THE LEGEND OF THE GRAIL

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Compiled and translated by
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Introduction

THE QUEST FOR THE HOLY GRAIL is the single most important element in the story of King Arthur. Even to the many who have only the haziest knowledge – or no knowledge at all – of things Arthurian, the Grail itself is an emblem, a metaphor for an ultimately challenging but supremely desirable goal: it has, indeed, become something of a journalistic cliché. Yet very few people, even those interested in the wonderful stories of the Round Table, have ever read at first hand the medieval masterpieces which, over a period of some forty years in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, constructed what might be called the legend of the Grail. Most people's mental images of the Grail quest are more likely to be dependent on Burne-Jones tapestries and Tennysonian idylls, themselves dependent principally on the comparatively late borrowings 'oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe' by Thomas Malory.

Complexities

There is a good reason for this. The original Grail romances did not develop a consistent, coherent narrative: there never appeared a clear and definitive 'legend of the Grail'. The romances were created by a series of writers working with different preoccupations, different purposes and different interpretations of their predecessors' stories – and in some cases almost certainly at the same time as each other, with no knowledge of one another's work. The manuscripts that have come down to us, therefore, were in many cases compiled by redactors – scribe/editors – struggling valiantly to make sense of the contradictory, half-adapted, subtly altered and rearranged inter-borrowings of the storytellers who had created a vast series of extraordinary adventures that constituted the Grail quests of many different knights.

Some of these romances contain huge digressions as well as contradictions: the *First Continuation* of the unfinished *Perceval* by Chrétien de Troyes, for example, contains a story about a young knight named Carados, unrelated to the Grail quest, which runs (albeit very entertainingly) for several thousand

lines, and *Gerbert de Montreuil*'s *Continuation* devotes the best part of 2,000 lines to a substantial story about Tristran, Iseult and King Marc.

The massive and unwieldy nature of this material has led to a body of magnificent literature, a major component of the European imagination, being unknown to the point of being effectively lost. This priceless material deserves to be presented in an accessible form. But to provide, for example, condensed versions of each major Grail text individually would, if anything, merely accentuate the contradictions and increase the modern reader's sense of bewilderment.

This volume is designed instead to interweave the principal motifs and narrative strands of all the original Grail romances in order to construct a single, consistent and completely accessible version of the Grail story. Avoiding all contradiction and repetition, it aims to accentuate instead what the medieval romances have in common. In spite of what has been said above, it is surprising how much common ground there is between the different writers, as they looked over their shoulders to the work of their predecessors and were remarkably aware of the gradual development of their potent and absorbing theme.

The development of the legend

So how did this development take place? A defeatist, but not entirely untrue, answer is that we shall never know. The order – let alone the precise dating – of the composition of the Grail romances will forever be a matter of conjecture and scholarly dispute. There is not even agreement about fairly long-standing assumptions that the mighty theme of the Grail was (a) initiated by the poet Chrétien de Troyes with his unfinished *Perceval* and (b) was based upon an amorphous body of much older Celtic tales of a maimed king and magic feeding vessels and cauldrons of regeneration.

What follows is, therefore, merely one of a number of possible accounts of the development of what might be called the legend of the Grail.

In the mid-1180s the great poet Chrétien de Troyes, borrowing and reworking various narrative elements from existing Celtic tales, wrote just over 9,000 lines of a romance in verse called *Perceval – the Story of the Grail*. The dating of this poem is fairly reliable: it was certainly written no later than 1191, when Count Philip of Flanders, to whom it is dedicated, died at Acre during the Third Crusade. It tells of a young knight who sees a procession of mysterious objects including a shining, bejewelled vessel referred to as a grail. Chrétien died with the poem unfinished. Its tantalising theme was, however, far too good to leave, and during the 1190s were composed at least two of the anonymous *Continuations* – the so-called First Continuation and Second Continuation – which are added to *Perceval* in most of the surviving

manuscripts. Simultaneously (though some scholars would claim that he was writing at the same time as, or even before, Chrétien de Troyes was working on *Perceval*), one Robert de Boron looked back rather than forward in time and created a prehistory of the Grail in his *Joseph of Arimathea*. In this crucial work, a kind of apocryphal gospel, Robert identified the Grail as a vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper and by Joseph of Arimathea at the Crucifixion.

This clear, unambiguous identification of the Grail as a holy relic of supreme importance was made at a time when, to the East, the forces of Christendom were losing holy places and relics to the Saracens in no uncertain manner – in 1187 the True Cross itself was lost to Saladin at the catastrophic battle of Hattin. Small wonder, then, that around 1200, with the situation in the Holy Land so critical, the anonymous writer of the next great treatment of the Grail theme, *The High Book of the Grail*, developed the story to stress a crucial connection between striving to recover the Grail and crusading – with ruthless violence if necessary – against the infidel.

By now Perceval and Gawain were well established as protagonists in the Grail quest, but a different anonymous writer with a different didactic purpose felt the need to create a new, unsullied Grail hero in the form of Galahad, who brings a decisive conclusion to the story in *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, probably composed around 1220–25. But it was by no means the only conclusion, or the first or the last. The writer of *The High Book of the Grail* had already decided to kill off the Fisher King, the maimed guardian of the Grail, without his having been healed; and two further Continuations of Chrétien's *Perceval* – despite the fact that they almost certainly post-date *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, being composed probably as late as 1230 – provide conclusions to the Grail story that have nothing to do with Galahad, who does not even appear. These are the so-called Third Continuation attributed to one Manessier, and Gerbert de Montreuil's Continuation. To continue the complication, Gerbert's work exists in two surviving manuscripts as a long interpolation between the Second and Third Continuations, and probably gave an independent ending to the story which was edited out to make possible the inclusion of the Third which would otherwise have been redundant.

A modern redaction

Given all this complexity, what might a scribe in, say, 1240, with *all* the available Grail texts before him and commissioned to compile a new and complete 'story of the Grail,' have produced? Who knows? But the likelihood is that he would have selected episodes, as all scribes did, to create a narrative as consistent as possible unto itself. He would surely have put Robert de Boron's 'prehistory' of the Grail, whether or not it was composed first, at the start. He would have edited out one ending at the expense of another, but tried to make sure that every narrative strand was satisfactorily brought to a conclusion.

That is what this volume sets out to do. It is no more and no less than a modern redaction, a compilation of existing material of a kind that medieval scribes were constructing in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The only difference is that it invents nothing: apart from an occasional linking phrase to clarify connections between various characters and incidents, there is no scribal interpolation of any kind.*

It is compiled by interweaving all the key narrative strands in the eight great French romances which, between the mid-1180s and some time around 1230, created and developed the legend of the Grail: Robert de Boron's *Joseph of Arimathea*, Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval – the Story of the Grail*, the anonymous First Continuation and Second Continuation, the Third Continuation attributed to Manessier and Gerbert de Montreuil's Continuation, and the anonymous *High Book of the Grail* (also known as *Perlesvaus*) and *Quest of the Holy Grail*.

The first and the last two of these were written in prose, the other five in verse. But whether verse or prose, it is vital to recognise that they were scripts. They were intended to be read aloud. The notion of sitting alone, reading a manuscript in silent isolation, was alien to the medieval mind; it would have been as strange and anti-social to our forebears as solitary drinking might be to us. The dramatic qualities of this medieval writing, and the power of its unfamiliar rhythms, become startlingly evident when read aloud. It is not by chance that the first three words of *Perlesvaus*, which open this modern redaction of the legend of the Grail, are:

Hear the story.

* With a rare exception: it has been necessary to take a very occasional liberty to overcome significant inconsistencies in the original. Readers with a detailed knowledge of the texts may notice, for example, that on page 61, when Perceval breaks the sword given to him by the Fisher King, an invented phrase states that the sword vanishes, to account for its otherwise inexplicable reappearance when Perceval next visits the Grail Castle.

Joseph of Arimathea

HEAR THE STORY OF THAT HOLY VESSEL which is called the Grail, in which the precious blood of the Saviour was gathered on the day when He was crucified to redeem mankind from Hell. Such was His purpose in coming to this world, being born of the Virgin Mary at Bethlehem.

At the time when Our Lord was upon the Earth, most of the land of Judaea was answerable to Rome, and the governor's name was Pilate. This Pilate had in his service a soldier named Joseph of Arimathea, who followed Christ to many places and loved him deeply in his heart, but dared not show it openly, for Our Lord had many enemies set against Him. And not only enemies: He had a disciple, too, who was not as a follower should be. He was ill-disposed towards his fellow disciples, and began to distance himself from them, serving them harshly and unkindly; they were very wary of him. But Our Lord, being God, knew all. This disciple's name was Judas, and his hatred towards Our Lord was conceived on account of an ointment; I shall tell you now of his treachery.

At this time it was the custom that a chamberlain received a tenth of all moneys that came into his lord's purse, and when Mary Magdalene poured an ointment upon Our Lord's feet Judas was enraged, counting in his heart that the ointment was worth three hundred pence. He did not want to lose his due; he reckoned his tenth was worth thirty pence, and was determined to secure that amount. At the earliest opportunity he sought to recover those thirty pence from God's enemies.

Three nights before the Passover, Christ's enemies were at the house of a man named Caiaphas, discussing how they could capture Him. Joseph of Arimathea was present as they talked, and their wicked words grieved him terribly. In the middle of their discussion Judas appeared, and when they saw him they fell silent, for they distrusted him, believing him to be a good disciple of Jesus.

Judas spoke out and asked them: 'Why are you assembled here?'

And they replied: 'Where is that master of yours?'

And he told them where Jesus was and why he had come to them, and when the Jews heard Judas's words of treachery they were overjoyed and said: 'Tell us how we can take him prisoner!'

And he replied: 'I'll sell him to you if you wish.'

'Yes indeed,' they said, 'most gladly!'

And he said he would give them Jesus for thirty pence. One of them had the money to hand, and paid it. And so Judas recovered his tenth of the three hundred pennies' worth of ointment.

Then they discussed how they would capture Jesus: they fixed the day and an early hour; Judas would inform them where Jesus would be, and they would be armed and ready to seize Him. But Judas warned them to be sure they did not seize James, for he looked very much like Jesus – understandably, for James was His cousin. And they asked him: 'How then will we recognise Jesus?'

And he replied: 'Take the man that I shall kiss.'

And so it was resolved.

Joseph of Arimathea was present throughout all this, and it weighed heavily upon his heart, but he dared do nothing. They went their several ways and waited till the Thursday.

On the Thursday evening Our Lord was at the house of Simon the Leper. I cannot and should not tell you everything He said to His disciples, but this much I can say for sure: He told them that eating and drinking with Him was one who would betray Him. The disciples were dismayed and swore they were not guilty. But Christ assured them it was true, and Judas asked Him: 'Are you saying it's me?'

And Jesus answered: '*You* say so.'

It was then that the men whom Judas had informed burst into the house, and the disciples were terrified. And once the house was full, and Judas was sure they had the upper hand, he stepped forward and kissed Jesus. Seeing this, the Jews seized Him from all sides, and Judas cried to them: 'Hold him fast!,' for he knew how great was Christ's strength. And they led Him away, leaving the disciples filled with grief.

And the vessel in which He had made the sacrament was there at Simon's house, and one of the Jews took it and kept it until the next day.

Jesus was taken before Pilate, and they charged Him with everything they could – though it wasn't much: they could find no justification for putting Him to death. But the weakness of the law was such, and Pilate felt so powerless before all the Jews, that he had to accept it. Then he spoke as governor, saying: 'Who will take responsibility if the emperor asks about this? I can see no reason for this man to suffer death.'

And they all cried out together: 'May his blood be showered upon us and all our children!'

And while they seized Jesus and led Him away, Pilate called for water and washed his hands, and said that, just as his hands were clean, so was he clean of responsibility for that man's death.

It was then that the Jew who had taken the vessel from Simon's house came to Pilate and gave it to him. Pilate took it and kept it safe.

When the news came that they had put Jesus to death, Joseph of Arimathea was overcome with grief and anguish, and he came to Pilate and said: 'Sir, my knights and I have served you for a long while, and you've given me nothing for my service.'

'Ask,' said Pilate, 'and I'll give you whatever you wish in payment.'

And Joseph thanked him and said: 'I would like the body of the prophet whom the Jews have wrongfully put to death.'

Pilate was astonished that he should ask for such a poor reward, and said: 'I thought you'd ask for a greater gift! If that's the payment you desire, you shall have it.'

'Many thanks, sir,' said Joseph. 'Give orders that it should be mine.'

'Go and take it,' Pilate said.

But Joseph replied: 'Sir, the Jews are strong in numbers, and won't want to give it to me.'

But Pilate was sure they would; so Joseph made his way to the Cross. When he saw Jesus hanging there he was filled with pity and wept bitter tears, for he had loved Him deeply. He came to the Jews who were guarding Him and said: 'Pilate has given me permission to remove the prophet's body from this shameful place.'

But all the Jews together said: 'You're not having it, for his disciples say he's going to revive. But however often he comes back to life, we'll kill him!'

'Let me take him, sirs,' said Joseph, 'for Pilate has granted him to me.'

But the Jews cried: 'We'd sooner kill you!'

Joseph left them and returned to Pilate and told him of the Jews' response. Pilate was amazed; but he saw before him a man named Nichodemus, and he commanded him to go with Joseph and take Christ's body from the Cross himself. And then he remembered the vessel that the Jew had given him, and he called Joseph and said: 'Joseph, you loved that prophet dearly.'

'Yes indeed, sir,' he replied.

And Pilate said: 'I have a vessel of his, given to me by one of the Jews who were present at his capture, and I've no wish to keep anything that belonged to him.'

And he gave the vessel to Joseph, who received it with the greatest joy.

Joseph and Nichodemus set off together, and Nichodemus went to a smith to borrow pincers and a hammer; then they came to the Cross where Christ still hung, and Nichodemus said to the people there: 'You've dealt wickedly with this man. But now he's clearly dead, and Pilate has granted the body to Joseph and has commanded me to deliver it to him.'

They all replied that he was sure to come back to life, and refused to let the body go; but Nichodemus said that nothing they could do would stop him taking it. So they all marched off to Pilate, while Joseph and Nichodemus climbed up and took Jesus Christ from the Cross.

Joseph held Him in his arms and laid Him on the ground, cradling Him tenderly and washing Him most gently. But when he had washed Him, he saw His wounds still bleeding and was dismayed to see the blood spilling into the ground; and then he remembered his vessel, and thought the falling drops of blood would be better gathered there. So he placed it beneath Christ's wounds; and blood from the wounds in His hands and His feet dripped into the vessel. Then Joseph set it to one side, and took Jesus' body and wrapped it in a sheet that he had bought for his own use.

Meanwhile the crowd who had gone to Pilate gained his agreement that, wherever Joseph might put the body, it should be closely watched in case it came back to life, and they arranged for a large armed guard.

While all this was happening, Our Lord descended into Hell, broke in and set free Adam and Eve and as many others as He pleased. And He returned to life, unknown and unseen by those who were standing guard, and He went forth and appeared to Mary Magdalene and to other disciples where He chose.

When the Jews heard He had come back to life they all assembled to hold council, and said to each other: 'This man will do us great harm if he's truly alive again!'

And those who had been guarding the body declared that they knew for sure it was not where Joseph had put it. 'It's his fault we've lost him!' they cried. 'And if harm befalls us it'll be because of him and Nichodemus!'

They discussed what they could do if the emperor demanded the body; and they agreed to say they had handed it over on the orders of Nichodemus.

'But if anyone says "You had the body guarded at the tomb: ask the guards what happened", what answer could we give?'

And one replied: 'There's a way around that. Let's seize Joseph and Nichodemus tonight in secret, and put them to a grim death. Then afterwards, if anyone asks us for Jesus' body, we'll say we gave it to them!'

They all agreed to this, and praised the man for his cleverness. So it was agreed they would seize them by night.

But friends of Nichodemus were present, and they informed him of the plan and he fled; and when the Jews arrived at his house they found no sign of him. So they moved on to the house of Joseph, and seized him naked in his bed; they made him dress and then led him to the house of one of the richest men in the land, where there was a tower with a dismal dungeon. Having Joseph there alone, they beat him and asked him what he had done with Jesus.

'Those who were guarding him will know,' he replied, 'for I did nothing secret or underhand.'

'You've stolen him from us, we know it!' they replied. 'We're going to throw you in this dungeon, and you'll die there unless you tell us where the body of Jesus is!'

And Joseph, knowing nothing of its whereabouts, said: 'I'm willing to die, if that's the will of the Lord – the Lord on whose account I'm your captive.'

Then the Jews seized him and beat him dreadfully, and flung him down into the dungeon vault. They sealed it with a stone, so that if anyone came in search of him, they would never find him.

And so it was that Joseph was abducted and imprisoned. When Pilate learned he was missing he was distressed and heavy-hearted, for he had been the best of friends to him. And Joseph was missing for a long time.

But the one in whose cause he had suffered did not forget him. Being Lord and God He watched over him, and came to the dungeon where he lay, and brought him his vessel. A shining light appeared to Joseph, and he was filled with joy and with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and he marvelled and said: 'Almighty God, where can such a brilliant light come from unless from You?'

And Jesus answered: 'Joseph, Joseph, do not be afraid, for my Father's power will guard you.'

'Who are you?' Joseph asked Him. 'You're so fair – I don't know you – I cannot look upon you.'

And Jesus said: 'Hear me, Joseph. I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I came to Earth to suffer death at the command of my Father, who made Adam and from Adam made Eve, but the Enemy deceived Eve and made her sin, and she caused Adam to do likewise. They were cast into misery; and they conceived and had children and a great line of descendants, and when they died the Devil was determined they should all be his. But it was my Father's will that I should come to Earth and be born of woman. It was through a woman, Eve, that the Enemy took possession of men; and as a woman had caused man's soul to be imprisoned, it was only right that it should be recovered and redeemed through a woman: that is why I was born of the Virgin.

'And you saw the torment I suffered on the Cross. Just as the tree in Eden bore the apple that tempted Eve, so the Son of God died on a tree to save His Father's creation. I came on Earth to work this salvation, and suffered worldly pain. Blood flowed from my body in five places.'

'Oh Lord,' said Joseph, 'have pity and mercy on me: it's for your sake I'm imprisoned here. I've always loved you dearly, but never dared to speak to you, for I feared you wouldn't trust me because of the people I conversed with, keeping company as I did with the ones who meant you harm.'

'Joseph,' Our Lord replied, 'it's good to have a friend amongst enemies – as you can see now for yourself! I knew you were a good friend to me, so I left you with them, knowing you would feel grief at my torment and would come to my aid when none of my disciples could. I knew you would help me out of love for my Father, who gave you the courage to do the service for which I was given to you.'

'Oh, dear Lord,' said Joseph, 'don't say that you're mine!'

'But I am,' Our Lord replied. 'I belong to all the good, and all the good are mine. And do you know what reward you'll have because I was given to you? Lasting joy will be yours at the end of this mortal life. None of my disciples knows of the love between us: you have loved me in secret as I have loved you.

But know this: our love will be revealed to all – and will be a curse to the wicked – for you shall have the sign of my death in your keeping; see: it is here.'

And Our Lord took hold of the precious vessel with the holy blood that Joseph had gathered from His body when he washed Him; and as soon as Joseph saw it he went down on his knees and cried for mercy, saying: 'Lord, am I worthy to keep such a holy thing as this vessel?'

And Our Lord replied: 'You, Joseph, must be its keeper, you and whoever else you may command. But there are to be no more than three keepers, and those three shall guard it in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, which three powers are one and the same being in God.'

And He held out the vessel and Joseph, still kneeling, took it; and Our Lord said: 'Joseph, you are holding the blood which contains these three powers. Do you understand your reward? Your reward is that the sacrament shall never be made without remembrance of your good work by those who recognise it.'

'Lord,' replied Joseph, 'please tell me what I did, for I don't know.'

And Jesus said: 'You took me from the Cross. And know this: when I sat at the table of the Last Supper on the night I was betrayed, I said that many tables will be established in my service, where the sacrament shall be made in my name, which will be a reminder of the Cross; and the vessel of the sacrament will be a reminder of the stone tomb in which you laid me, and the paten which will be placed on top will be a reminder of the lid with which you covered me, and the cloth called the corporal will be a reminder of the winding-sheet in which you wrapped me. And so your work, Joseph, will be remembered until the world's end. And all who see the vessel and remain in its presence will have lasting joy and fulfilment for their souls.'

And so saying, Christ gave the vessel to Joseph. And when he had taken it, Our Lord spoke sacred words that He had prepared for him, and said: 'Whenever you have need, seek the help of the three powers that are one being, and of that blessed lady Mary who gave birth to God the Son, and ask for whatever counsel your heart desires, and you will hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. And be assured, you will not remain imprisoned in this dark dungeon; and your deliverance will astound your wicked captors.'

With that, Christ left him, and for the time being Joseph remained in prison. Of his imprisonment nothing is said by the apostles or the writers of the Gospels, for they knew nothing about Joseph except that, because of his affection for Christ, he had asked to be granted His body. Some of the apostles did hear of Joseph's disappearance, but they did not speak of it, for they committed nothing to the Scriptures except what they had seen or heard themselves.

Joseph stayed imprisoned for a long time.

* * *

Meanwhile there was a pilgrim who had been in Judaea and seen Our Lord performing miracles upon the blind and the lame, and had seen Him crucified,

too, under the authority of Pilate. This worthy man journeyed through many lands until at last he came to Rome, at the time when Vespasian, the son of the emperor Titus, was sick with leprosy: he was shut away in a stone chamber with only a tiny window through which they passed his food. The worthy pilgrim came to Rome and took lodging with a rich man in the city. In conversation that evening, the rich man told his guest how pitiful it was that the emperor's son was sick and shut away, and said that if he knew of any possible remedy he should say so. And the pilgrim replied:

'No, I don't; but I can tell you that in the land of Judaea there was a prophet through whom God worked many miracles. I saw Him heal the lame who couldn't walk and the blind who couldn't see. He healed anyone He wished to heal, and the rich and powerful of Judaea came to hate him because they could do nothing to match His words and deeds. They put Him to death by crucifying Him. And I swear to you,' said the pilgrim, 'had He still been alive and brought before the emperor's son, if He'd wished to cure him He'd have surely done so.'

And his host said: 'Did you ever hear why He was crucified?'

'No,' said the pilgrim, 'except that they hated Him.'

'Where did this happen, under whose jurisdiction?'

'Pilate's,' said the pilgrim, 'the emperor's governor in that city.'

'Truly now, would you come with me and tell this to the emperor?'

'I'd tell it to anyone,' he replied.

And when they came before the emperor and his counsellors and the pilgrim repeated his story, they were utterly amazed, for they had always thought Pilate a good and wise man who would never have permitted such an outrage. And one of them said: 'I love Pilate dearly, and can't believe he'd have allowed the killing of such a great healer, if he could have prevented it.'

But the pilgrim assured them it was true. 'And I'd wager my life that Pilate would not deny it. I also believe that if anyone found anything that had belonged to the prophet, and brought it to the emperor's son, if he had faith and touched it, he would be healed.'

They were all astounded at his words, and one of them said: 'If my lord the emperor sends me to learn the truth, what would you have us do with you?'

'Keep me fed until your return, and if you say my story isn't true, I shall accept death by beheading.'

They all agreed he had said enough, and they had him taken and placed in a chamber under guard. When the emperor's son Vespasian heard the news he begged his father to send messengers as soon as he could. The emperor did so, sending the wisest men of his court to confirm the pilgrim's story and, if the prophet was dead, to bring back something He had touched to heal his son.

The emperor's messengers crossed the sea to the land of Judaea, and ordered Pilate to meet them at Arimathea. When he arrived there was no rejoicing, for they feared they might be taking him back to Rome to execute him. They gave

him the emperor's letters, which told him everything the pilgrim had said. He read them, turned back to the messengers, looked kindly upon them, and said:

'Sirs, everything these letters state is true: it was exactly as they say.'

They were amazed at his admission, and said: 'You're acknowledging great folly! If you can't excuse yourself, you'll surely die!'

Pilate called the messengers into a chamber, and made sure the doors were firmly shut so that they could not be overheard by the Jews. Then he began to tell them everything he knew or had heard about Christ's life: how the rich had come to hate Him; how He had healed whoever He wished; how the Jews had accused Him and bought His betrayal by a disciple who did not love Him. And he told them of the foul treatment they had dealt Him, and how they had brought Christ before him and demanded that he condemn Him to death.

'I saw no reason to sentence the man, but they were so many, and so aggressive and rich and powerful! I told them that if the emperor asked me about it, it would be on their heads, and they replied that they wished Christ's blood might be showered on them and their children! Then they seized Him and led Him away and did with Him as you've heard. I wanted it known that I was blameless, and called for water and washed my hands and said: "May I be as clean of this man's death as my hands are clean in this water." When the prophet was dead, one of my knights asked to be given His body, which I gladly granted, and he took it from its place of shame and laid it in a stone tomb. I don't know what became of it after that. But I believe they've killed Joseph, my knight. That's my story: now judge whether I did wrong.'

Having heard all this, the messengers thought Pilate less guilty than before, and said: 'We don't know if what you say is true, but if it is, you may well absolve yourself of blame.'

'The Jews know the truth of it,' said Pilate. 'I'll have them confirm my story.'

'Call them,' the messengers replied. 'Command all who were involved in the prophet's crucifixion to gather in this city a month from today.'

Pilate sent messengers throughout the land to summon all who had been present at Christ's death, and to let them know that the emperor's envoys wished to speak to them. While waiting for the month to pass, Pilate had people search the country for anything touched by Jesus Christ, but they could find nothing.

At the end of the month the Jews assembled at Arimathea. Pilate said to the emperor's messengers: 'Let me speak to them first: you'll hear my words and their replies, and when you've heard what both sides say, act accordingly.'

When they were all assembled, Pilate said: 'Sirs, here are the emperor's envoys, who wish to know who it was that you put to death, the one held to be King of the Jews. For the emperor has heard He was a great healer, and has commanded that He be taken to him, if He can be found. But I've told his envoys He's dead, and that you yourselves, the powerful men of this land, put Him to death because He said He was your king – and you did so without the emperor's leave.'

'Because you were so poor a governor,' the Jews replied, 'that you dared not punish Him! Instead you seemed upset when we said we'd put Him to death.'

And one of the messengers addressed them, saying: 'Sirs, this man who claimed to be a greater lord than the emperor, did Pilate then not pass sentence upon Him?'

'No indeed!' they replied. 'We had to take responsibility upon ourselves and our children, or Pilate would never have agreed!'

'And who was this prophet of whom so much has been spoken?'

They replied that He performed the greatest miracles and wonders in the world; He was an enchanter. Then the messengers asked all those present to tell them if they knew of anything that had ever been touched by the prophet, but they replied that they knew of nothing, for everything he owned had been thrown away and anyone might have taken it. With that the assembly broke up, and Pilate was cleared of the envoys' suspicion.

Then, a while later, while they were still distressed at their failure to find anything that had touched the body of Our Lord, a man came to them saying that he knew a woman who had an image of Christ that she revered, but did not know how she had come by it. Pilate sent for her and she came. And when Pilate saw her he rose to greet her, and embraced her and asked her name, and the good woman, baffled by Pilate's joyful welcome, told him her name was Veronica. He drew her aside, and said: 'Veronica, I hear you have the image of a man in your keeping; I beg you to show it to me.'

'I know nothing about this!' the woman said, greatly alarmed, and denied it vigorously. Then the emperor's messengers approached and greeted her with joy, and told her why they had come to the land and about the illness of the emperor's son Vespasian. 'We believe that if he were given the image, he'd be healed.' If she would sell it to them, they would pay whatever she asked.

Hearing the plight of the emperor's son, she realised she must reveal the truth, and said: 'Sirs, I could never sell the thing you seek, however much you paid me. But if you swear by all you believe in that you'll not keep what I give you, I'll come with you to Rome.'

They were overjoyed at this and said: 'We'll take you to Rome most gladly, and as you've requested, so we swear.' They made their vow all together, and then said: 'You'll be made a rich woman. Now show us the thing we seek.'

So Veronica went back to her house and fetched the image of the face and returned to where they were waiting.

'Sit down,' she said when she arrived, and they did so, and she took out the image. When they saw it they were overcome with joy and all rose to their feet. 'Why have you stood up?' she asked, and they replied: 'When we saw the face we couldn't help it. Ah, lady, tell us where you found it and how it came to be yours.'

'I will,' she said. 'I'd made a length of linen cloth and was carrying it to market to sell it, when I met the people who were driving the prophet through the streets, His hands bound, leading Him to His death. And He asked me to

wipe away the sweat that was running down His face. So I took one end of the cloth and wiped His face; then I went on my way while they drove Him on, flogging Him and abusing Him. And when I got home and looked at the cloth, I found it bore this image of His face. That's exactly how it happened. And if,' she said, 'you think it would be of use to the emperor's son, I'll go with you and take it to him.'

'Many thanks,' they replied. 'We believe it would be of use to him indeed!'

This image was the only thing they found which had touched Our Lord.

* * *

The emperor was overjoyed when they arrived back in Rome, and they confirmed that every word the pilgrim had told them was true. The emperor asked if the prophet was such a great man as was said, and they replied: 'Yes, and a good deal more!'

'And have you brought back anything that touched Him?'

'Yes!' they said, and they told him how they had found Veronica and her image of the prophet's face.

'This is a great wonder,' said the emperor. 'I've never heard of the like.'

And he went to Veronica and gave her a joyful welcome, and said he would make her a rich woman for what she had brought him. And Veronica showed him the face on the cloth; and when he saw it, the emperor, filled with wonder, made three deep bows and said: 'This is the most beautiful face I've ever seen.'

Then he took it in both hands and carried it into the chamber where his son was shut away. He was sleeping; so the emperor placed the cloth at the window, and called to his son and showed him the face. As soon as Vespasian set eyes upon it he was healed, in better health than he had ever been in his life. And he said: 'Dear Lord God, whose face is this that has healed me of all sickness? Father!' he cried to the emperor. 'Have this wall knocked down at once!'

It was done with all possible speed, and Vespasian left the chamber in perfect health and spirits, to the great joy of the emperor and everyone. He asked where the image of the face had been found, and whose it was, which had healed him as no man on Earth could do. And when the emperor told him the pilgrim's story of Christ and all His miracles, Vespasian asked the messengers: 'Sirs, did they truly put to death such a worthy man as He?'

'They did,' they said; and when he heard this he was deeply angry and said they had done a shameful deed, and that he would never be content until they had paid for it. And he said to his father: 'Sir, you are not our king or emperor: the true lord is the man who by His very image has healed me as neither you nor anyone else could do. He is the lord of men and women and of all things, and I beg you now, let me go and take revenge upon His killers.'

'Dear son,' the emperor replied, 'do exactly as you wish.'

And Vespasian crossed the sea and ordered Pilate to come to him; and when Pilate saw he had come with a great company he was filled with fear and said: 'Dear sir, I am at your command. Let me know your will.'

'I have come to avenge the death of Jesus Christ,' Vespasian replied, 'the prophet who healed me.'

Pilate was terrified, imagining Vespasian had been told he was responsible; and he said: 'Sir, would you like to see the men who were present at His death and know who was guilty and who was not?'

'Indeed I would,' said Vespasian.

'Then have me taken and imprisoned,' said Pilate, 'and say it's because I wouldn't sentence Him. Pretend to despise me.'

Vespasian did as Pilate said, and summoned those involved from every corner of the land. When they had all assembled, Vespasian asked them about the prophet who was a higher lord than his father, and said: 'You committed treason, allowing Him to make Himself your king.'

And they all replied: 'It was Pilate, your governor, who stood up for Him! He said that even if the prophet claimed to be our king, it wasn't enough to merit death. But we said it was, and that we wouldn't allow Him to be lord above our masters, but Pilate said the man was lord above all kings!'

