

Sample Translation

King's Daughter, Sailor's Sweetheart

(Koningsdochter, zeemanslief)

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Sailor’s sweetheart

She was a carpenter’s daughter. She had blonde hair and blue eyes, and she was small and slender. She was called Brettele. Her sister Antinua had brown eyes and black hair and she was short and sturdy.

Brettele worked in her father’s furniture workshop. She carved the lions’ heads to decorate the arms of the chairs and the garlands of roses for the lids of the Legestrand bridal chests.

Antinua helped her mother in the garden and in the yard, churning the milk, slinging honey out of the comb and weeding the vegetable garden.

Every Saturday evening the sisters would go dancing in the sailors’ inn in Legestrand. Antinua would dance with her intended, a farmer’s son. Brettele would dance with anyone who wanted to dance. She loved music and her nimble feet could follow any rhythm, but she didn’t feel the arms that the sailors and the farmers’ sons would put around her waist, and she didn’t hear the sweet words that they would whisper in her ear.

One evening, when Antinua was whirling around with her farmer’s son, a sailor asked Brettele to dance. He was big and scrawny, just as a sailor should be, and when he took her in his arms and swung her around, Brettele felt as though she were in a huge ship surging over the towering waves of the ocean.

‘Never take a sailor,’ said Antinua as they were walking home at night. ‘A sailor loves only the sea.’

‘And your farmer’s son loves only his land,’ teased Brettele.

‘He’s always nearby in any case,’ said Antinua. ‘In the morning you milk the cows together, in the afternoon you both work on the land, and in the evening the two of you take care of the animals and the poultry and you clean your farmyard together. If you marry a farmer, you’re never alone again.’

Brettele said nothing. She was thinking about the strong arms of the sailor, which had picked her up and whirled her around as though she were a feather. And about his muscular thighs and his large hands. His skin was brown and

weather-beaten and his eyes were deep and dark, and when he looked at her they glowed.

He had black curls that were all of a tangle, as though no comb were capable of undoing the work of the sea wind that blew through them every day. He smelled of salt and tar and also, although she didn’t know why, of horses’ bodies steaming in the winter.

The next evening Brettele returned to the sailors’ inn.

‘What are you thinking of?’ asked Antinua. ‘It’s Sunday evening. The farmers have to get up early again tomorrow and the fishers are putting out to sea. It’s no evening for dancing.’

But Brettele’s sailor was there and they danced the whole evening without saying a word. When she lay in his strong arms it seemed as though she were floating through the skies on a cloud. The gentle breath from his nostrils made the blonde hairs on her neck stand shivering on end.

When they were outside, taking their leave in the light of the moon, Brettele heard his voice for the first time.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked, taking hold of her hands.

Brettele felt as though she suddenly had twenty fingers instead of ten, and she swayed a little.

‘Brettele,’ she said in a quavering voice.

‘My name is Gawein. I’m sailing to Riga tomorrow for wood, grain, hemp and tar. What shall I bring back for you?’

‘A block of wood,’ said Brettele.

‘I’ll bring you back a block of wood from Riga,’ said Gawein, ‘and then we’ll get married.’

‘Fine,’ said Brettele.

Gawein took out a handful of gold pieces. ‘Rent a little house and furnish it,’ he said.

‘Fine,’ said Brettele. She stowed the money away.

Gawein took hold of her hands once again. His fingers on hers were scorching hot. ‘I have to go aboard,’ he said. He let go of Brettele and turned around.

For a moment she felt as though, instead of twenty fingers, she had none at all. The gentle night air had suddenly become chilly around her shoulders. She shivered and ran back home.

A few months later, the double wedding was celebrated. Brettele and Antinua were married on the same day – to keep the costs down. They danced the whole evening and it wasn’t only Brettele’s feet that stamped in time with the music, her heart beat along with it too.

When she was whirling around in Gawein’s arms, she thought that she could feel the earth spinning. His hand on her back was so hot that it felt as though her skin were melting and she was surprised that his fingers didn’t just go straight through her.

Antinua and her bridegroom Rudroch left the party early. Rudroch had bought a farm, not far from Legestrand, and his parents had given him a horse and cart.

