



Translated extract from

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Iwein, the Knight of the Lion

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14. The Castle of the Bad Adventure

I had better tell you something about this castle at once. For the castle is not a good place, and a visitor with his eyes and ears about him would certainly not have stopped there at all. However, a tired knight is only half a knight, and he can't tell good from bad. Weariness takes clarity of vision from your eyes and sharp hearing from your ears. You no longer see what you could see, and you hear only what you want to hear.

That's what human beings are like. Their weariness thinks only of beds and pillows and sweet dreams. Their hunger thinks of tables and plates, and their thirst thinks of nothing but glasses and goblets. Iwein and the younger sister were no exception. They simply rode along the path leading to the castle, ignoring what they could have seen around them because they were thinking about themselves so much.

Only the King of the Beasts picked up the scent of the castle from a long way off, and knew that it could not be a good place to stay the night, for even a tired animal has a good nose, keen ears and clear eyes.

At first glance, however, everything seemed normal. There were women carrying buckets and baskets. There were grooms taking horses to the water to drink. The castle steward was busy arranging for some large crates to be sent away. And in the garden behind the castle walls the gardeners were cutting down some of the trees that grew there in the same way as other trees, although perhaps a little faster and a little taller.

Something was different, all the same. And now I will tell you what it was. It was the faces of the people. They didn't look like human faces at all, they looked like masks. Nothing showed in those faces, no happiness and no sadness. There was nothing at all to be seen in them. They were empty faces, with empty eyes and empty foreheads and empty mouths, because they never spoke.

The bodies of these people were strange too, for they were all bent over and saw nothing but the ground in front of their feet, as if they had never looked up and didn't know about the sky, the sun and the stars. And they knew nothing about the clouds wandering over the sky either.

While Iwein rode along the path to the castle, nodding in a friendly way to right and left and greeting everyone he saw, always wishing them, "Good evening, ladies, good evening, gentlemen!" the ladies and gentlemen said not a word in reply, but went on gazing silently at the ground as if they had neither seen nor heard

anything. Not Iwein, nor his companion, nor the King of the Beasts, whose mane shone more beautifully than any crown in the evening sunlight.

Iwein rode up to the gate into the castle courtyard, brought his horse to a halt, dismounted and knocked.

The heavy gate was opened at once. In the gateway stood a man wearing a long grey cloak, and his face was as grey as his cloak. He had a long whip in his hand.

“What do you want?” asked the man with the whip.

“I’m looking for a place to stay the night,” said Iwein. “For the lady, for my King and for me.”

The man laughed, and brought his whip down on the paving stones with a loud crack. Then he said:

“My dear Sir Knight, nothing could be easier! The lord of the castle has been expecting you for a long time.”

Iwein was surprised, because he knew neither the lord of the castle nor the castle itself, and had no idea how he could be expected here. But they were inside now, so he followed the man with the whip, who led them into a great hall.

There was a large table laden with steaming dishes in this hall. Golden plates stood beside the dishes. And beside the plates lay silver cutlery, and beside the cutlery velvet napkins lay ready.

Beside the velvet napkins stood great goblets full of gleaming red wine that smelled like the wine of a thousand years ago.

All this is nearly as grand as King Arthur’s hall at home, thought Iwein. I wonder who the lord of this castle is?

“Sit down, help yourselves, and eat your fill,” said the grey man with the whip. “Meanwhile I’ll tell the lord of the castle that you’re here. Perhaps he will come and keep you company later.”

As he said that, he laughed quietly, and cracked his whip once more. Still laughing, he left the hall.

15. The Captive Women

Only when he heard that strange laughter did Iwein realize, as you will all have guessed by now, that he had fallen into a trap.

His hunger and thirst suddenly disappeared. He gave the King of the Beasts a bowl of water to drink, and he gave the younger sister a glass of wine. But the idea of eating and drinking had gone right out of his own head. Instead, he paced restlessly up and down.

When he tried to open the door, he found that it was locked.

There was a second door at the back of the magnificent hall, and it was through that door that the man with the whip had disappeared. It too was locked.

Now you see what kind of a trap this was.

But there was a little window beside the door. And when Iwein pressed his face against the pane he saw a second hall beyond the window.

This second hall was as large as the first, but there were no dining tables there laid with steaming dishes and glasses of wine. Instead, it was full of long rows of women sitting on small, low stools at long wooden tables, all of them busy sewing heavy, festive robes.

Who were the women making these robes for? And why were they all so pale and thin? And why were their faces so grey, as if they had never seen the sun or a single cloud passing over the sky?

I can tell you why. The women were not here of their own free will; they were all prisoners. Prisoners of the lord of the castle. They had to work for him day and night. Day and night they had to sew those robes.

