed rest. Hothfer might be younger, but he was not seasoned and clearly had others who found fault in him. Gawain was not yet angry and he hoped he wouldn't need to be. There was diplomacy to think of.

Gawain was not sure if he wanted to go to the next tournament, but realized that he had made a commitment to Kyra. It was there he might find out what had transpired. He really wished he could avoid this confrontation. It could be harmful to the Round Table he thought initially. He then realized that maybe it would strengthen their ties with the disenfranchised. It would show that they would champion the powerless. It would also mean that they would hold each other to a higher standard. His brothers did not know how to advise him since they did not know what had transpired. There were plenty of angry girls in their day. That was part of their value. They would harden and toughen a man if they could. Some of them sought to trap men that way. They were especially forthright because of the prevalence of warfare. Part of being a knight was knowing how to defend oneself and those they represented.

If he was a farmer or tradesmen or builder, things would be different. These were common folk who usually needed to be defended. There were times when they needed to go to war, but usually knights would solve the problems for them. It was their duty, but they also received payments in kind for it. The peasants depended upon the gentry to protect them. The knights had to study warfare to be up to this charge. They also needed funds to purchase metal-ware from blacksmiths.

Kyra was technically a peasant. She must have been done wrong by Hothfer who may have sought her out for fun. Knights were not always allowed to do such things. But maybe Hothfer did not understand that knights needed to follow a code. If they did not, God might not be on their side. It was battle that sought out who was wrong, and what was right. A maiden could turn such things out of balance. There might be unnecessary battles. Some might be hurt unjustly. It might take a long time to sort such things out.

If Hothfer was humiliated in a duel, that might appease Kyra. Maybe that would be enough for her to keep what was probably matters of love between them, Gawain kept thinking. Older women seemed to be able to live better with this. Young women wanted to change the world more, as did young knights, but there were things worth protecting. It also seemed as if things remained the same.

He decided that he would tie up his horse farther from the tournament grounds so he could walk more and see if he could find this young lady. He would not be jousting today. He would battle on foot. He would also challenge Hothfer directly if he could. He was an elder and people would understand if he taught this young knight a lesson.

Gawain walked slowly through the parade ground. Some noticed him, but none stood in

his way or stopped him while he was on this errand he did not yet understand. Kyra would be easy to pick out, but he wondered what people would think if he talked with her in front of others. He wanted to be private about this, but if he approached her that might not be possible. He also would not find her in the reserved seating.

Some gave him a knowing smile as he walked by. She would be there to talk with him if it was still important. He would have to have patience also.

Among the crowd he saw Kyra, who was now wearing a red dress. Her hair was tied back and in curls. She did not seem like she was enjoying herself.

What am I getting myself into? Gawain thought as he approached her.

She took him as a surprise and seemed ambivalent about bumping into him there. She was relieved, but not happy.

"What is it you wish to discuss with me?" Gawain said as he was trying to take her to a place where they could talk alone. He put his hand on her shoulder and nudged her to indicate this, but realized that maybe he should remove it.

Defensively, he said that he needed to talk with her in private.

She seemed irritated by this but followed him to a private place anyway.

Some noticed them in the crowd as they streamed by, but they did not stop to hear what they were saying to each other.

When they were alone and had her attention Gawain said, "What do you wish of me now?"

Kyra collected her thoughts for a moment and then began, "I gave your proposal some thought and think we should keep this between us three."

Gawain was relieved and sighed.

"We make mistakes also. What is it that you wish me to do?"

"Women cannot be treated as such. He did not offer generosity. He offered humorous bantering instead."

"I have brothers, Kyra. We like to make a distinction between blood sport between men, and matters of love. We prefer fun in matters of love. We seek respite and sometimes mirth."

"Is the world suited for such?"

"Yes. And we are brothers in arms to protect ourselves from all sorts of foes."

"Women are not supposed to be treated as property or exist just for amusement."

"It depends upon how one sees the marriage contract. It depends upon how one defines relationships."

"We are at war also," said Kyra.

"However we must do so with wit and wiles. Can I carry a sword? Would I have a squire?"

"This is a long conversation, Kyra. Can you tell me what your charge is? What is it that you wish me to do?"

"I would have you keep this between the three of us. That is something Hothfer does not know. That is something that he will need to learn. That is also something that those who heard his tales will need to be reminded."

"How many of those might that be?"

"I don't know. But there is a remedy."

"What is that?"

"If you make an example of him, others will know not to discuss the matter further."

"Hothfer would know, but do you think the others would learn from this?"

"Yes," said Kyra. "I want to be there when others watch him fall."

"I would be more willing to do this if I knew what transpired between you."

"I prefer that remain between us."