‘You’re not in any hurry to leave,’ said Antinua to her sister.

‘No,’ said Brettele, ‘I’m not in any hurry. Wherever Gawein is, I want to be there too, and I don’t care where it is.’

Only after the last of the guests had left did Brettele and Gawein go to their house, which stood in the centre of Legestrand. When Brettele had turned the key in the lock, Gawein pushed the door open with his foot and carried her over the threshold. Brettele felt as though she were sitting on a flying star that was shooting through the universe with her.

Gawein had a few weeks’ leave. Every evening Brettele and her bridegroom would go dancing in the sailors’ inn until the last of the guests had disappeared. And every evening Gawein would carry his bride over the threshold of their house.

‘I’m going to Bilbao for iron and wool,’ said Gawein when his leave was over. ‘What shall I bring back for you?’

‘Wool for knitting,’ said Brettele, blushing.

Once Gawein had put out to sea, Brettele went to visit her sister.

‘You don’t look too good,’ said Antinua. ‘I warned you. Never marry a sailor.’

‘When he picks me up I feel as though I’m an angel floating through the air,’ said Brettele. ‘Do you feel the same way?’

Antinua showed Brettele the clean yard and the brick-paved space in front of the farmhouse, where Rudroch had placed a beautiful white rocking chair. ‘When I’m tired in the evening I sit down and rock in my chair,’ said Antinua. ‘That’s all the floating I need.’

Once she was back in her house, Brettele took out the chisels and gouges that she had brought from her father’s workshop. She fixed the block of wood from Riga to the kitchen table with her vice and began to chop away at it.

Every day she would go to the carpenter’s workshop to help her father, and every evening after dinner she would take the chisel to the block of wood and work on the statue of her sailor.

When she missed Gawein’s arms around her, she took a finely sharpened knife and cut out the muscular upper arms and shoulders. When she was sad and thought he would never return, she used the smallest gouge of all to carve his eyes and mouth. When she was angry with the sea for taking her husband away, she used the big chisel to hack the folds into his sailors’ trousers.

One day flowed into the next like waves upon the shore. Until finally the day came when Gawein’s ship sailed into the harbour. Brettele had been on the lookout all day.

When he came down the gangplank she waved to him with both arms and called his name. Gawein put down his bags and bundles and waved back.

When he reached her and put down his bags and bundles once again so that he could swing her around in his strong arms, Brettele thought she was floating into heaven on a cloud and that the angels were singing for her. But it was Gawein’s song.

Within sight of the stable

Horses hasten and snort
But the sailor’s heart quickens
Within sight of the port...

And she felt his heart thumping in his chest, more slowly and heavily than her own.

For the third time Gawein put down his bags and bundles, so that he could carry Brettele over the threshold of the house. But this time, when she lay in his arms, she didn’t think that she was in a ship that was surging over the towering waves of the ocean.

She lay her face against his shoulder and no longer imagined that she was floating through the skies on a cloud.

She closed her eyes. She didn’t think of a flying star that was shooting through the universe with her.

When he put her down and she swayed as she held on to him, she understood. There was no ship, no cloud and no star. It was only the arms of her husband Gawein that had carried her over the threshold of their house. That was all. And it made her feel giddy.

‘I’m going to London for coal and lead,’ said Gawein when it was time. ‘But I’ll bring back a block of wood for you so that you can make a figurehead for my ship. Because you’re the best wood-carver that a sailor’s ever seen.’

Brettele blushed. ‘I’ll knit until you get back,’ she said.

In the daytime Brettele helped out in her father’s workshop and in the evening she knitted baby clothes: little jumpers, cardigans, trousers and jackets. Sometimes she would visit her sister, who would be sitting with her round belly in the rocking chair in front of the house.

‘You look cold and lonely,’ Antinua would say. ‘I told you that you shouldn’t marry a sailor. A sailor loves only the sea.’

‘When I think of him, I’m not cold,’ said Brettele. ‘I only have to see his face before me or look at my wooden sailor statue and then I start to glow. Do you glow when you think about your husband?’

‘We’ve had the latest and most expensive wood-burner installed in the kitchen,’ said Antinua proudly. ‘We don’t have to be cold ever again.’