Some cut pieces of fabric to the right size, others sewed the pieces together to make the robes, while yet others added buttons, or made matching bows and ribbons or fur collars to be sewn on the robes later.

When the robes were finished they were washed thoroughly, and the women hung them up to dry on long lines running from corner to corner of the hall. And because the women were good with their needles and worked hard, the robes they made were really very beautiful, in magnificent bright colours such as only knights and ladies and royal kings wear. They were blue and green and yellow and red, red as Laudine's red cloak, blue as the blue ribbons worn by the winners of tournaments at King Arthur's court.

And when the robes were dry they were brushed, ironed and folded, and packed into large crates. Crates upon crates of robes were stacked against the back wall of the great hall, piles of them reaching to the ceiling. After a while they would all be taken away, sent to another country and sold.

Now you know what was in the crates that the steward had been sending off from the castle courtyard.

But the lords and ladies, kings and knights who bought the robes in the crates probably knew nothing about the women who made them.

For none of them had ever been a guest in the Castle of the Bad Adventure. And none of them had ever seen what Iwein saw now from the other side of the little window.

While he stood there seeing all this, he suddenly realized why the table in front of him was so magnificent and so lavishly laid, and where the golden goblets and dishes and silver cutlery came from.

The lord of this castle had grown rich on the work of the captive women.

But the women saw nothing of these riches. They did not wear brightly coloured robes themselves. Their dresses were mere sacks, not real dresses at all. They had no shoes to wear, and went barefoot.

And they wore scarves on their heads to hide their hair, which was as dull and lifeless as their faces, because they never saw the sun.

They did not drink from golden goblets, and they drank no wine, only water. They were given hardly anything to eat, just a crust of bread now and then.

But worst of all was the silence that lay over them all. It was not a peaceful silence, but a terrible, heavy, leaden silence.

However hard you strained your ears, you could hear nothing. Nothing but the busy snipping of the women's scissors. Apart from that, all was silent as the grave.

For the women didn't talk and laugh, and nor did they sing as people sometimes sing while they work. They told each other no stories either. They were all as mute as if they had no tongues in their mouths and no hearts in their breasts.

Now you must be wondering how the women could work in such a place. Iwein too wondered as he stood by the window. And the longer he watched the women sitting on the other side of the window sewing, the heavier his heart felt.

16. The Inn of the Last Night

So there stood Iwein, in the hall with the little window, and he couldn't take his eyes off the sewing women. For Laudine's heart beat in his breast, the heart of a woman. And in his mind's eye he suddenly saw Laudine again in her red cloak, standing in the gateway of the castle of the Land Nearby and waving to him.

All at once he thought he could hear her voice, and it was as if she were saying: "Iwein, if you truly love me, you must set these women free."

And he heard his own voice replying, "I will set these women free even if it costs me my life."

At that moment the door at the back of the hall on the other side of the window was flung open, and Iwein saw the man in the grey cloak walking up and down between the tables, cracking his whip menacingly and crying, "Dear me, dear me, what's this I see? Why are you working so slowly? Is this the way you mean to earn your bread? What will the lord of the castle say when I tell him how lazy you are? No one earns any bread that way. Mountains of fabric here, but no robes. I'll be back tomorrow morning, and if you haven't used up the last bale and the robes aren't ready, I promise you you'll be sorry. And until then, there'll be no water and no bread for you either!"

Then he cracked his whip again, and slammed the door. The women bent their heads even lower over their work, and snipped away even faster with the scissors they held in their thin hands.

But Iwein saw very clearly that they were in utter despair, for with the best will in the world they couldn't make clothes any faster.

The needles shook in their fingers, and in secret they wiped their eyes, because tears kept flowing out and dropping on the rich fabric.

They would have liked to weep and wail noisily, but they dared not.

Then the door to the banqueting hall behind Iwein was flung open, and the man with the whip came up to the window beside him, placed one hand on his back and said: "Dear Sir Knight, that's enough eating, that's enough drinking, that's enough spying and that's enough seeing! Now you know who puts the food on our tables and who you have to thank for it."

"Whoever I have to thank," said Iwein, "I won't do it until I see him before me face to face. For by God, no one who allows such misery and torment can be a good man. So he had better get to know me, because I intend to set those women free."

At that the man with the whip laughed aloud, with such an ugly smile that it chilled Iwein to the marrow of his bones. The King of the Beasts began to growl, and the younger sister, who was still sitting at the table, started shivering.

Still laughing, the man with the whip said: “Dear Sir Knight, I am really moved. You are a truly good man; you think yourself brave, and probably strong too. But you are not the first, let me tell you, to have been a guest at our table, to have cast a glance through the window there, and then to talk grandly about honour and renown and saving the whole world. Before you set about it, however, you ought to know where you are. This is the Castle of the Bad Adventure. Many also call it the Castle of No Return, and when my master is in a good temper he calls it the Inn of the Last Night. If you see what I mean.”

