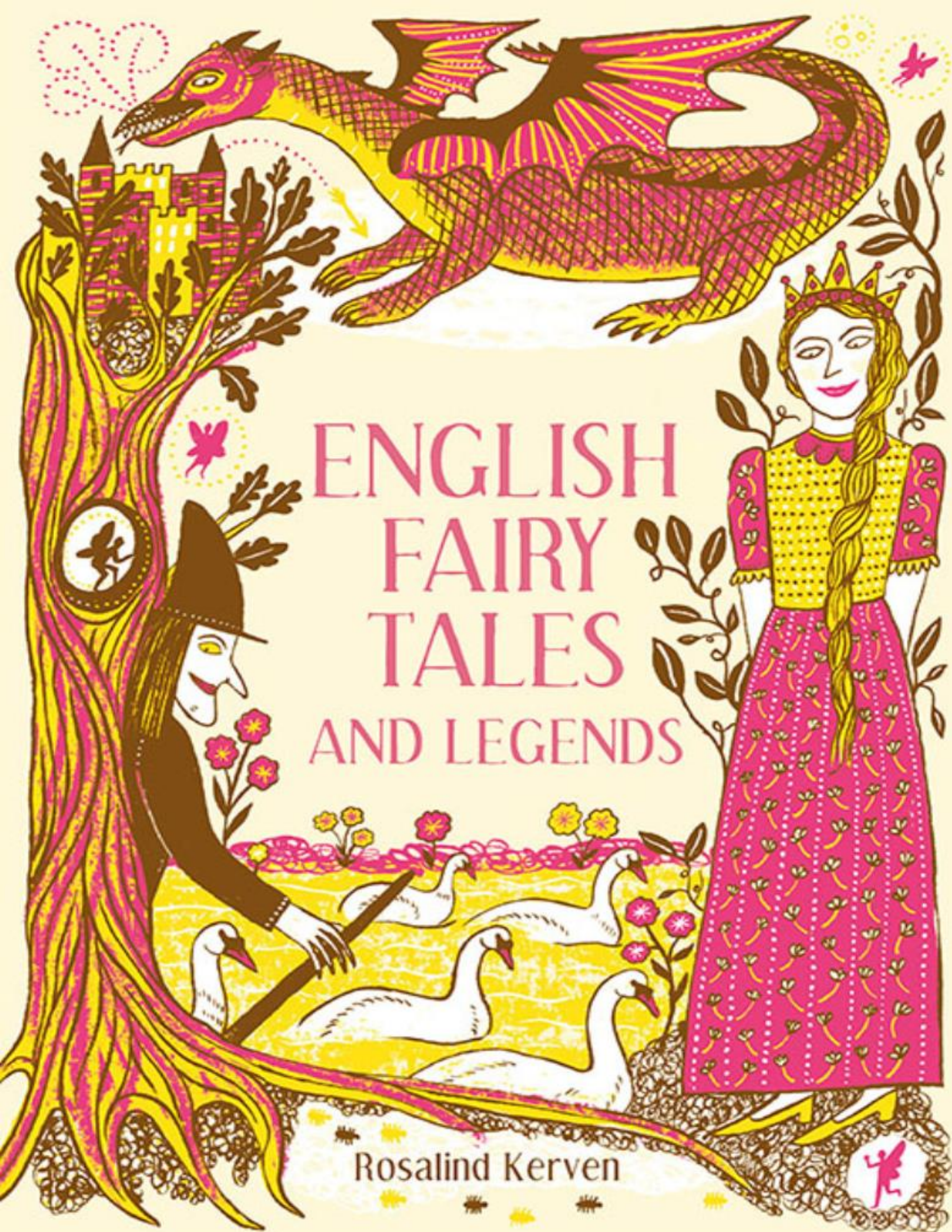