'That's why I've thrown him in prison,' Vespasian said. 'I'd heard about his actions, and how he loved the prophet more than us. Now I wish to know,' he said, 'which of you inflicted most pain on the prophet, who was most offended at His claim to be king, and which of you were most involved in the plot against Him. Tell me everything, exactly as it happened.'

Imagining it was for their benefit and Pilate's downfall, they were delighted, and told him exactly what they had done: they pointed out the one who had paid Judas the thirty pence and the ones who had captured Christ. Each one of them bragged of the foul things they had said and done. Then they told him how they had led Him before Pilate.

'But he wouldn't pass judgment, so we killed Him without leave. We had to take his death upon ourselves and our children. We pray you now, declare us relieved of this responsibility.'

Without another word Vespasian had them all seized and kept under guard; and then he sent for Pilate and said: 'You're not as guilty of wrongdoing as I thought. But I mean to destroy all who were involved in the killing of the Lord who has cured me.'

And he called for a great number of horses, and with four horses to each man he began to have the guilty torn to pieces. They were astounded to see him mete out such justice and asked him why, and he said it was because they had killed Jesus Christ, and now they were all to suffer the same death unless they delivered Christ's body to him.

'We gave it to Joseph!' they cried. 'And we don't know what he's done with it. But if Pilate gives us Joseph, we'll give you Jesus!'

'You didn't trust Joseph at all,' said Pilate. 'You had the body watched by your own guards. And now Christ's disciples say they've seen Him since, and that He is resurrected.'

'All these people must die,' said Vespasian, 'unless they return the body to me.'

He began to have more of them put to death, commanding them to deliver up either Jesus or Joseph. When they saw they were all destined to die, one of them said: 'Would my children and I be spared if I told you where to find Joseph?'

Vespasian said they would; and the man led him to the tower where Joseph had been locked away, and said: 'I saw him imprisoned here, sealed up under this great stone slab.'

'How long ago was this?' Vespasian asked.

'On the third day after the prophet was crucified.'

'Did you kill him before you threw him in prison?'

'No,' the man replied, 'but we gave him a good beating for his crazy words!'

'Do you think he's dead now?'

'How could he possibly be alive,' said the man, 'after so long in here?'

And Vespasian replied: 'He might well have been saved by the one who healed me of my sickness. He healed me, even though I had never done anything for Him – I had never even seen Him! But Joseph was imprisoned for His sake; Joseph asked to be granted His body, and cleaned it, and buried it: I can't believe He would let Joseph die so wretchedly.'

Then the stone slab was lifted, and Vespasian bent down and called to Joseph; but there was no reply. The others said: 'This is incredible. Do you really think this man could have survived so long?'

'I'll not believe he's dead,' Vespasian replied, 'until I've seen him.'

And he took a rope and called to Joseph again. And when no reply came he clambered down into the vault. When he reached the bottom he looked all around, and in one corner of the dungeon he saw a brilliant light. He commanded that the rope be pulled back up, leaving him alone there in the dungeon. Then he moved towards the light.

'Welcome, Vespasian.'

He stood motionless, astonished, and said: 'Who are you who call my name, but wouldn't reply when I called?'

And the answer came: 'I am Joseph of Arimathea.'

Vespasian was elated, and cried: 'Blessed be the Lord who has saved you, for none but He could have done so!'

They embraced each other with the greatest joy, and Vespasian asked Joseph: 'Who told you my name?'

And Joseph said: 'The one who is omniscient.'

Then Vespasian asked if he knew the man who had healed him, and he replied: 'Of what sickness did he cure you?'

And Vespasian told him of his illness in every detail. Joseph was amazed by the story, and said: 'I know Him very well. Do you want to know His name and who He is? If you do, I'll let you know what He bade me tell you.'

'Yes indeed,' said Vespasian, 'I'd be very glad to hear it.'

'Believe then,' said Joseph, 'that it is the Holy Spirit that created all things: Heaven and Earth, night and day and the four elements. The Holy Spirit created the angels, too; but the evil angels became full of pride and envy, and God cast them out of Heaven and for three days and three nights they fell like the heaviest rain that ever was, bringing to Earth all evil, deceit and wickedness. The angels who remain in Heaven strive to guide men, to keep them from sin – in the face of those who rebelled against Christ and whose reward was to lose all spiritual joy. It was in contempt of them that Our Lord created man from the very basest mud, and gave him intelligence and light; and Our Lord declared that with this new creation He would fill the place vacated by the fallen angels. When the Devil realised that so base a being had risen to the glory from which he had fallen, he was enraged, and pondered deeply on how he could deceive him. By tricking Eve he succeeded, and when she and Adam had been led astray, Our Lord, who will not countenance sin, cast them out of Paradise. And they conceived and gave birth to mankind; and the Devil wanted all mankind to be his. But to save mankind, the Father, the Lord of all things, sent His son to Earth to save His people, being born of the Virgin Mary at Bethlehem. He it was who walked the Earth for thirty-three years. He it was who performed the great miracles and wondrous deeds beyond compare. He it was that the Jews put to death on the Cross. He is one being with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and His power is manifest in the fact that He healed you and brought you here and saved me. And know this in all certainty: He is risen again, and has returned to His Father in the same flesh in which He walked the Earth.'

'Joseph,' Vespasian replied, 'you have shown me clearly that He is Lord of all things, and that God is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Just as you have said, so I believe, and will do so all the days of my life.'

And so it was that Joseph converted Vespasian to a firm belief in the true faith. Then Vespasian called to the people in the chamber above, and said he had found Joseph and wanted the dungeon broken open. They were amazed, and said the man could not possibly be alive. But he commanded them to do as he said quickly; and as soon as it was done, Vespasian came out first and Joseph after. And when they saw him they were filled with wonder, and declared it was a mighty power indeed that had saved him.

And so Vespasian freed Joseph from prison, and led him to where the Jews were gathered. When they saw him they were astounded; and Vespasian said to them: 'Will you deliver Jesus to me, if I give you Joseph?'

'We gave Him to Joseph!' they replied. 'Let him tell you what he's done with Him!'

'You know very well what I did,' said Joseph, 'and you set your own guards

to watch the place where I laid His body. But know this now: He is risen again, as Lord and God.'

They were horrified by his words; and Vespasian asked him: 'Do you wish to save any of these people?'

And Joseph answered: 'Unless they believe in the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that the Son of God was born of the Virgin Mary, they will perish in body and in soul.'

Now, Joseph had a sister named Enigeus whose husband's name was Bron, and Bron loved Joseph dearly; and when Bron and his wife heard that Joseph had been found they were overjoyed and came to meet him and said: 'Sir, we have come for your blessing.'

'Not for mine,' said Joseph, 'but for the blessing of the one who was born of the Virgin and who kept me alive in prison, and in whom you should believe for evermore.'

And he asked if they could find more people who would be willing to believe in the Trinity and in God; and they went and spoke with others, who came before Joseph and declared they would believe in his words, and he said: 'Don't tell me lies or you'll suffer for it, for Vespasian says you'll pay a more terrible price if you do.'

'We could never lie to you,' they said.

'If you wish to follow my belief,' said Joseph, 'you'll not stay in your homes and estates, but will come with me into exile and give up everything for the sake of God and me.'

Vespasian pardoned these; but upon those who would not believe, he exacted such terrible justice as he pleased. And thus it was that he avenged the death of Christ.

* * *

Joseph now took his people into exile. He taught them many of the good words of Our Lord, and set them to work upon the land. For some while they prospered; but as time passed all their work and labour began to be fruitless. Their plight grew worse and worse, until they could bear it no more. They came to Bron, who was very dear to Joseph, and said to him:

'The good and plentiful harvests that we used to enjoy are failing us; no people ever suffered such hunger – we're close to eating our children! We beg you in God's name to talk to Joseph, and find out whether it's because of some sin of ours or his.'

And Bron came to Joseph and told him of his people's plea.

'I shall pray to the one who was born of the Virgin,' said Joseph, 'to tell me why this famine has befallen them.' He was afraid that he had failed to fulfil one of Our Lord's commands. 'If I can find the answer, I'll tell you.'

And Joseph came and knelt before his vessel, the vessel Christ had brought him in his prison, and said: 'Lord, I saw you truly both alive and dead, and saw you again – in the tower where I was imprisoned – after you had suffered the

agonies of death, and you bade that, whenever I needed you, I should come and pray before this precious vessel which held your holy blood; so truly, Lord, I beg you now to guide me in answering my people's plea, so that I may act according to your will.'

And when Joseph had made this prayer, the voice of the Holy Spirit descended and said: 'Joseph, do not be afraid: you are not the one who is guilty of this sin.'

'Ah, Lord,' said Joseph, 'help me remove from my company the sinners who have brought this famine upon us!'

And the voice replied: 'Joseph, you will give your people a great sign, testing the power of my flesh and blood against those who have sinned. Remember, Joseph, that I was sold and betrayed on Earth – and knew that it would be so: as I sat at the table of the Last Supper, I said that eating and drinking with me was one who would betray me. Make another table in its name; and when you have made it, summon your brother-in-law Bron – he is a good man and more good will spring from him – and bid him go and fish on the water and bring you the first he catches. While he is fishing, lay the table and take your vessel and place it where you will be sitting, and cover it with the edge of the tablecloth. When you have done so, call your people and tell them they are about to see the cause of their distress. Then take Bron and seat him at your right hand; and you will see him move one seat away, leaving an empty place between you. Know this: that seat will signify the place abandoned by Judas when he betrayed me, and it cannot be filled until the son of Bron's son fills it. Once Bron is seated, call your people and bid those who have true faith in the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and are willing to obey the commandments, to come forward and take their seats.'

With that the voice departed; and Joseph did as Our Lord had commanded, and a great number of his people sat down at the table; but there were many more who did not. The table was full except for the place that could not be filled. And when those who had sat down to eat sensed the sweetness and the fulfilment of their hearts, they very soon forgot the others. One who was seated at the table, whose name was Petrus, looked at those who were standing and said: 'Do you feel what we feel?'

'We feel nothing,' they replied.

And Petrus said: 'Then you are guilty of the sin which has brought the famine upon us.'

Hearing Petrus's words, they were overcome with shame and left the house. And when the service was over, all rose from the table and went off with the others, but Joseph commanded them to return each morning. And so it was that, by the will of God, Joseph came to discover who had sinned, and this was the first place in which the vessel was put to the test.

So things remained for a long time, until those who were excluded asked those who attended about the grace they were given, saying: 'What is it you receive and feel each day?'

'Our hearts could not conceive,' they replied, 'the great joy and delight we feel while we are sitting at that table, and we remain in a state of grace until we return the next day.'

'Where can such grace come from, which so fills man's heart?'

And Petrus replied: 'It comes from the one who saved Joseph in prison.'

'And tell us of the vessel we've seen, of which we know nothing.'

'By that vessel,' he replied, 'we are separated, for it will allow no sinner in its presence. And those who wish to name it rightly will call it the Grail, for it gives such joy and delight to those who can stay in its presence that they feel as elated as a fish escaping from a man's hands into the wide water.'

And hearing this, they said: 'This vessel should indeed be called the Grail*.'

Both those who went and those who stayed named it so, and when Joseph heard the name it pleased him greatly. And to the service of the Grail they all came each morning at the third hour**.

Now, among those who were excluded was a man named Moyse, and he stayed behind when the others left. And every time he saw one of those who had been granted grace he would beg for mercy most earnestly, with an apparently good heart and good intentions, saying: 'In the name of God, sir, ask Joseph to have pity on me and let me share in the grace that you enjoy!' He made this entreaty many times, desperate to join them, until one day, when all the company of the Grail were gathered together, they said they felt sorry for Moyse and would plead to Joseph on his behalf. They all came to him and fell at his feet and implored his mercy. Joseph was taken aback and asked them what they wanted.

'Most of the people leave,' they replied, 'when we come before the Grail. But there's one, sir, named Moyse, who stays behind, and he seems to be full of penitence, and begs you to grant him the grace we share in the company of your vessel.'

When Joseph heard this he replied: 'Grace is not mine to bestow. Our Lord has granted it as He pleases, and those He chooses shall have it. And this man Moyse may not be all he seems. He may well be tricking us – but if so, he'll be his own victim.'

'We'll never trust him again,' they replied, 'if he's been deceiving us by his behaviour. But please invite him to join us.'

And Joseph said: 'I'll pray for Our Lord's guidance in this.'

Then Joseph went alone and prayed, prostrate, before his vessel, that Christ might reveal whether Moyse was truly as he seemed. And thereupon the voice of the Holy Spirit spoke to him, saying: 'Now the time has come when you will see what I told you about the seat left empty between you and Bron.

* An untranslatable play on words runs through this passage, linking the name 'graal' to the verb 'agreer' (to delight).

** The third canonical hour: nine o'clock in the morning.

Moyse claims to seek the grace of the Holy Spirit. Let him come forward then, and sit in its presence, and you will see what becomes of him.'

So Joseph returned to those who had pleaded for Moyse and told them: 'Say to Moyse that if he is as he claims and deserves to be granted grace, no man can deprive him of it. But if he is other than good, he should not come, for he could betray no-one so badly as himself.'

They went and told Moyse what Joseph had said, and he was delighted and said: 'My only fear was that he'd think me unworthy!'

'You have his leave to come,' they replied, 'if you share our faith.'

So they welcomed him into their company, and took him to the service, and when Joseph saw him he said: 'Moyse, Moyse, stay away from anything of which you're not worthy. No-one can deceive you so thoroughly as yourself.'

'As I am truly a good man,' he replied, 'may God permit me to remain in your company.'

'Then step forward,' said Joseph, 'if you're as you say. Be seated, and we'll clearly see your goodness.'

Then Joseph sat down, along with his brother-in-law Bron and all the others, each in his rightful place. And when they were all seated, Moyse, still standing, felt suddenly afraid. He went around the table, but could see nowhere to sit – except in the seat left empty between Joseph and Bron. So he sat there. And the moment he did so he was swallowed up. It was as if he had never been.

When they all rose from the table at the end of the service Petrus spoke to Joseph, saying: 'We've never been so bewildered! By all the powers you believe in, tell us what's become of that man!'

'I've no idea at all,' Joseph replied, 'but if it please the one who has revealed so much to us, we'll find out.'

And Joseph returned and knelt before his vessel, and said: 'Dear Lord God, your powers are wonderful and your ways are wise. Free me from doubt and tell me truly what has become of Moyse.'

Then the voice of the Holy Spirit came to Joseph once more and said: 'Now is revealed the significance of my words when you established this table. I told you that the place left empty beside you would be a reminder of Judas – who lost his seat on the night he betrayed me – and that it would remain empty until one of Bron's lineage came to fill it. The third man of Bron's line will fill that place at the table – or another established in its name. As for the one who was swallowed up, I will tell you what became of him. When he stayed behind after his fellows left, he did so only to deceive you, for he did not believe that those of your company could have such great grace as they did. And be assured that he has fallen into abysmal depths and will never be heard of again. Tell this to your disciples, and consider what you have gained in serving me.'

* * *

A long while now passed, in which Joseph and his followers lived in this state of grace. And the time came when Joseph's sister Enigeus and his brother-in-law Bron decided to ask Joseph for advice about their children's future.

'Sir,' said Bron, 'your sister and I have twelve fair sons, but we wish to take no decision about their future life except with God's advice and yours.'

Joseph promised to pray for guidance, and he came in private before the Grail and remembered his nephews. And when he had finished his prayer, an angel appeared to him and said:

'Joseph, Jesus Christ has sent me to you in answer to your prayer. His will is this: those of your nephews who wish to take wives should do so, but the one who does not shall have the others as his disciples. And when they are married, command Bron the father and Enigeus the mother to bring the unmarried son to you. Then come with him before your vessel and you will hear the word of Jesus Christ, who will speak to you and your nephew together.'

The angel departed, and when Joseph told his sister and Bron how his prayer had been answered, Bron searched far and wide to find wives for his sons according to the command of Holy Church.

Eleven of the sons were glad to marry, but the twelfth, whose name was Alain li Gros, said he would take none of the women, even if he were to be flayed alive. His father was amazed by this and said: 'Dear son, why won't you marry like your brothers?'

'Sir,' he replied, 'I've no desire to do so yet; I'll take none of those wives.'

And so Bron saw eleven of his children married, and the twelfth he took to Joseph and said: 'Sir, here is your nephew who will not take a wife either at my bidding or his mother's.'

And Joseph said to Bron: 'Will you and my sister give him into my keeping?'

And they replied: 'Yes, sir, most willingly.'

Joseph was overjoyed at this, and he took Alain in his arms and embraced him, and said to the father and mother: 'Go now, and leave him with me.'

So Bron and his wife departed, and the child stayed with Joseph, who said to him: 'My good, dear nephew, you should feel joy indeed, for Our Lord has chosen you to serve Him and exalt His name. Stay with me now, and you shall hear the mighty words of Jesus Christ Our Saviour.'

Then Joseph prayed to Our Lord to reveal the truth about his nephew's future life. And when his prayer was done, he heard the voice saying:

'Joseph, your nephew is chaste and honest and good, and will believe your words in all matters. Tell him of the love I have shown you, and of why I came to Earth; and show him your vessel and tell him to read what is written about me inside, for it will confirm his faith. And let him know this: that from him will be born a male child to whom my vessel is to come. Then entrust to him the guardianship of his brothers, and let him go to the West, to the most distant parts he can find, and wherever he goes let him do all he can to exalt my name.'

With that the voice departed, and Joseph took Alain back to his father and said: 'Bron, this son shall be guardian on Earth of his brothers and sisters. They

must trust in him and take his advice in all things; if they believe in him, it will be to their advantage. Give him your blessing in their sight and they will trust him and love him the more; he will be a fine leader for as long as they are willing to believe in him.'

Then Bron summoned his sons and their wives and said: 'I want you to be obedient to one of our number. All I can give that is of worth or grace I bestow upon my son Alain, with my prayer that he keep you all in God's name. And I command you to obey him and take his advice in all your troubles, and he will give you guidance. Be sure to undertake nothing against his will.'

With that the children left their father's house, knowing they had a protector. And Alain led them into strange lands; and wherever he went, to all the worthy men and women he met he recounted the story of the death of Jesus Christ. Alain was blessed with so much of God's grace that no man could have more.

Then Our Lord, who had arranged how everything was to be, sent his messenger to Joseph once more, with the words:

'Joseph, your vessel will have an end as well as a beginning. Our Lord knows that Bron is a worthy servant, and He wishes him to be guardian of the vessel after you. Tell him how to behave as its keeper, and tell him everything you have learned in your life of Christ's deeds, so that you confirm him in his faith. And tell him the words Christ taught you when He brought the Grail to you in prison: they are the holy words of the sacrament of the Grail. When you have told Bron all this, commend the vessel into his keeping; and all who hear of him will call him the rich Fisher King because of the fish he caught on the day the table of the Grail was first established. And know this: just as the world is and always will be moving towards night, so must Bron and his people move towards the setting sun – into the West. As soon as the Fisher King has the vessel bestowed upon him, he must journey westward, wherever his heart leads him. And where he comes to rest, there he must await the coming of Alain's son, and when the time is right, pass on to him the vessel and the grace that he will have received from you. Between you then you will have completed a sign of the Trinity, which is in three parts. As for the third of you – the son of Alain li Gros – what befalls him will be determined by Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.'

Joseph did as Christ's messenger commanded, and remained in the company of the Fisher King for three days and three nights, bequeathing to him the vessel and entrusting to him all Christ's secret words. Then Bron said to Joseph: 'Sir, a great desire to leave has come upon me; is it your will that I should go?'

'It is indeed,' Joseph replied, 'since it is the will of Our Lord. You are well aware of what you will be taking with you, and who will be watching over you; no-one knows as well as you and I. Go when you will.'

And so it was that the rich Fisher King departed and, like his son Alain, made his way into the West.

The Welsh Boy

NOW BEGINS THE HOLY TALE ABOUT A GOOD KNIGHT who was born of Joseph's line. A good knight he was indeed, for he was chaste and pure in body, bold of heart and strong, and in him there was no wickedness. But his face did not suggest such courage, and he had no way with words; indeed, through just a few words which he failed to say, such great misfortunes befell Britain that all the isles and all the lands fell into great sorrow; but he then restored them to happiness by the valour of his fine chivalry. And a good knight he should have been, being descended from Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was his grandmother's brother, and had asked no reward for his service to Pilate but permission to take Christ's body from the Cross. Pilate had supposed that he would drag it shamefully through the city of Jerusalem and leave it in some foul place outside; but the good soldier had no such intention: rather did he honour the body as highly as he could, laying it to rest in the holy tomb; and he kept the lance with which Christ's side had been pierced and the holy vessel in which he gathered the blood that flowed from Our Saviour's wounds.

Descended from this line was the Good Knight: Joseph was his grandmother's brother, and the Fisher King was his grandfather; his mother's name was Yglais, by whom he had an uncle, the King of Castle Mortal, in whom there was as much evil as there was good in her; by his father, Alain li Gros, he had eleven uncles, but those eleven – Gosgallian, Brun Brandalis, Bertolet the Bald, Brandalus of Wales, Elinant of Escavalon, Calobrutus, Meralis, Fortimet of the Crimson Heath, Meliarman of Albanie, Galerian of the White Tower and Aliban of the Waste City – all died in battle in the service of the Holy Prophet who renewed the Law by His crucifixion, as they strove to check His enemies as much as they could. From such a line was the Good Knight descended, of whose name and ways you soon will hear.

It was in the time when trees burst into leaf, and fields and woods and meadows are green, and the birds in their own Latin sing so sweetly in the morning, and every soul is aflame with joy, that the son of the Widowed Lady of the wild and lonely forest rose, and with all eagerness he saddled up his hunting-horse and took three javelins, and set out from his mother's house.

As he passed into the forest his heart leaped for joy at the sweetness of the season, and taking the bridle from his hunting-horse he let him go free to graze amongst the fresh green grass.

The boy was very skilled with his javelins, and all around he went throwing them, back and forth, high and low, until he heard, coming through the woods, five knights – all fully armed from head to foot. And their arms made a terrible din as they came, as oak- and elm-branch crashed against them; their lances clashed upon their shields, the mail-rings of their hauberks ground; the wood beat, the iron rang, upon their mail-coats and their shields. The boy could hear but could not see them as they came towards him at a walk. He was filled with awe, and said:

'By my soul, my mother's words were true when she told me that devils are the foulest things in the world! She taught me that to counter them a man should always cross himself; but never mind that! I'm going to strike the fiercest with one of my javelins; for then none of the others will dare come near me!'

So he said before he saw the knights; but when he saw them openly, no longer hidden by the trees, and saw their mail-coats shimmering, their helmets, burnished, dazzling, saw the white and the red shining brightly in the sun, and the gold and blue and silver, he thought it glorious indeed, and cried:

'Oh, thank you, God! These are angels I see here! My mother was telling no fable when she said that angels were the fairest things there are – except God, whose beauty surpasses all other. But there, I think, I see God Himself! For I can see one who's ten times fairer than all the rest! My mother told me we should worship God above all things, and so I shall!'

And he threw himself to the ground and said such creed and prayers as his mother had taught him. And the foremost of the knights saw this and said:

'Stay back! A boy who's seen us has collapsed in fear. If we all advance at once he'll die of fright, I think, and won't be able to answer my question.'

So they drew rein, while the foremost knight rode on and greeted the boy and reassured him, saying: 'You needn't be afraid, lad.'

'I'm not, but tell me,' the boy replied, 'are you God?'

'No, in faith!'

'Who are you, then?'

'I'm a knight.'

'I've never met a knight before,' the boy said, 'or ever heard of them; but you're more beautiful than God! Oh, I wish I were the same – made like you, and shining so!'

Then the knight asked him: 'Have you seen five knights and three young ladies pass this way today?'

But the boy had questions of his own to ask: he reached for the knight's lance and, taking hold, said: 'What's this thing you're holding?'

'I see I'm to have fine guidance here!' the knight said. 'I'd thought to learn some news from you, dear friend, but you want some from me! And I'll tell you: this is my lance.'

'Do you throw it,' asked the boy, 'as I do my javelins?'

'Why no! What a simpleton you are! You strike with it directly.'

'Then one of my javelins is better! With these I can kill as many birds or beasts as I like, and with fully the range of a crossbow.'

'That's not really my concern! Come, boy, answer my question about the knights. Tell me, do you know where they are, and did you see the young ladies?'

The boy grabbed the bottom of his shield and said: 'What's this? What's it for?'

'Boy,' said the knight, 'is this some trick? I thought you'd tell me news rather than learn from me! But so you shall, come what may, for I've taken a liking to you: this thing I'm carrying is called a shield.'

'A shield?'

'And truly,' he said, 'it's such a faithful friend to me that if anything's thrown or aimed at me it sets itself against the blows.'

Just then the knights who had stayed behind came briskly up to their lord and said: 'What's this Welshman saying, sir?'

'He doesn't quite know his manners,' their lord replied. 'He won't give me a straight reply to anything I ask him. Instead he asks the name and use of everything he sees!'

'Oh, I promise you, sir, the Welsh are all more stupid than the beasts in pasture; and so is this one – just like a beast! Only a fool would dally with him.'

'I don't care,' the lord said. 'Before I carry on I'll tell him whatever he wants to know.' Then he asked him again: 'If you don't mind, boy, tell me of the five knights and the girls; have you seen them today?'

The boy clutched him by his mail-coat and tugged at it, saying: 'What's this thing you're wearing here?'

'Don't you know, boy?' said the knight.

'No, I don't.'

'This is my hauberk, and it's as heavy as iron – because that's what it's made of, as you can see.'

'I don't know anything about that,' he said, 'but it's very beautiful. What do you do with it? What's it for?'

'That's easily answered, boy. If you threw a javelin or shot an arrow at me, you couldn't do me any harm.'

'Oh, sir knight! God keep the hinds and stags from getting hauberks, or I'd never kill one! I'd have to give up hunting them!'

The knight said to him yet again: 'Now, boy, can you tell me news of the knights and the girls?'

But he, in his simplicity, said to him: 'Were you born like that?'

'No, lad, that's impossible! How could a man be born like this?'

'Who was it, then, made you so?'

'Very well, I'll tell you.'

'Go on, then.'

'Five years ago I was given these arms by King Arthur, who dubbed me knight. But come, lad, tell me now: what became of them – the knights who passed this way with the three girls? Were they riding fast or slowly?'

And the boy replied: 'Up there, sir, where the woods encircle the mountain, are the passes of Valbone.'

'What of it?' said the knight.

'That's where my mother's harrowers are, who plough and sow her lands. And if those people passed that way and they saw them, they'll tell you.'

They said they would go with him if he would guide them there, and so the boy took his hunting-horse and rode to where the harrowers were working in the barley-fields. But when they caught sight of their lady's son accompanied by armed knights they all trembled with fear; for they knew all too well that if the knights had told him of their life and ways, then he would want to be a knight; and his mother then would lose her mind, for she had been trying to keep him from ever seeing knights or learning anything of their business. The boy said to the men who drove the oxen:

'Have you seen five knights and three girls ride this way?'

'They went through the pass this very day,' the ox-drivers said.

And so the boy said to the knight who had talked to him so long: 'Sir, the knights and girls did go this way; but tell me more now of the king who makes men knights: where does he live?'

'At present, boy, the king is staying at Cardoeil. He was there not five days ago, for I was there and saw him; and if he's not there now, there'll be someone who'll give you news of him for sure, and tell you where he's gone.'

With that the knight rode off at a gallop, anxious to catch up with the others. Nor did the boy delay in riding home, where his mother was waiting, her heart black with grief because he had been away so long. But the moment she saw him she was filled with joy; she could not hide her happiness, she loved her son so much, and ran to meet him, crying: 'Dear son! Dear son! You've been away so long! Where have you been? I could have died!'

'I'll tell you, and without a word of a lie; I've seen something that made my heart rejoice. Mother, didn't you always say that God and the angels were so beautiful that there was nothing in the world so fair?'

'I said so, truly, and still do.'

'Say so no more, mother! Haven't I seen the fairest things alive, that pass through the lonely forest? They're more beautiful, I think, than God and all His angels!'

His mother took him in her arms and said: 'God protect you, dear son! I do believe you've seen the angels who cause people such grief, killing whoever they come across.'

'No, truly, mother, no, I didn't! They told me they were called knights.'

On hearing him utter this word his mother fainted; and when she came to, she cried, now filled with grief and anger: 'Oh, no! Oh, no! My sweet, dear son, I'd planned to guard you so well from knights that you'd never hear of them or

ever see one! You should indeed have been a knight, if God had guarded your father and others close to you. There was no knight of such high worth, or as feared and respected, as your father, in all the islands of the sea. You may be proud indeed of your descent, both on his side and on mine: for I too was born of a line of knights, and the finest in the land. In all the ocean's isles there was no finer lineage than mine in my time; but now the greatest of my line have fallen: it's often the case that misfortunes befall the worthy men who strive to live in honour. Your father, though you don't know this, was wounded in the leg and crippled. Then his great land and his great treasures all were lost, and he fell into utter poverty. And after the death of King Uther Pendragon, the father of good King Arthur, the lands were laid waste and all who could do so took refuge elsewhere. Your father had this manor-house out here in the wild forest; he couldn't flee, but with all possible speed he had himself borne here in a litter, for he didn't know where else to go. And you, who were very small – not yet weaned – had two dear brothers, and when they grew older, at your father's advice they went to two royal courts, to receive arms and horses. The elder went to the king of Escavalon, and served him a long while, and the younger served King Ban of Gomorret. On one and the same day both boys were dubbed and knighted; and on one and the same day they both set out to return home, wanting to delight me and their father; but we never saw them again, for they were both killed in combat and left for the crows and rooks to peck out their eyes. Your father died of grief for his sons, and I've suffered a bitter life since his death. You were all my consolation then, and all that I possessed, for nothing else remained to me. God had left me nothing more to give me joy and comfort.'

The boy had heard very little of what his mother had been saying. 'Give me something to eat,' he said. 'I don't know what you're talking about. I'd be very glad to go to the king who makes men knights; and I *shall* go, whatever grief it brings.'

His mother kept him there as long as she could, and dressed him in a great canvas shirt, and breeches made in the Welsh fashion, where shoes and leggings are made together in one piece; and she gave him a hooded tunic of deer-hide, stitched tight all round; that was how his mother clothed him. She held him back for three days, but that was all; after that all her ploys were vain. Then she was overcome with grief. Weeping, she kissed and embraced him, and said:

'I can't bear to see you leave! You'll go to the king's court and tell him to give you arms. And he won't refuse: he'll give you them, I know he will. But when it comes to trial of arms, what will happen then? How will you fare at something you've never done before – and never seen another do? Badly, I fear! Dear son, I want to give you some advice which you'd do very well to heed. Soon you'll be a knight. Well, if you encounter, near or far, any lady or girl in need of help, be ready to aid her if she asks, for when a man fails to honour ladies, his own honour is dead. But if you should desire the love of any, take care. A maid who kisses gives much; so if she consents to kiss you, I forbid you to take more: leave

with the kiss! But if she has a ring on her finger or a purse at her waist, and out of love she should give it to you, then I'd be happy that you should take her ring; yes, I give you leave to take the ring or purse. And one thing more: on the road, or in lodging, share no-one's company for long without asking him his name; for know this: the name reveals the man. Dear son, seek the company of worthy men, for they never give bad advice. Above all I beg you to go to minster or to church, to pray to Our Lord to give you honour in this world and grant that you so lead your life that you may come to a good end.'

'Mother,' he said, 'what's a church?'

'It's where one pays service to God, who made Heaven and Earth and set us men and women here.'

'And what's a minster?'

'The same: a beautiful and holy house where sacred relics and treasures are kept; and there we sacrifice the body of Jesus Christ, the holy prophet. He was betrayed and wrongly judged, and He suffered death's anguish for all men and women; for their souls went to Hell when they left their bodies, but He set them free. He was bound to a stake and scourged, and then crucified, and made to wear a crown of thorns. To hear masses and matins, and to worship this lord, I would have you go to church.'