Iwein removed the man’s heavy hand from his shoulder, looked him in the face, and said: “Whip-man, I do see what you mean. However, I’m not interested in your opinions. A game is a game, and this is a serious matter. So put your jokes away again. I’m not looking for a bed for the night any more. Give my bed to this lady and give my King a place to sleep. And then take me to your master so that I can strike him down as he deserves.”

Then the whip-man cracked his whip, and looked at Iwein with such wicked cruelty in his eyes that the King of the Beasts growled even louder.

And the younger sister felt icy cold when she heard the man say: “A bed for the lady, yes, but only for tonight. After tomorrow she’ll be sleeping in the hall next door. All our guests have the same rights. As for your hairy King, he can lay his shaggy head down with the dogs at the doorway there. And so far as your third wish goes, I’m afraid I can’t grant it.”

But Iwein never took his eyes off the whip-man’s face, and he did not flinch a single step back as he said in a firm voice: “Don’t you have the use of your ears, whip-man? Don’t you have the use of your mind? That wasn’t a wish, it was an order. Take me to your lord and master so that I can strike him to the ground as he deserves.”

Suddenly the voice of the man with the whip dropped very low, sounding very dangerous and as sharp as a knife, and he said: “My poor guest, who do you think you are? Don’t you know who my master is? If you knew who my high and mighty lord and master was, you’d know how busy he is and that no one ever sees him, because he is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, and doesn’t waste his time fighting,

He needs his time to give orders. He never gets his hands dirty. Other people fight for him, and you'll never defeat them. For they are both one and two at the same time."

As he spoke, he cracked the whip twice and let out two shrill cries.

And the door to the banqueting hall swung open.

17. The Double Knight

There in the doorway stood the Double Knight, chief retainer to the lord of the Castle of No Return! The knight who is both one and two. And now you will want to know what a double knight looks like. But ought I really to describe the dreadful enemy that Iwein was facing now? Are you sure you can stand the sight of him? Wouldn't it be enough if I told you, instead, that the younger sister fell off the bench where she was sitting in a faint? And that even the man with the whip began to tremble beneath his grey cloak? And that outside the window the moon set, although it had only just risen? I can tell you where that fear and that cold darkness came from. For compared with the Double Knight, the Giant Harpin was nothing but a dwarf, and the Everwood Dragon was nothing but a worm.

But it is not the Double Knight's size that makes him so dreadful and so dangerous, not his strength, not his breath and not his sword. It is his face!

Because the Double Knight has two faces.

One looks like a human face on its friendliest days. It laughs, it speaks only kind words. There isn't a bad thought behind its brow. And above that brow it wears a white helmet, white as cream or newly fallen snow, or as the hands of the Lady with the White Hands, if you still happen to remember her hands.

But the other face is grotesque and distorted. It has two ice-cold eyes in it, and there is no word for their colour because they have none. They are colourless and empty as two cold lights in a bleak, deserted street.

All who look into those eyes are dazzled and have to shut their own. And the blood freezes in their veins. For between the nose and chin of that face is a lipless mouth which is always screaming or roaring, as if monsters by the dozen lived inside the Knight's jaws.

And above the brow of that grotesque mask the knight wears a heavy helmet like a starless sky, a helmet as black as the helmet of the Lord with the Black Hands, if you still happen to remember him.

So now you know who the Double Knight is, and next I will tell you how he fights.

He only appears to fight with his fists and with swords, for he is really fighting with a very different power. It is the power of confusion and bewilderment.

No one who faces him ever knows just whom he is fighting. For he has to fight them both, his white friend and his black enemy, the knight who is both one and two at the same time.

And how fast the Double Knight is! He is swift and supple as a snake. He changes his two faces, and the two helmets as well, so quickly that you never know exactly what you are seeing and which face you have before you. Is it the good one or the bad one, is it the right one or the wrong one, is it the friend or is it the enemy? For if a knight raises his sword with determination against the grotesque face, ready to strike its ugly mouth and silence the roaring that comes from its jaws, suddenly he is looking at a laughing mouth with smiling, friendly lips. But then, if he lowers his sword, once again he is suddenly looking into the cold eyes that flash like deadly lightning.

That is how the Double Knight whom Iwein now saw before him fights. The younger sister lay under the table, and the man with the whip stood in the corner holding tight to the handle of the whip. What you can hold tight to I don't know, but I advise you to hold tight to something, and mind you don't let go!

For now comes the battle against utter bewilderment.

And that is the hardest battle of all.

18. The Fight Against the Double Knight

But there was also someone else in the hall. You will know what I mean.