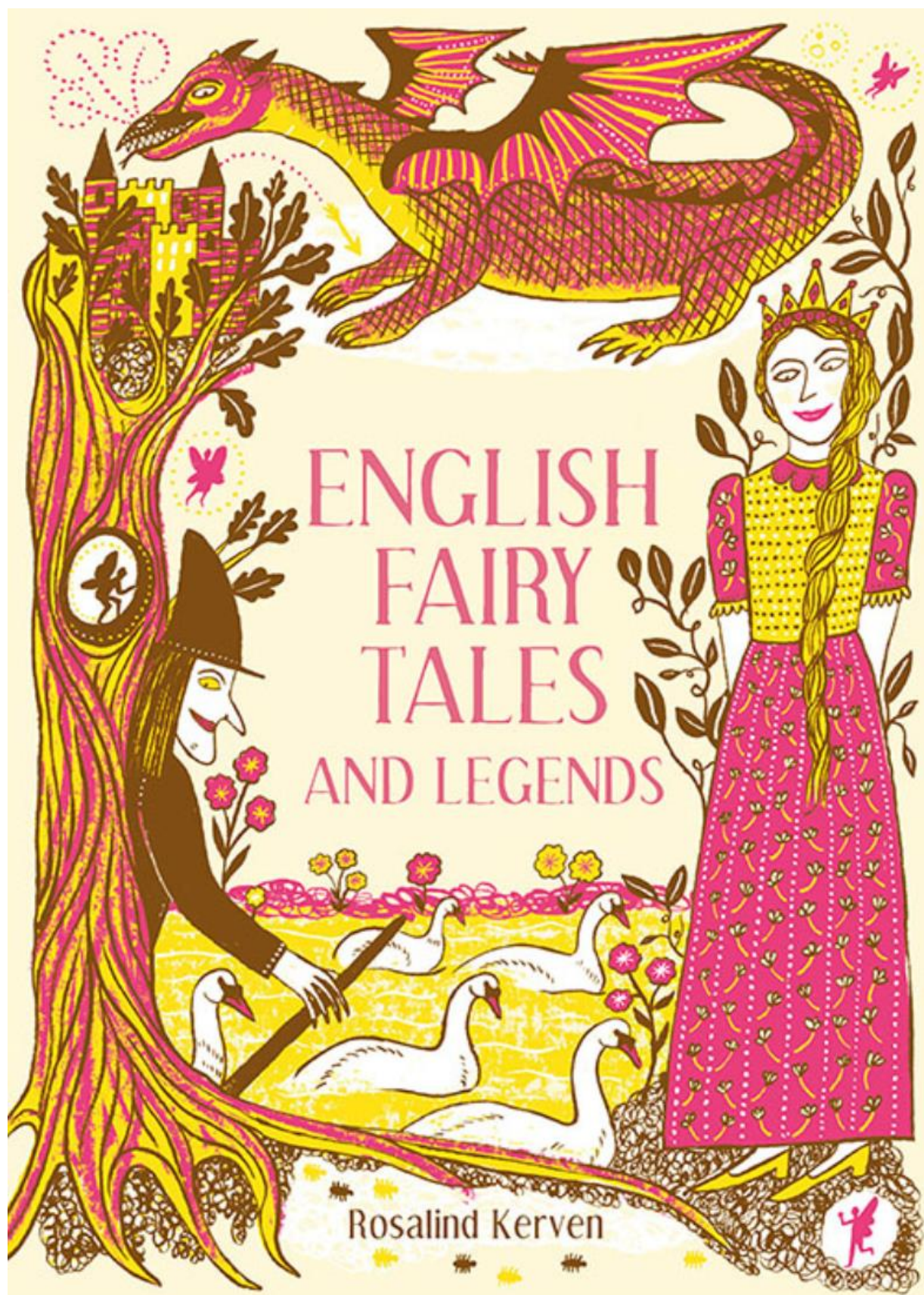