With that he would delay no more and took his leave. His mother wept. He was dressed in the style and manner of the Welsh, with shoes of coarse hide on his feet, and he carried a switch in his right hand to goad his hunting-horse along. He always bore three javelins: he wanted to take them with him now, but his mother took two of them because he would have looked too Welsh. She would have taken all three of them if she could. And as he left, she kissed him, weeping, for she loved him dearly, and prayed to God to keep him safe.

'Dear son!' she cried. 'God guide you! May he give you more joy than I have now, wherever you may go.'

When the boy had gone a stone's throw he looked back and saw his mother in a heap at the bridge's foot; she lay there in a faint, as though she had fallen dead. But the boy lashed his hunting-horse hard on the rump and departed; and his mount was sure of foot and bore him swiftly through the forest, great and dark. He rode on from early morning till the day drew to a close. He slept in the forest that night, until the bright new day appeared.

* * *

In the morning when the birds began to sing the boy rose and mounted, and rode on until he caught sight of a pavilion pitched in a beautiful meadow beside a stream from a spring. The pavilion was a wonder, it was so fair: one side was vermilion, the other embroidered with a thread of gold, and on the top was a golden eagle. Upon this eagle the sun fell, bright and blazing, and the whole meadow shimmered with the pavilion's light. All around it were leafy bowers,

and lodges made in the Welsh manner, of interwoven branches. The boy rode towards the pavilion, and as he approached he said:

'God, I see your house! It would be shameful not to go and worship you. My mother was telling the truth when she said that a church was the fairest thing there is, and she told me that whenever I came across a church I should go and worship the Creator. I'll go and pray to Him to give me food: I'm starving!'

Then he came up to the pavilion and found it open; and inside he saw a bed covered with a rich silken cloth; and in the bed, all alone, lay a young girl, sleeping. Her companions were out in the wood: her maids had gone to pick fresh flowers with which to strew the pavilion. As the boy entered, his horse neighed so loudly that the maiden heard it and awoke with a start. And the boy, in his simplicity, said:

'I give you greeting, girl, as my mother taught me to do. She told me I should greet girls whenever I met them!'

The girl trembled with fear, thinking the boy was mad – and she charged herself with madness for letting him find her alone.

'Go away, boy!' she cried. 'Be off, or my love will see you!'

'No, by my life! I'm going to kiss you!' said the boy. 'I don't care who it upsets, for my mother told me to!'

'I'll never kiss you, truly I won't!' cried the girl. 'Be off! If my love finds you here you're dead!'

But the boy had strong arms and embraced her – but gauchely, for that was the only way he knew. Then he laid her down full-length beneath him, and she struggled with all her might to get away; but she fought in vain, for whether she liked it or not the boy kissed her seven times – until he saw a ring on her finger crowned with a brilliant emerald.

'My mother also told me,' he said, 'to take the ring from your finger, but to do no more with you. So now for the ring! Let me have it!'

'You'll never have my ring,' the maiden cried, 'unless you tear it from my hand by force!'

The boy took her by the hand, forced her fist open, snatched the ring from her finger and set it on his own; then he said: 'I wish you well, girl! I'm off now, and with good reward! It's much better kissing you than any of the maids at my mother's house: your lips don't taste sour!'

The girl began to weep and begged him: 'Don't take my ring, boy! I'll be sorely treated for it, and it'll cost you your life, I promise you!'

He took in not a word of this, but he knew he hadn't breakfasted; he was dying of hunger, horribly. He found a cask full of wine and beside it a silver goblet; and then he saw a fresh, white cloth on a bundle of rushes. He picked it up, and underneath he found three venison pies, new-baked – a dish of which he was not unfond! To quell the hunger that beset him he broke off a hunk of pie and ate with a vengeance, and started pouring wine into the silver cup; it wasn't bad; he drank great and frequent draughts, and said:

'I can't eat all these pies myself, girl. Give me a hand, they're very good! We can have one each and there'll still be a whole one left!'

But the girl just wept and couldn't say a word. She wrung her hands and shed piteous tears, while the boy ate and drank till he had had his fill. Then he covered up what was left and took his leave at once, commending her to God – little though his good wishes pleased her.

'God save you, friend!' he cried. 'I'm off now, by your leave.'

The girl wept on and said she would never commend him to God, for he had betrayed her, and because of him she would suffer shame and distress such as no girl had ever known. And so he left her there, in tears.

It was not long before her lover returned from the wood; and when he saw the hoofprints left by the boy, who had now set off on his way, he was most aggrieved. He found his love weeping, and said: 'Girl, from the signs I see, I think a knight has been here!'

'No, sir, no, I promise you! It was a Welsh boy, a tiresome, base and foolish thing, who drank as much of your wine as he pleased, and ate some of your pies!'

'Is that why you're weeping? If he'd eaten and drunk it all it would have been as I'd have wished.'

'That's not all, sir,' she said. 'There's also my ring: he seized it from me and carried it off. I'd rather have died than have had him take that!'

Her love was downcast then, and anguished in his heart. 'What? This is outrageous! Since he's taken it, let him keep it; but I think he did more! If he did, don't hide it.'

'Sir,' she said, 'he kissed me.'

'Kissed you?'

'Yes, truly, but it was against my will.'

'No!' he cried, struck through with jealousy. 'It was as you wished, and pleased you well! He found no great resistance! You think I don't know you? I'm not blind to your falseness! You've taken a wicked course – and a course to suffering: your horse shall be neither groomed nor fed until I've taken my revenge! If he loses a shoe he'll not be re-shod; and if he dies you'll have to walk! And the clothes you wear will not be changed; you'll follow me on foot and naked until I have his head; I'll settle for no less.'

With that he sat down and began to eat.

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Meanwhile the boy rode on, until he saw a charcoal-burner coming along his path, driving an ass before him.

'Worthy sir,' said the boy, 'tell me the quickest way to Cardoeil. They say King Arthur makes men knights there.'

'Boy,' he said, 'this way lies a castle overlooking the sea. That's where you'll find King Arthur, both joyful and grieving.'

'Oh? Why's that, sir? Tell me, please.'

'He fought with all his army against King Rion, the King of the Isles, and Rion was defeated, which brought King Arthur joy. But now his companions have left him, deciding they'd rather stay at their own castles, and he has no news of them: that's what's caused him grief.'

The boy cared little for the charcoal-burner's news, but set off along the road he had shown him, until he caught sight of a castle standing by the sea, finely positioned and strong and handsome. And then he saw, riding out through the gate, an armed knight carrying a cup of gold; he held his lance and his reins and his shield by his left hand, and the cup of gold in his right. His arms were quite magnificent, and from head to foot they were entirely red. The boy saw these arms, so handsome and all brand new, and they appealed to him greatly, and he said:

'In faith, I'll ask the king to grant me those; how I'd love it if he gave them to me! A curse on the man who'd seek any others!'

With that he hurried on towards the castle, so eager to reach the court; but as he drew near, the knight stopped him and asked: 'Where are you scurrying off to, boy?'

'To the king's court,' he said, 'to ask him for those arms!'

'And well you might, lad!' the knight laughed. 'Off you trot, then, and hurry back. And tell this to that worthless king: if he doesn't wish to hold his land as my vassal, he should yield it to me or send a champion to fight me for it, for I say it's mine. To prove my point, I've just taken this cup from under his nose, with the very wine he was drinking!'

The knight should have sought another messenger, for the boy hadn't heard a word. He rode straight on to the court, where the king and his knights were seated at dinner. The hall was paved with flagstones, and was as long as it was wide – and it was on ground level, so the boy rode his horse straight in. King Arthur was sitting at the head of the table, lost in troubled thought; but while he was sombre and silent, all his knights were laughing and joking. The boy came forward, not knowing whom to greet, for he did not know the king at all. Then Yvonet came towards him, holding a knife in his hand.

'Vassal,' the boy said, 'show me which of these men is the king.'

Yvonet, who was courteous indeed, replied: 'There he is, friend.'

And the boy went up to him at once and gave him such greeting as he knew. But the king was still lost in thought and did not say a word. The boy addressed him a second time; the king thought on and said nothing.

'By my life,' said the boy, 'this king never made anyone a knight! How could he when you can't get a word out of him?'

So he prepared to go back and turned his hunting-horse about; but he pulled his mount so near the king, like the rude soul that he was, that he sent the king's hat flying from his head to the table. The king turned his bowed head to the boy and awoke from his thoughts and said: 'Dear brother, welcome. Please don't take it ill that I didn't return your greeting. I couldn't reply for grief and

anger, for my greatest enemy, the one who hates and torments me most, has now contested my land; he's mad enough to claim that he'll have it all, unconditionally, whether I like it or not! His name is the Red Knight of the Forest of Quinqueroi. I wouldn't have cared about his words, but he took my cup from in front of me, and snatched it up so recklessly that he poured the whole cupful of wine over the queen! It was a base, ugly, shameful deed; the queen has run back to her chamber, suicidal with anger.'

The boy didn't care a jot about the king's story, or about his grief or shame – and just as little about the king's wife.

'Make me a knight, lord king,' he said, 'for I want to go.'

The eyes of the simple, untaught youth were bright and laughing. No-one who saw him thought him wise, but all who saw him thought him handsome and fair.

'Friend,' said the king, 'dismount and give your horse to a boy, who'll care for it and do your bidding. You'll shortly be a knight, to my honour and your profit.'

But the boy replied: 'The ones I met in the glade never dismounted. Why do you want *me* to? By my life, I won't get down! Just hurry up, then I can go. And I shan't be a knight without being a *red* knight! Grant me the arms of the one who took your golden cup – I met him outside the gate.'

Kay the seneschal was angered by these words and said: 'How right you are, friend! Off you go and take his arms: they're yours! How wise of you to come and ask!'

The king heard this and was enraged, and said to Kay: 'It's very wrong of you to mock the boy, and no mark of a worthy man. Though the boy be simple, his upbringing may be to blame, at the hands of a bad master; he may yet prove a worthy vassal.'

So said the king to Kay. Then the boy, just as he was leaving, noticed a fair and lovely girl and greeted her; and she returned his greeting, and then laughed, and as she laughed she said: 'If you live long, boy, I feel in my heart that in all the world there will not be, nor will there ever have been known, a finer knight than you.'

The girl had not laughed for more than six years; but she said these words so loud and clear that everyone could hear her. And the words enraged Kay. He leaped forward and slapped her so hard across her tender cheek that he laid her full-length on the floor. And turning back after hitting the girl he found the court fool standing by a chimney, and he kicked him into the blazing fire in rage, because the fool had always said: 'That girl will not laugh until she sees the one who is to be the greatest of all knights.'

The fool wailed, the girl wept, and the boy delayed no longer: without a word from anyone he set off after the Red Knight. And Yvonet, who was a keen bringer of news to court, ran off, all alone, through a garden beside the hall and down through a postern gate, and came straight to the path where the Red Knight sat, waiting for adventure and a test of chivalry. The boy was racing

towards him to take his arms, and the knight, while he was waiting, had placed the golden cup on a rock of grey stone. When the boy had ridden within earshot he cried:

'Lay down your arms! Carry them no more, for King Arthur commands you!'

And the knight called back: 'Boy, is anyone coming to defend the king's right?'

'What? By the Devil, sir knight, are you mocking me, that you haven't laid aside my arms? Take them off now, I command you!'

'Boy,' he said, 'I asked you if anyone was coming from the king to fight with me.'

'Sir knight, take off those arms or I'll take them off you! They're not yours any more! I'm warning you, I'll hit you if you make me say it again!'

The knight was angered then: he raised his lance with both hands and gave the boy such a blow across the shoulders with the shaft that he rocked forward on to the neck of his horse. The boy was enraged by the pain from the blow; he aimed for the knight's eye and let fly his javelin so fast that the knight neither saw nor heard it; it struck him through the eye and into the brain, and out through the nape of his neck the blood and brain gushed. The knight's heart burst with the pain, and he toppled over and crashed to the ground, stone dead. The boy dismounted and laid the knight's lance to one side and took his shield from his neck; but he didn't know how to tackle the helmet on the knight's head: he couldn't think how to remove it. And he wanted to ungird the knight's sword but he didn't know how, nor how to draw it from its scabbard; he just took the sword and heaved and pulled. Yvonet began to laugh when he saw the boy's bewilderment.

'What are you doing, friend?' he said.

'I don't know. From what your king said I thought he'd granted these arms to me, but it seems I'll have to butcher the knight first: they're stuck to the body so tight that inside and out are one piece, it seems.'

'Don't worry,' said Yvonet. 'I can separate them if you wish.'

'Go on, then,' said the boy, 'and give them to me, quickly.'

So Yvonet set to work, and stripped the knight right down to his toes; he left neither hauberk nor shoe, nor the helm on his head nor any other armour. But the boy would not lay aside his own clothes; in spite of Yvonet's pleas he would not take the sumptuous tunic of quilted silk that the knight had worn beneath his hauberk. Nor could Yvonet take from the boy the old ankle-boots he wore; the boy said:

'You must be joking! Swap the clothes my mother made me for this knight's useless stuff? My lovely thick canvas shirt for his, all soft and thin? My tunic never leaks: his wouldn't keep out a drop! Hang the man who'd change good clothes for bad!'

Teaching a fool isn't easy. All pleas were vain: he would take nothing but the arms. Yvonet laced them on for him, and tied the spurs to his ankle-boots, and clad him in the hauberk – a finer one was never seen; and over the mail hood

he set the helmet, which fitted him very well; and he taught him to gird on the sword so that it hung loose and free; then he set the boy's foot in the stirrup and mounted him on the knight's charger. He had never seen stirrups before, and knew nothing of spurs – he had never used anything but sticks and switches. Yvonet brought him the shield and the lance and gave them to him. And before Yvonet turned back, the boy said:

'Friend, have my hunting-horse – take him with you. He's very good, but I don't need him now. And take the king his cup with my greetings. Oh, and tell this to the girl that Kay struck on the cheek: that if I can, I mean to deal with Kay so that she may consider herself avenged.'

And Yvonet replied that he would return the cup to the king and deliver his message faithfully. And with that they parted and went their ways.

Yvonet came into the hall where the barons were, and carried the cup to the king, saying: 'Sire, be joyful now, for your knight returns your cup to you.'

'Which knight do you mean?'

'The one who's just left here,' said Yvonet.

'You mean the Welsh boy,' said the king, 'who asked me for the red arms of the knight who's done me every possible shame?'

'Yes indeed, sire!'

'And how did he get my cup? Did the knight love and esteem him so much that he returned it of his own free will?'

'No indeed. The boy made him pay dearly for it: he killed him.'

'What? How was that, friend?'

'I saw the knight strike him with his lance most painfully, and the boy replied with a javelin clean through the eye, so that blood and brain spilled out behind, and laid him dead on the ground.'

Then the king said to the seneschal: 'Ah, Kay! You've done me ill service today! With your offensive tongue, which has uttered so many insults, you've robbed me of the boy who has been of such worth to me.'

'And, sire,' said Yvonet to the king, 'he gave me a message for the queen's maid whom Kay struck out of spite and hatred: he says he'll take revenge on him if he gets the chance.'

The fool, who was sitting beside the fire, heard this and leaped to his feet; he came happily up to the king, hopping and jumping for joy, and said: 'God save me, sire, adventures are now about to befall us, and many of them will be hard and cruel! And I promise you, Kay can be quite certain that his foot and his hand and his base and foolish tongue will bring shame upon his life, for before a fortnight has passed the knight will have avenged the kick he gave me, and the slap he gave the girl will be well repaid, for his right arm will be broken between the elbow and the armpit: he'll carry it in a sling for half a year, indeed he will; he can escape it no more than death!'

These words upset Kay so much that he nearly burst with fury; he would have killed the fool in front of everyone, but he refrained from attacking him for fear of incurring the king's displeasure. And the king cried:

'Ah, Kay! You've earned my rage today! If someone had guided the boy in the art of arms, so that he could handle a shield and lance, he would have made a good knight without question; but he knows so little that he couldn't even draw a sword if he needed to! Now he's sitting in the saddle, fully armed, and he's sure to meet some hardy knight who won't hesitate to wound him to win his horse; he'll kill or maim him in an instant, for he won't know how to defend himself. He's so naive and untaught, he won't last long.'

Thus the king lamented and grieved for the boy, and his face was downcast. But lamenting would do no good, and he said no more.

* * *

Meanwhile the boy went riding through the forest without a stop, until he came to a flat land beside a river, great and roaring and wider than a cross-bow's range. He rode across a meadow towards it, but he did not venture into the water: he saw that it was dark and rushing, and a good deal deeper than the Loire. And so he rode along the bank; and on the far side of the river there rose a jagged crop of rock, the water thundering at its foot, and on a side of the rock sloping down towards the sea there stood a rich, strong castle. Where the river opened into a bay the boy turned to his left, and there he saw the castle's towers being born: for in his eyes they were being born there, issuing from the rock. In the middle of the castle loomed a great, strong tower, and a mighty barbican faced the bay and made its stand against the sea, which pounded at its foot. At the four corners of the castle wall, which was made of great, square, solid stones, were four handsome turrets. The castle was finely situated, and well arranged inside. Before the round gatehouse was a bridge built of stone and sand and lime, stretching across the water; it was strong and high, with battlements all the way along, and before it was a drawbridge, built to serve its special purpose: by day it was a bridge, by night a gate.

The boy rode on towards it. Dressed in a rich and deep-hued robe, a nobleman was strolling on the bridge. Up rode the boy. He was very mindful of what his mother had told him, for he gave the nobleman his greeting, and said: 'Sir, my mother taught me that.'

'God bless you, brother,' the nobleman replied, seeing he was a simpleton. 'Where have you come from?'

'From the court of King Arthur!'

'Oh yes? What were you doing there?'

'The king made me a knight!'

'A knight! God save me, I thought he'd forgotten about such matters; I thought he had other things on his mind than making men knights. But tell me, brother, who gave you those arms?'

'The king!' he said.

'He gave them to you? How was that?'

And the boy told him the whole story. Then the nobleman questioned him further, and seeing him mounted on the magnificent charger, asked him about his horsemanship.

'I run him up and down nicely, just like I did with the hunting-horse I took from my mother's house.'

'Tell me more, friend. How do you manage with your arms?'

'I know all about getting them on and off, just the way the fellow did when he disarmed the knight I killed and put them on me. They're so light to wear, they're no trouble at all.'

'By my life, that's good,' the noble said, 'I'm glad of that. Now tell me, what was it brought you here?'

'Sir, my mother told me to seek the company of worthy men wherever I found them, and to trust in what they said, for there was much to gain by heeding them.'

And the nobleman replied: 'God bless your mother, for she gave you good advice. Have you anything else to tell me?'

'Yes.'

'What's that?'

'Just one thing: give me lodging tonight.'

'Gladly,' said the nobleman, 'provided you grant me a favour – one from which you'll greatly benefit.'

'What's that?' he said.

'Trust in your mother's advice – and also mine.'

'In faith,' said the boy, 'I promise you that.'

'Dismount then.'

And the boy stepped down. One of the two boys who were there took his horse, while the other disarmed him; that left him in his ridiculous outfit – the ankle-boots and the ill-made, ill-cut coat of deer-hide that his mother had given him. The nobleman was then fitted with the sharp steel spurs that the boy had brought, and he mounted the boy's horse, hung the shield from his neck by its strap and took up the lance, and said:

'Now, friend, learn the art of arms: note how a lance should be held, and a horse spurred on and reined in.'

Then he unfurled the pennon and showed the boy how a shield should be carried. He made it hang a little forward until it touched the horse's neck, and he set the lance in its rest and spurred the horse on. It was worth a hundred marks, that horse: none ever charged with more will, more speed or more power. The nobleman was highly skilled with shield and horse and lance, for he had learned the art from his youth, and everything he did filled the boy with delight and he watched with rapt attention. When he had finished his splendid mock-combat before the boy, the nobleman came back to him with his lance raised and asked him:

'Well, friend, could you handle the lance and shield like that, and spur and guide the horse?'

And straight away the boy replied that he did not wish to live a day longer without knowing how to do those things.

'Dear friend,' said the nobleman, 'what a man can't do he can learn to do, if he's willing to apply himself. All crafts can be learned with will and work and practice. And you shouldn't be ashamed or blamed if you can't do what you've never done and have never seen others do.'

Then the nobleman told him to mount, and the boy began to carry the lance and shield as perfectly as if he had spent his life in tournaments and wars, and ridden through every land in search of battle and adventure; for it came to him quite naturally, and with nature instructing him and his whole heart determined, he was bound to have no difficulty. He gave such a fine account of himself that the nobleman was greatly pleased, and said to himself that if the boy had spent his whole life engaged in arms this would still have seemed a fine display.

When the boy had done his turn he came back to the nobleman with his lance raised, just as he had seen him do, and said: 'Did I do it well, sir? Do you think my effort will pay off, if I keep on trying? I've never seen anything I desired so much. I'd love to know as much about it all as you.'

'My friend,' said the nobleman, 'if that's your heart, you will; you need have no fear of that.'

Three times the nobleman mounted, three times he taught the boy as much as he could, until he had taught him a good deal; and three times he bade the boy do likewise. The final time he said to him:

'If you met a knight and he struck you, what would you do?'

'I'd hit him back.'

'And if your lance broke?'

'Then there'd be nothing else for it: I'd lay into him with my fists.'

'No you wouldn't, friend.'

'What should I do, then?'

'Join combat with the sword.'

Then the nobleman plunged the lance bolt upright in the ground before him, eager to teach the boy to defend himself with the sword if he were attacked, and to go on the offensive if the chance arose; and grasping the sword he said to the boy: 'This is how to defend yourself if anyone attacks you.'

'God save me,' said the boy, 'no-one knows as much about that as I; I learned all about it at my mother's house, practising with cushions and shields, often till I was quite worn out.'

'Then let's go to my house at once,' said the nobleman, 'I can give you no better advice! Tonight we'll enjoy the finest lodging – no-one shall stand in our way!'

They both set off then side by side, and the boy said to his host: 'Sir, my mother taught me that I should never share a man's company for long without knowing his name. So I'd like to know yours.'

'Dear friend,' the nobleman replied, 'my name is Gorneman de Gorhaut.'

And with that they walked into the castle, holding each other by the hand.

As they began to climb the steps a young lad came up eagerly, carrying a short mantle; he ran and dressed the boy in it, in case he caught some harmful cold after getting so hot. The nobleman's house was rich and handsome, and he had fine retainers; and the table was already laid, with dishes good and appealing and well prepared. The knights washed and sat down to dine. The nobleman seated the boy next to him, and had him eat with him from the same platter. They ate and drank their fill. And when they had risen from the table the nobleman, who was most courteous, begged the boy to stay for a month. He would gladly keep him a full year if he wished, and in that time would teach him things, if he cared to learn, which would be of great use in time of need. And the boy replied:

'Sir, I don't know if I'm near the house where my mother lives, but I pray to God to lead me to her so that I may see her again, for I saw her faint and fall at the foot of the bridge outside the gate, and I don't know whether she's alive or dead. She fainted with grief because I left her, I know it. So I can't stay, not until I know how she is.'

The nobleman could see it was no use pleading with him. They said no more, and retired to their rest without another word, for the beds were already made.

The nobleman rose early next morning and went to the boy's bed where he found him still lying, and had a shirt and breeches of fine linen brought to him as a present, and hose dyed with Brazil-wood, and a tunic of violet silk woven and made in India; he sent him all these things to wear, and said to him: 'If you'll take my advice, friend, you'll wear *these* clothes.'

And the boy replied: 'How can you say that? Aren't the clothes my mother made me twice as good as these?'

'By the eyes in my head, boy, these are far better!'

'Far worse, you mean!'

'You said, friend, when I brought you here, that you'd do everything I told you.'

'And so I will,' said the boy. 'I won't break my promise to you in any way.'

And so he delayed no longer in donning the clothes, and abandoned the ones his mother had made. Then the nobleman knelt down and fastened the boy's right spur; for it was the custom that whoever made a man a knight should put on his spur. And the nobleman took the sword and girded it on the boy and kissed him, and said that with the sword he had given him the highest order that God had created: the order of chivalry, which should always be clean of all wickedness. Then he said:

'Good brother, listen to me now: if you ever have to fight a knight, I pray you, if you gain the upper hand and he begs for mercy, make sure you grant it and don't kill him. Another thing: don't be too keen on talking. Anyone who talks too much is bound to say things that make him look a fool. In the words of the wise: "He sins who speaks too much". That's why I warn you, friend, not to have too loose a tongue. I beg this, too: if you find a man or a woman, or an orphan or a lady, in any kind of distress, lend them your aid if you can. And

one more lesson I have for you – and don't scorn it, for it's not a lesson to be scorned: go willingly to church to pray to the One who made all things, that He may have mercy on your soul, and in this life here on Earth He may guard you as His Christian.'

The boy said to the nobleman: 'May you be blessed by all the popes, sir, for my mother said the same!'

'Never say, dear brother,' said the nobleman, 'that your mother taught you such and such: say it was I. I don't blame you for having said so hitherto, but henceforth please refrain, for if you keep saying it people will think you're mad.'

'What shall I say, then, sir?'

'You can say that the vassal who fastened your spur taught and instructed you so.'

And the boy gave him his word that for as long as he lived he would not mention anyone but him, for he felt that his advice was good. Then the nobleman raised his hand and made the sign of the Cross over him, and said:

'Since you've no desire to stay and are determined to go, go with God and may He guide you.'

The Fisher King

THE NEW KNIGHT TOOK HIS LEAVE OF HIS HOST, most anxious now to return to his mother and to find her alive and well. He made his way into the lonely forest, for he was more at home there than in the open country, knowing the ways of the woods. He rode on until he caught sight of a castle: it was strong and impressive, but outside its walls there was nothing but sea and river and wasteland. He hurried on until he neared the gate; but before he could reach it he had to cross a bridge so weak that he feared it would hardly take his weight. He managed to get across without mishap, but when he reached the gate he found it locked fast. He wasn't one to hammer gently, and his cries were none too soft. He pounded away until a thin, pale girl rushed to the windows of the hall and cried:

'Who's that calling?'

He looked up towards the girl and said: 'Dear friend, I'm a knight who prays that you let me in and give me lodging tonight.'

'Sir,' she said, 'you shall have lodging, though you'll give me little thanks for it. But we'll lodge you as well as we can.'

The girl drew back from the window then; and he, waiting at the gate, thought they were making him stand around too long and began to shout again. Then four retainers came, each clutching an axe and bearing a sword at his waist, and unlocked the gate and said to him: 'Come this way.'

If the retainers had been in a happy state they would have been handsome men indeed; but they had suffered so much hardship from lack of food and sleep that they were a pitiful sight. And just as he had found the land outside all bare and deserted, so he found precious little within. Everywhere he went the streets were empty and the houses in ruins, with not a man or woman anywhere. There were two churches in the town which had both been abbeys: one of nuns, lost and fearful, the other of monks, confused, bewildered. He found these churches well adorned neither with ornament nor tapestry; instead he saw their walls crumbling and broken, their towers open to the sky; and the doors of all the houses hung open at night as they did by day. No millstone ground, no oven baked in any part of the town, and there was not a pennyworth of anything to be had: no bread, no pastry, no wine, no cider, no ale.

The four retainers led him to a palace roofed with slate, and there they helped him dismount and disarm. Then a boy came down a staircase from the hall carrying a grey mantle, and draped it on the knight's shoulders. Another took his horse to the stable, where there was only the tiniest amount of hay or oats. The others ushered him up the steps to the hall, which was handsome indeed, and two noblemen and a girl came to meet him. The noblemen were grey with age but not altogether white; they would have been in their prime of blood and strength had it not been for their troubles and their woe. As for the girl who came with them, she was more gracious, comely and elegant than a hawk or bird of paradise. Her mantle and tunic were of a rich black cloth starred with gold, and there was no sign of wear on the ermine lining. The neck of her gown had a border of black and white sable, of perfect length and breadth. Her hair was so fair and shining that anyone who saw it would have thought it strands of purest gold. Her forehead was high and white and smooth, as if it had been carved by a man's hand from stone or wood or ivory. Her eyebrows were fine and perfectly spaced, and her eyes were bright and clear and well set; her nose was straight and smooth; and in her face the red and white made a finer blend than red and silver in heraldry. God had made in her a prodigy for stealing men's hearts; He had never made her like before and has never done so since. When the young knight saw her he greeted her, and she greeted him, as did the noblemen with her. She took him by the hand most courteously and said:

'Good sir, your lodging tonight will certainly not be such as befits a worthy man. If I told you now the full extent of our plight, you might think I was saying it in a base attempt to make you go. But come now, please, and take lodging, such as it is, and may God give you better tomorrow!'

And she led him by the hand to a chamber with a painted ceiling, long and wide and beautiful, where they sat together on a bed spread with a quilt of samite. Knights came in and sat in groups of four and five and six, and looked at the one who was sitting beside their lady – not saying a word. He was refraining from talking because he remembered the advice the nobleman had given him, and all the knights began whispering to each other about his silence.

'God,' they all said, 'is this knight dumb? It would be a great shame, for never was such a handsome knight born of woman. He looks so well beside our lady, and our lady beside him – if only they weren't both stricken dumb! He is so handsome, and she so beautiful, that it looks as if God made them for each other.'

The girl waited for him to broach some subject or other, until she realised he was not going to say a word unless she spoke to him first. So she said, most courteously: 'Where have you come from today, sir?'

'Young lady,' he replied, 'I stayed last night at the castle of a nobleman where I had fine lodging. It had five strong and splendid towers, one big and four small; I could describe it all to you, but I don't know what it was called – though I do know the worthy man's name was Gorneman de Gorhaut.'

'Oh, dear friend!' cried the girl. 'May God the King reward you well for calling him a worthy man, for you never said a truer word. I'm his niece, you know, but I haven't seen him for a very long time. But certainly, since you left your home you won't have met a worthier man. He'll have given you delightful lodging, being the courteous soul he is – and powerful, too, and well served and rich. But here there are only five small loaves which another uncle of mine – a prior, a most holy and religious man – sent me for supper tonight, and a small cask of sour wine. There's no other food here.'

She gave orders then for the tables to be set; her bidding was done and everyone sat down to supper. It did not last long, but the food was taken eagerly. When they had finished they parted: those who had kept watch the previous night stayed there to sleep, and those whose turn it was to be on guard made themselves ready. Fifty retainers and knights kept watch that night, while the others did everything they could to make their guest comfortable. The one who took charge of making his bed laid out white sheets and a costly coverlet, and a fine pillow for his head. That night he had all the comfort and pleasure one can imagine in a bed – except for the enjoyment of a girl, if that had been his wish, or a lady, if that had been allowed. But he knew as little about love as he did about anything else, and fell asleep quite soon, untroubled by any cares.

But his hostess, in her chamber, could get no rest. While he slept at ease she was burdened with thought, for she had no defence in a battle that threatened her. She tossed and turned this way and that, until finally she threw a mantle of silk over her shirt, deciding in her boldness and courage to take the risk; and it was no easy decision: she had decided to go to her guest and tell him of her worries. So she rose from her bed and left her chamber, in such fear that she trembled in every limb and broke into a sweat. She came to the bed where he lay sleeping, and began to grieve and sigh, and went down on her knees and wept so much that her tears spilt all over his face until he awoke, startled to find his cheeks all wet and to see her kneeling beside his bed, hugging him tightly round the neck. He was courteous enough to take her in his arms and draw her towards him, saying:

'What do you want, dear girl? Why have you come here?'