Brettele gave her all the clothes she’d knitted. ‘I don’t need them for the time being,’ she said.

‘A sailor’s never there when you need him,’ said Antinua. ‘I’m going for a nap now, because it’s hard work carrying a baby inside you.’

The days and nights without Gawein were endlessly long for Brettele, but when the ship finally sailed into harbour and she heard his voice singing the same song as before, she forgot her sadness and loneliness.

Gawein put down his bags and bundles to wave to her. He put them down again to take her in his arms, and he put them down for the third time to carry her over the threshold of their house.

When Brettele lay in his arms and pressed her face into his sailors’ jumper, she knew that this was the moment that she’d been waiting for all those weeks. It was worth all of those lonely nights and days to lie in Gawein’s arms like this and to float over the threshold of their house. And when he put her down, she felt giddy.

‘Let me see what you’ve knitted,’ said Gawein when they’d finished eating and he’d given her the block of wood to make a figurehead for his ship.

‘I gave it all to Antinua,’ blushed Brettele. She lowered her eyes. ‘We don’t need the clothes.’

‘Fine,’ said Gawein. ‘You’ll be able to spend all of your time on the figurehead. I want you to make a mermaid, naked from the waist up, with golden hair and roses in her cheeks, but she’s not to look like you. I don’t want the whole crew on board and all of the pilots and dockers in foreign harbours to be looking at you.’

‘I’ll do it,’ said Brettele.

‘I’m going to Smyrna for silk and carpets,’ said Gawein when it was time. ‘I shall bring back another block of wood for you so that you can make a mast board and a decorated rudder, because you’re the best wood-carver that a sailor’s ever seen.’

‘Bring back a carpet for me as well,’ said Brettele. ‘The house gets cold in winter.’

It was the worst winter for years. During the day, Brettele helped out in her father’s workshop and in the evening she kept herself warm by working on the figurehead, which she made in her sister’s likeness.

Sometimes she would go to see Antinua, who had tightly bundled up her child in the clothes that Brettele had knitted.

‘I told you that you shouldn’t marry a sailor,’ said Antinua. ‘Just take a good look at yourself. You’re always alone. I can talk with my husband and my child all day. Who listens to you?’

‘When I go to the sea,’ said Brettele, ‘the waves tell me how Gawein is and they carry my greetings to him.’

‘Then you’ll have heard from the waves that his ship is stuck in the ice at Wijdestrand,’ said Antinua.

Brettele blushed and went to her father’s workshop.

‘Father, lend me your horse and cart,’ she said. ‘I’m going to call on my husband.’

Her father loaded up the cart with cases and chests to be delivered along the way. Brettele carefully packed her figurehead in a Legestrand bridal chest, which she filled with wood shavings. The figurehead was just finished and she wanted to surprise Gawein with it.

The journey took two days. It was cold sitting up front; snow and ice blew into Brettele’s face, but she thought about Gawein’s warm hands and didn’t notice the cold at all.

Brettele spent the first night at an inn, but the second day she carried on driving her cart until, in the evening, the smell of tar from the shipyard in

Wijdestrand, mixed with the smell of burning from the smokehouses, entered her nostrils. Her horse started trotting faster all by itself, as though it fancied a bit of smoked eel for dinner.

Full of anticipation, Brettele drove into Wijdestrand. She left the cart by the harbour inn and stepped over the threshold.

In the harbour inn there was a thick fug of soot, smoke and steaming bodies. It muffled the shouts of the sailors and the accordion music. Brettele waited until she became accustomed to the haze and looked around to see if she could spot Gawein.

Beyond the bar was a raised platform where cabin boys and harbour girls were dancing. Gawein wasn't there.

Around the large fire in the middle of the room were wooden benches where sailors were sitting with ladies of pleasure in their arms. Gawein wasn't there.

Brettele was afraid that he'd stayed behind on his boat and that she wouldn't get to see him this evening. Her heart thumped with disappointment and she began to feel cold, in spite of the stuffy heat that was filling the room.

Around the walls were large corduroy smoking chairs with little tables in front of them. The helmsmen, the skippers and the bosuns sat there, with scantily dressed ladies on their laps. Gawein wasn't there.