ENGLISH FAIRY TALES AND LEGENDS

Rosalind Kerven



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ROSALIND KERVEN

BATSFORD

For Sue Mason

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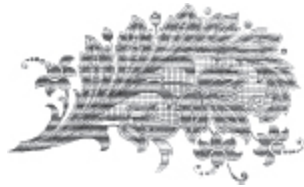
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Introduction



An English childhood is peppered with fairy tales, yet surprisingly the most familiar stories – Cinderella, Snow White, Aladdin and so on – are not home-grown at all, but have their roots in France, Germany and the Middle East. Does England not have its own store of tales? Of course it does! And though most have, curiously, failed to find their way into the popular collections, they are equally magical, amusing, haunting and, indeed, astonishing.

Countless long-dead voices lie behind this rich cultural heritage, for every fairy tale and legend has been developed and refined by successive generations of anonymous authors. Traditional stories ‘belong to everyone’, thus permitting each reteller to add a bit here, tweak something there, colour it with his or her own personality or add a quaint snippet of local flavour. Often the same story exists in several different versions, either nationally or in different parts of the country.

In the manner of fairy tales and legends everywhere, the traditional stories of England are set in a parallel world: fantastical, often illogical, outside normal time and beyond the edges of reality, imbued with supernatural elements and a dream-like quality. Typically, their plots centre on a problem or challenge, and their dramatis personae are anonymous ideal types (‘a king’, ‘a peasant boy’, ‘a wise woman’), with generous helpings of supernatural beings

such as fairies, giants and dragons. The stories tend towards an optimistic moral structure, with justice fairly done, wickedness punished and goodness rewarded. However, they are stubbornly politically incorrect, portraying characters as old-fashioned stereotypes, offering no excuses for evil, and not flinching from the gruesome ends suffered by villains. Displaying weak, oppressed characters overcoming more powerful ones, and exploring major emotional issues, such as parental rejection and the need to 'prove' oneself, they have natural appeal to children. Yet they cannot be classified as children's stories, for they have the special quality of being able to entertain and uplift readers of *all* ages.

The stories were originally narrated aloud 'around the fireside', but the nineteenth century saw a golden age for folklore, when collectors all over the world began to gather these ancient tales from oral sources and write them down. In England (and indeed, in the rest of the United Kingdom and Ireland), such collections were made, often several times over, in every county. From these, anthologists put together their own country-wide selections, including the once much-loved *English Fairy Tales* (1890) and *More English Fairy Tales* (1894) by Joseph Jacobs, which included interesting annotations. This work was continued well into the twentieth century, culminating in the 1970s with Katherine M. Briggs's four-volume work, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales and Legends*. I am deeply indebted to this monumental collection, which reproduces stories from all over the country in their original forms, often in dialect. It was the most comprehensive and invaluable of the many sourcebooks I used to compile my own retellings.

But good stories need no further introduction. So leave the real world behind you for a while and forget your troubles as

you enter the wildly irrational yet totally enchanting world of
English Fairy Tales and Legends.

Rosalind Kerven
Northumberland, 2008



King Arthur and the Hideous Hag

· *Cumbria* ·

King Arthur and the Hideous Hag



In the golden days when the Great Forest still spread across the land, and travellers could pass freely between this world and the faerie realms, good King Arthur had his court at Carlisle.

One New Year's Day, the king and all his knights were sitting at the Round Table making merry, when suddenly there was a frenzied knocking at the door. The next moment, a pretty farm girl came rushing in with her hair all tangled and her dress torn, weeping most piteously.

'Your majesty,' she cried, 'I beg you to help me!'

King Arthur rose to his feet at once. 'Fair lady,' he answered her courteously, 'I will be honoured to help you. But what troubles you?'

'An evil ogre has moved into Hewin Castle, sir!' wept the farm girl, wringing her hands. 'You know – the old fortress that stands on the fells above Wadlyn Tarn. I live on the opposite shore, and the ogre has been snatching girls and women from all the farms around there, and taking them up to his lair. Not one has ever come back. *Please*, your majesty, I beg you to send one of your knights to kill him!'

A murmur rippled through the bold company at the Round Table.

King Arthur said: 'The first adventure of this New Year! It must be mine! I will go to this evil ogre's castle and I shall destroy him single-handed.'

The king put on his armour and took up Excalibur, the wondrous sword that was forged in Faeryland and gifted him

by the Lady of the Lake. Then he mounted a white horse and rode with all speed, over the snow-topped fells and through the dark forest, until he reached the looming fortress of Hewin Castle. The sky was dark with storm clouds. King Arthur jumped from his mount, drew Excalibur and rapped upon the gates, calling:

‘Show yourself, ogre! I am Arthur, High King of all this land. I order you to cease your evil – or else come out and fight me to the death.’

An ugly roar of laughter answered him. Then the castle door burst open and a huge, fearsome fellow came stooping through it. He was twice as tall as an ordinary man, with arms like great oak branches and a leering, slaver face.

‘Why are you bothering me, Arthur?’ the ogre spat. ‘Who do you think you are, calling yourself “High King” and ordering me about like a common servant? Yes, I can see that pathetic piece of metal you’re clutching and I’ve heard all about how mighty you’re supposed to be. But, let me tell you this: *my* power comes from witchcraft and devilry, and it’s far more dangerous than Excalibur. Just in case you don’t believe me, I’ll give you a taste of it.’

Arthur brandished his sword and made ready to run at the ogre. But before he could move, the ogre raised his left hand high above his head, sending a dazzle of lightning across the winter sky. King Arthur gave a strangled cry. He swayed and stumbled back. Excalibur slipped from his hand and his fingers clutched helplessly at the air. He began to shiver and tremble, his legs buckled and he fell to the ground.

‘You viper!’ he shouted. ‘What have you done to me?’ His voice was hoarse and cracked.