'Oh, gentle knight, have pity! In God's name, don't think ill of me! Although I'm almost naked I had no thought of folly or sin. There's no-one living in the world so beset by grief and misery as I! Nothing I have brings me any comfort, and I haven't had a day free of misfortune. But I shall see no night after tonight, nor any day after tomorrow, for I'm going to kill myself with my own hand! Of three hundred and ten knights who used to man this castle only fifty now remain; for 260 have been killed or captured by an evil knight named Engygeron, the seneschal of Clamadeus of the Isles. I grieve as much for those held captive as for those who've been killed, for I know they'll die – they'll never escape. Engygeron has besieged us here for a whole winter and summer, never moving; and his strength increases constantly, while ours has diminished

and our provisions have been exhausted. We're now in such a plight that tomorrow, unless God intervenes, this castle will be surrendered, for it can no longer be defended, and I shall be surrendered with it as a miserable prisoner. But truly, I'll kill myself before he takes me alive. He'll have me dead; then I shan't care if he carries me off. Clamadeus, who thinks to have me, never will in any way, except bereft of life and soul. In a jewel-case of mine I keep a knife of the finest steel which I shall bury in my heart. That's what I had to tell you; I'll go now and leave you in peace.'

The knight could soon earn great praise if he had the courage, for whatever she may have given him to understand, the only reason she had come and wept on his face was to inspire him to take up the battle to defend her land. He said to her:

'Dear friend, take comfort now and stop your weeping; come here beside me and wipe the tears from your eyes. If God pleases, He'll send you better fortune tomorrow than you say. Lie here beside me on this bed – it's wide enough for both of us.'

And she said: 'I will, sir, if that's your wish.'

And he kissed her and held her close, and drew her gently and softly under the coverlet. She let him kiss her, and it didn't displease her. She found great comfort that night, as they slept lip to lip, in each other's arms, until day broke. At dawn the girl returned to her chamber; and without the help of a maid or waiting-woman she dressed and made herself ready, waking no-one.

As soon as they saw the day break those who had been keeping watch that night woke the sleepers, rousing them from their beds. At the same time the girl returned to her knight, and said to him most graciously:

'Sir, may God give you a good day today; I don't think you'll be staying here: what would you gain by doing so? You'll leave, I know; but I don't object to that – I'd be discourteous if I did, for we've done you no honour or service here. I pray that God may have better lodging in store for you.'

'Dear lady,' he replied, 'I shan't be looking for other lodging today. I'll be bringing peace to all your land instead. I'll not have your enemy stay to harass you longer. But if I kill and vanquish him, I ask, as my reward, that your love may be mine. I'll take no other payment.'

'Sir,' she replied, 'you've asked of me a small, poor thing; but if it were denied you, you'd take it as pride, so I won't refuse it. But don't say that the condition of having my love is that you go and die for me, for that would be a grievous shame. Be sure of this: your body and your age are not such that you could endure combat against so hard and strong and great a knight as the one who waits outside.'

'You'll see if that's so today,' he said, 'for I'm going to fight with him. Nothing you can say will stop me.'

She fashioned her speech cleverly, pretending to plead against his plan when it was exactly what she wanted, inspiring him to do what she staunchly deplored. He called for his arms; they were brought to him, and he was armed

and mounted on a horse made ready for him in the middle of the square. Everyone there looked dismayed and said:

'Sir, may God lend you aid today, and heap misfortune upon Engygeron the seneschal who has destroyed all this land.'

They led him in a convoy to the gate, and having seen him outside the castle they all cried with one voice:

'Good sir, may the True Cross on which God allowed His son to suffer guard you today from mortal danger, and lead you back safely to where you may rest in happiness and pleasure.'

Such was the prayer of every man and woman.

Then the men of the besieging army saw him coming, and pointed him out to Engygeron. He was sitting outside his tent, expecting either that the castle would be surrendered to him before nightfall, or that someone would come to fight with him in single combat. His men were in high spirits, thinking they had conquered the castle and the whole country. Engygeron, mounted on a sturdy charger, rode calmly up to the knight at a walk and said:

'Who sent you here, boy? Tell me your business: have you come in search of peace or battle?'

'What are you doing in this land?' replied the boy. 'You'll tell me first why you've been killing their knights and ravaging the country.'

And Engygeron answered, like the haughty and arrogant man he was: 'I want that castle cleared forthwith and the keep surrendered. It's been held against me too long. And my lord will have the girl.'

'Damn that decree and the one who uttered it!' cried the boy. 'You'll renounce every claim you've made!'

'By Saint Peter!' cried Engygeron. 'What nonsense are you talking? It's often the way that one who's not to blame pays the penalty!'

The boy was incensed at this and set his lance in its rest; and they charged at each other as fast as their horses could carry them. With their anger and rage, and the strength in their arms, they made their lances shiver and fly into pieces. But Engygeron was the only one to fall, with a terrible wound in his arm and side. The boy dismounted, not knowing how to attack him on horseback; down he jumped, sword in hand, and strode up to Engygeron and assailed him fiercely. The battle lasted a long while, with awesome blows exchanged, until Engygeron collapsed and cried for mercy. The boy said he would have no mercy whatever; but then he remembered the nobleman, who had taught him never to kill a knight deliberately once he had vanquished him and had mastery. And Engygeron cried:

'Oh, gentle friend, don't be so cruel as to refuse me mercy! I grant victory to you; you're a true and a splendid knight indeed, but no-one would have believed from seeing you that you'd have killed me in battle by your own arms alone. But if I testify in the presence of my men that you've defeated me in combat, my word will be taken and your honour will be enhanced beyond any other knight's. And if you have a lord who's done you some kindness or service,

send me to him, and I'll tell him on your behalf how you vanquished me in battle, and yield myself as his prisoner to do with me as he pleases.'

'Curse anyone who would sue for more!' said the boy. 'I'll tell you where to go, then: to that castle; and you'll tell the fair girl who's my love that never, as long as you live, will you ever trouble her again, and you'll put yourself entirely at her mercy.'

'Then kill me,' Engygeron replied, 'for she would have me killed! She desires nothing so much, for I was involved in her father's death; and I've incurred her greatest wrath by killing and capturing all her knights this year. Anyone who sent me to her would be committing me to a terrible imprisonment; it's the worst he could possibly do! Have you no other friend or sweetheart?'

So the boy told him to go to a castle belonging to a worthy man: there is not a mason in the world who could have described the castle better. He told him with high praise of the river and the bridge, and the turrets and the tower and the mighty walls around it, until Engygeron realised all too well that the boy wanted to send him as a prisoner to the place where he was hated most.

'You're sending me to no haven there! God help me,' he said, 'you mean to put me in the direst plight of all! I killed one of his brothers in this war. Kill me yourself, friend, rather than make me go to him: if you force me there it'll be my death.'

So the boy replied: 'Then go as a prisoner to King Arthur; give the king my greetings, and ask him to show you the girl whom Kay the seneschal struck because she laughed when she saw me. You're to yield yourself her prisoner and tell her that I hope to God I live long enough to avenge her.'

And Engygeron replied that he would do that service as finely as he could. The victorious knight turned back towards the castle, while Engygeron set off to his imprisonment, giving orders that his standard should be taken down. The besieging army departed, till neither a fair nor a dark-haired head remained.

The people of the castle poured forth to meet the knight on his return, and joyfully helped him dismount and disarm, but they all said: 'Since you've not brought Engygeron back, why didn't you cut off his head?'

'In faith, sirs, how could I properly do either? He's killed your kinsmen, and I couldn't have protected him: you'd have killed him in spite of me. And it wouldn't have been very good of me to refuse him mercy when I had the better of him. He's to present himself as a prisoner to King Arthur.'

Just then the girl appeared and greeted him with the greatest joy, and led him to her chamber to rest and take his ease. She did not resist his embraces and kisses; instead of eating and drinking they sported and kissed and exchanged sweet words.

Meanwhile Clamadeus, in his delusion, was expecting to have the castle without contest that day, until he met a boy along his way, lamenting bitterly, who told him the news about Engygeron the seneschal.

'In God's name, sir, things are going badly!' cried the boy, who was grieving

so much that he was tearing at his hair with both hands; and Clamadeus said: 'What's wrong?'

'Truly, sir, your seneschal's been defeated in combat, and is to yield himself prisoner to King Arthur: he's on his way to him now.'

'Who did this, boy? Speak up! How could it happen? Where could they have found a knight who could beat such a mighty, valiant man into submission?'

'I don't know who the knight was, sir,' the boy replied. 'But I know this much, for I saw it myself: he came out of Beaurepaire, and was armed with red arms.'

'Tell me, boy, what shall I do now?' he cried, nearly going out of his mind.

'Go back the way you came, sir. You'll gain nothing by carrying on.'

Just as he said this there appeared a white-haired knight, Clamadeus's counsellor, who said: 'Those are base words, boy! You should give wiser and better advice than that: he'd be mad to listen to you! Sir, do you want to know how to get the knight and the castle? It'll be done with ease! Within the walls of Beaurepaire there's nothing to drink or eat and the knights are weak, while we are strong and healthy, neither hungry nor thirsty, and could endure a long battle if they dared to come out and engage us. We'll send twenty knights to fight outside the gate. This knight of theirs, sporting with his fair love Blancheflor, will want to prove his chivalry; and he'll be captured or killed, for the others, who'll be weak, will give him little help. The twenty will do nothing except draw them into the trap and keep them occupied while we creep up through this valley and close in on them from behind!'

'Truly,' said Clamadeus, 'I approve of that! We have four hundred armed knights here, and a thousand footmen fully equipped, all chosen fighting men. Our enemies are as good as dead!'

So Clamadeus sent twenty of his knights to the castle gate, with pennons and banners unfurled in the wind. And when the men of the castle saw them they rashly flung open the gates at the boy's request, and with everyone watching he rode out to do combat with the knights. Bold and strong and confident, he met them all together; and no-one who felt his onslaught guessed he was an apprentice in the art of arms! He showed great skill that day: he gutted many with his lance, here pierced their chests and there their bellies, here broke an arm and there a collar, this one he killed and that one wounded, this one unhorsed and that one seized, and gave the captives and the horses to those who had need of them.

But then they caught sight of the great battalion that had come up through the valley: four hundred armed knights and a thousand footsoldiers. The men of the castle drew up close to the open gate, while the besiegers beheld their wounded and dead companions and came charging towards the gate in impetuous disarray. The defenders were ranged in serried ranks and received them boldly; but they were few in number and weak, while their attackers were boosted by the men-at-arms who followed them; and finally they could resist no longer and fell back into the castle. Above the gate there were archers

shooting into the great crowd who were burning and raging to break into the castle, until finally, violently, a band forced their way in. The men above dropped a gate on to those below, killing and crushing all it caught as it fell. Clamadeus could not have seen a more grievous sight: the falling gate had killed huge numbers of his men and locked him out; there was nothing for it but to go and rest: to continue such a furious assault would be a waste of effort now.

But his counsellor said: 'Sir, good or ill befalls us all according to God's will. The long and the short of it is: you've lost. But every saint has his feast-day! The tempest has fallen on you, your men are wounded and the men of the castle have won; but they'll lose yet, be sure of that! Tear out both my eyes if they survive in there for three more days! The castle and the keep will be yours; they'll put themselves entirely at your mercy. If you can stay here just today and tomorrow – that's all – the castle will fall into your hands. Even the girl who's refused you for so long will beg you in God's name to take her!'

So the besieging army pitched a great camp of tents and fine pavilions.

Meanwhile the men of the castle disarmed the knights they had captured; but they did not lock them up in dungeons or irons, on condition that they promised as loyal knights to stay in captivity honourably and to do their captors no harm.

And then, that very day, a mighty wind drove a vessel across the sea with a huge cargo of wheat and other supplies, and by God's will it arrived safe and sound below the castle. When they caught sight of it the men of the castle sent down to enquire who they were and what they wanted. And they replied: 'We're merchants carrying provisions to sell: bread and wine and salted bacon, and we've plenty of cattle and pigs to slaughter if need be.'

The men of the castle cried: 'God be praised for giving the wind the power that brought you drifting here! You are welcome indeed! Start unloading! You can sell the lot, as dear as you dare! Come quickly now and take your payment! We'll give you bars of gold and silver for your wheat. And for the wine and meat you'll have riches enough to fill a cart – more, if need be!'

The buyers and sellers did a fine job as they set about unloading the ship and sending all the goods ahead to fortify the people in the castle. When they saw them coming with the provisions you can imagine how they rejoiced! And with all possible speed they gave orders for dinner to be prepared.

Clamadeus, loitering outside, could now stay as long as he liked, for in the castle they had cattle and pigs and salted meat in abundance, and enough wheat to last till the next harvest. The castle cooks were not idle, and boys lit the kitchen fires to cook the dinner. Now the new knight could sport with his love at his ease; she embraced him, and he kissed her, and they delighted in each other's company. The hall was far from silent now: it rang with a mighty, joyful din. The cooks laboured with all their might until finally they told them to sit down to dine – and how they needed that dinner!

News of the castle's provisioning now reached Clamadeus and his men; they were filled with anguish, and all said they should leave, for there was no

way now of starving out the castle: they had besieged the town for nothing. Clamadeus was furious, and without anyone's advice he sent a message to the castle, telling the red knight that until noon the next day he could come and meet him alone in the plain to do battle with him if he dared. When the girl heard this she was filled with grief and anger; but he sent word back that, come what may, Clamadeus would have battle since that was what he wanted. At that the girl's distress grew deeper still, but no amount of tears from her would ever have made him stay. All the women and all the men implored him not to go and fight the one whom no knight had ever withstood in battle; but the boy said:

'Save your breath, my friends: no man in the world could hold me back.'

Thus he stopped their tongues, and they went to their beds and rested until the sun rose next morning. They were still most distressed for their lord, but no matter how much they implored him they could not change his mind. And his love, too, begged him not to go to battle but to stay there in peace, for they had nothing to fear any longer from Clamadeus and his men. But all this entreaty was in vain – which was remarkable indeed, for her coaxing words to him were as sweet as could be, and with each word she kissed him so softly and gently that she slid love's key into the lock of his heart. Yet still she found no way of dissuading him from going to battle; instead he called for his arms, and they were brought with all speed. But there was the greatest sorrow as the boy was armed; all the men and women were heavy-hearted. He commended them all to the king of kings and mounted the swarthy horse which had been brought to him; and then in a moment he was gone.

When Clamadeus saw his opponent coming he was in such a wild mood that he imagined he would empty the knight's saddle in no time. The plain was beautiful and smooth, and there was no-one there but the two of them, for Clamadeus had dismissed his men and sent them all away. Each had his lance fixed in its rest before the saddle-bow, and they charged at each other without a challenge or wasting words. Both had the sharpest heads on their ash-wood lances, stout and fine to handle; and they charged full tilt, and the knights were strong and filled with mortal hatred; and they struck each other so hard that their wooden shields split and their lances smashed and they brought each other down; but they both leaped up and came straight at each other, fighting with swords for a long while. It was an even battle, but in the end Clamadeus, against his will, had to cry for mercy. But he swore most earnestly, as his seneschal had done, that on no condition would he submit to imprisonment in Beaurepaire; nor, for all the Roman Empire, would he go to the nobleman who owned the fine castle. But he willingly promised to yield himself prisoner to King Arthur, and to give the boy's message to the girl whom Kay had struck so basely: that he longed to avenge her, if God gave him strength. Then the boy made Clamadeus swear that before dawn the next day he would set free, safe and sound, all he held captive in his dungeons; and that, as long as he lived, if ever there were an army besieging Beaurepaire he would drive them off if he could; and that the girl would never again be troubled either by him

or by his men. And so Clamadeus returned to his land, and when he arrived he commanded that all his captives be released from prison, and said they could go their ways now, completely free. As soon as he had given the word his bidding was done: out came the prisoners, freed from the dungeons, and they set off immediately with all their belongings, for nothing was kept from them.

Clamadeus set out on a different path, travelling all alone. It was the custom at this time that a knight had to yield himself prisoner dressed just as he was when he was vanquished, without removing or donning anything. Thus attired, Clamadeus set off after Engygeron, who was heading for Disnadaron where King Arthur was to hold court.

Meanwhile there was great jubilation in the castle of Beaurepaire, where those who had spent so long in foul captivity had now returned. The hall and the knights' lodgings rang with rejoicing, and in the chapels and churches all the bells pealed with joy. Every monk and nun gave thanks to God, while through the streets and squares all the men and women danced their rounds. How the castle celebrated, now that no-one was besieging them or waging war!

And meanwhile Engygeron rode on; and Clamadeus followed him, staying three nights in a row at the house where Engygeron had lodged before. Lodging by lodging, he followed him to Disnadaron in Wales, where King Arthur was holding a packed court in his halls. They saw Clamadeus coming, armed as custom required, and he was recognised by Engygeron, who had already given the boy's message to the court on his arrival the night before, and had been retained for the king's household and council. He now saw his lord covered in crimson blood, and said at once:

'My lords, my lords, just look at this! Believe me, the boy with the red arms has sent this knight here! He's vanquished him, I'm sure of it, for he's covered in blood! I know the man well, for he's my lord and I'm his vassal. Clamadeus of the Isles is his name, and I thought there was no finer knight in the Empire of Rome, but misfortune befalls even the worthiest.'

So said Engygeron; and then Clamadeus arrived, and they ran to meet each other in the middle of the hall. It was Pentecost, and the queen was sitting beside King Arthur at the head of the table, surrounded by a good many kings and queens and dukes and counts and countesses. Kay the seneschal strode through the hall, a staff of office in his hand and a hat of rich cloth upon his fair-haired head. His tunic was coloured with a fine, deep dye, and girdled with a belt of which the buckle and all the links were gold. There was not a more handsome knight in all the world; but his beauty and his prowess were tainted by his wicked, mocking tongue. Everyone stepped out of his path as he strode through the middle of the hall; they all feared his base jests and his evil tongue. Any wise man fears open spitefulness, whether it be in jest or not. In view of them all, Kay marched up to where the king was sitting and said:

'If you wished, sir, you could dine at once.'

'Kay,' said the king, 'leave me in peace. Never, by the eyes in my head, will I eat on so great a feast-day when I hold so full a court, until some news arrives.'

It was while they were talking thus that Clamadeus entered to yield himself a prisoner, armed as custom demanded; and he said: 'God bless the finest king alive, the noblest and most generous: such is the testimony of all who have heard of his great deeds. Now hear me, sire,' he said, 'for I have a message to give. Much as it grieves me, I acknowledge that I'm sent here by a knight who's defeated me. I have to yield myself prisoner to you on his behalf, whether I like it or not. If anyone asked me if I knew the knight's name, I would have to say no. But I can tell you that he bears red arms, and he said you gave them to him.'

'God guide you, friend,' said the king. 'Tell me truly: is he in good health and spirits?'

'You may be sure he is, sire,' said Clamadeus. 'He's the most valiant knight I've ever known. And he told me to speak to the girl who laughed at him, which made Kay shamefully strike her: he says he'll avenge her, if God grants him the power.'

The court fool, when he heard these words, jumped for joy and cried: 'God bless me, lord king, that blow will indeed be avenged, without a word of a lie; for Kay will have his arm broken and his shoulder dislocated – there's nothing he can do to stop it!'

Kay heard this and thought it the most insulting folly; you may be sure it was not cowardice that stopped him beating the fool about the head, but the presence of the king and the risk of shame. The king shook his head and said to Kay:

'It grieves me deeply that he's not here with me. It was you and your foolish tongue that made him go, and it saddens me.'

Then Gifflet rose at the king's command, along with Sir Yvain, who improved all who shared his company; and the king told them to take Clamadeus and escort him to the chambers where the queen's maids were playing. They did so, and pointed out the girl, and he told her the news that she so wished to hear, grieving as she still was for the shame that rested on her cheek: she had recovered from the blow, but had not forgotten or forgiven the shame. And so it was that Clamadeus delivered his message; and the king retained him in his court and household for life.

Meanwhile the one who had fought him for Beaurepaire and for the beautiful girl Blancheflor, his love, was now taking his ease beside her. The land could now have been his, entirely and undisputed, had his heart not been elsewhere; but he was thinking more of someone else: his heart was fixed on his mother whom he had seen faint and fall, and he longed more than anything to go and see her. He did not dare to ask leave of his love, for she refused and forbade it and commanded all her people to beg him to stay. But all their pleas were vain, except that he made them a promise: if he found his mother alive he would bring her back with him, and from that day forward would be lord of the land; and if she were dead, he would return likewise.

And so he set out, promising to return, leaving his beautiful love filled with anguish and sorrow, as was everyone else. There was such a procession as he

rode from the town that it was like Ascension Day, for all the monks were there, dressed in their rich silk copes, and all the nuns in their veils; and they all said:

'Sir, you've rescued us from exile and restored us to our homes: it's no wonder that we grieve when you mean to leave us so soon.'

And he said to them: 'There's no need to cry any more. With God's guidance I'll return, and what's the use of weeping? Don't you think it's right that I should go and see my mother, whom I left on her own in the wild forest? I shan't fail to come back, not for all the world; and if she's alive, I'll have her take the veil as a nun in your church; and if she's dead, I'll have a service sung for her soul each year.'

At that the monks and nuns and everyone turned back. And the boy set out, his lance in its rest, fully armed, just as he had come.

* * *

All day long he rode on, meeting no earthly being who could guide him on his way. He prayed constantly to God the sovereign father that he might find his mother full of life and health. He was still praying when he caught sight of a river flowing down a hill. He saw that the water was swift and deep and he did not dare to ride in; and he said:

'Oh! If only I could cross this river I think I'd find my mother on the other side, if she's still alive.'

He rode along the bank until he came to a high, jutting rock, and the river washed all round it so that he could go no further. But suddenly he noticed a boat with two men on board, sailing downstream. He stopped and waited, thinking that they would sail on down to him. But they stopped and stayed dead still in midstream, anchored fast. The one at the front was fishing with a line, baiting his hook with a little fish slightly bigger than a minnow. The boy, not knowing what to do or where to find a crossing, greeted them and asked them:

'Tell me, sirs, is there a bridge across this river?'

And the one who was fishing replied: 'No indeed, brother; nor is there any boat, I think, bigger than the one we're in, which wouldn't carry five men. You can't cross on horseback for twenty leagues upstream or down, for there's no ferry or bridge or ford.'

'Then tell me, I pray you, where I could find lodging.'

And the man replied: 'You've need of that and more besides, I think. *I* will give you lodging tonight. Ride up through the cleft in that rock, and when you come to the top you'll see a house in a valley ahead of you. That's where I live, between the river and the woods.'

So the boy climbed up the rock; but when he reached the top he peered all around and saw nothing but earth and sky, and said: 'God bring disgrace upon the one who sent me here! What a dance he led me, telling me I'd find a house when I reached the top! Fisherman, that was an unworthy deed!'

But just then, in a valley nearby, the top of a tower caught his eye. You wouldn't find one more handsome from here to Beirut. It was square and built of grey stone, and flanked by two smaller towers. A hall stood before the tower, and lodges before the hall. The boy rode down towards it, saying that the one who had sent him there had guided him well, and he praised the fisherman, no longer calling him treacherous or dishonest. He headed towards the gate; and before it he found a drawbridge, and it was lowered. Over the bridge he rode and in, and four boys came to meet him; two of them disarmed him, while the third led away his horse to be fed and stabled; the fourth dressed the boy in a fresh and brand-new mantle of scarlet cloth. Then they led him to the lodges; and he could have searched as far as Limoges without finding any so fine.

The boy stayed there until two servants came to escort him to their lord. He returned with them to the hall, which was square, being as long as it was wide. And in the middle of the hall he saw, sitting in a bed, a most handsome nobleman with greying hair; on his head he wore a hat of sable, dark as mulberry, covered in a deep rich cloth on top, and his whole gown was the same. He was leaning on his elbow, and before him was a huge fire of seasoned logs, blazing brightly, surrounded by four columns supporting a tall, wide chimney of heavy bronze. Four hundred men could easily have sat around that fire and each would have had an excellent place. The two servants who were escorting the boy, one at each shoulder, came before their lord, who greeted him at once, and said:

'Forgive me if I don't rise to meet you, for I'm unable.'

'Think no more about it, sir,' the boy replied. 'It doesn't bother me at all.'

But the worthy man made an effort and strained to be as upright as he could; then he said: 'Come here, my friend. Don't be afraid of me: sit down here beside me, you're quite safe.'

The boy did so, and the nobleman asked him: 'Where have you come from today, dear friend?'

'Sir,' he said, 'I rode this morning from Beaurepaire – that was its name.'

'Before God, you've travelled a very long way. You must have left before the watch blew the dawn signal.'

'No indeed,' said the boy. 'The first hour* had already been sounded, I promise you.'

While they were talking thus, a boy came through the door; he was carrying a sword hung round his neck, and presented it to the nobleman. He drew it half out of its scabbard, and saw clearly where it was made, for it was written on the blade. And he also learned from the writing that it was of such fine steel that there was only one way it could ever be broken, which no-one knew except the one who had forged and tempered it. The boy who had brought it to him said:

* The first canonical hour: six o'clock in the morning.

'Sir, that beautiful fair-haired girl, your niece, has sent you this gift; you never saw a finer sword as long and as broad as this. You may give it to whoever you like, but my lady wishes it to be put to good use where it's bestowed. The one who forged the sword has only ever made three, and he's not long to live, so this is the last he'll ever make.'

And straight away the lord girded his guest with the sword by its belt, which itself was worth a fortune. The sword's pommel was made of the finest gold of Arabia or Greece, and the scabbard was of golden thread from Venice.

'Good brother,' he said, 'this sword was intended and destined for you, and I very much want you to have it; come, draw it now.'

The boy thanked him, and fastened it so that it was not restricting, and then drew it, naked, from the scabbard; and after gazing at it for a while, he slid it back into the sheath. And truly, it sat splendidly at his side, and even better in his hand, and it seemed indeed that in time of need he would wield it like a man of valour. Behind him he saw some boys standing around the brightly burning fire; he noticed the one who was looking after his arms, and entrusted the sword to him. Then he sat down again beside the lord, who treated him with the greatest honour. And no house lit by candles could ever provide a brighter light than shone there in that hall.

While they were talking of one thing and another, a boy came from a chamber clutching a white lance by the middle of the shaft, and he passed between the fire and the two who were sitting on the bed. Everyone in the hall saw the white lance with its white head; and a drop of blood issued from the lance-head's tip, and right down to the boy's hand this red drop ran. The lord's guest gazed at this marvel, but restrained himself from asking how it came to be, because he remembered the advice of the nobleman who had made him a knight, who had taught him to beware of talking too much; he feared it would be considered base of him if he asked – so he did not. Then two other boys appeared, and in their hands they held candlesticks of the finest gold, inlaid with black enamel, and in each burned ten candles at the very least. A girl who came in with the boys, fair and comely and beautifully attired, was holding a vessel between her hands. And when she entered holding this vessel, so brilliant a light appeared that the candles lost their brightness like the stars or the moon when the sun rises. The vessel was made of fine, pure gold; and in it were set jewels of many kinds, the richest and most precious stones in the earth or the sea. Another girl followed, holding a silver trencher. The procession passed before the bed and disappeared into another chamber. The boy saw them pass, but did not dare to ask who was served from the vessel, for he had taken the words of the wise nobleman to heart. I fear he may suffer for doing so, for I've heard it said that in time of need a man can talk too little as well as too much. I don't know whether it will bring him good or ill, but he asked nothing.

The lord commanded boys to bring them water and to lay the cloths. They did as they were bidden, and the lord and the new knight washed their hands in warm water. Two boys brought in a wide table of ivory, and held it in front

of their lord until two others came bringing trestles of ebony. Then the cloth was laid, and no cardinal or pope ever dined at one so white. The first dish was a haunch of venison, seasoned with hot pepper. There was no shortage of clear, delicious wine to drink, from golden cups. Before them a boy carved the peppered venison, drawing the haunch to him with the silver trencher, and presented pieces to them on a slice of perfectly baked bread. And meanwhile the vessel passed before them again, but the boy did not ask who was served from it: he refrained because of the nobleman's well-meaning warning not to talk too much – he had taken it to heart and had it constantly in mind. But he held his tongue more than he should have done, for as each dish was served he saw the vessel pass before him, right before his eyes, and he did not know who was served from it and he longed to know. He said to himself that before he left he would certainly ask one of the boys of the court, but would wait until the morning when he took his leave of the lord and the rest of the household. And so he put it off till a later time, and concentrated on eating and drinking.

They did not stint with the wines and food, which were delicious indeed: the worthy man and the boy were served that night with all the dishes befitting a king or a count or an emperor. And after they had dined they stayed together and talked, while the boys prepared the beds and provided fruit to eat – and there were fruits of the dearest kind: dates and figs and pomegranates. Then there were many different drinks to taste: sweet, aromatic wine, made with neither honey nor pepper, and old mulberry wine and clear syrup. The boy, who had never tasted the like, was filled with wonder. Then the nobleman said:

'Good friend, it's time to take to our beds for the night. I'll go now, if you don't mind, and sleep in my chamber, and whenever you wish you can go to sleep in here. I've no strength in my body: I shall have to be carried.'

Then four strong and hearty servants came from the chamber, and taking hold of the four corners of the blanket that was spread across the bed beneath him, they carried their lord where he directed. Other boys stayed with his guest and served him and fulfilled his every need: when he wished they took off his shoes and clothes and put him to bed in sheets of fine white linen.

He slept until the morning when day had broken and the household had risen; but he could see no-one as he looked about him, and he had to get up alone whether he liked it or not. He did the best he could, and put on his shoes without waiting for help; then he went to don his arms again, finding that they had been brought and left at the head of a table. When he had fully armed he headed for the doors of the chambers which he had seen open the night before; but he found them shut tight. He called and beat and barged a good deal, but no-one opened up for him or uttered a single word. After calling in vain for quite a while he turned back to the door of the hall. This was open, and he went down the steps to find his horse saddled and his lance and shield leaning against a wall. He mounted and went looking everywhere, but could not see a living

soul. So he came straight to the gate and found the drawbridge lowered: he thought the boys must all have gone into the woods to check their traps and snares. He had no wish to stay longer, and decided to go after them to see if anyone would tell him why the lance bled – if perhaps there were something wrong – and where the beautiful vessel was being taken. And so he rode out through the gate; but before he had got across the bridge, he felt his horse's hooves rise high into the air. The horse made a great leap; and if he had not jumped so well both horse and rider would have been in a sorry plight. The boy looked back to see what had happened, and saw that the bridge had been raised. He called out, but no-one replied.

'Hey!' he cried. 'Whoever raised the bridge, talk to me! Where are you? I can't see you. Come out and let me look at you: there's something I want to ask.'

But he was wasting his time calling out like this, for nobody would answer him.

* * *

He headed towards the forest, and came upon a path where he found fresh hoofprints.

'I think,' he said, 'the ones I'm looking for went this way.'

So he went galloping through the wood as far as the tracks led him, until he chanced to see a girl beneath an oak tree weeping and lamenting, filled with sorrow and misery.

'Alas!' she cried. 'How unfortunate I am! Cursed be the hour I was born! Oh, would to God my love had lived and I had died! With him gone I care nothing for my life. Come, Death, and take my soul! Let it be the chambermaid and companion of his, if he'll accept it.'

Such was the girl's lament for a knight she was cradling in her lap: he had been beheaded. As soon as he saw her the boy rode towards her and said: 'Young lady, who killed this knight?'

'Good sir,' she replied, 'another knight killed him, this very morning. But there's something that amazes me: you could ride forty leagues the way you've come and you wouldn't find any decent lodging, yet your horse is well fed and his coat smooth. If he'd been washed and groomed and given a manger of oats and hay he wouldn't have had a fuller belly or a sleeker coat. And you seem yourself to have had a comfortable and restful night.'

'Truly,' he said, 'I had every possible comfort. But if you shouted loudly from here it would be heard quite clearly where I lodged last night! You can't have explored this country much, for without a doubt I had the finest lodging I've ever known.'

'Oh, sir! Then you lodged at the house of the rich Fisher King!'

'I don't know if he's a fisher or a king, but he's very wise and courteous. I came across two men in a boat late yesterday, sailing gently along. One of them

was rowing, the other was fishing with a hook, and he told me the way to his house last night, and gave me lodging there.'