Brettele turned around, tears in her eyes. She would have to ask the innkeeper for a place to sleep and go in search of Gawein tomorrow.

Then she saw him. He came reeling in through a side door, followed by a big, ruddy woman who looked as though she hadn't had time to get properly dressed. Her hair was hanging loose and slovenly around her face, the top of her dress was only done up halfway and her feet were bare.

Gawein's hair was all of a tangle as well, as though no comb could compete with the sea wind that blew through his curls every day. His jumper was on back to front and his bootlaces were undone. His cheeks were flushed in the way that Brettele knew so well and as soon as the two of them were through the door he put his arm around the woman and kissed her on the lips. Then he looked around.

At that moment Gawein saw Brettele. He let go of the woman and opened his mouth. Brettele dashed to the door and ran away, into the narrow lanes of Wijdestrand. She heard Gawein calling her name.

Brettele ran past the eel smokehouse and the shipyard, Gawein’s footsteps thudding behind her. Then she heard a thump and a curse. In her mind’s eye, she saw Gawein’s loose bootlaces and she slowed her pace. She hid in a shed where someone had stored fishing nets for the winter. Much later she crept back to the harbour inn, untied her horse and drove the cart away.

The inn where she’d spent the night on the way there was too far. When she became too tired to carry on, she stopped. She covered the horse with two blankets. She took the figurehead out of the bridal chest where she’d stored it for transport, and she lay down in the chest herself, with her knees drawn up, and covered herself with wood shavings. Shivering, she tried to get to sleep.

Early in the morning she drove on without eating or drinking and delivered the packages and chests for her father as she went, because she’d been too impatient to do it on the way there. She also delivered the Legestrand bridal chest. She left her figurehead lying loose in the cart, where it rolled to and fro on every sharp bend.

When she arrived at her father’s workshop, she stabled the horse and put away the cart in silence. That night, in her cold house, she couldn’t warm herself up again. She spent the following days ill in bed.

When she was better again, she fastened the figurehead to the table and carved away at the wood until Antinua’s face had become hers and her sister’s upper body had changed into her own. Then she touched up the paintwork and left the figurehead to dry.

The thaw set in, spring arrived, and Gawein came home. Brettele was too weak to go to the harbour. She waited for him in front of the house. Gawein put down his bags and bundles and picked her up. Brettele laid her face against his jumper and closed her eyes. And she floated over the threshold like that. It wasn’t

a happy of kind of floating, like at the fair, but a slow and mournful floating, like that of an ill person on a litter.

‘That’s a beautiful figurehead,’ said Gawein after dinner. ‘You’ve made it look like you and now all of the sailors on board will look at you. Pilots and dockers in foreign harbours will admire you when they see my ship coming. But I asked you not to carve it in your own likeness, didn’t I?’

‘Indeed you did,’ said Brettele.

Gawein sighed. ‘You knew that you were marrying a sailor,’ he said. ‘A sailor belongs to the sea.’ He looked at Brettele.

Brettele went weak at the knees when he looked her right in the eyes and she nodded.

‘When a sailor’s been sailing on the ocean for weeks and land comes into view, then the only thing he wants to do is to stretch his legs and walk on dry land. And then he has to go out drinking, because the order and discipline on a ship are so stifling, and every once in a while a sailor has to cast off anchor.’

Gawein looked entreatingly at Brettele.

Brettele felt her heart melting and she nodded.

Gawein put his arm around her and she went giddy. She felt like clinging on to him and keeping him with her for ever.

‘When a sailor’s been out drinking with his mates, then his legs want to dance and he wants to hold the harbour girls in his arms and swing them around.’

Gawein had tears in his eyes.

Brettele brushed his tears dry with her hand and nodded.

‘And then he remembers how long he’s been lying alone in his cage of planks without anyone to hold or to kiss, while his wife is at home cuddling and caressing her children.’

Brettele remained silent.

‘If a sailor can’t kiss and cuddle a harbour girl when he’s on shore,’ said Gawein, ‘then he mustn’t go out dancing with his mates. And if he can’t dance with his mates he mustn’t go to the harbour inn to drink and to cast off anchor. If

a sailor can’t cast off anchor, then he mustn’t go on shore to stretch his legs. And a sailor who doesn’t go on shore from time to time to stretch his legs can’t manage life on board. A sailor who can’t manage life on board has to return to dry land and open up a shop selling sailing supplies.’