‘Ah, it is only a mild enchantment to shrivel away your strength, your majesty,’ the ogre mocked him. ‘You’d better

not feel sorry for yourself: I do far nastier things to the women I drag up here. Anyway, there's an easy enough way to break the spell. All you have to do is come back in exactly a year's time and tell me the answer to this very simple riddle: What does every woman long for?

Then he turned his back on the king, stomped inside the fortress and slammed the door.



The Knights of the Round Table were smitten with horror when their king finally managed to stagger back to Carlisle, bent and broken with sickness and despair. He took to his bed and lay there in a shameful torpor, day after day, and then month after month. None of his wise men or healers – not even Wizard Merlin himself – could find a way to cure him.

His illness cast a blight over the whole kingdom. That summer, there was no rain and the crops failed. Robbers and wolves crept out from the Great Forest and brought terror to the land. And by Wadlyn Tarn, the shadow cast by the cruel, misogynous ogre grew ever longer and darker.

If only someone could solve the ogre's riddle! Every day Arthur called his entire court around his sickbed and urged them to try: 'Surely, between you all, you can work out what every woman longs for?'

'Judging by my wife, I reckon it's gold and jewels,' said one knight.

'No, no; mine just wants the most expensive dresses,' sighed another.

'Not material things,' said a third knight. 'In my experience, every woman longs to be flattered.'

‘Rubbish!’ said a lady. ‘What use is empty flattery? What I’d like is a really rich husband – and then for him to die quickly and leave me all his fortune!’

‘Speak for yourself,’ said a haughty old dame. ‘The only thing I long for is a bit of respect.’

And so the arguments ran on and on. But not one person in all the court could agree with another.

The year turned: summer faded into autumn, which then hardened into a bitter winter. New Year grew closer, and with it the king’s only chance to escape his bewitchment. Finally, he said:

‘Good knights, it seems to me that the only solution is to organise a quest to seek the answer to the riddle. So I command you all to ride forth into the Great Forest, each man alone, and let none of you return or rest until at least one man has found it.’



So the knights set out. Some rode eastwards through the winding paths of the forest, some rode westwards, and others went south or north.

At that time, the Great Forest was like no place you will find anywhere in England today. For its ancient trees and creepers spread to the horizon and even further, and it was dotted with mysterious wells, lonely hermitages, lost bowers and secret caves.

As Sir Pellinore rode wonderingly through it, he caught the sound of distant music – a frenzied, eerie tune played on pipe and drum. He followed it to a clearing and glimpsed there a whorl of ethereal dancers who seemed to fade away into a flurry of snow. Then a hunched shape in a scarlet

cloak stepped out from the undergrowth and called to him in a creaking voice:



‘Greetings, noble sir! Now, why should our paths cross on such an ill-weathered night, eh? Can it be that I am fated to help you?’

It was an old hag – a hideous, hunchbacked, filthy old woman. Her lipless mouth was drawn into a grimace, revealing blackened teeth. Her squinty, sunken eyes were riddled with bloody veins. Her nose was broken and hooked like an eagle’s beak. Her jowls sagged and her skin was as warty as a toad’s.

‘I know what you’re after,’ she cackled. ‘It’s the answer to a riddle, isn’t it? Well, / could tell you it.’

‘Then in God’s name, you must!’ cried Sir Pellinore.

‘Judging by your desperation,’ said the hag smugly, ‘this knowledge must be very valuable. Don’t think I shall hand it out unless you give me something of equal worth in return.’

‘I swear the king himself will give you a chest full of gold if you can answer the riddle correctly and free him from his enchantment,’ said Sir Pellinore eagerly.

‘Gold?’ scoffed the hideous hag. ‘What would I want with gold? It’s no use to me.’ She rocked with laughter. ‘No, no, young man, it’s *you* I want. I want to marry you.’

At this, Sir Pellinore turned as white as the snow that fell softly all around him. ‘Impossible!’ he cried.

‘Then be gone, you spineless wretch!’ the hag screeched at him.

And before he could say another word, she disappeared into the blizzard.



By and by the snow melted into rain, while thunder rumbled overhead. In another corner of the forest, Sir Kay rode boldly through the storm, driving his horse on and on until he came to a ruined tower. As he drew towards it to take shelter, the same scarlet-cloaked old hag suddenly stepped from the crumbling stones, her mouth twisting into a lascivious grin and yellow tears dripping from her bloodshot eyes.