And the girl said: 'Good sir, he *is* a king, I can assure you. But he was crippled years ago by a wound in the thighs, so that he's helpless now; he can't even mount a horse. But when he wants to engage in some sport he has himself carried to a boat and goes fishing with a hook, and is known as the Fisher King. He finds his enjoyment that way because he couldn't manage any other sport: he can't hunt in the woods or along the riverbanks and marshes. But he has men to hunt the wildfowl, and archers who go shooting with their bows in the forests. That's why he likes to live in this house just here; for in all the world he could find no retreat so suited to his needs, and he's had a house built befitting a rich king.'

'It's true what you say, young lady, and I wondered at it when I came into his presence last night. I stood a little way from him, and he told me to come and sit beside him, and not to take it for haughtiness if he didn't rise to greet me, for he didn't have the strength or power; so I went and sat at his side.'

'Truly, he did you a great honour when he seated you beside him. And tell me now: as you sat there, did you see the lance which bleeds from its tip, though it has neither flesh nor veins?'

'Did I see it? Yes, in faith!'

'And did you ask why it bled?'

'So help me God, I didn't say a word.'

'Then I tell you,' she said, 'you've done great wrong. And did you see the Grail?'

'The Grail?'

'The beautiful, bejewelled vessel.'

'I saw it clearly.'

'Who was holding it?'

'A girl.'

'Where did she come from?'

'From a chamber.'

'And where did she go?'

'Into another chamber.'

'Did anyone go ahead of the Grail?'

'Yes.'

'Who?'

'Two boys, that's all.'

'What were they holding?'

'Candlesticks full of candles.'

'And who came after the Grail?'

'Another girl.'

'What was she holding?'

'A small silver trencher.'

'Did you ask where they were going?'

'Not a word crossed my lips.'

'God help me, so much the worse. What's your name, friend?'

And the boy, who did not know his name, guessed and said it was Perceval the Welshman, not knowing if it were true or not. But it was true, though he did not know it. And when the girl heard this she stood up before him and said, distressed:

'Your name is changed, friend.'

'To what?'

'Perceval the wretched! Oh, luckless Perceval! How unfortunate you are to have failed to ask all this! You would have healed the good king who is crippled, and he would have regained the use of his limbs and the rule of his land – and you would have profited greatly! But know this now: many ills will befall both you and others. And know this, too: this has come upon you because of the sin against your mother, for she has died of grief on your account. I know you better than you know me; you don't know who I am, but I was brought up with you for a long time at your mother's house: I'm your cousin and you are mine. And I grieve no less for your misfortune in not learning what was done with the Grail or where it's taken, than I do for your mother who has died – and for this knight whom I adored.'

'Oh, cousin!' cried Perceval. 'If what you've told me is true, tell me how you know.'

'I know it to be true,' said the girl, 'for I saw her laid in the earth.'

'God have mercy on her soul,' said Perceval. 'It's a cruel tale you've told me. And now that she's been buried, what would be the use of going on? I was on my way to see her; I'll have to take a different course. If you wanted to come with me I'd be very glad, for the one who lies here dead will be of no service to you now. The dead with the dead, the living with the living; let's go together. It seems foolish to stay here on your own watching over this body: let's follow the one who killed him. And I swear this: we'll fight to the bitter end if I can track him down.'

But his cousin, unable to suppress the grief in her heart, replied: 'I won't leave him at any price until I've buried him. If you'll take my advice you'll follow the road down here, for the wicked knight who killed my sweetheart went this way. Not that I want you to pursue him – though I wish him as much ill as if it were *me* he'd killed. But listen: where did you get that sword that hangs at your side? It's never spilled a man's blood and has never had occasion to be drawn. I know very well where it was made, and I know very well who forged it. Beware! Don't ever put your trust in it! It'll betray you, I promise you, when you find yourself in a great battle, for it'll fly into pieces.'

'Dear cousin, it was sent to my host last night by a niece of his, and he gave it to me, and I consider it a fine present. But you alarm me if what you've said is true. Tell me: if it came to be broken, do you know if it could be repaired?'

'It could, but there'd be great hardship for whoever took the road to the lake

below Cothoatre. There you could have the sword tempered anew and made whole once more, if adventure* led you there. You must go to a smith named Triboet, and to him alone, for he made it and will remake it; it will never be repaired by any other man who tries.'

'Truly,' said Perceval, 'it would grieve me deeply if it broke.'

And with that he set off, and his cousin stayed behind, not wanting to leave the body of the one whose death weighed so heavily on her heart.

* * *

On Perceval rode, following the horse's tracks, until he came upon a palfrey, thin and weary, plodding along before him. The palfrey was so skinny and wretched that he thought he must have fallen into bad hands. He seemed to have been well worked and ill fed – like a borrowed horse: overtaxed all day and neglected at night. He shivered as if frozen stiff, his neck was mangy and his ears drooped. He would soon be fodder for mastiffs and mongrels, for his hide was all that covered his bones. On his head was a bridle and on his back was a saddle, and in the saddle was a girl – and one more wretched was never seen. She would have been comely enough if she had been well cared for, but she was in such a sorry state that there was not a hand's breadth of her gown untorn: her breasts showed through the rips. It was held together here and there with knots and coarse stitches; and her flesh looked as if it had been slashed with a lancet, it was so beaten and burned by heat and gale and frost. She was bare-headed, without veil or wimple, so her face was clearly visible, with many an ugly stain left in the paths of her endless tears, which flowed down to her breast and over her robe and right down to her knees. Well might she have had a heavy heart, being in such distress.

As soon as Perceval saw her he rode swiftly to meet her. She clasped her clothes around her to cover up her skin, but she was bound to open other gaps: whenever she covered one spot she closed one hole and opened a hundred. Thus Perceval found her, pale and wan and wretched, and as he approached he heard her complaining bitterly of her suffering and misery.

'God,' she cried, 'let me live no longer! I've lived in misery too long and suffered too much misfortune, and through no fault of my own. Dear God, you know very well that I've done nothing to deserve it, so send me, I beg you, someone who'll free me from this torment; or deliver me from the one who makes me suffer this shame, for I can find no mercy in him. I don't know why

* In medieval French the word 'aventure' meant a great deal more than its modern equivalent. It could mean 'chance' or 'phenomenon' or perhaps 'fortune', and was frequently, and importantly, a sign of God's intervention in the world – or of His favour. A knight would not even encounter an 'aventure' (let alone succeed in whatever test it might present) if he were unworthy of doing so, or unable to recognise it as a sign of God's presence and guidance.

he wants my company when he keeps me like this, unless he relishes my shame and misery.'

'God save you, fair lady,' said Perceval, who was now beside her.

The girl bowed, and answered softly: 'May you, sir, have all that your heart desires – but I shouldn't be wishing you that.'

And Perceval, blushing with shame, replied: 'In God's name, lady, why not? Truly, I don't think I've ever seen you before or done you any wrong.'

'Yes, you have!' she cried. 'For I mustn't be greeted by anyone! That's the torment I have to bear, wretch that I am. I sweat with anguish whenever anyone addresses me or even looks at me.'

'I wasn't aware of my misdeed,' said Perceval. 'I certainly didn't come here to do you shame or wrong: my path just led me here. And once I'd seen you in such a plight, so poor and naked, I couldn't rest until I'd learned the truth: what adventure has brought you such sorrow and hardship?'

'Oh, sir!' she cried. 'Have pity on me! Ride on! Fly from here and leave me in peace!'

'I want to know,' he said, 'what fear or threat should make me fly, when nobody's pursuing me?'

'Sir,' she replied, 'fly as fast as you can, in case the Proud Knight of the Heath should see us talking! If he found you here he'd kill you on the spot. No-one who stops me can leave with his head – he killed one just a short while ago!'

And just as they were talking thus, the Proud Knight rode out of the wood and came like a thunderbolt across the sand and dust, crying at the top of his voice: 'Woe betide you! Your end has come for stopping that girl for a single pace!' And as he approached he drew rein and said: 'But I won't kill you until I've told you why I'm making her live in shame; so listen now, and you'll hear the tale. Just recently I'd gone into the wood and left this girl in my pavilion; and I loved no-one but her. But a Welsh boy chanced to come there. I don't know who he was, but he went so far as to kiss her – by force, so she told me. And if she lied, then what was to stop him doing more? And even if it was against her will, wouldn't he then have done all he wanted? Yes! No-one would believe he kissed her and did no more, for one thing always leads to the other. If a man kisses a woman and does no more when they're alone together, then I think it's *his* decision; for a woman who yields her lips gives the rest most easily to whoever makes the effort! And though she may defend herself, we all know that a woman wants to win in all things but one: that struggle in which she grabs the man by the throat and scratches and bites and wrestles, but wants to be beaten! She struggles, but she longs for it; too cowardly to grant it, she wants it to be taken by force, but then shows neither willingness nor thanks! That's why I think he lay with her. And he took from her a ring of mine and carried it off, much to my annoyance; and before that he drank and ate his fill of strong wine and good pies that were being kept for me. So now my love has a charming reward as you see! I vowed that her palfrey would have no oats to

eat and would not be groomed or shod again, and that she would have no coat or mantle but the ones that she was wearing then, until I found the one who'd violated her, and killed him and beheaded him.'

When Perceval had heard him out he answered exactly thus: 'Know this, friend, without a doubt: she's done her penance, for it was I who kissed her – and it was against her will, and grieved her deeply. And I took the ring from her finger, but that was all – I did nothing more; though I ate, I admit, one of the pies and half of the other, and drank as much wine as I pleased. But I did nothing stupid.'

'By my life!' cried the Proud Knight. 'What an incredible confession! You've deserved death, that's for sure!'

'My death's not as near as you think,' said Perceval.

Without another word they sent their horses charging at each other, and clashed with such fury that their lances flew into splinters. Both saddles were emptied as they brought each other down, but they leaped to their feet at once and unsheathed their swords and dealt each other mighty blows. Perceval struck him first with the sword he had been given, because he wanted to test it. And he dealt him so great a blow upon his steel helmet that he broke the Fisher King's good sword in two. The Proud Knight was not cowed; he repaid him well upon his decorated helmet, smashing off the flowers and gems that adorned it. Perceval was bitterly sad at heart that his sword had failed him; but he gathered up the pieces and put them back in the sheath; and in that very instant they vanished, sword and sheath together; Perceval was astounded, but he cast off his bewilderment and drew the sword that had belonged to the Red Knight. Then they came at each other on equal terms and began a bitter battle: you never saw one greater. The combat raged, hard and mighty, until the Proud Knight of the Heath admitted defeat and cried for mercy. And Perceval said:

'By my life, knight, I'll not have mercy on you until you have mercy on your love; for she hasn't deserved the punishment you've made her suffer, I can swear to that.'

And the knight, who loved her more than his own eyes, replied: 'Good sir, I'll make amends to her as you wish: I'll do whatever you command. My heart is sad and dark indeed for the suffering I've made her bear.'

'Then go,' said Perceval, 'to the nearest house you have in these parts, and let her bathe at leisure until she's healed and well. Then get ready and take her, properly dressed and attired, to King Arthur, and greet him on my behalf and yield yourself to his mercy. If he asks who sent you, tell him it was the one he made a red knight by the advice of Sir Kay the seneschal. And you must tell the court of the penance and suffering you've made your girl endure; tell it aloud to all those present, so that all the men and women hear it, and the queen and her maids, too – there are many lovely ones in her company. I hold one in special esteem, whom Kay, because she'd laughed at me, dealt such a blow that he knocked her out. Find her, I command you, and give her this message from

me: that I will never, on any account, enter any court King Arthur may hold until I've avenged her.'

And the knight replied that he would go there most willingly and say everything he had commanded, and without delay – except that he would first let his sweetheart rest, and clothe her as she needed. He would gladly have taken Perceval to rest as well, and to heal and dress his wounds, but Perceval said:

'Go now, and good luck to you; just take care of her – I'm going to look for other lodging.'

The talking ended there, and neither party dallied longer: they both set out without more ado. And that evening the knight had his love bathed and richly clothed, and he cared for her so lovingly that she was restored to her former beauty. Then they both set out and went straight to Carlion, where King Arthur was holding court – and a most intimate affair it was, with only three thousand knights of high repute! In the sight of them all he yielded himself a prisoner to King Arthur, saying:

'Lord king, I am your prisoner and will do whatever you wish: I was commanded to do so by the boy who asked you for red arms, and got them.'

As soon as the king heard this he knew exactly who he meant. 'Disarm, good sir,' he said. 'May the one who's sent you here have joy and good fortune. For his sake you'll be cherished and honoured in my house.'

'My lord, there's something else I wish to tell you before I disarm. And I'd like the queen and her maids to come and hear my news, for it'll be told only in the presence of the one who was struck on the cheek for no other crime than uttering a single laugh.'

Then the knight paused, and the king sent for the queen; she came, and all her maids with her, hand in hand. When the queen was seated beside her lord King Arthur, the Proud Knight of the Heath said to her:

'My lady, a knight I hold in great respect, who vanquished me with his skill in combat, sends you greetings. He also sends you my beloved – the girl you see here.'

'My thanks to him, friend,' said the queen.

Then he told her of all the baseness and shame he had inflicted upon her for so long, and the suffering she had endured, and the reason for it all: he told her everything, concealing nothing. When he had finished they showed him the girl whom Kay the seneschal had struck, and he said to her:

'The one who sent me here asked me to greet you on his behalf, and to tell you that he'll never enter any court King Arthur holds until he's avenged you for the blow you received on his account.'

When the court fool heard this he leaped to his feet and cried: 'Kay! Kay! God bless me, you'll pay for it, you really will, and soon!'

When the fool had finished, the king in turn said: 'Ah, Kay! How courteous you were to mock the boy! You've robbed me of him with your mockery; I don't think I'll ever see him again.'

Then the king seated his captive knight before him, and declared him free from imprisonment and bade that he be disarmed. And Sir Gawain, who was seated at the king's right hand, asked:

'In God's name, sire, who can that young man be who could defeat such a fine knight as this in single combat? In all the isles of the sea I've never heard of any knight who could equal the Proud Knight in arms and chivalry.'

'Dear nephew,' said the king, 'I don't know who he is. I saw him only once, and didn't have time to ask anything. He told me to make him a knight that instant, and I saw how fair and handsome he was, and said: "Gladly, brother, but dismount while they bring you golden arms". But he said he'd never dismount until he had red arms – those of the knight who'd stolen my golden cup! And Kay, insulting as ever, said to him: "Friend, the king grants you the arms – they're all yours – go and take them!" And the boy, not realising it was a joke, went after the knight and killed him with a javelin. I don't know how the quarrel began, except that the Red Knight of the Forest of Quinqueroi hit him with his lance most haughtily, and the boy struck him clean through the eye with his javelin and killed him, and took his arms. Since then his service to me has been so good that, by Saint David of Wales, I shan't lie in a chamber or hall for two nights in a row until I know if he's alive! I'm setting out to search for him – this instant!'

And once the king had made the vow, everyone knew there was nothing for it but to go. Sheets and blankets and pillows were packed, coffers filled, packhorses loaded and carts and wagons piled high, for they were not sparing with the number of tents and pavilions they took. If he had taken all day, a bright, well-lettered clerk could not have kept account of the baggage train, for the king rode from Carlion as if he were going on campaign, with all his barons following. Not even a girl remained behind: the queen took them all as a display of power and authority.

That night they camped in a meadow beside a forest, and in the morning they found that it had snowed heavily, and the country round about was freezing cold.

Perceval had risen early as usual, eager to find adventure and deeds of chivalry; and he came straight towards the frozen, snowy meadow where the king's army was encamped. But before he reached their pavilions, a flock of wild geese, dazzled by the snow, came flying overhead. He saw them and heard them as they fled, screeching, from a falcon that swooped after them like a flash, until it found one of them alone, cut off from the flock, and swept down and struck the bird so hard that it sent it plummeting to the ground; but it was very early in the morning, and the falcon flew off, not wanting to attack it. Perceval spurred on to where he had seen it fall. The goose was wounded in the neck, and it bled three drops of blood which spilled on to the whiteness of the snow: it looked like a natural colouring. The goose was not hurt badly enough to keep it grounded, and by the time Perceval arrived it had already flown away. When Perceval saw the crushed snow where the goose had lain,

and the blood spilled around it, he leaned on his lance to gaze at the vision; for the blood and snow together resembled for him the fresh hues in the face of his beloved Blancheflor, and he became quite lost in the thought that in her face the red was blended with the white like those three drops of blood in the whiteness of the snow. As Perceval mused upon the drops, enraptured, all the early morning passed him by.

At length some squires emerged from the tents and, seeing him in his contemplation, thought he was asleep. Before the king, still slumbering in his pavilion, was awake, the squires met Saigremor outside the royal tent, who because of his impetuosity was called the Rash.

'Come on!' he cried. 'Don't hide it from me: why have you come here in such a hurry?'

'Sir,' they said, 'we've seen a knight outside the camp, asleep upon his charger.'

'Is he armed?'

'Yes, in faith.'

'I'll go and speak to him,' said Saigremor, 'and bring him back to the court.' And he ran straight to the king's tent and woke him. 'Sire,' he said, 'out on the heath there's a knight sleeping.'

And the king commanded him to go and bring the knight back without fail. Saigremor called for his arms and his horse; his bidding was done at once, and he left the camp, fully armed, and rode on until he reached the knight.

'Sir,' he said, 'you must come to the king!'

The knight did not move, and seemed not to have heard him. He addressed him again, but he made no reply, and Saigremor was annoyed and said: 'By Saint Peter, you'll come whether you like it or not! I'm sorry I ever deigned to ask – I wasted my breath!'

Then he unfurled the pennon that was rolled around his lance, and the horse beneath him leaped forward; he called out to the knight once more, warning that he would strike him unless he defended himself. Perceval glanced up and saw him coming full tilt. He snapped out of his dreaming and spurred forward to meet him. Saigremor smashed his lance as they met, but Perceval's neither broke nor bent: he struck him with such force that he brought him crashing down in the middle of the field. His horse did not linger but fled away, head high, towards the camp; those who were rising saw the horse from their tents and were most distressed.

But Kay, who could never resist a cruel joke, said to the king: 'Look, sire, here's Saigremor! He's got the knight by the reins and is bringing him back against his will!'

'Kay,' said the king, 'it's bad of you to mock worthy men. Go yourself, and let's see you do better.'

'Truly,' said Kay, 'I'll be only too glad to go, and I'll bring him back by force, whether he likes it or not, and make him give his name.'

He had himself armed with great attention, and then mounted and set off

towards the knight, who was so intent upon gazing at the three drops that he was oblivious to everything else. Kay shouted to him from far away: 'Vassal! Vassal! Come to the king! You'll come right now, or pay most dearly!'

Perceval, hearing this threat, turned his horse's head about; and thrusting in his spurs of steel he came galloping at Kay – who was not riding slowly himself. Both were anxious to do well, and they clashed full-bloodedly. Kay struck with all his force, so hard that his lance smashed and crumbled like a pie-crust. Nor did Perceval hold himself back: he hit Kay smack upon the boss, and brought him crashing down upon a rock so that he dislocated his shoulder and broke his right arm between the elbow and the armpit like a dry twig – just as the fool had foretold: the fool's prediction had come true. Kay fainted with the pain, while his horse fled towards the camp at a gallop.

The Britons saw the horse return without the seneschal, and boys and knights and ladies set out and found him still unconscious, and felt sure that he was dead. They began to mourn for him bitterly. Meanwhile Perceval was leaning on his lance again over the three drops.

The king was most upset about his wounded seneschal, but he sent for a learned doctor and two girls who were pupils of his, and they put his shoulder back in place and bandaged his arm and joined the broken bone. Then they carried him to the king's tent and did all they could to comfort him.

Then Sir Gawain said to the king: 'Truly, sire, it isn't right – as you've always said yourself – that a knight should disturb another from his thoughts as Saigremor and Kay have done. The knight was thinking, perhaps, of some loss he's suffered, or maybe his love has been stolen from him and it's weighing on his mind. Let me go and see how he looks, and if I find that he's left his musing I'll ask him to come back here to you.'

Kay was enraged at this and said: 'Oh yes, Sir Gawain, you'll lead the knight back by the reins whether he likes it or not, of course you will – provided victory's handed to you on a plate! You've conquered many a knight like that! When the knight's worn out and has fought long enough, then the worthy Gawain asks leave to try his hand – and of course he goes and conquers him! Oh Gawain, you're no fool! There are plenty of tricks to learn from you! And you're good at spinning fair and courteous phrases, aren't you? You could do this job in a silk tunic! You won't need to draw a sword or break a lance. If you can just get your tongue round "Sir, God save you and give you joy and health", he'll do your will! You'll cosset and coax him like a cat, while everyone's saying "Now Sir Gawain's engaged in a mighty combat!"'

'Oh, Sir Kay,' said Gawain, 'there was no need to speak so unkindly. Why do you vent your rage on me? By my faith, I'll bring back the knight if I can. And I shan't have my arm injured for it or my shoulder dislocated – that's not my idea of a reward.'

'Go now, nephew,' said the king. 'You've spoken most courteously. Bring him back if you can – but take all your arms with you: you're not to go unarmed.'

Gawain, renowned and esteemed for all knightly virtues, armed at once and

mounted a strong, keen horse, and rode straight up to the knight who was leaning on his lance, still not tired of the musing that so enraptured him. But the sun had dried up two of the drops of blood that had lain upon the snow, and was fast drying the third, so he was not as absorbed in thought as he had been.

Sir Gawain cantered gently up to him, suggesting no hostility, and said: 'Sir, I'd have greeted you if I'd known your heart as well as my own. I'm a messenger of the king, who summons and requests you to come and speak to him.'

'There have already been two,' said Perceval, 'who tried to take my life and lead me off as a captive. I was musing so deeply upon a delightful thought that whoever tried to draw me from it was asking for trouble; for just in this spot there were three drops of fresh blood gleaming in the whiteness, and as I gazed at them I thought I saw the fresh colour of my fair love's face, and I didn't want to leave.'

'Truly,' said Sir Gawain, 'there was nothing base about that thought: it was most courteous and sweet; and the one who turned your heart from it was cruel and harsh. But tell me: what do you want to do now? I'd gladly take you to the king, if you don't object.'

'Tell me first, dear friend,' said Perceval, 'if Kay the seneschal's there.'

'Indeed he is. And I tell you, he was the one who jousted with you here just now – and the joust cost him dearly, for you've broken his right arm and dislocated his shoulder.'

'Then I think I've avenged the girl he struck!'

When Sir Gawain heard this he was startled and said: 'God save me, sir, it's you the king's been looking for! What's your name, sir?'

'Perceval, sir; and yours?'

'I was baptised with the name of Gawain.'

'Gawain?'

'Yes, good sir.'

Perceval was overjoyed and said: 'I've heard tell of you, sir, in many places, and longed to meet you: I hope it may please you as well.'

'Truly,' said Sir Gawain, 'it pleases me no less than you, but more, I think!'

And Perceval replied: 'Then I'll gladly go where you wish, and consider myself honoured to be your companion.'

With that they embraced each other, and began to unlace their helmets and the necks of their hauberks, opening their mail-hoods; then they made their way back, rejoicing in each other's company. Some boys watching from a hillock saw them returning, and came running down to the king.

'Sire! Sire!' they cried. 'Sir Gawain's bringing back the knight, and they seem pleased to see each other!'

All who heard the news rushed from their pavilions and went out to meet them.

And Kay said to the king: 'Now Sir Gawain, your nephew, has won esteem and honour! My word, it's been a hard and perilous battle! He's coming back

as hearty as he left: he hasn't had a blow from anyone, and no-one's felt a blow from him. He hasn't uttered a word of challenge! How right that he should be esteemed and praised, and that people should say he's done what we all failed to do, for all our might and effort!'

So, rightly or wrongly, Kay spoke his mind, as he always did.

Sir Gawain did not want to take his companion to court in his armour, so he had him disarmed in his tent, and a chamberlain took a robe from a coffer and presented it to Perceval. Once he was finely and handsomely dressed, in a tunic and mantle which suited him splendidly, they both came hand in hand to the king, who was sitting outside his pavilion.

'Sire,' said Sir Gawain to the king, 'I bring you the one you've been longing to meet, the one you've been out searching for; I present him to you – here he is.'

'Many thanks, dear nephew!' said the king. And overcome with joy, he leaped to his feet to greet him, saying: 'Welcome, sir! Now tell me, please, by what name I should call you.'

'Lord king,' he replied, 'my name is Perceval the Welshman.'

'Oh, Perceval, dear friend, now that you've come to my court I'd have you never leave it! I've been worried about you, for when first we met I didn't know what a great future God had in store for you. Yet it was clearly predicted by the girl and the fool whom Kay the seneschal struck; and you've verified their prediction in every way! No-one now can be in doubt that we've heard the truth about your chivalry.'

As he said this the queen arrived, having heard the news about the knight's arrival. As soon as Perceval saw her and was told that it was she, and saw the girl behind her who had laughed when he had looked at her, he stepped straight up to meet them and said:

'May God give joy and honour to the fairest and finest of all ladies living, as all who have seen her testify.'

And the queen replied: 'It's a great joy that you've been found, for you've proved yourself to be a knight of high prowess.'

Then Perceval greeted the girl who had laughed at him, and embraced her, saying: 'Dear girl, if ever you need me, I shan't fail to come to your aid.'

And she thanked him. The king, the queen and the barons gave the most joyful welcome to Perceval the Welshman, and led him back to Carlion, returning there that day. They celebrated all that night and all the day that followed.

And then, on the third day, they saw a girl coming on a tawny mule, clutching a whip in her right hand. And there was no creature so utterly ugly even in Hell. There is no iron as black as her neck and hands, but that was little compared to the rest of her ugliness: her hair hung in two tresses, black and twisted; her eyes were just two holes, tiny as a rat's; her nose was like a cat's or monkey's, her lips like an ass's or a cow's, and her teeth were the colour of egg-yolk. She had a beard like a billy-goat, a hump in the middle of her chest,

a curving spine and legs that bent like willow-wands. None such was ever seen at a royal court.

She greeted the king and all his knights together – except for Perceval. Seated on the tawny mule she said:

'Ah, Perceval! Fortune has fair tresses in front but is bald behind! A curse on anyone who wishes you well, for you didn't take Fortune by the hand when you met her! You entered the house of the Fisher King and saw the lance that bleeds, but it was so much trouble to you to open your mouth and speak that you never asked why that drop of blood sprang from the tip of the white head; nor did you ask what worthy man was served from the vessel that you saw, the Grail. How wretched is the man who sees the perfect opportunity and still waits for a better one! And you, you are wretched indeed: you saw that it was the time and place to speak and yet stayed silent; you had ample opportunity! It was an evil hour when you held your tongue, for if you had asked, the rich king who is so distressed would now have been healed of his wound and would have held his land in peace, which now he will never do. And do you know what will happen because that king will not now rule his land or be healed? Ladies will lose their husbands, lands will be laid waste, girls will be left in distress and orphaned, and many knights will die; all these evils will happen because of you!'

Then turning to the king she said: 'Don't be displeased if I leave now, for my lodging tonight will be far from here. I don't know if you've heard of the Proud Castle, but that's where I have to go tonight. In that castle there are 566 knights of worth; and I tell you, each of them has his sweetheart with him, a noble, fair and courtly lady. I'm telling you this because no-one who goes there can fail to find a joust or battle. Anyone eager for chivalrous deeds is sure to find them if he seeks them there. But if he wants to gain the whole world's esteem, I know where he could win it best, if he dared. On the peak of Montesclaire a girl lies besieged; whoever could raise the siege and free the girl would win the greatest honour and all possible praise; and the one to whom God granted such good fortune could safely gird on the Sword of the Strange Belt.'

With that the girl fell silent, having said all she wished, and set off without another word. And Sir Gawain leaped up and said he would go to Montesclaire and do all in his power to rescue the girl. And Gifflet the son of Do said that he would go, with God's aid, to the Proud Castle. All the knights pledged themselves to a host of great adventures: 'I,' said Kahendin, 'shall climb Mount Dolorous.'

But Perceval spoke quite differently: he said that as long as he lived he would not lodge in the same place for two nights together, nor hear word of any perilous passage but he would go and attempt it, nor hear of a knight greater than any other but he would go and do combat with him, until he knew who was served from the Grail and had found the bleeding lance and learned the certain truth about why it bled; he would never give up, whatever happened.

And so up to fifty of them rose, vowing to each other that they would go and seek out any wonder or adventure they might hear of, no matter in how terrible a land.

* * *

April and May passed by five times. Five years went by. And in that time Perceval lost his memory to such a degree that he no longer remembered God. In five years he failed to set foot in a church or worship God or His Cross. That's not to say that he stopped seeking deeds of chivalry: he went in search of strange, hard and terrible adventures, and encountered so many that he tested himself well. In five years he sent sixty worthy knights as prisoners to King Arthur's court. But for five years he lived without a thought for God.

It was at the end of these five years that he was riding across a wilderness, fully armed as always, when he met three knights and ten ladies, all in hair-shirts, bare-footed and with their heads hidden in their hoods. For the salvation of their souls they were doing penance on foot for the sins they had committed, and were astonished to see Perceval coming in armour, holding a lance and a shield. And one of the three knights stopped him and said:

'Dear friend, don't you believe in Jesus Christ, who laid down the New Law and gave it to the Christians? Truly, it's very wrong to carry arms on the day when Jesus died.'

And he who had no sense of day or hour or time, in such turmoil was his heart, replied: 'What day is it, then?'

'Don't you know, sir? It's Good Friday, the day when a man should worship the Cross and weep for his sins, for on this day the one who was sold for thirty pieces of silver was nailed to the Cross. He saw the sins with which the whole world was stained and bound, and became a man to save us from them. It's certain truth that He was both God and man, for the Virgin bore a son conceived by the Holy Spirit, so that the Deity was housed in the flesh of man. And those who will not believe that will never see Him face to face. And it was on this day that the son born of the Virgin Lady was nailed to the Cross and freed all His friends from Hell. It was a most holy death, which saved the living and brought the dead to life. All who believe in Him should be spending today in penitence. No man who believes in God should be carrying arms today, either in the field or on the road.'

'Where have you just come from now?' Perceval asked.

'From a worthy hermit who lives in this forest. He's such a holy man that he lives solely by the glory of God.'

'And why were you there? What did you ask? What were you looking for?'

'We asked him for guidance from our sins,' said one of the ladies. 'And we did the greatest thing any Christian can do who wants to come to God – we made confession.'

What Perceval had heard made him weep, and he longed to go and talk to the worthy man.

'I would very much like to go there,' he said, 'if you'd tell me the way.'

'Go straight along the way we've come, through the thick, dense wood, and look out for the branches that we knotted together as we came. We left such signs so that no-one going to the holy hermit should lose his way.'

With that they commended each other to God and no more questions were asked. Perceval set off along the path, sighing from the depths of his heart, for he felt he had wronged God and regretted it deeply. He rode on, weeping, right through the wood.

When he came to the hermitage he dismounted and disarmed and tethered his horse to an elm tree. Then he entered the hermit's cell. In a little chapel he found the hermit and a priest and a clerk beginning the highest and sweetest service that can be held in a holy church. Perceval went down on his knees as soon as he entered the chapel, and the good man, seeing him so humble and weeping, with tears streaming from his eyes to his chin, beckoned him to draw near. And Perceval bowed down before him and clung to the hermit's foot, and then, with hands clasped, begged him to give him guidance, for he had great need of it. The good man told him to make confession, for he would never have remission if he did not confess and repent.

'Sir,' said Perceval, 'fully five years ago I lost my bearings, and stopped loving God and believing in Him; and since then I've done nothing but ill.'

'Oh, good friend,' said the worthy man, 'tell me why you did this, and pray to God to have mercy on His sinner's soul.'