Gawein fixed his gaze on Brettele. ‘If you want me to return to dry land and open up a shop selling sailing supplies, I’ll do it. I’ll be able to carry you over the threshold every day and we can be together day and night. I’ll forget about the sea.’

‘It’s time for bed,’ said Brettele. She put the carpet that Gawein had brought from Smyrna on the floor next to the bed in the bedroom, wrapped herself up in a blanket and lay down on it.

‘Come to bed,’ said Gawein.

‘Husband and wife sleep in a bed,’ said Brettele, ‘but a sailor is married to the sea and everything to do with it. I can’t be your wife – I’m your sailor’s sweetheart. Come here.’

From that day forth Gawein and Brettele slept on the carpet from Smyrna.

‘I’m going to Naples for wine and marble and oil,’ said Gawein when it was time. ‘What shall I bring back for you?’

‘Bring back a block of wood for me,’ said Brettele. ‘I’m going to open up a shop selling ornamentation for ships. There’s a lot of demand for mast boards and decorated rudders, for figureheads and swords with carved decoration. You need money to be able to go on shore and to drink and to dance and to kiss the harbour girls, because you can’t get all of those things for free. I need money for the rent and my paint and tools.’

‘Fine,’ said Gawein. ‘When I come back I’ll bring wood for you and I’ll put down all my bags and bundles to carry you over the threshold. I’m married to the sea, but you’re number two and I won’t carry anyone other than you over the threshold.’

‘Fine,’ said Brettele.

When Gawein was away, Brettele didn’t help in her father’s workshop any more, but she carved and hacked away all day to stock up on carvings for her shop.

She carved crocodiles with cruel teeth, dragons with vicious jaws, and evil women with snakes in their hair, and the flowers in the borders had long tongues to catch insects with.

She sold everything that she made, because sailors are superstitious and they think that having terrifying animals, evil women and carnivorous flowers on their ship will scare away disaster.

Sometimes Brettele would go to visit Antinua, who was usually sitting in the rocking chair with her child in her lap. Chickens and rabbits and piglets would be scratching about in the yard and Rudroch, her husband, was always nearby.

‘I told you not to marry a sailor,’ said Antinua, ‘a sailor loves the sea first and foremost, and all that it entails.’

‘You’re right,’ said Brettele and she took her nephew from Antinua. ‘But I’m number two, and that’s worth something. And when he comes on shore and takes me in his arms, I float straight to heaven.’

‘I’d rather not think about Rudroch taking me in his arms,’ said Antinua, rubbing her hand over her round belly. ‘There’ll soon be more than enough mouths to feed on the farm and I haven’t got any time for floating anyway.’

On Saturday Brettele went to the harbour inn just as she had done before she met Gawein. I’m not a married woman, she said to herself, and on Saturday evening single girls go out dancing.

She closed her eyes as she whirled around and imagined that it was Gawein holding her in his arms, because the hands of the sailors and helmsmen had no weight and she didn’t feel their touch. And she always went over the threshold of the harbour inn on her own.

And so the years passed, until Gawein went to Trondheim for stockfish, cod-liver oil and copper, and didn’t return. Brettele had used up all of the wood that he’d brought and still his ship hadn’t returned to the harbour.

‘He’s married the sea once and for all,’ said Antinua, ‘and all that’s involved with it. I told you that mustn’t marry a sailor, didn’t I? He’s got another sweetheart in another town with poor little mites and he’s never going to come back to you.’

‘But I have a lifetime’s worth of memories of him,’ said Brettele, ‘and when I think of him my head fills with music.’

‘We’re going to a wedding for farming folk on Saturday, with bagpipes and hurdy-gurdies,’ said Antinua, ‘that’s all the music I need.’

Brettele ordered wood from the city and carried on working. Her shop selling ship ornamentation became well-known even in distant lands and orders came in from far and wide.

Her arms grew muscular from all the hacking and carving. She had enough money for a bigger and better home, but she didn’t want to leave Gawein’s house and any money she had over she gave to Antinua, who now had five little mouths to feed.