‘Well met, good sir!’ she hailed him. ‘I suppose you’re on the royal quest too, eh? Looking for the answer to a riddle to save the kingdom and King Arthur’s life? Well, I could easily solve it and turn you into the hero of the quest – but only if you marry me first!’

Sir Kay stared at her in horror, shuddering at her twisted, warty face and misshapen body. ‘God forbid, you ugly old

witch,' he answered. 'Get out of my way and let me pass!'
And he spurred his horse to gallop back into the storm.



Far away from the ruined tower, the rain softened into a grey, swirling mist. Sir Gawain slipped off his horse and led the animal slowly through it, holding his hand before him like one who is blind. Soon he stumbled into the dark, spiky mass of a holly bush ablaze with scarlet berries. At once, its branches parted and the hideous hag stepped out before him.

'Good day to you, Grandmother,' said Sir Gawain courteously.

'It's not a good day for me but a tedious one,' the hag croaked back at him. 'I suppose you're like the rest of them, are you? Seeking the answer to a foolish riddle?'

Sir Gawain bowed his head. 'You are right, Grandmother,' he answered. 'And if by chance you are as wise as you are old, perhaps *you* can tell me: What does every woman long for?'

'I know the answer,' the hag replied in a cunning voice, 'but I'm keeping it secret until I find a knight willing to marry me. What do you say to that, eh?'

Sir Gawain gazed at the hideous hag. He took in her warty skin with grime etched into its lines and wrinkles. He breathed in her foul, ditch-water stench. Finally, he looked into her eyes and saw that, hideous as she was, he had no choice.

'I will do what I must to save our kingdom from evil,' he said, even though his heart was heavy with dread. 'Come, good lady: come back to Carlisle with me at once and let us arrange our wedding.'

With a sweeping bow, he offered the hag his hand and lifted her on to his horse.



When Sir Gawain returned to Carlisle with the old hag and her promise to tell the answer to the evil riddle, King Arthur sent messengers out to find the other knights, and by Yuletide all had returned from the Great Forest. Although the king still languished in his sickbed, the rest of the court celebrated that season's feast more hopefully than any had dared to anticipate.

Six days later, another feast was held. This was to celebrate the ending of the old, ill-fated year – and to mark the marriage of Sir Gawain to the hideous hag. The dancing went on for many hours, with Carlisle Castle lit by a thousand lamps under the silvery midwinter moon. While King Arthur lay groaning in bed, Sir Gawain and the hag were married in the little chapel nearby. Then they retired early to their chamber, for Sir Gawain wished to get the ordeal with his hideous bride over with, and quickly.



The little room had been hastily prepared and was in darkness. As Sir Gawain fumbled to light a candle, the hag said to him:

‘Why don’t you come closer, husband?’

Reluctantly, Sir Gawain took a single small step towards her.

‘For pity’s sake!’ the hag said. ‘A big, strong knight like you can’t be afraid of me, surely? Go on, kiss me!’

Trembling in the darkness, Sir Gawain placed a kiss on her repulsive, twitching lips. But – wonders! – they were sweeter than dew on a May morning!

‘Here,’ she whispered, ‘I’ll light that candle for you.’

So she did – and by its light, Sir Gawain saw that she was transformed. She had shed her ancient, wart-encrusted skin like a snake. Now she had become a beauteous, fair-skinned, golden-haired lady!

‘Whatever has happened?’ Sir Gawain cried.

‘Husband,’ said the beauteous lady, ‘by marrying me, you have saved me from a bewitchment no less terrible than the king’s, which was placed on me by my jealous stepmother. I thank you for it from the bottom of my heart. But there is no time to waste. Let us hurry to King Arthur, so I can answer the riddle that imprisons him.’

So they hastened straight away to the king’s chamber, where noble Arthur still lay feebly against his pillows. The Knights of the Round Table and all their ladies came crowding in behind them. ‘Who is that lady?’ they whispered to each other, and all marvelled when they heard she was the very same woman who, less than an hour before, had been the hideous hag.

King Arthur greeted her warmly. Then he said, ‘So, my lady, I believe you can tell me the secret I am desperate to know. What is it that every woman longs for?’

And the beauteous lady curtsied and tossed back her golden hair and said,

‘Why, my lord, that is easy. Every woman simply wants her own way!’

At once, every lady assembled in the king’s chamber began to nod and laugh and clap her hands, for never had they heard truer words spoken.

King Arthur cheered and applauded with them. Then he called to his servants: ‘Help me from my bed. Take me to the ogre’s castle, and let me free myself from this spell!’