'Sir, I was once at the house of the Fisher King, and I saw the lance with the head that most certainly bleeds, but I asked nothing about the drop of blood I saw hanging from the tip of that white head. And truly, I've done nothing since then to make amends. Nor do I know who was served from the vessel I saw, the Grail, and I've suffered such grief ever since that I would gladly be dead; for I've forgotten God because of it, and not once since then have I asked Him for mercy – and I don't think I've done anything to earn it.'

'Oh, my dear friend,' said the worthy man, 'tell me your name.'

And he said: 'Perceval, sir.'

At that the hermit gave a sigh, for he recognised the name, and said: 'Friend, a sin of which you perhaps know nothing has done you great harm: it's the grief you caused your mother when you left her. She fell to the ground in a faint at the foot of the bridge outside the gate, and she died of that grief. I know this well, for she, your mother, was my sister. It was because of the sin you committed there that you came to ask nothing about the lance and the vessel, and many misfortunes have befallen you because of that. And I tell you this: you wouldn't have survived this long if she hadn't commended you to God. It was sin that stopped your tongue when you saw the lance-head with its ceaseless flow of blood, so that you didn't ask the reason; and folly seized you when you failed to learn who was served from that vessel, the Grail. The one who is served from

it, I believe, is the father of the rich Fisher King. And don't imagine he's given pike or lamprey or salmon; he's served with a single host* which is brought to him in the Grail. It comforts and sustains his life – the Grail is such a holy thing. And he, who is so spiritual that he needs no more in his life than the host that comes in the Grail, has lived there for twelve years without ever leaving the chamber which you saw the Grail enter. Now I want to direct you and give you penance for your sin.'

'I want that with all my heart, good uncle,' said Perceval. 'And since my mother was your sister, you ought to call me nephew and I should love you the more.'

'That's true, dear nephew, but listen now: if pity has taken hold of your soul, repent in all truthfulness, and go in the name of penitence to church each morning before anywhere else, and you'll benefit greatly: don't fail to do so on any account. If you're in a place where there's a minster, church or chapel, go there when you hear the bell ring, or sooner if you're awake. And if mass is begun there'll be even more profit in being there: stay there until the priest has said and sung it all. If you do this with a will, you may come to redeem yourself and win honour and a place in Paradise. Love God, believe in God, worship God; honour godly men and women; and if a girl or a widow or an orphan requests your help, grant it, and it'll be the better for you. I'd have you do this if you'd recover all your former virtues. Now tell me if you'll do so.'

'Yes, sir, most gladly.'

'Then stay here with me for a while, and in penitence eat such food as I eat.'

Perceval agreed to all of this, and the hermit whispered a prayer in his ear, repeating it to him until he had learnt it. Many of the names of Our Lord appeared in this prayer, including the greatest ones, which the tongue of man should never utter except in fear of death. And when he had taught him the prayer he forbade him ever to utter those names except in times of grave peril.

'I shan't, sir,' said Perceval.

And so he stayed there and heard the service, which delighted him. And after the service he worshipped the Cross and wept for his sins. That night he ate as the holy hermit pleased: beets, chervil, lettuce and cress and millet, and bread made of barley and oats, and water from a clear spring. And his horse had straw and a full trough of barley.

Thus Perceval came to recognise that God received death and was crucified on the Friday. And at Easter, most worthily, Perceval received communion.

The story leaves Perceval with his uncle for now, and before saying any more about him, it first recounts the adventures of Sir Gawain.

* Communion bread or wafer. The references to fish are less strange than they appear, for the word 'graal' is almost certainly derived from the Latin 'gradalis', a broad, shallow dish or platter.

Sir Gawain's Quest Begins

KING ARTHUR HAD HAD LETTERS SEALED and sent to every land summoning lords and knights to attend a court at Pennevoiseuse by the Welsh sea at the feast of Saint John. The knights of the Round Table, who were scattered throughout the lands and forests, heard the news and were filled with joy, and returned to the court with all speed. Sir Gawain and Lancelot did not come on the day decreed, but the other knights of the court made their arrival, every one.

Saint John's Day came. The weather was fine and clear and the hall was high and wide and filled with a great throng of knights. Cloths were laid on the tables, of which there were many in the hall, and when the king and queen had washed and were seated at the head of one table, all the knights sat down – and there were at least five hundred present. Kay the seneschal and Sir Yvain, son of King Urien, were serving at the table that day along with twenty-five knights, and Lucan the butler served the king with his cup of gold. The sun streamed in through the windows all around the hall, and the floor was strewn with rushes and flowers and wild mint, filling the air with a heady fragrance.

The first course had been served and everyone was waiting for the second when three maidens suddenly entered the hall. The first was riding a mule, whiter than snow, with a head-piece of gold and an ivory saddle inlaid with precious stones, and a saddle-cloth of red samite traced with gold. The maiden had a most comely body, and she was clad in a rich silken gown, with a fine head-dress flowing all around her head, laden with jewels that blazed like fires. And it was well that her head was covered thus, for she was quite bald. Her right arm was hung in a sling embroidered with gold, and rested on the richest cushion ever seen, set about with little golden bells. And in her hands she held the head of a king, sealed with silver and crowned with gold.

The second maiden, more beautiful still, was mounted on a horse such as a squire might ride, and from her neck a shield hung: pure white it was, with a red cross, and in it was fixed a piece of the True Cross on which Christ was crucified.

The third maiden came in on foot. She was about the height of a boy and wore a short skirt, and carried a whip in her hand with which she drove the two mounts. She was the most beautiful of all.

The first maiden rode up to the king and queen where they were seated at the table, and said: 'Sire, may the Saviour of the world grant honour and joy to you and the queen and all those present; and don't take offence if I remain mounted, for I cannot dismount in the company of knights, nor must I, until the Grail is won.'

'Damsel,' said the king, 'nothing would please me more than that.'

'I know that, sire; and I've a request to make.'

'Speak your will.'

'Sire,' she said, 'the shield this maiden bears belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, the good soldier who took Our Lord from the Cross, and I now present it to you, on these conditions: that you keep the shield for a knight who'll come to collect it, and that you hang it on that pillar in the middle of the hall and keep it there; for none but he must take it down or hang it from his neck. With this shield he will win the Grail, and he'll leave another shield here, a red shield emblazoned with a white stag.'

'Damsel,' said the king, 'the shield we will gladly keep, and I thank you deeply for bringing it here.'

'Sire,' she said, 'I've more to say. I bring you greetings from the greatest, most loyal and upright king on earth – the Fisher King, who is to be pitied indeed, for he has fallen into a grievous weakness.'

'That is a great shame, damsel,' said the king, 'and may God grant him what his heart desires.'

'But sire, do you know why this weakness has beset him? It's because of a knight he lodged at his castle, to whom the Grail appeared. Because the knight failed to ask who was served from it, all lands were engulfed by war; whenever a knight met another in a forest or glade they would do battle without any real cause. And I have my own grievance, sire, against the knight, and I'll show you why.'

And so saying she took off her rich head-dress and showed the king, the queen and all the assembly her bald, quite hairless head.

'Sire,' she said, 'I had a beautiful head of hair, all braided into golden tresses, until the knight came to the house of the Fisher King; because he failed to ask the question I'm now bald, and my hair will not return until a knight goes and asks the question properly, or goes and wins the Grail. But sire, you've not yet seen the full harm this has wrought. Outside this hall is a cart pulled by three white stags. I tell you, the harness is of silk and gold, and all the timber is ebony. It's draped in black samite, with a gold cross on top as long as the cart itself. And on the cart beneath the drape are the heads of 150 knights, some sealed in gold, some in silver and others in lead. And the rich Fisher King wants you to know that this calamity is all the fault of the knight who failed to ask who was served from the Grail. Sire, the maiden with the shield is holding in her hand the head of a queen, sealed in lead and crowned with copper, and by her were betrayed the king whose head I am carrying and the knights whose heads are in the cart outside. Send someone, my lord, to witness the richness and finery of the cart.'

So the king sent Kay the seneschal, who looked all over, inside and out, and returned to the king and said: 'Sire, I've never seen such a handsome cart. And the three white stags that pull it are the sleekest you ever beheld. But if you'll take my advice, you'll take the one at the front; he's the best of the lot, and would make fine venison!'

'Kay!' cried the king. 'You've spoken basely! I wouldn't do such a thing for all the kingdom of Logres!'

'Sire,' said the maiden, 'Sir Kay may speak his mind, but I know you'll take no heed of what he says. Command that the shield be hung on that pillar. We'll leave you now, for we've stayed long enough.'

At the king's command Sir Yvain took the shield from the maiden's neck and hung it on the pillar in the middle of the hall. Then the maidens took their leave of the king and turned away, and the king commended them to God.

When the banquet in the hall was over, the king and the queen and all the knights went to the windows to see the three maidens and the cart with the three stags. The bald maiden was riding in front, and did not don her head-dress again until she had entered the forest and the knights watching from the windows could no longer see her: only then did she cover her head once more. When the maidens were lost to view the king and the knights came down from the windows, and most said that she was the first bald maiden they had ever seen.

* * *

Now the story leaves King Arthur and tells of the three maidens and the cart pulled by the three stags. They made their way into the forest and rode hard until, with the castle seven leagues behind them, they saw a knight coming along their path. He was riding a big horse, but it was all skin and bone; his hauberk was turned to rust, his shield was holed in more than seven places, and its colour was so faded as to be indiscernible; and he had a great lance in his hand. As he came up to the first maiden he greeted her most nobly, saying:

'Damsel, may God guide you and your company!'

'Sir,' she said, 'may God give you joy and good fortune.'

'Where have you ridden from today?' he asked.

'From a great court, sir, held by King Arthur at Pennevoiseuse. Are you going there?'

'No,' he said, 'but I've been there many times.'

'Where are you headed, then?' she asked.

'To the land of the Fisher King, if it please God.'

'Tell me your name, sir, and tarry awhile with me.'

The knight drew rein and the maidens and the cart halted.

'Damsel,' he said. 'It's only right that you should know my name. I'm the nephew of King Arthur, and my name is Gawain.'

'By my life!' she cried. 'Sir Gawain? But in truth, my heart told me so. And

God be praised, so fine a knight as you should indeed go and see the rich Fisher King. And now I entreat you, by the valour that is in you and for the sake of all that's noble, to return with me and guide me past a castle which stands in this forest, for it's a perilous place.'

'As you wish,' said Sir Gawain.

So he turned back and rode with the maiden through the forest, which was high indeed and thick with leaves and little frequented by people. The maiden recounted the story of the heads they were carrying in the cart, just as she had done at King Arthur's court, and also of the shield that they had left there. But Sir Gawain was more concerned about the maiden who was following behind them on foot.

'Lady,' he said, 'why does the maiden walking behind us not ride on the cart?'

'That she will not, sir. Henceforth she must travel only on foot. But if you're as fine a knight as they say, her penance will soon be done.'

'How so?' asked Sir Gawain.

'I'll tell you,' she said. 'If God should lead you to the castle of the Fisher King and the Holy Grail appears to you, and you ask who is served from it, her penance will be done, and I who am bald shall have tresses once more. But if you fail to do so, we shall have to suffer our afflictions until such time as the Good Knight wins the Grail. For because of the knight who went there first and failed to ask the question, all lands have fallen into misery and war, and the good Fisher King is languishing.'

'Damsel,' said Sir Gawain, 'may God give me the courage and the will to do what will find favour in His eyes and win the world's praise.'

Sir Gawain and the maidens journeyed on and passed through the high forest, green with leaves and filled with birdsong, and entered the most terrible and forbidding forest that ever a man beheld. It seemed it had never been blessed with green: all the branches were bare of leaves and shrivelled, the trees were black as though burnt by fire, and the ground was charred, devoid of grass and full of great crevices.

'Damsel,' said Sir Gawain, 'this forest is grim indeed. Does it go on like this for a long way?'

'A good ten leagues, sir, but you'll not have to suffer them all.'

From time to time Sir Gawain looked back at the maiden walking behind, and worried about how he could help her. They rode on until they came to a great valley. Sir Gawain looked down a wide defile, and there before him was a black castle enclosed by a great ring of wall, forbidding and ghastly; and the nearer he came to the castle the more hideous it seemed. He could see great halls looming, of foul aspect; and a river tumbled from the peak of a lowering black mountain and surged through the castle with such a terrible roar that it sounded like bolts of thunder. Sir Gawain saw the gateway, as ugly as the mouth of Hell, and from within came a great wailing and weeping, with many people crying:

'God! What has become of the Good Knight? When will he come?'

'Damsel,' said Sir Gawain, 'what castle is this, so ugly and foul? There seems to be great suffering here, and people are crying for a good knight to come.'

'It's the castle of the Black Hermit. And no matter what the ones within may do to me, I beg you not to intervene, for you might very well die: you'd have no strength or power against them.'

They rode to within two bowshots of the castle; then through the gates they saw knights on black horses pouring forth, armed all in black. There were 152 of them, and they were hideous to behold. They galloped up to the maidens and the cart, and each took one of the 152 heads, spiking them on the ends of their lances; then they rode back into the castle rejoicing. Sir Gawain had seen what the knights had done, and felt deeply ashamed for not intervening.

'Sir Gawain,' said the maiden, 'now you can see that your strength would be worth little here!'

'Damsel,' he said, 'this is a wicked castle if they rob people so.'

'But there'll be no amends for this outrage, sir, nor will the evil-doers be overcome, nor will those who wail and weep be released from their imprisonment, until the coming of the Good Knight for whom you heard them crying.'

'Damsel,' said Sir Gawain, 'that knight should be happy indeed if he has the valour and strength to overcome such a wicked people.'

'That knight, sir, is the finest in the world and is still quite young. And my heart grieves that I've no news of him, for I'd rather see him than any man alive.'

'So would I, damsel,' said Sir Gawain. 'But may I turn back now, by your leave?'

'No, sir, not until we're past the castle. Then I'll show you the path you should take.'

With that they all moved off together. Just as they were about to leave the castle walls behind, a knight suddenly rode out from a hidden postern, mounted on a great horse and fully armed, lance in hand, and from his neck hung a red shield emblazoned with a golden eagle.

'Sir knight!' he cried to Gawain. 'Stop there, I pray you.'

'What do you want, good sir?' Gawain said.

'You must joust with me,' he cried, 'and try to win this shield; it's a splendid shield, and you should be at great pains to win it, for it belonged to the greatest knight there ever was of his religion, the strongest and the wisest.'

'And who was that?' asked Sir Gawain.

'Judas Machabeus, the creator of falconry.'

'Truly,' said Gawain, 'he was a good knight.'

'So you should be glad indeed,' said the knight, 'if you won this shield, for your own is the most pitiful and battered I've ever seen; I can hardly tell what colour it is!'

'Then you can plainly see,' said the Maiden of the Cart, 'that the knight and his shield have not been idle; and his horse is not as well rested as yours, sir.'

'Damsel,' said the knight, 'there's no need for all this talking. He must fight with me to the death. I challenge him!'

And Sir Gawain said: 'I heard you.'

He drew back and prepared to charge. The knight did likewise, and they came at each other as fast as their horses could bear them, lances levelled. The knight struck Sir Gawain on his shield where he had little protection and rammed it a full yard through, breaking his lance in the thrust; and Sir Gawain struck him full in the chest with his lance and sent him tumbling over his horse's rear and crashing to the ground, impaled on the lance with a full hand's breadth of steel in his breast. Gawain withdrew the lance, and when the knight found himself unpinned he climbed to his feet and came back to his horse. He was about to step into the stirrups when the Maiden of the Cart cried:

'Sir Gawain, take the knight now, for if he remounts you'll have great trouble beating him!'

When the knight heard Sir Gawain named he drew back. 'What?' he said. 'Is this the good Gawain, the nephew of King Arthur?'

'Yes indeed,' said the maiden.

'I admit defeat, sir, and it grieves me that I didn't know who you were before I began fighting you.' He took the shield from his neck and handed it to Gawain. 'Sir,' he said, 'take the shield that belonged to the good Machabeus, for I know of none on whom it could be better bestowed than you. With this shield were beaten all the knights who are held prisoner in this castle.' Sir Gawain took the shield, which was most handsome and rich, and then the knight said: 'Now give me yours, sir, for you'll surely not carry two?'

'You're right,' said Sir Gawain, and he lifted the shield-strap from his neck. But just as he was about to hand over the shield, the maiden on foot cried out:

'No! Sir Gawain, what are you doing? If he takes your shield back to the castle, all those within will think you've been beaten and will come out after you! They'll force you back inside and throw you into the terrible dungeon! For no man carries back a shield except from a vanquished knight.'

'Sir knight,' said Gawain, 'you seek to do me ill, if this maiden's words are true.'

'Have mercy on me, sir, I pray you,' said the knight. 'Once more I admit defeat. But I'd be very glad to take your shield back to the castle, for never will the shield of so fine a knight be seen there. And I'm delighted you've come, even though you've wounded me, for you've delivered me from the greatest hardship that ever a knight endured.'

'What hardship's that?' said Sir Gawain.

'I'll tell you, sir: many knights have passed this castle, both valiant and cowardly, and I've had to joust and do combat with them all, offering them the shield as a prize just as I did with you. I found most of them courageous and bold in defending themselves, and they wounded me in many places, but never did a knight strike me down or give me such a blow as you. And since you've

carried off the shield and beaten me, never again will any knight who passes this castle need to fear me or any of the knights within.'

'By my life,' said Sir Gawain, 'I prize my victory even more now!'

'Sir,' said the knight, 'I'll go now by your leave. I won't be able to hide my shame at the castle; I'll have to show it openly.'

'May God give you courage,' said Sir Gawain.

Then the Maiden of the Cart told Gawain to give her the shield which the knight had asked to carry off.

'Gladly, damsel,' he said, and the maiden on foot took the shield and placed it in the cart, while the vanquished knight remounted and rode back to the castle. When he was inside, so great a commotion and shouting arose that all the forest and valley resounded.

'Sir Gawain,' said the Maiden of the Cart, 'the knight is disgraced: he's being thrown into that dread prison. But hurry! Now we can go!'

And with that they all set off together and left the castle a league behind.

'Damsel,' said Sir Gawain, 'when it shall please you I'll take my leave.'

'May God keep you, sir, and I thank you deeply for escorting us.'

'Damsel,' he said, 'I shall always be at your service.'

'Many thanks, sir,' she said. 'There's your path, by that tall cross at the edge of the forest. There you'll find the most beautiful wood in the world, once you've passed through this one that's so grim.'

Sir Gawain turned away, and suddenly the maiden on foot cried out: 'Sir! Sir! You're not as alert as I thought!'

Sir Gawain, startled, turned his horse back. 'Why do you say that, damsel?'

'Because,' she said, 'you didn't ask my lady of the Cart why she carries her arm in that golden sling. Will you be as alert at the court of the Fisher King?'

'Oh sweet friend,' said the Maiden of the Cart, 'don't hold Gawain alone guilty, but King Arthur before him, and all the knights of his court, for none had the presence of mind to ask. Sir Gawain, go your way. It's no use asking the question now, for I won't tell you, and you'll never have the answer except from the most cowardly knight in the world, who's in my service and trying to find me – though without success.'

'Damsel,' said Sir Gawain, 'I shall press you no further.'

And with that the maiden took her leave, while Gawain rode off along the path she had shown him.

* * *

The story now leaves the three maidens and the cart and tells how Sir Gawain passed through the dismal forest and entered a beautiful, vast and lofty wood, full of wild creatures. He rode on at a good pace; but he was greatly disturbed by what the maiden had said, and feared he would be widely reproached.

He rode all day until evening fell and the sun was sinking. Then looking ahead he saw the cell of a hermit and its chapel deep in the forest. Before the

chapel leaped a spring, clear and swift, shaded by a wide-spreading tree. A maiden was seated beneath the tree, holding a mule by the reins, and from her saddle-bow hung the head of a knight. Sir Gawain rode up and dismounted.

'God keep you, damsel,' he said.

'And you, sir, all the days of your life.'

Then she rose to meet him, and he said: 'Damsel, what are you waiting for here?'

'For the hermit, sir, who's gone out into the woods. I want to ask him news of a knight.'

'Do you think he'll have the news you seek?'

'Yes, sir; so I've been told.'

Just then the hermit appeared and greeted the maiden and Sir Gawain. He opened the door of his cell and led their mounts inside, where he unbridled them and gave them hay and barley. He was just about to take off their saddles when Sir Gawain stepped forward and said: 'Leave that, sir; it's not a task for you.'

'I'm quite capable of it,' replied the hermit, 'for I was in King Uther's household as a squire and a knight for forty years; and now I've been a hermit here for more than thirty.'

Sir Gawain gazed at him in wonder. 'Sir,' he said, 'you don't look even forty years old!'

'I know,' said the hermit.

Sir Gawain saw to the unsaddling, taking more care of the maiden's mule than of his own horse, and then the hermit took Gawain and the maiden by the hand and led them to the chapel, which was a most beautiful place.

'Sir,' said the hermit to Sir Gawain, 'you mustn't lay aside your arms, for this forest is full of adventures, and no worthy man should be unarmed here.'

So he went and fetched his lance and shield and placed them inside the chapel. Then the hermit brought them such food as he had and water from the spring; and when they had eaten, the maiden said to the hermit:

'I've come here, sir, to ask you news of a knight I'm seeking.'

'And who is that?'

'A chaste knight of the most holy lineage. He has a head of gold, the gaze of a lion, a heart full of valour and a mind quite free of baseness.'

'Damsel,' said the hermit, 'I can tell you nothing, for I don't know for certain where he is. But he's slept in this chapel twice in less than a year.'

'Is that all you can tell me?'

'Yes, damsel.'

'And you, good sir?' she said to Gawain.

'Damsel,' he said, 'if he's the youth I think you mean, I'd be as glad to see him as you, but I've met no-one who had news of him.'

'And the Maiden of the Cart, sir, have you seen her?'

'Yes, indeed,' he said, 'and just a short while ago.'

'Did she still have her arm in a sling?'

'Yes,' said Sir Gawain.

'She'll carry it so for a long time,' said the maiden.

Then the hermit said: 'What's your name, sir?'

'Gawain, the nephew of King Arthur.'

'Then I love you the more,' said the hermit. 'God save King Arthur, for his father made me a knight. But now I'm a priest, and ever since I came to this hermitage I've served the Fisher King, by Our Lord's command. And all who serve him are well aware of his grace, for his holy house is so sweet that a year's stay seems no more than a month. And because of his holiness and the sweetness of his house, where I've many times held service in the chapel where the Grail appears, I, and all who serve him, retain the appearance of youth.'

'Sir,' said Sir Gawain, 'can you show me the way to his house?'

'No-one,' said the hermit, 'can show you the way; the will of God must lead you there. Do you wish to go?'

'There's nothing I desire more.'

'Then may God grant,' said the hermit, 'that you ask the question that the other knight to whom the Grail appeared failed to ask, for because of him many misfortunes have since befallen a great many people.'

With that they ceased their talking, and the hermit led Sir Gawain to his cell to rest, while the maiden stayed in the chapel.

As soon as dawn broke next day, Sir Gawain, who had slept all night fully armed, arose to find his horse and the maiden's mule saddled and bridled. He went to the chapel and saw the hermit dressed for mass and the maiden kneeling before the altar of Our Lady, praying to God and His mother for guidance and weeping most tenderly, the tears running down her cheeks.

When she had prayed for some time she rose, and Sir Gawain said to her: 'May God bless your day.'

And she returned his greeting.

'Damsel,' he said, 'you don't seem very happy.'

'I've no reason to be, sir, for I'm near to being disinherited since I can't find the Good Knight. Now I must go to the castle of the Black Hermit and take the head that hangs on my saddle-bow, for otherwise I'll not be able to pass through the forest without being taken captive or dishonoured, but this will buy me safe passage. Then I'll seek out the Maiden of the Cart and travel through the forest in safety.'

At that the hermit began mass. Sir Gawain and the maiden heard it, and when it had been sung Gawain took his leave of the hermit, and the maiden likewise. He rode off in one direction and the maiden in another, and they commended each other to God.

Sir Gawain passed into the high forest and rode swiftly on, praying to God to show him the path that would lead him to the land of the Fisher King. On he rode until midday when, deep in the forest, he saw a youth beneath a tree, sitting beside his hunting-horse.

Sir Gawain greeted him, and the youth called back: 'God guide you, sir.'

'Where are you headed, friend?' said Sir Gawain.

'I'm looking for the lord of this forest.'

'Why, to whom does the forest belong?'

'To the finest knight in the world, sir. Perhaps you've news of him: he should be bearing a red shield with a white stag. I say he's a good knight, but in faith I shouldn't praise him, for he killed my father in these woods with a javelin. He was just a boy when he killed him, and while I'm just a boy I'll avenge my father if I find the knight, for when he killed my father he robbed me of the greatest knight in the kingdom of Logres. And he robbed me well, killing him with a javelin without so much as a proper challenge! I'll never rest until I've avenged him.'

'Dear friend,' said Sir Gawain, 'since he's such a good knight, take care you don't bring misfortune upon yourself; I pray you may meet him on peaceful terms.'

'That can never be,' said the youth, 'for if I once catch sight of him I'll attack him as a mortal enemy.'

'Whatever you say, good friend,' said Sir Gawain. 'But can you tell me if there's a house in this forest where I could find lodging tonight?'

'I know of no house on your path within twenty leagues of here. So you mustn't delay, for it's long past noon.'

And so Sir Gawain bade the youth farewell and rode swiftly away. He knew none of the paths or tracks: he galloped on as chance took him, rejoicing at the beauty of the forest and the great herds of wild beasts that wandered across his path. He rode on until he came at twilight to the forest's edge. The dusk was soft and tranquil and the sun was about to set. He had ridden fully twenty leagues since leaving the boy, yet he feared he was going to find no lodging. Gawain now found himself in the most beautiful meadowland in the world, and after riding on a little way he looked ahead, and there before him appeared a castle, standing close to the forest upon a mountain. It was bounded by a great wall lined with battlements; rich, windowed halls peered out above them, and in the middle of the castle loomed an ancient tower. All around were great rivers, wide meadowlands and deep forest. Sir Gawain spurred on towards the castle, and just as he came in sight of the gate he saw a youth ride out towards him, mounted on a packhorse. As the boy approached he greeted Sir Gawain courteously, saying: 'God keep you, sir.'

'And bring you good fortune,' replied Gawain. 'Good friend, what castle is this?'

'The castle of the Widowed Lady, sir.'

'And what's it called?'

'Kamaalot, sir. It belonged to Alain li Gros, a most fair and noble knight, but he died a long time ago, and so, more lately, did his widow. And now the castle's at war, for the Lord of the Fens and another knight are trying to take it by force, and indeed, they've already seized seven of her castles. Only the widow's

daughter and five elderly knights are left to defend this castle, and they long for the return of the widow's son. Sir,' said the boy, 'the gate is shut and the drawbridge raised, for the castle is on the alert. But if you'll tell me your name, I'll ride ahead and have the bridge lowered and the gate unbarred, and tell them you'll lodge there tonight.'

'Many thanks,' said Sir Gawain. 'Truly, my name shall be known before I leave the castle.'

So the youth rode off at a gallop while Sir Gawain sauntered along behind, for he had had a long day's ride. Between the forest and the castle he came across a chapel, its roof supported by four marble columns, and inside was a beautiful tomb, which was wide open to view since the chapel had no walls. Sir Gawain stopped to take a look. Meanwhile the boy rode into the castle and had the drawbridge lowered and the gate opened. Then he dismounted and ran to the hall where the Widowed Lady's daughter was sitting. She said to the boy:

'Why have you turned back from delivering my message?'

'Lady, I've just met the finest knight I've ever seen! He wishes to lodge here tonight; he's fully armed and riding alone.'

'Well, what's his name?' she asked.

'He told me that we'd know his name before he left the castle.'

At that she began to weep for joy, and raising her hands to heaven she cried: 'Dear Lord God, never will I have known such joy if this is my brother: I would not then lose my honour or my castle, which they're wrongfully trying to take from me because I've no lord or defender.'

Then the Widow's daughter rose and walked out across the drawbridge, and there she saw Sir Gawain still gazing at the tomb in the chapel.

'Ah!' she said. 'The tomb will tell us if it's really he!'

She hurried on to the chapel, and when Sir Gawain saw her coming he dismounted.

'Good day, young lady,' he said.

She made no reply and came straight up to the tomb; but when she saw that it was not open she collapsed in a swoon, much to Sir Gawain's dismay. As she recovered from her faint she began to cry out in grief; but at last she said: 'Sir, I bid you welcome. But I thought you were my brother and was overjoyed, and now I see you're not I can't help but grieve. For the tomb is to open as soon as he returns, and until then no-one will know what lies within.'

She rose to her feet and took Sir Gawain by the hand and said: 'What's your name, good sir?'

'Gawain, damsel, the nephew of King Arthur.'

'I bid you welcome, sir, out of love for my brother and you.'

Then she bade the boy take Sir Gawain's horse into the castle, while she led him up to the hall, where his arms were laid aside and water was brought for him to wash his face and hands, for he had been bruised and chafed by his hauberk. Then she robed him in a rich gown of silk and gold, lined with ermine, and seated him beside her.

'Sir,' she said, 'have you any news of my brother? I haven't seen him for a long time and I've great need of him. His name is Perceval.'

'Perceval? I'm sorry, damsel, I can tell you nothing at all. But there's no knight in the world I'd rather see.'

'He was a fair youth indeed, sir, when he left here. And I've since heard he's the fairest knight alive, and the boldest. His bravery now would serve me well, for he left me embroiled in war when he departed. That was a good seven years ago, but I've never seen him since. He killed the Red Knight of the Forest of Quinqueroi, and now that knight's brother and the Lord of the Fens are waging war upon me and trying to seize my castle, so I pray that God will help me, for most of my uncles are dead. King Pelles is not, but he's given up his lands for God and retired to a hermitage. And another of my uncles, the King of Castle Mortal, would give me no support or aid, for he has as much evil in his heart as King Pelles has goodness, which is a great deal; he has designs on the lands of my grandfather the Fisher King, and on the Holy Grail and the lance with the head that bleeds each day; but if it please God they'll never be his.'

Sir Gawain was astonished to hear of the Welsh boy's family, and wondered how much his sister knew. 'Damsel,' he said gently, 'at the house of the Fisher King there was once a knight to whom the Grail appeared three times, but he failed to ask what was done with it or who was served from it.'

'True, sir,' said Perceval's sister. 'Yet they say he was the finest knight in the world. I would curse him indeed, but out of love for my brother I love all knights. Yet because of that knight's folly, my grandfather the Fisher King is now languishing. Sir,' she said, 'all good knights should go and see the house of the rich Fisher King. Will you go?'

'Oh yes, damsel, and as soon as may be. I had no other goal in mind.'

'Then sir,' she said, 'tell my brother and my grandfather the Fisher King of my plight, if you see them. But make sure, Sir Gawain, that you're more alert than the other knight.'

Sir Gawain could not bear to tell her what he knew of her brother Perceval, and said no more than: 'Damsel, I shall do as God guides me.'

While they were talking thus the five elderly knights who guarded the castle came riding back from the forest bearing stags and hinds and boars. They dismounted, and greeted Sir Gawain with joy when they knew that it was he.

When the food was ready they all sat down to dine and were served most graciously. Just then in came the boy who had opened the gate for Sir Gawain. He knelt before the Widow's daughter and said he had delivered her message.

'And what news?' she said.

'My lady, there's to be a great tournament in the vales which once belonged to you: the pavilions are already set. Both your enemies are there, with a great host of other knights, and they've declared that the one who wins the prize at the tournament will become guardian of this castle and hold it against all comers for a year.'

The Widow's daughter began to weep, and said to Sir Gawain: 'Now you know, sir: this castle is no longer mine; those knights have laid claim to it.'

'Truly, my lady, they're wicked and sinful men.'

When the tables had been cleared away the Widow's daughter came to Sir Gawain and fell at his feet, weeping. He raised her up at once, saying: 'Come, damsel; no tears, I pray you.'