One day, when Brettele had sat down for a little rest, she heard a strange knocking sound in the lane where her house was. She went to the doorway and saw a man approaching in the distance.

At first she thought it was Gawein and her heart began to thump with joy, but then she remembered that there was no news of a ship coming in.

She took another good look. The man had a wooden leg that tapped on the cobbles with every step he took. He had a scruffy grizzled beard and curls that the constant sea wind had permanently made all of a tangle, so that no comb or brush could do anything with them.

It was Gawein.

‘You’ve been away for a long time,’ said Brettele when he was standing before her. She looked down at his wooden leg. ‘Is that the piece of wood you’ve brought me from Trondheim?’

Gawein looked at the ground. ‘An anchor fell on my leg,’ he said. ‘I got gangrene in it. I didn’t dare come back to you.’

‘I’ve never been scared of a piece of wood,’ said Brettele.

‘I’ve lost my ship,’ said Gawein, ‘I’ve come to you empty-handed.’ He turned away from her and made to leave.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Brettele.

‘The worst thing of all,’ mumbled Gawein, his face turned away, ‘the worst thing of all is that I can’t carry you over the threshold.’

‘Would you like to carry me over the threshold then?’ asked Brettele. Her heart was thumping.

‘That’s what I always dreamed of,’ said Gawein. ‘On the sea, on land, in storms and in heat waves, by day and at night, in the harbour and away from the shore, I always thought about how I would carry you over the threshold and how you would lie with your head on my chest and then sway a little when I put you down.’

‘There’s only one thing for it,’ said Brettele. She picked up Gawein in her strong arms and carried him over the threshold. She pushed the door shut with her foot. With Gawein in her arms, she walked through the room and up the stairs until she was standing before the bed. There she laid him down.

‘Now you’re divorced from the sea,’ she said, ‘even though I don’t know for how long. But right now I’m your wife.’ She stretched out next to him. ‘We can sleep in the bed.’

The heart of a sailor

It was deep in the night by the time Smee had finished singing.

They sat together in silence for a while. Smee coughed and cleared his dry throat.

‘What happened to your leg?’ Mitoo finally asked Gawein shyly. She was wearing a yellow skirt with blue roses on it and she traced the petals with her finger, so that she wouldn’t have to look at Gawein.

Gawein let go of his wife’s hand and knocked on his wooden leg. ‘A fight,’ he said after a while. ‘That’s how it happened. A drunken seamen’s fight.’ He sighed. ‘About a woman.’

He stood up and limped off to fetch a glass of water for Smee.

‘She was the helmsman’s girl,’ he said when he came back. ‘When he heard that she was carrying my child, he dropped the heavy anchor on me when I was standing on the quay. He didn’t want his girl any more, she didn’t want me any more, I got a wooden leg and I was sunk.’

Gawein looked at his wife. ‘She always waited for me with open arms. “You must go back to sea, on your own ship,” she said when I came back to her as a cripple. “We can make a lot of money from my work. If you help me with selling and delivery, you can buy a new ship in a few years and go to sea and pay for everything that life at sea entails. Because the girls in the harbour inns aren’t as cheap as I am.” And then she laughed and kissed me.’

Gawein looked at Brettele and a tear ran down his cheek. ‘She wasted away when I stayed on shore,’ he said, ‘even more than I did. One day she asked me to go dancing with her in the harbour inn. I danced as best I could. Brettele lay in my arms with her eyes closed. She was pale. At night we walked to the beach and sat on a dune. “You must go to sea soon,” she said to me. “Don’t wait any longer. Look for a ship.” She cuddled up to me, but she was still trembling. “I loved your breath,” she said, “because I could hear the sound of the sea in it. I loved the tide that crashed in the thumping of your heart. I loved the waves that picked me up

when I lay in your arms. Because a sailor’s wife loves the sea first and foremost, and her husband is number two.” I laughed, but she wasn’t joking. “Since you’ve left the sea, the sea has left you,” she said. “I can’t love a man who sells shipping supplies.” Then I knew that I would have to hurry, or I would lose both the sea and the love of my wife. But it was already too late.’