"I would be better about my business if I knew."

"All right then. We both grew weary of each other. We did not have things really to give each other. I did not find him generous."

He also thought he could seek out others to tell of what transpired. He laughed at me."

"Did he?"

"Not with many. He is not very popular."

"Would you take humor away from the world? Do you wish me to publicly let people know what transpired?"

"The humor is not for everyone. If you'll be my champion in this that will be enough."

"I wonder how others will react to me besting him before others."

Kyra was now annoyed. "Is that not what tournaments are about?"

"Not usually. I will do this for you, but you must not do this to a knight again."

"What if I want to? What if I need to? This is beyond my control."

"I hope fate shines better upon you. You are a fine looking lass who is a skilled talker. I would imagine you will have choices for the next."

"After this day, after this battle with Hothfer, they will need to be formidable."

"Yes I will do this for you this day. I will also keep the discussion between us. I will be your champion and this should keep things quiet."

"Thank you, Gawain."

"And what if I lose? Will you still be a diplomatic maiden?"

"Yes, because of the generosity you have shown."

Later that day in the tournament Gawain made it official that he sought out single combat with Hothfer. Some wondered about what this was about. There was some murmuring, but it was clear that Gawain and his brothers would not be dismissed lightly.

Hothfer was surprised by the actions of his distant kin. His annoyance was clear. It was clear that he seemed to be getting a public scolding.

His anger was palpable.

Gawain knew he had the advantage. He was more skilled. He also had more respect

and admiration. Hothfer's big battles were before him. Gawain had met his challenges. This was also likely to be the only time he would be able to talk with Hothfer. It was likely to be through yelling at each other while they dueled. Hothfer might be more forthcoming. It would have to be decided here in the tournament.

The crowd had now assembled to see Gawain. Hothfer would have preferred not to have been challenged by a distant renowned kinsman. They stood now before each other while the crowd looked on.

"Why do you challenge me?" asked Hothfer.

"It concerned the lady Kyra," said Gawain.

"Need we fight over such a matter?"

"She has not really given me a choice."

"What is her charge?"

"It is between you two and I need keep that between us three. Humor appears to be less popular these days," said Gawain.

"That is sad. I will not fight you."

"Many might not be satisfied with that."

"I do not wish to injure you, kinsman."

"We are here for sport."

"I will accept my defeat."

"That might not appease Kyra."

"I wish to be done of it."

"Raise your weapon."

"I will not."

Gawain tried to find Kyra in the crowd but she was too far away for him to see her expression. She was alert and attentive. He could tell from her posture.

"Take up your weapon," Gawain said again.

"I do not wish to combat with you."

"You will attend to Kyra's wishes."

"I will if I can. I now would like to leave. You are the victor. I submit."

"That might not be enough," said Gawain who now had an idea. He switched his sword to his weaker arm and took off his helmet.

For a moment he faced the crowd and then hit Hothfer over the head with his helmet. Hothfer lost his balance and fell to the ground. The crowd laughed in a short conceit.

Hothfer rubbed his head while Gawain walked of the field hoping this would suffice.

Gawain walked past Kyra into the crowd. There was a satisfied smile on her face when

he nodded. He hoped that this would be the last of it. Love. Diplomacy. Things really seemed to have changed in this Modern Age. He would not share this joke with everyone.

Editorial: This Issue

In this issue, we welcome some new writers with a variety of tastes and techniques. Publishing with us for the first time, Charlie Starr contributes a short story which features the passion of spelunking, with background of Kentucky folklore and other mythologies. Mary Ann Georgia Banks Marin explores a timeless old Chinese tale. Myles Buchanan brings us “Brackenstead,” an excerpt from his developing story of a fantastic world in conflict, where a pragmatic authoritarian government faces down rebels who dream of freedom. Gania Barlow offers two sensitive poems inspired by the classics, while Marly Youmans presents prophetic poetry partly in the style of Yoruban praise poems.

We also welcome back some previous authors. In fiction, William Wandless, who published “The Third Mercy” in *MC31* (2009), and “Ornery Corn” in *MC 37* (2015), now brings us “The Finest Jest,” exploring the conflict between faith and the drive for conquest in a remote ancient Eastern setting, with a style reminiscent of Poe and Lovecraft. Ryder Miller, in “The

Undiplomatic Girl,” shows the impact of social change on King Arthur’s court. Lee Clark Zumpe examines the merits of diplomacy in extraterrestrial conflict. Chelsi Robichaud presents three short poems based on themes from the *Odyssey*.

Once more, L. C. Atencio provides a cover illustration, while Emily Metcalf produces two wonderful illustrations for “The Finest Jest.”

Special thanks to Bethany Abrahamson for her help with editing and layout.