'Sir,' she said, 'for God's sake, have pity on me.'

'I have, damsel, by my life.'

'Then our plight will reveal whether you're truly a good knight.'

With that she retired to her chamber, while a bed was set up for Sir Gawain in the hall; and there he lay down to sleep, and the five elderly knights likewise. But thoughts filled Gawain's mind that night, and when he rose next morning he went to hear mass in the castle chapel and then, after eating three pieces of bread soaked in wine, he armed himself at once and asked the five knights if they would go with him to the tourney.

'Oh yes, sir,' they said, 'if you're going!'

'In faith,' cried Sir Gawain, 'I wouldn't miss it for the world!'

So the knights donned their armour, and their horses were brought along with Sir Gawain's. Then he went to take his leave of the Widow's daughter, who was filled with joy when the knights told her that Sir Gawain was going to the tournament.

Gawain and the knights mounted and rode from the castle, galloping on with all speed. When they reached the edge of the forest Sir Gawain looked before him and saw the most beautiful valley he had ever beheld, so great that he could not see a quarter of it; in between patches of deep green forest lay wide stretches of rich meadowland, abounding with game.

'Sir,' said the knights, 'behold the Vales of Kamaalot, which have been taken from our lady the Widow's daughter, along with seven splendid castles in Wales.'

'It's a crime and a sin,' said Sir Gawain.

They rode on until at last they spied the pennants and shields where the tournament was to take place; and already they could see most of the knights mounted and fully armed, spurring their horses down the meadow, and the lodges and pavilions pitched all around in the shade of the woods. Sir Gawain and his companions drew rein beneath a tree and watched as knights gathered on all sides for the tourney, and they pointed out the Lord of the Fens and the brother of the Red Knight, whose name was Cahot the Red. As soon as the tourney was assembled, Sir Gawain and the knights rode down and joined in: Gawain charged a Welsh knight and sent him and his horse crashing to the ground in a heap. Behind him galloped his five companions, each felling an enemy, elated at being with so fine a knight. Cahot the Red saw Sir Gawain, and not realising who he was, came charging at him full tilt. Gawain met him with the head of his lance and struck him so fiercely that he shattered his collar-bone and sent his lance flying from his hand. All over the field Gawain rode

seeking out opponents, and every knight he met he unhorsed or wounded: the five knights rejoiced at the feats they saw him perform. But suddenly they pointed out the Lord of the Fens, who was advancing with a great body of knights. Sir Gawain turned his horse and galloped straight towards him; they struck each other at such close quarters that their lances bent and flew into splinters, and they and their horses collided so hard that the Lord of the Fens lost his stirrups, his rear saddle-bow was shattered, and he came crashing down behind his horse so that the spike on his helmet plunged a full hand's breadth into the ground. Gawain took his horse, a fine mount indeed, and in full view of all the Lord's followers gave it to one of the five knights, who bade a squire take it back to the castle of Kamaalot. Meanwhile Sir Gawain rode on, seeking opponents all over the field and performing impossible feats of arms. And the five knights themselves, inspired by his example, summoned all their courage and did greater feats of arms that day than they had ever done before, each taking knights captive and winning their horses.

But the Lord of the Fens was now remounted on a fine charger, full of shame at being toppled by Sir Gawain. So he picked out Gawain and came galloping at him, thinking to avenge his disgrace. They clashed; Sir Gawain had but a broken shaft of lance, but he struck him with it full in the chest to balk him, and the Lord of the Fens in turn broke his lance as he struck his foe. Sir Gawain drew his sword and cast away his broken lance, and the Lord of the Fens did likewise, shouting to his men not to intervene, for he had never failed to vanquish any knight he met. They rained great blows on each other's helm, until sparks flew and the swords were notched. But Sir Gawain's blows were the greater, so fierce and terrible that blood poured from his foe's mouth and nose until his hauberk was drenched. The Lord of the Fens could take no more, and he yielded himself prisoner and liegeman to Sir Gawain, who was exultant, as were his five companions. The Lord of the Fens then rode to his tent and dismounted; Gawain took the Lord's horse and said to one of the five knights: 'Keep it for me.'

Meanwhile all the knights of the tournament had retired to their pavilions, all agreeing that the knight with the red shield emblazoned with the eagle of gold had won the day. They asked the Lord of the Fens if he agreed and he did so.

'Then sir,' they said to Sir Gawain, 'the castle of Kamaalot is in your keeping for a year.'

'Many thanks, my lords!' said Sir Gawain, and calling to the five knights he said: 'Sirs, it's my wish that you keep the castle on my behalf, and that you do so with the consent of these knights here.'

'We grant your wish most gladly, sir.'

'And you, sir,' said Sir Gawain to the Lord of the Fens, 'I give as my prisoner to the Widow's daughter who gave me lodging last night.'

'That is not yours to do,' he replied. 'A tournament is not warfare, and I'll not be taken captive back to the castle: I'm quite able to pay my ransom. But tell me your name, sir.'

'My name is Gawain,' he said.

'Oh, Sir Gawain, I've heard tell of you many times, but never seen you until today. Since the castle of Kamaalot is now in your keeping, I swear that for a year and a day the castle and the Widow's lands will have nothing to fear from me – or from anyone else, if I can help it: that I swear before all these knights. And if you want gold or silver of me I'll give it willingly.'

'I thank you, sir. Your pledge gives me joy enough.'

Sir Gawain took his leave and turned away, riding back towards the castle of Kamaalot. To the daughter of the Widowed Lady he bade a squire take the horse of the Lord of the Fens, and she was overjoyed by the gift. The five knights likewise sent all their spoils before them, and there was great rejoicing when they arrived at the castle and he announced that the castle was now in the keeping of the five knights and himself. It is no wonder that Sir Gawain was highly honoured and given fine lodging that night.

When morning came, Sir Gawain took his leave and left the castle; but first he heard mass, for such was his custom. The Widow's daughter, Perceval's sister, commended him to God, and truly, he left the castle a happier place than he had found it.

* * *

Sir Gawain rode on, as God and adventure took him, searching for the land of the Fisher King. Fully armed, his shield hung from his neck and lance in hand, he passed into a great forest, praying to Our Lord to guide him on the high quest he had undertaken, so that he might win through with honour. He rode on until he came as evening fell to a house deep in the forest, built on an island in the middle of a river. It was surrounded by tangled woods so that he could scarcely make out the hall; but it was handsome indeed, and Sir Gawain, thinking it must be the house of a great nobleman, headed that way to seek lodging.

Just as he neared the drawbridge, he noticed a dwarf sitting on one of the pillars of the bridge. He jumped up and cried: 'Welcome, Sir Gawain!'

'I wish you good fortune, friend,' said Gawain. 'So you know my name?'

'Indeed I do, sir!' said the dwarf. 'I saw you at the tournament. You couldn't have come here at a better time, for my lord's away but my lady's stayed behind, and she's the most beautiful, wise and noble lady in all the kingdom of Logres, though she's only twenty!'

'My friend,' said Sir Gawain, 'what's the name of the lord of this castle?'

'He's called Marin the Jealous, sir, of the Castle of Gomorret. I'll go and tell my lady that the good Sir Gawain has come, and to make merry!'

Sir Gawain was astonished by the dwarf's welcome, for in most dwarfs he had found great villainy.

The dwarf ran to his lady's bedchamber. 'Quickly, madam,' he said. 'Prepare! The good Sir Gawain has come to lodge with you!'

'Truly,' she said, 'that brings me both joy and sorrow: joy that such a fine knight should lie here, and sorrow, too, because he's the knight my lord fears most in all the world, for he's told me many times that Gawain never won the trust of a lady or a maiden but he had his way.'

'That's not true, my lady,' said the dwarf, 'whatever they may say.'

At that moment Sir Gawain rode into the courtyard and dismounted, and the lady came down to meet him.

'I wish you joy and good fortune, sir.'

'My lady,' he replied, 'may your life be graced with honour.'

The lady took him by the hand and led him to the hall where she seated him on a cloth of golden silk, while a boy went to stable his horse. The dwarf called two other boys to disarm Sir Gawain, and was most anxious to help, calling for water to be brought to wash his face and hands.

'Sir,' he said, 'your hands and nose are still swollen from the blows you received at the tournament.'

Sir Gawain made no reply. The dwarf ran to the bedchamber and brought back a gown of rich scarlet cloth lined with ermine in which he dressed Sir Gawain. And now the food was all ready and the tables were set, and Gawain and the lady could sit down to dine. From time to time he would sit and gaze at the lady because of her great beauty, and if he had given way to his heart and his eyes he would soon have lost his resolve; but because of the high quest he had undertaken he had so bound and restrained his heart that he would not permit any thoughts to turn to baseness. And so his eyes began to turn away from the lady and her shining beauty.

After they had dined a bed was set up for Sir Gawain and he made ready to lie down to sleep. He and the lady wished each other a good night, and when she had gone to her bedchamber, the dwarf said to Sir Gawain: 'I'll lie down here at the foot of your bed, sir, and make sure you're comfortable until you're asleep.'

'Many thanks,' he said. 'And may God grant that I soon earn such kind treatment.'

So the dwarf lay down on a couch before Sir Gawain. And as soon as he saw that he was asleep he got up as quietly as he could and ran down to where a boat was moored on the river that flowed behind the hall. He clambered in and rowed downstream until he came to a fishing-lodge, a fine-looking hall on a little islet, where Marin the Jealous had gone to find sport. The dwarf jumped from the boat and ran inside, where he lit a fistful of candles and came to where Marin was lying on a couch.

'How now?' he cried. 'Are you asleep?'

Marin awoke with a frightened start; he asked the dwarf what was wrong.

'You don't sleep like Sir Gawain,' came the reply.

'What do you know about that?'

'A lot,' said the dwarf. 'I've just left him asleep in your hall – arm in arm with your wife, I do believe!'

'What?' he cried. 'But I forbade her ever to give Sir Gawain lodging!'

'Well truly,' said the dwarf, 'she gave him a more joyful welcome than I ever saw her give anyone! But come quickly, for I fear he'll carry her off!'

'By my life,' cried Marin, 'I'll not return while he's there, but she'll pay for it when he's gone!'

'Then you'll be too late!' said the dwarf.

Meanwhile Sir Gawain was lying in the hall, suspecting nothing; and seeing the dawn break bright and clear, he arose. But just then the lady came to the door of her chamber, and when she saw the dwarf was not in the hall she realised at once his treachery.

'In God's name, sir,' she cried to Gawain, 'have pity on me – the dwarf has betrayed me! If you leave now and don't try to save me from the punishment my lord will make me suffer on your account, then shame upon you! For you know there's nothing you've done to me or I to you for which my lord or anyone else should reproach me!'

'That's true indeed, my lady,' said Sir Gawain, and he armed and rode out of the castle and hid among the trees close by. At that very moment the jealous knight appeared with the dwarf and ran into the hall. The lady came to meet him.

'I bid you welcome, sir,' she said.

'And I wish you,' he cried, 'shame and ill fortune! You're the most faithless woman alive! Last night you lodged in my castle and my bed the man I most despise!'

'Sir, I lodged him in your castle, but your bed I never dishonoured, nor shall I ever!'

'You're lying, false woman!' he cried; and hurriedly arming himself he called for his horse, while his wife, crying for mercy and weeping bitterly, was stripped to her shirt. He mounted, took his shield and lance, and bade his dwarf seize the lady by her hair and drag her after him into the forest. He halted beside the pool of a spring and forced her in where the water was coldest. Then he dismounted and gathered switches among the trees, and began to beat her and flog her across the back and breasts until the stream was running with blood. She cried with all her strength for mercy, and when Sir Gawain heard her he came out of the bushes and galloped towards them.

'Sir!' cried the dwarf. 'Here comes Sir Gawain!'

'In faith,' said the knight, 'now I know there's been evil done – it was a conspiracy!'

'For God's sake, sir,' cried Sir Gawain as he rode up, 'why would you kill the most noble and faithful lady I ever saw in the world? Never has a lady done me such honour, and you should be most grateful to her. In her conduct, her speech and her person I found only virtues, and all the virtues that can be found in a good and faithful lady, and it's a grievous sin to ill-treat her so! I pray you in the name of honour and love to forgive her your anger and fetch her from the water. I swear I did her no harm or dishonour, nor did I wish to.'

The knight was filled with anger when he saw that Sir Gawain would not be gone; a bitter jealousy inflamed his heart, and he conceived an insane and wicked plan.

'Sir Gawain,' he said, 'I'll let her out if you'll joust with me. And if you can vanquish me, she'll be absolved of all guilt and wrong; but if I vanquish you she'll be most surely accused. So shall it be decided.'

'I ask for nothing more,' said Sir Gawain.

And so the knight bade his dwarf take the lady from the pool and seat her in the glade where they were to joust. The knight drew back ready to charge and Sir Gawain came at him as fast as his horse could go. But when he saw him coming Marin the Jealous swerved away from the attack; and lowering his lance he rode up to his wife who was weeping in her innocence, and thrust his lance clean through her and struck her dead. Then he turned and galloped off towards his castle. Sir Gawain saw the lady lying dead and the dwarf running off after his master; he raced after him and trampled him under the hooves of his horse, bursting open the heart in the dwarf's chest, and then rode on towards the castle in the hope of finding a way in. But the drawbridge was raised and the gate bolted, and he could hear Marin shouting to him from within:

'Sir Gawain, this shame and misfortune has befallen me because of you; but, as I live, you'll pay for it yet!'

Sir Gawain had no desire to argue with him, and seeing there was no way in, he turned away and rode back to where the lady lay dead. Across the neck of his horse he laid her body, covered in blood, and wept for her most tenderly. Then he carried her to a chapel outside the castle, and took the body down and laid it inside the chapel, his heart filled with grief and anger. Then he closed the door to keep out the wild beasts, and trusted that someone would come and shroud her and give her burial when he had gone.

And so Sir Gawain departed, grieving so much that he was scarcely in command of himself. Never had any misfortune weighed so heavily on his heart; and with his head hung low, burdened with thought, he rode on through the forest.

Suddenly he saw a knight coming towards him in a most curious manner: he was riding backwards, with the reins of his horse tied round his chest, his shield back to front, his lance upside down, and his hauberk and greaves hanging round his neck. Sir Gawain gazed at him in wonder.

The knight could hear Gawain coming but could not see him, and so he cried aloud: 'Good, gentle knight there, for God's sake don't hurt me, for I'm the Coward Knight!'

'In faith,' said Sir Gawain to himself, 'you don't look like a man that anyone would try to hurt.' And had it not been for the grief that burdened him he would have laughed at his strange appearance. 'You need have no fear of me,' he said, and he rode up to the Coward Knight and looked him in the face. The Coward Knight looked back.

'Sir,' said the knight, 'well met!'

'Well met, indeed,' replied Sir Gawain. 'In whose service are you, sir knight?'

'The Maiden of the Cart's, sir.'

'By my life, I love you the more for that.'

'Then you won't hurt me?' said the knight.

'No,' said Sir Gawain, 'have no fear.'

Just then the knight noticed Sir Gawain's shield and recognised it at once. 'Sir,' he said, 'I know who you are! I'll dismount and ride properly now, and put my armour on the right way round, for you're Sir Gawain, I know, for you alone were to win that shield.'

The knight dismounted to put his armour on properly, asking Sir Gawain to wait until he had armed himself; and Gawain did so, and gave the knight some help. At that moment a knight came galloping through the forest like thunder, and he bore a shield quartered in black and white.

'Sir Gawain,' he cried, 'stop there! I challenge you on behalf of Marin the Jealous, who has murdered his wife because of you!'

'Sir knight,' said Gawain, 'my heart is full of grief for her death, for she'd done nothing to deserve it.'

'I don't care!' cried the Motley Knight. 'I want you dead. If I vanquish you then you're in the wrong, and if you vanquish me then the guilt and shame will lie with my lord – though if you grant me mercy he'll hold his castle as your vassal.'

'God knows in truth,' Gawain replied, 'that I'm guilty of no wrongdoing.'

'Sir Gawain,' said the Coward Knight, 'I hope you're not relying on me; please don't imagine I'll be any help.'

'I've accomplished many things without you,' said Gawain, 'and I'll do so now, with God's aid.'

With that they charged at each other full tilt; their lances shattered on their shields, and as Sir Gawain galloped past he collided with the knight and sent him and his horse crashing to the ground in a heap. Then he drew his sword and returned to the attack, but the knight shouted:

'No! Sir Gawain, do you mean to kill me? I admit defeat; I've no wish to die through another man's folly; have mercy, I pray you!'

Sir Gawain decided to do him no harm, for he wanted him to do as his master had said. So the knight rose to his feet and held out his hands to Gawain, and did him homage on his lord's behalf for the castle and all his lands, and thus he became his vassal. Without another word the knight departed.

'Oh, sir!' said the Coward Knight. 'I'm glad I'm not as brave as you! If he'd challenged me like that I'd have run straight off or fallen at his feet and begged for mercy.'

'You don't seem to like battle,' said Sir Gawain.

'Which is only right,' said the knight, 'for nothing but ill comes of war. I've never been injured or wounded, except once when I was hit by a branch in the woods. But look at *your* face – cut and scarred all over! I commend you to God; I'm going to look for the Maiden of the Cart.'

'Stay,' said Sir Gawain. 'Tell me first why the Maiden of the Cart carries her arm in a sling.'

'Willingly, sir,' he said. 'With that hand she presented the Holy Grail to the knight who came to the castle of the Fisher King but failed to ask what was done with the Grail. And because she held in that hand the precious vessel into which the hallowed blood drips from the point of the lance, she won't hold anything else in it until she returns to the holy house of the Grail. And now, sir,' said the Coward Knight, 'I'll take my leave, if it please you; but here, take my lance, for I shan't be needing it.'

Sir Gawain accepted it gratefully, for his own was broken, and then took his leave of the knight, commending him to God.

Gawain rode swiftly on through the forest, until he was tired and weary. Then, just as the sun was about to set, he saw a knight galloping through the trees towards him, and speared he was, and filling the forest with his cries:

'Sir knight! What's your name, sir knight?'

'Good sir, my name is Gawain.'

'Oh, Sir Gawain!' he cried. 'See my wounds, received in your service!'

'In my service?' said Gawain. 'What do you mean?'

'I went to bury the lady, sir, whom you bore to the chapel, but Marin came and attacked me, and wounded me as you see; I'd just dug a grave with my sword when he seized the body from me and abandoned it to the wild beasts. Now I'm going to find the hermit who lives in this forest so that I can make confession, for I know I've not long to live: the wound lies close to my heart. But I shall die the more at ease for having shown you the grief I've come to on your account.'

'By my life,' said Sir Gawain, 'it pains me deeply.'

The knight departed and Sir Gawain rode on until, deep in the forest, he came upon a handsome, splendid castle. Out of the castle an aged knight had ridden to hunt, with a hawk perched on his wrist. He greeted Sir Gawain, who returned the greeting and asked the name of the fine castle he could see. It was the castle, said the knight, of the Proud Maiden, who never deigned to ask any knight his name. 'And we who are in her service dare not ask on her behalf. But you'll be well lodged here, for in other ways she's a most gracious lady, and the most beautiful in all the land. She's never had a husband, nor ever deigned to love a knight unless she heard he was the finest knight in the world. But come, I'll accompany you on your way.'

'Many thanks,' said Sir Gawain.

They rode into the castle together, and dismounted at the steps of the great hall. The knight took Sir Gawain by the hand and led him upstairs to be stripped of his arms, and brought him a coat of rich scarlet cloth all lined with fur, which he fastened for him. Then he brought the lady of the castle to greet Sir Gawain, who rose as she came and said: 'My lady, may good fortune ever follow you!'

'I bid you welcome, sir knight,' she said, and taking him by the hand she led him to the castle chambers. 'Would you like to see my chapel, sir?' she said.

'As you wish, damsel,' said Sir Gawain, and she led him there.

Gawain looked about him and thought he had never entered a chapel so beautiful or so richly adorned. Before him were four tombs, the finest he had ever seen; and on the right-hand side were three recesses in the wall, set all about with gold and precious stones, at the back of which could be seen crosses and amulets and the bright gleam of candles, and they smelt sweeter than balsam.

'Sir,' said the maiden, 'do you see those tombs?'

'Yes, damsel.'

'Three of them have been made for the three finest knights in the world, and the fourth is for me. One of the knights is named Gawain, and another is Lancelot of the Lake, and each of them I love deeply; but the third, whose name is Perceval, I love more than either. In those three recesses relics have been placed out of love for them. But look; I'll show you what I'd do to them if they were here – and if I can't do it to all three, I'll do it at least to one or two.'

She reached towards the recesses and pulled on a golden bolt fixed in the wall, whereupon a steel blade, sharper than a razor, flashed down and closed the three holes.

'This is how I'll cut off their heads when they go to worship the relics in the recesses. Then I'll take their bodies and lay them in these tombs with much honour, richly shrouded. For I can have no joy of them while they're alive, but joy I shall have of them dead; and when I die, I'll be laid to rest in the fourth coffin in the company of the three good knights.'

Sir Gawain heard all this and was amazed, and wished the night were already over.

That night the maiden did Sir Gawain much honour. She had a great company of knights to serve her and to help her defend the castle, and they honoured Gawain highly, though they did not know that it was he, and no-one asked his name for that was not the custom of the castle. But the maiden knew that the three knights she sought often rode through the forest, and she had given orders to four of her knights to keep watch on the forest's paths and bring her any of the three if they should pass by.

Next morning Sir Gawain went to hear mass, and then armed and took his leave of the maiden and her knights and galloped out of the castle with no pressing wish to return. Into the deep forest he went, and had ridden a full league when he came upon two knights sitting in a defile. As soon as they saw him coming they leaped on to their horses, fully armed, and with shields hung from their necks and lances in hand they came to meet him.

'Halt there, sir knight,' they cried, 'and tell us your name!'

'Sirs,' he said, 'I've never kept my name from anyone who asked it. My name is Gawain, the nephew of King Arthur.'

'Oh, you are welcome, sir!' they said. 'We wished for nothing more! Come with us now to the lady on the hill: she's very eager to see you, and will give you a joyful reception at the Proud Castle where she lives!'

'I've no time to go there, sirs,' said Sir Gawain. 'I'm headed elsewhere.'

'You have to come with us, sir! We've been ordered to take you there by force if you won't come with a good grace.'

'I say I will not come,' said Sir Gawain.

At that they seized his bridle, but Gawain, filled with indignation, drew his sword and struck one of the knights with such fury that he cut off his arm. The other dropped the bridle and turned swiftly away, and he and his wounded companion galloped back to the castle where they found the Proud Maiden at the gate and showed her what had befallen them.

'Who did that to you?' she said.

'Sir Gawain, my lady!'

She called for a horn to be sounded at once, and all the knights of the castle took up arms, but just as they were about to set off in pursuit of Gawain, two other knights who had been on watch in the forest appeared, both speared through the body. Sir Gawain had inflicted these terrible wounds, they said, and the knights all agreed that it would be folly to pursue him.

'And it's my lady's fault that she's lost him!' said one. 'We all know it was he who lodged here last night. Was he carrying a red shield with a golden eagle?'

'Indeed he was,' said one of the wounded.

'Then it was he!' said the maiden. 'And I admit I lost him through my pride. Never again shall I lodge a knight in my castle without asking him his name. But now it's too late: I've lost that one forever, unless God leads him back to me, and through him I'll lose the other two.'

And so the pursuit of Sir Gawain was abandoned, and he rode on, praying to God for guidance and direction in his quest, that he might find news of the castle of the rich Fisher King.

* * *

Sir Gawain travelled on until evening was approaching, when he saw to the right of his path a narrow track which seemed to be frequented by people. So, seeing the sun about to sink, he turned that way and found, deep in the heart of the forest, a great chapel with a splendid house beside it. Before the chapel was an orchard enclosed by a row of palings, though they were less than the height of a man, and a hermit of noble appearance was leaning on them and peering into the orchard; and from time to time he laughed and clapped his hands with joy. He saw Sir Gawain approaching and came to meet him, saying: 'I bid you welcome, sir.'

'God give you the joy of Heaven,' Gawain replied.

The hermit bade a boy take Gawain's horse to be stabled, and then he took him by the hand to lean beside him at the orchard fence.

'Now, sir, you'll see why I was so delighted.'

Sir Gawain followed his gaze and saw two maidens and a boy, and a child who was riding on a lion.

'Sir,' said the hermit, 'have you ever seen a child so fair?'

'No indeed,' said Sir Gawain.

They went and sat down in the orchard, for it was a fine and tranquil evening, and as Gawain took off his armour a maiden brought him a coat of rich cloth lined with ermine. Sir Gawain sat and watched with delight as the child rode the lion, and the hermit said:

'Sir, no-one but that child dares look after or master that lion, yet the boy is only young. He's of noble descent, sir, but is the son of the most cruel and wicked knight alive: his father is Marin the Jealous, who murdered his wife because of an incident with Sir Gawain. And since his mother died the boy hasn't wanted to live with his father, for he knows he murdered her wrongfully. I'm his uncle, and he's being looked after by those maidens and two young boys. But there's no-one in the world he desires to see so much as Sir Gawain, for he wants to be his liegeman when his father dies. If you have news of Sir Gawain, sir, do tell us.'

'In faith,' said Gawain, 'I've very reliable news of him. There are his shield and lance, and you'll be lodging him in your house tonight!'

'Good sir, are you Gawain?'

'That's my name; and I saw the lady murdered in the forest, and it grieved me very much.'

'Ho there! Nephew!' cried the hermit. 'Here is Sir Gawain, whom you've so longed to see! Come and greet him!'

The boy jumped down from the lion's back and goading it with a whip he led it to its den and shut the gate so that it could not escape. Then he came up to Sir Gawain, who met him with an embrace.

'Welcome, sir!' said the boy.

'And may God ever enhance your honour,' said Sir Gawain. He kissed him and greeted him most affectionately. Then the boy knelt before him and held out his joined hands.

'Sir,' said the hermit, 'is that not a moving sight? He is offering you his homage. He should indeed be your liegeman, and have your help and guidance, for his mother met her death because of you.'

Sir Gawain took the boy's hands between his own, saying: 'Truly, I greatly value your love and homage, and will come to your aid whenever you need it. But tell me your name.'

'Meliot of Logres, sir.'

Sir Gawain was lodged well there that night; and in the morning after mass, the hermit asked him where he was headed, and he said towards the land of the Fisher King, if it pleased God.

'Sir Gawain,' said the hermit, 'may God grant that you do better than the knight who went there before you, for because of him great misfortunes have befallen all lands, and the good Fisher King is languishing.'

'Sir,' said Sir Gawain, 'may God grant that I do His will.'

And with that he took his leave and rode off, the hermit commending him to God.

Sir Gawain rode so hard each day that he left the forest and the hermitage far behind, and found himself in the fairest land in the world, with the most beautiful meadowland ever seen, stretching a full two leagues. Beyond that he could see another forest, and as he rode on he met a boy who had just emerged from it, looking most downcast and dejected.

'Good friend,' said Sir Gawain, 'where have you come from?'

'From the forest, sir.'

'You don't seem very happy.'

'Nor should I be,' said the boy. 'Anyone who loses his good master has no reason to be joyful.'

'And who's your master?'

'The finest knight in the world.'

'And he's dead?'

'No, sir, please God; if he were it would be a grave misfortune to the world. But he's been in distress for some time.'

'What's his name?'

'Where he is now, he's called Par-lui-fet.'

'And where's that? May I not be told?'

'Not by me, sir,' said the boy. 'I'll tell you he's in yonder forest, but I'll say no more of his whereabouts – I must do nothing against my master's will.'

Suddenly the boy bowed down to the ground, with tears streaming from his eyes. Gawain asked him what was wrong.

'Sir,' he said, 'I shall never be happy until I can enter a hermitage to save my soul, for I've committed the greatest sin anyone can commit: I've killed my mother – and a queen she was – because she said I wouldn't be king when my father died; she was going to make me a monk or a priest and have my younger brother inherit the kingdom. When my father knew I'd killed her, he went off into that forest and built a hermitage and abandoned his kingdom, but because of the crime I've committed I don't want to take his place: I've decided to go into exile like him.'

'What's your name?' asked Sir Gawain.

'Joseus, sir. King Pelles is my father, and the Widowed Lady of Kamaalot was my aunt, so the good knight Par-lui-fet is my cousin.'

At that the boy took his leave and Sir Gawain commended him to God. He felt very sorry for him.

Gawain plunged into the forest and rode swiftly on until he came upon the rill of a spring running through the woods, and nearby was a path which seemed much used. He left the main track and followed the line of the stream for a good league until he spied a fine house and a chapel surrounded by a hedge. And seated beneath a tree outside the entrance he could see one of the most handsome men he had ever beheld of such an age: dressed like a hermit he was, with white hair and a white beard, and he was resting his cheek in his hand. Before him stood a youth holding a fine, sleek horse and a shield that shone in the sun, and the hermit was gazing at the hauberk and iron greaves

that he had bade the boy bring. When he saw Sir Gawain coming, he rose to his feet and came to meet him.

'Dear sir,' he said, 'please ride on quietly and make no noise, for we don't want any more trouble than we have already. I beg you not to take offence: I'd gladly have you lodge here if we didn't have such troubles. For a knight is lying sick within who is held to be the finest in the world, and I wouldn't like him to know there'd been a knight here, or he'd get up, ill as he is, and no-one could keep him from donning his arms, mounting his charger and going off to joust with you, and it might well make him worse. That's why we're keeping him inside the house: I don't want him to see you or any other knight, for it would be a grave misfortune to the world if he died.'

'What's his name?' asked Sir Gawain.

'Sir,' replied the hermit, 'he has made his own name, and so I call him Par-lui-fet – "Self-made" – out of affection and love.'

'May I see him?' said Sir Gawain.

'No, sir,' said the hermit. 'No stranger may until he's restored to health and happiness.'

'Then will you give him a message from me?'

'I'll say nothing to him unless he speaks to me first.'

Sir Gawain was most upset that he could not speak to the knight. 'What is his lineage?' he asked the hermit.

'He's descended,' he replied, 'from the good soldier Joseph of Arimathea.'

Just then a maiden appeared at the chapel door and called softly to the hermit, who rose and took his leave of Sir Gawain, and shut the door of the chapel behind him, while the youth took the horse and the armour inside the house and closed the door. Sir Gawain was left outside, quite bewildered, not knowing for certain whether the ailing knight was the son of the Widowed Lady, for there can be many good knights in one family.

He rode away, most disturbed, and passed into the forest; and he wandered far until he found himself in a beautiful, rich and fertile land, in the middle of which stood a magnificent castle. He turned that way and rode towards it, and soon he could see the great wall that surrounded it and the mighty castle gate. And lying in the middle of the gateway he saw a lion, chained to the wall, and on either side of the gate stood two awesome figures of copper, which by an ingenious device could fling forth crossbow-bolts with the utmost strength and fury. Seeing the lion at the gateway and these dread figures, Sir Gawain did not dare go any nearer. He looked along the top of the walls and saw priests dressed in albs, and old white-haired knights clothed like monks or clerics, and on each of the battlements was a cross. A chapel stood on the wall, and on the chapel's roof were three crosses, each one topped with an eagle of gold. The priests and the knights on the wall knelt towards the chapel, and from time to time they would look up at the sky, rejoicing, as if they could see God and His mother on high. Sir Gawain sat watching from a distance, not daring to approach the castle because of the figures that could loose bolts with such fury that no armour could

withstand them. But he could see no path to right or left: he would have to turn back or go on to the castle. He did not know what to do. But just then he looked ahead and saw a priest coming out of the gate.

'Good sir,' he cried to Sir Gawain, 'what's your business here?'

'I pray you, tell me what castle this is.'

'This is the entrance to the land of the rich Fisher King, and inside the service of the Holy Grail is begun.'

'Then permit me to ride on,' said Sir Gawain, 'for I've been heading for the land of the Fisher King!'