The Double Knight knew too. No sooner had he entered the hall than he saw the King of the Beasts standing in the doorway at the back of it.

His coat shone in the darkness, his mane gleamed like a crown, and his eyes looked calmly and fearlessly into both of the Double Knight's faces. Both faces at once. For a true king doesn't bother about the second face, he prefers to trust his nose. And his nose had recognized the knight.

The Double Knight turned to Iwein and said, in a soft voice, 'Dear knight, what is that lion doing over there in the doorway? Lions have no business here, and

you know that as well as I do. Ours is single combat, and single combat is between two opponents and not three. Those have been the rules of the castle since time immemorial. And that's what the lord of the castle wants.'

'Then it's your rules against my rules!' replied Iwein. 'My king and I always fight together; we are companions from first to last, and no one can part us. Not you, not the lord of your castle, not even death. You may be one and two at the same time, but we are two and yet at the same time only one. If you know what my words mean you will understand the facts of the case. For in truth it is the other way around: I am fighting as the two of us, and you are fighting on your own.'

'It is the lord of the castle who makes the rules here, not the guest,' said the Double Knight. And without raising his voice, he signalled to the man with the whip and said: 'Take that animal away to where it belongs.'

The man picked his whip up, opened the door to the castle courtyard, and drove the lion out, lashing him. Then he slammed the door, and bolted it twice and three times over from inside.

When the Double Knight saw the door bolted like that, he drew his sword. And Iwein drew the Eversword, and they began to fight.

I'll cut a long story short, because no one can describe that fight. But one thing is sure: this was Iwein's most terrible conflict, because he didn't know whether he was fighting the black helmet or the white one.

If he saw the black helmet he felt strong and struck hard, so that the stones began to shake. But if he suddenly saw the white helmet the sword faltered fearfully in his hand, for it seemed to him as if he were facing a mirror and must strike his own helmet and pierce his own heart. He was more afraid than he had ever been in his life before.

And because fear wears down your strength more than fighting, Iwein fought more slowly and feebly now, and sank to his knees.

The Double Knight saw that very clearly and was glad of it, and he pressed Iwein even harder with his sword.

19. The King of the Beasts Decides the Battle

Iwein fought to the point of desperation, and still he didn't know which knight he was fighting.

But the King of the Beasts was standing outside, keeping his eyes and ears open. Yes, the man with the whip had driven him out and barred the way back against him. But his will, his courage and his loyalty were the same outside as inside. He had made a plan at once, and he tirelessly dug away the earth under the threshold of the door.

As he dug, he heard the monsters that lived in the Double Knight's jaws screaming and roaring. He heard the swords whistle through the air, he heard their blades clash, he heard the sweetest and kindest of words, then screaming and slashing and hacking again. He could tell that his knight was in trouble.

And then there was a terrible silence. The silence was broken by the sound of weeping. It must be the weeping of the women who had stopped sewing the robes, because they had risen to their feet some while ago and were crowding to the little window to watch that dreadful combat.

For just like the brave King of the Beasts, the women had not given up hope that someone might yet save them. And nothing is more dreadful than a great silence when you don't know what is going on, you don't know whether someone is still alive or already dying.

But the greater the silence, the greater also is the hope that a happy outcome is still possible. For just as the weeping of the women was dying away, and there was nothing at all to be heard any more, not even the whip wielded by the man who held it, the King of the Beasts had finished his work and dug his way under the threshold and through into the hall.

He who hesitates loses, he who presses on will win! The King of the Beasts was inside now!

There lay Iwein on the floor. And the Double Knight was raising his sword to bring it down for the final blow that would kill Iwein. Hear the keen swish of his sword, and the hard breathing of the man with the whip standing in his corner and listening!

Take a good look at the man with the whip and the Double Knight, and remember their faces, cold and grey as ashes when the fire has gone out, because a victory that is not won in an honourable fight cannot warm the heart with joy.

But we're not talking about anyone's victory yet.

Because before the Double Knight's sword struck what it intended to strike, which was the nape of Iwein's neck, the King of the Beasts had pounced. With one

great bound, he leaped towards the Double Knight's sword and knocked him to the ground for ever.

And with a single blow, the King of the Beasts split the Double Knight in two from head to foot. A thousand monsters rose from the two halves lying there and flew out into the dawning day.

Because the sun was rising. And Iwein got to his feet, knocked the dust off himself and the pain out of his knees, and opened all the windows and doors wide to let all the monsters go free.

Then Iwein opened the door to the hall next door where the women sat sewing. Laughing, they laid down their scissors and needles on the long tables, and tore off their veils.

And Iwein said: "Go back to where you came from. You are free now.'

The women could hardly believe their luck. But before they went back to where they had come from they gave Iwein a cloak as red as the cloak worn by Laudine.