'I tell you truly,' said the priest, 'you cannot enter the castle or go any nearer the Grail, unless you bring the sword with which Saint John was beheaded.'

'Oh,' said Sir Gawain, 'then I'm in a sorry plight.'

'But you may trust me that it's so,' said the priest, 'and I tell you, it's now in the possession of the most wicked and heathen king alive. But if you bring the sword, you'll be gladly admitted to the castle and celebrated wherever the Fisher King holds sway.'

'Then I must turn back,' said Gawain, 'and that grieves me deeply.'

'You shouldn't grieve, for if you win the sword and bring it here, then all will know you worthy to look upon the Holy Grail. But remember the knight who failed to ask what was done with it.'

At that Sir Gawain rode off, so downcast and troubled that he forgot to ask in what land he would find the sword, or the name of the king who then possessed it; but he would know of the sword when it pleased God.

He rode on until, one beautiful clear day, he found himself outside a city, and looking ahead he could see a townsman in the middle of a field mounted on a great charger which looked fine and handsome indeed. The man caught sight of Gawain and came towards him, and they greeted each other most nobly.

'Sir,' said the townsman, 'I'm sorry you've such a thin and scraggy horse. Such a worthy knight as you seem to be should be better mounted.'

'Alas, sir,' said Gawain, 'there's nothing I can do about that – I'll have another when it shall please God.'

'Where are you headed, good sir?'

'I'm on the quest for the sword with which Saint John was beheaded.'

'Oh sir,' said the townsman, 'you're riding into great danger! It's in the possession of King Gurgaran – a wicked and cruel man, and an infidel. Many knights have passed this way in search of the sword, and they never returned. But if you promise to come back here and let me see the sword if you win it, I'll give you this horse.'

'Will you?' said Sir Gawain. 'Then you're a most courteous man, sir, for you don't even know me.'

'You seem so noble that I've no doubt you'd keep a promise.'

'And I do promise,' said Sir Gawain, 'that if God lets me win the sword, I'll bring it for you to see on my return.'

And so the townsman dismounted and exchanged horses with Gawain, who bade farewell and departed. On he rode into a great forest beyond the city, and he journeyed on until the sun began to set, but could find neither house nor castle. But then, in the depths of the forest, he came across a wide clearing through which a stream flowed from a spring, and looking towards the head of the clearing, right at the edge of the woods, he could see a great tent with ropes of silk and pegs of ivory to fix them in the ground, and golden pommels on the tent-poles with an eagle of gold on top of each. The tent's walls were white and the roof was red, of a rich silken cloth like samite. Sir Gawain rode up and dismounted at the door. He took off his horse's bridle and set it free to graze, and propping his shield and lance outside the tent he took a look inside. He could see a rich golden couch, with a silken sheet on top as fine as white linen, and a coverlet of ermine and green samite with drops of gold. And at the head lay two pillows, so sweetly perfumed that the tent was filled with a balmy fragrance. All around the couch rich silken cloths were spread on the ground, and on either side of the couch's head was an ivory chair with cushions of gold cloth, and above the couch's foot hung a golden candlestick holding a great candle. A table had been set in the middle of the tent: of ivory it was, and edged with gold and precious stones; and a cloth had been laid upon it with a silver trencher and ivory-handled knives and golden plate.

Sir Gawain sat down upon the couch fully armed, wondering for whom the tent could have been so richly furnished, and puzzled at seeing no-one around. But just as Gawain was about to take off his armour, a dwarf appeared at the door and greeted him, and kneeling down he began to disarm him. But Sir Gawain remembered the dwarf who had caused the death of Marin's wife, and said:

'Please leave me, friend, for I don't wish to lay aside my armour yet.'

'Indeed you shall, sir,' said the dwarf, 'for you've nothing to fear until tomorrow, and tonight you'll be lodged more richly and with more honour than ever before!'

And so Sir Gawain, with the dwarf's assistance, began to remove his armour, and placed it beside the couch along with his sword and shield and lance. Then the dwarf brought two silver basins and a white towel and bathed Sir Gawain's face and hands. He then unlocked a handsome chest from which he took a rich gown of gold cloth and silk, all lined with ermine, and with this he robed Sir Gawain.

'Sir,' said the dwarf, 'don't worry about your horse, for you'll have him again in the morning when you rise. To put you more at ease I'll bring him close by, and then I'll be back.'

Sir Gawain agreed. Then two boys came in bearing wine and food for the table, and they seated Sir Gawain to dine. They lit two great candles in golden candlesticks and then left at once. But before Sir Gawain had finished eating, into the tent came two maidens who greeted him most nobly, and he returned their greeting as graciously as could be.

'Sir,' they said, 'may God give you the power and strength tomorrow to destroy the evil custom of this tent.'

'Is there an evil custom?' said Gawain.

'Yes, sir, and it grieves us much, but you seem to be a knight fine enough to put an end to it.'

At that he rose from the table, and a boy was called to remove the cloth. The two maidens took Gawain by the hands and led him outside, where they sat down together in the middle of the clearing.

'Sir,' said the elder maiden, 'what's your name?'

'Gawain, damsel.'

'Then we love you the more!' she said. 'Now we know for certain that the evil custom of the tent will be cast out – on condition that you choose tonight which of the two of us will please you most!'

'Thank you, damsel,' he said.

With that he rose, and as he was tired he made his way back to the couch, where the maidens attended him as he lay down. Then they sat before him, lit the candle, and rested on the couch, offering him their service. Sir Gawain made no reply except to thank them, for his only thought was to sleep and rest.

'In faith,' said one, 'if this were Gawain, the nephew of King Arthur, he'd speak to us differently! And we'd find in him more entertainment than in this man: this Gawain's an impostor! The honour we've paid him was ill-spent!'

'But what does it matter?' said the other. 'Tomorrow he'll repay us well enough!'

Just then the dwarf appeared.

'Watch over this knight, friend,' said the maidens, 'and see he doesn't leave. He rambles from lodging to lodging like a beggar and calls himself Sir Gawain, but he can't be, for if this were he, and we wished to go sleepless for three nights, then he would do so for four!'

'Damsels,' said the dwarf, 'he can't escape except on foot, for his horse is in my keeping.'

Sir Gawain had heard every word of this but said nothing in reply, and they departed, bidding him an ill night since he was so base, half-hearted and cowardly. And they ordered the dwarf not to leave on any account, but to guard him closely.

Sir Gawain did not sleep much that night, and as soon as he saw day break he rose and found that his arms were all ready and his horse had been brought to the tent, fully harnessed. He armed as fast as he could, and the dwarf helped him, saying:

'Sir, you haven't served the maidens very well; they're complaining a lot about you!'

'I'm sorry,' said Sir Gawain, 'if I've deserved it.'

'It would be a great shame if one as handsome as you were as bad a knight as they say.'

'They may say what they like,' said Sir Gawain, 'for that's their right. I don't

know who to thank for the fine lodging I had last night, but if I meet the lord or lady of the tent I'll thank them deeply.'

Just then two knights came riding past the tent, fully armed, and saw Sir Gawain, who was mounted with his shield at his neck and lance in hand, expecting to take his leave without any more ado. They rode up to him, crying:

'Sir, you must pay for your lodging! We put ourselves out for you last night, and left you the tent and all quite freely, yet now you'd just ride off!'

'What would you have me do?' said Sir Gawain.

'You must earn the food you ate and the honour you were paid.'

At that moment the two maidens appeared, and beautiful they were indeed, and said: 'Now, sir knight, we'll see if you're Gawain, the nephew of King Arthur!'

'Truly,' said the elder, 'I don't think he'll be able to break the evil custom and free us of these knights, but if he could I'd forgive him my harsh words.'

Sir Gawain heard these insults just as he had done that night, and felt deeply ashamed. But he saw he could not depart without combat. One of the knights had drawn back and dismounted, but the other was on horseback, fully armed, his shield at his neck and lance in hand, and he came charging full tilt at Sir Gawain, and Gawain charged him, and struck the knight such a furious blow that he pierced his shield, pinned his arm to his side and thrust his lance into his body before crashing into him so hard that he brought both the knight and his horse tumbling to the ground in a heap.

'By my life,' said the elder maiden, 'the false Sir Gawain is doing better than he did last night!'

He pulled out the lance, drew his sword and charged to the attack; but the knight cried for mercy and admitted defeat. Sir Gawain tried to decide what to do, and he looked to the maidens.

'Sir knight,' said the elder, 'you've nothing to fear from the other knight while this one's alive, but the evil custom will not be broken as long as he lives, for he's the lord of the tent, and because of his wickedness I've seen no knight here for a long time.'

'Just listen,' the knight said to Sir Gawain, 'to her disloyalty! There's no-one in the world she seemed to love as much as me, and now she condemns me to death!'

'And I say again,' she cried, 'that the evil custom will never be broken unless he kills you!'

Thereupon Sir Gawain lifted the skirts of the knight's hauberk and ran him through with his sword. The other knight, seeing his companion slain, was filled with rage and grief and hatred, and he and Gawain came charging and struck one another with such fury that they smashed through their shields, rent their hauberks and tore into their flesh with the heads of their lances; and both men and horses collided with such force that their stirrups stretched, their saddle-girths snapped, their lances shivered and the knights crashed to the

ground so hard that blood gushed from their mouths and noses. And in his fall Sir Gawain's enemy broke his arm and collar-bone, and the dwarf cried:

'Girls, your Gawain's fighting well!'

'He will indeed be our Gawain henceforth,' they said, 'if he's willing!'

Sir Gawain drew away from the knight and returned to his horse, and had it not been for the maidens he would gladly have let the knight live, for he had appealed for mercy and Gawain felt pity for him. But the maidens were shouting:

'If you don't kill him, the evil custom won't be broken!'

'Sir,' said the younger, 'if you want to kill him, you must strike him with your sword in the sole of his foot; it's the only way he'll die!'

'Damsel,' cried the knight, 'your love for me has turned to hatred! A knight should never trust in a maiden's love. But may God grant that others are not like you!'

Sir Gawain was astonished by the maiden's words and drew back, feeling very sorry for the knight. He went behind the tent and took the saddle from the dead knight's mount and placed it on his own, and then drew his horse away. But the wounded knight had remounted with the dwarf's help, and was fleeing towards the forest as fast as he could ride. The maidens were crying:

'Sir Gawain, your pity for him will bring you to your death! That knight has no mercy: he's gone to find help, and if he escapes, we shall die and so will you!'

Hearing this, Sir Gawain leaped into his saddle, and seizing a lance propped against the tent he went galloping after the knight, and struck him so hard that he knocked him to the ground, crying: 'You'll go no further!'

'That grieves me,' said the knight, 'for I would soon have had revenge on you and the maidens!'

At that Sir Gawain thrust his sword a full hand's breadth into the sole of the knight's foot, and the knight stretched out dead. Then he rode back to be greeted with joy by the maidens, who told him how that was the only way the knight could have been killed, for he was of the line of Achilles, whose descendants could die in no other way. Sir Gawain dismounted, and the maidens tended to the wound in his side. Then they said: 'Sir, we offer you our service once more, for now we know for certain that you're the good knight Gawain. Take as your lady which of us you wish!'

'I thank you, damsels,' said Sir Gawain. 'I shan't refuse your love. I commend you to God.'

'What?' they cried. 'Do you mean to leave us? You'd do better to stay with us in our pavilion and take your ease!'

'It's no use,' said Sir Gawain. 'I've no time to spare.'

'Let him go,' said the younger maiden. 'He's the most foolish knight in the world!'

'By my life,' said the elder, 'it grieves me to see him depart.'

But Sir Gawain left them at once and mounted his horse, and away he rode into the forest.

On he journeyed until he reached the edge of the woods and saw before him a rich and pleasant land bounded by a huge wall which stretched a great way. As he drew nearer he found there was only one gate; and when he passed through he saw the fairest and most abundant land that ever a man beheld, filled with the most beautiful orchards. It was no more than three leagues wide, but in the middle stood a great tower upon a rock, and at the top of the tower a crane had built its nest, and cried out whenever a stranger entered the land. Sir Gawain rode forward, but the crane gave such a clamouring call that the King of the Watch, the lord of the land, sent two knights galloping after Sir Gawain, shouting:

'Halt there, sir knight! You must come and answer to the king of this land. No stranger passes through without seeing him.'

'My lords,' said Sir Gawain, 'I wasn't aware of the custom. I'll willingly come.'

And so they rode back to the king's hall and dismounted. Sir Gawain left his shield and lance outside and then climbed the stairs to the hall. The king gave him a joyful welcome and asked him where he was heading.

'To a land, sire, where I've never been before.'

'Ah,' said the king. 'Since you're passing through my country, you'll be going to the land of King Gurgaran on the quest of the sword with which Saint John was beheaded.'

'Exactly so, sire. And may God grant that I win it.'

'You'll not win it so soon,' said the king, 'for you'll not leave my land until a year has passed.'

'No, sire, I beg you!' cried Sir Gawain.

'It must be so,' said the king, and with that he had Gawain disarmed and called for a gown to be brought for him. He did him much honour, but Sir Gawain was uneasy, and said:

'Sire, why do you want to keep me here so long?'

'Because I know you'd win the sword and would not return by way of my country.'

'I promise you, sire,' said Sir Gawain, 'that if it please God that I win it, I shall return through this land.'

'Then I'll let you go as you wish, for there's nothing I desire to see as much as that sword.'

And so Gawain slept there that night and departed next day with a glad and joyful heart, and journeyed on towards the land of King Gurgaran. He passed into the grimmest forest in the world, but just on the hour of noon he came across a fountain set about with marble; it was shaded by the forest as if by a bower, and rich pillars of marble stood all around inlaid with bands of gold and precious stones, and from the central pillar hung a vessel of gold on a silver chain. And in the middle of the fountain stood a statue so finely sculpted that it seemed to be alive; and the moment Sir Gawain appeared before the fountain the statue plunged into the water and vanished. Gawain dismounted, but just

as he went to take hold of the golden vessel a voice cried out: 'You are not the Good Knight who is served from the vessel and cured by it.'

Sir Gawain drew back and saw a priest approaching the spring: a young man he was, dressed in white robes, with his arm in a sling, and he was holding a square golden vessel. He walked up to the vessel which hung from the marble pillar and looked inside; then he rinsed the vessel he was holding and poured what he found in the other into his own. Then three maidens of fabulous beauty appeared, all draped in white robes over body and head; one of them carried bread in a vessel of gold, another brought wine in a vessel of ivory, and the third bore meat in a vessel of silver. They came to the golden vessel which hung from the pillar and in it they placed their offerings. And after sitting awhile at the foot of the pillar they began to walk back; but as they went, it seemed to Sir Gawain that there was but one of them, and he marvelled at this miracle. He went after the priest who bore the other vessel, and said:

'Good sir, speak to me.'

'What do you want?' said the priest.

'Where are you taking that golden vessel and whatever it holds?'

'To the hermits,' he replied, 'who live in this forest, and to the Good Knight who lies sick at the house of his uncle, the Hermit King.'

'Is that far from here?'

'It would be for you,' said the priest. 'But I'll get there sooner than you could.'

'In faith,' said Gawain, 'I wish I were there now, so that I could see him and talk to him!'

'That I can well believe, but the time is not yet ripe.'

So Sir Gawain took his leave and departed, and on he rode until he came across a hermitage. Out of it came a hermit, old and white, a most good-living man, and he said to Sir Gawain:

'Where are you heading, sir?'

'To the land of King Gurgaran. Is this the right road?'

'It is,' said the hermit, 'but many knights have passed this way and never returned.'

'Is it far?'

'His land is near enough, sir, but it's a long way to the castle where the sword lies.'

Sir Gawain spent the night at the hermitage, and the next morning after hearing mass he set out, and rode on until he came to the land of King Gurgaran, where he heard the people everywhere wailing with grief. Then he met a knight riding swiftly towards a castle, and Gawain asked him: 'Sir, why are the people of this land lamenting so? Everywhere I go I hear them weeping and beating their palms with grief.'

'I'll tell you, sir,' said the knight. 'King Gurgaran has but one son, and he's been abducted by a giant who's done the king much harm and laid waste a great part of his country. And now King Gurgaran has proclaimed throughout his land that to anyone who rescues his son and kills the giant he'll give the

finest sword in the world, which is in his possession, and as much of his treasure as he wishes to take. But he can find no knight bold enough to go, and he curses his own religion even more than Christianity, and has said that if any Christian knight enters his land he'll receive him.'

Sir Gawain was elated at this news, and taking his leave of the knight, he rode on until he came to the castle of King Gurgaran. The king rejoiced when word reached him that a Christian knight had arrived at his castle, and he summoned him to come before him, and asked him his name and country.

'My name is Gawain,' he said, 'and I'm from the land of King Arthur.'

'A land of good knights,' said the king. 'But in my land I can find no knight brave enough to bring order to my affairs. If you would help me, I would reward you well. A giant has carried off my son whom I dearly love, and if you'll risk your life to save my son, I'll give you the finest sword ever forged, the sword with which Saint John was beheaded. It bleeds each day at noon, because that was the hour when they severed that good man's head.'

The king called for the sword to be brought, and he showed Gawain the scabbard first, all inlaid with precious stones; and the belt was made of silk with golden studs; and the hilt was of gold likewise; and the pommel was a holy, sacred stone which Evalus, a noble emperor of Rome, had mounted there. Then the king drew the sword from its sheath, and out it came, bleeding, for it was then noon, and he commanded that it be held before Gawain until that hour had passed. Thereupon the sword became as bright and green as emerald. Sir Gawain gazed at it in wonder, coveting it more than ever, and he saw that it was as big as any other sword, but that when it was sheathed neither the scabbard nor the sword looked longer than two spans.

'Sir knight,' said the king, 'I will give you this sword – and I will do something else which will bring you great joy.'

'And I, sire,' said Sir Gawain, 'will do as you've asked, if it please Our Lord and His sweet mother.'

With that the king pointed out the path the giant had taken and the place where he lived, and Sir Gawain set out along that road, commending himself to God. The men of the castle prayed for him in the manner of their religion, that he might return in joy and safety, for he was riding into grave danger.

On he rode until he came to a great high mountain, and bounded by its peaks was a land that the giant had completely laid waste, a land some three leagues across. And there within was the giant, so huge and cruel and terrible that he feared no-one in the world. Nor had any knight sought him out for a long time, for none dared linger there. The entrance to his mountain home was so narrow that a horse could not pass through; so Sir Gawain had to dismount and leave his horse and shield and lance behind, and with great difficulty he clambered up the mountain, the path being a cleft between sharp rocks. Then he came to the open plain, and looking ahead he could see the giant's stronghold upon a crag; and there in the plain beneath a tree the giant and the king's son were playing chess. Sir Gawain was armed and his sword was girded on. He

advanced towards them. The giant, seeing him coming, leaped to his feet and seized a great axe that lay beside him, and strode towards Gawain ready to strike, aiming to deal him a two-handed blow full on the head. But Sir Gawain dodged aside and attacked the giant with his sword, and gave him such a blow that he cut off the arm that clutched the axe. The giant reeled back when he felt himself wounded and seized the king's son by the throat with his other hand, and crushed and strangled him to death. Then he turned back to Sir Gawain and took hold of him, squeezing him hard around the waist and hauling him three feet off the ground. He intended to carry him back to his stronghold on the crag, but on the way he stumbled and fell, along with Sir Gawain; the giant ended up beneath him, and before he could get to his feet Sir Gawain thrust his sword right through the giant's heart and hacked off his head. Then he came back to where the king's son lay, and when he found that he was dead it grieved him deeply. He lifted the boy on to his shoulders, and with the giant's head in his hand he returned to where he had left his horse and shield and lance. Then he mounted and rode back, carrying the king's son and the giant's head before him.

The king and all the men of the castle came down to meet him full of joy, but when they saw the dead boy their jubilation turned to grief. Sir Gawain dismounted and presented to the king his son and the giant's head.

'Truly, sire,' he said, 'I'd have been happy indeed if I could have presented him to you alive.'

'I know,' said the king, 'but I'm grateful to you for doing as much as you've done, and you shall have your reward.'

But he and all the men of the castle began to lament for his son most bitterly; and the king commanded that a great fire be kindled in the heart of the city, and that his son be placed in a brass vessel full of water to be cooked and boiled over the fire, while the giant's head was hung above the gate. And when his son's flesh was cooked, he had it cut into the smallest pieces possible, and summoned all the people of his land and gave each a piece until all the flesh was gone.

Then he called for the sword to be brought and presented it to Sir Gawain, who thanked him deeply.

'I'll do still more for you,' said the king, and summoning all the men of his land to his castle hall, he said: 'Sir, I wish to be baptised.'

And Sir Gawain said: 'God be praised!'

The king then summoned a hermit from the forest and was baptised with the name Archier, and he declared that all those who refused to believe in God were to be beheaded by Gawain. So it was that the king who was lord of Albanie was baptised by the miracle of God and the chivalry of Sir Gawain, who departed from the castle with a heart full of joy.

He now retraced his path, and rode on until he came to the land of the King of the Watch where he decided to go and fulfil his promise. He dismounted before the hall. The king was overjoyed to see him coming, and Sir Gawain said to him: 'I've come to do as I promised; here is the sword.'

The king took it in his hand and gazed at it in delight, and filled with joy, he went and placed it among his own treasures.

'Sire!' said Sir Gawain. 'Do you mean to betray me?'

'I've more right to it than you,' said the king. 'I'm descended from the king who beheaded Saint John!'

'Sire,' said the king's men, 'Sir Gawain is a true and worthy knight and kept his promise; you should return to him what he's won: it would be a grave disgrace to do him wrong!'

The king sighed, and said: 'Very well – on one condition: that he will grant to the first maiden who has a request of him whatever she asks, no matter what it may be.'

Sir Gawain agreed to this quite willingly, but by doing so he was soon to suffer much humiliation.

The king returned the sword to him, and after sleeping there that night, Gawain left in the morning as soon as he could, and rode on until he came to the city where the townsman had exchanged horses with him. He remembered his promise to this man, too; so he halted for a long while, leaning on the butt of his lance until the townsman appeared. They rejoiced to see each other, and Sir Gawain showed him the sword. The townsman took it, plunged his spurs into his horse and galloped off towards the city. Gawain was astounded, and raced after him, shouting to him that he was acting wickedly. He pursued him into the city, but ran into a great procession of priests and clerks bearing crosses and censers. Sir Gawain dismounted because of the procession, and saw the townsman enter the church and the procession after him.

'Sirs,' said Gawain to the priests, 'return to me what that man in your church has stolen!'

'We're well aware,' replied the priests, 'that it's the sword with which Saint John was beheaded, and that man has brought it to us to add to our relics. He says it was given to him in his honour.'

'Indeed it was not! I showed it to him because I'd promised to do so, and he carried it off like a rogue!'

He told them all that had happened, and the priests ordered that it be returned to him. He took his leave with joy in his heart, remounted and took up his arms, and rode out of the city.

On he journeyed, and made his way back to the castle at the entrance to the land of the Fisher King. And he saw now that the ghastly copper statues were no longer shooting, and the lion was not at the gate. Then he caught sight of the priests and men of the castle coming towards him in a great procession, and he dismounted, and a squire took his arms and his horse. Gawain held the sword aloft before the procession; it was noon; and when he drew the sword from its scabbard, he saw that it was bleeding. Down they bowed before it, worshipping it and singing '*Te Deum laudamus*'. He slid the sword back into its scabbard and guarded it closely; and he never let it be known in any of the places where he lodged what sword it was. And so the priests and the knights

greeted him with great joy, and earnestly begged him to promise that if God led him to the castle of the Fisher King and the Grail appeared before him, he would not be as negligent as the other knight had been. And Gawain replied that he would follow God's guidance.

'Sir,' said the head priest, 'you must have great need of rest now, for you seem very tired.'

'If I do,' he replied, 'it's because I've seen many bewildering things that I don't understand.'

'This, sir,' said the priest, 'is the Castle of Enquiry, where you'll be told the significance of anything you ask.'

'In faith,' said Sir Gawain, 'I'm greatly puzzled about three maidens who came to the court of King Arthur, bearing two heads – the head of a king and the head of a queen; and in a cart they were carrying the heads of 150 knights, some sealed with gold, some with silver and others with lead.'

'Indeed,' said the priest, 'but the maiden said that by the queen the king was betrayed and killed, along with the knights whose heads were in the cart. She was telling the truth; for by Eve was Adam betrayed, and all the people who have lived since then and every age to come will suffer for it. Because Adam was the first man, he is called king, for he was our earthly father, and his wife is queen. And the heads of the knights sealed in gold signify the New Law of Christ, the heads sealed in silver the Old Law of the Jews, and the heads sealed in lead the false law of the Saracens. Of these three kinds of men is the world composed.'

'Sir,' said Sir Gawain, 'I wonder much about the castle of the Black Hermit, where all the heads were taken; the maiden told me that the Good Knight would set free all those within when he came, and the people imprisoned there are calling for him.'

'You surely know,' said the priest, 'that because of the apple that Eve gave Adam to eat, the good went to Hell as well as the wicked, and to free His people from Hell God came as a man and through His goodness and power He set His friends free. And thus the castle of the Black Hermit signifies Hell, from which the Good Knight will set the imprisoned free; and the Black Hermit is Lucifer, who is lord of Hell just as he wished to be of Paradise.'

'In God's name,' said Sir Gawain, 'I wonder also about the maiden who's completely bald, and says she'll never have hair again until the Good Knight conquers the Grail.'

'She must indeed be bald, sir,' replied the priest. 'She's been bald ever since the Fisher King gave lodging to the knight who failed to ask the question. The bald maiden signifies Fortune, who was bald before the Crucifixion of Our Lord, and never had hair until the hour when the Saviour redeemed His people with His blood and His death. The cart which the maiden brought with her signifies Fortune's wheel, for just as the cart is borne by its wheels so is the world governed by the wheel of Fortune. This can be clearly seen from the two maidens who followed her, for the most beautiful went on foot and the other

on a lowly packhorse and they were poorly attired, while the third was much better dressed. The shield with the red cross which was left at King Arthur's court signifies the holy shield of the Cross for which none but God ever dared pay the price.'

Sir Gawain was delighted to hear these explanations. And he thought of the shield hanging in King Arthur's hall which no-one dared take up, as he had heard in many places; everyone was waiting daily for the Good Knight who was to come for it.

'Many thanks,' said Sir Gawain to the priest, 'for explaining the things that have puzzled me so. But I was most grieved for a lady whose husband killed her because of me, though neither she nor I was guilty of any wrong.'

'Sir,' said the priest, 'her death was of great significance, for the Old Law was irreparably overthrown by the thrust of a lance; to overthrow the Old Law God suffered Himself to be stabbed in the side with a spear, and by that blow and His crucifixion the Old Law was cast down. That lady signifies the Old Law. Have you anything else to ask me?'

'Sir,' said Sir Gawain, 'I met a knight in the forest who was riding backwards and carrying his arms upside down and back to front; he said he was the Coward Knight – and he had his hauberk tied round his neck! But as soon as he saw me he carried his arms properly and rode along like any other knight.'

'Religion,' said the priest, 'was turned the wrong way before the death of Our Lord, but once He was crucified it was set right.'

'One more thing,' said Sir Gawain. 'Another knight came to joust with me with arms quartered in black and white, seeking satisfaction for that lady's death on behalf of her husband Marin. And he told me that if I vanquished him, then he and his lord would be my vassals. I did vanquish him and he paid me homage.'

'Which was only right,' said the priest, 'for when the Old Law was overthrown all those who upheld it were brought into subjection, and always will be. Have you anything more to ask?'

'I wonder much,' said Sir Gawain, 'about a child who was riding a lion at a hermitage, when none but he dared go near it. He was only young, and the lion was a most ferocious beast. He was the son of the lady who was murdered because of me.'

'You've spoken well,' replied the priest, 'in reminding me of that. The child signifies the Saviour of the world, who was born into the Old Law and was circumcised, and the lion he was riding signifies the world and the people in it, and the animals and birds, for only He with His divine power could govern them and bring them justice.'

'Oh, sir!' cried Sir Gawain. 'Your words fill me with joy! But I came upon a fountain in the forest, sir, the most beautiful ever seen, and a statue was there which vanished as soon as it saw me. Then a priest came bearing a golden vessel, and he went up to another which hung from the pillar and took what was inside and placed it in his own. Then three maidens came and filled the vessel with

whatever they were carrying, and thereupon it seemed to me that there was but one maiden.'

'Of that,' said the priest, 'I'll tell you no more than you've heard, for no-one should reveal the secrets of the Saviour.'

'Sir,' said Sir Gawain, 'I'd like to ask about a king I saw who took his dead son and had him boiled and cooked, and then gave him to all the people of his land to eat.'

'Sir,' replied the priest, 'he had brought his heart to the Saviour and wanted to make a sacrifice to Our Lord with his son's blood and flesh, and so he gave him to be eaten by all his people, wishing them to share his belief. And he's so entirely cleared his land of all wrongful religion that none now remains.'

'Blessed be the hour I came here!' said Sir Gawain, and the priest replied:

'Amen.'

Sir Gawain slept there that night and was given good lodging. The next morning after hearing mass he departed, and after taking his leave and riding out of the castle he found himself in the fairest land in the world, with the most beautiful meadows and rivers that ever a man beheld. He rode on until, just as evening was setting in, he came to a hermit's cell, a hut so low that a horse could not enter, and the chapel was no bigger. The good man had not set foot outside his house for at least forty years. He leaned out of his window when he saw Sir Gawain, and cried: 'Welcome, sir!'

Gawain wished him God's blessing, and said: 'Sir, would you give me lodging here?'

'None but God finds lodging here, sir,' said the hermit. 'No earthly man has come in here with me for forty years. But just ahead is a castle where good knights are given lodging.'

'To whom does the castle belong?' asked Sir Gawain.

'To the Fisher King. It's surrounded by great rivers, rich in fish, or would be if only he weren't languishing. But he gives lodging only to good knights.'

'May God grant that I be one,' said Sir Gawain.

Knowing now that he was near the castle, he dismounted and made confession to the hermit, telling him of all his sins for which he was deeply and truly repentant.

'Now, sir,' said the hermit, 'don't forget to ask what the other knight forgot; and don't be afraid of anything you see at the entrance to the castle. Ride on without fear, and worship the holy chapel that you'll find at the castle, where the flame of the Holy Spirit descends each day because of the Holy Grail which they serve there along with the sacred lance with the head that bleeds.'

'Sir,' said Sir Gawain, 'may God guide me to do His will.'

He took his leave and departed, and rode on until a valley opened before him, flourishing with good crops; and there stood the castle. And Sir Gawain saw the holy chapel appear; he dismounted and went down on his knees, bowing to it and worshipping it with a gentle heart. Then he remounted and

rode on until he came across a magnificent tomb with a beautiful lid; there appeared to be a little cemetery there, for it was fenced all around, and yet there seemed to be no other tombs. And just as he was passing the cemetery, a voice cried out to him:

'Do not touch the tomb, for you are not the knight who shall learn who lies within.'

Hearing the voice Sir Gawain rode on past; but as he approached the castle entrance he saw that there were three long and terrible bridges to cross, with three great rivers rushing beneath. It seemed to him that the first bridge was about the length of a bowshot but less than a foot wide. It looked narrow indeed, and the river beneath was wide and deep and swift. He did not know what to do, for it seemed to him that no-one could cross it either on foot or on horseback.

Just then an aged knight appeared from the castle and came to the head of the bridge, which was called the Bridge of the Needle, and cried at the top of his voice: 'Sir knight, come across now! It'll soon be dark and the people of the castle are waiting for you!'

'But sir!' shouted Sir Gawain. 'Tell me how I can cross!'

'In faith,' the knight called back, 'I know of no other way but here at this gate, so if you want to come to the castle, take courage and cross now.'

Sir Gawain felt ashamed for having tarried so long, and thought again of how the hermit had told him to fear nothing he saw at the entrance to the castle; and he had made confession in all truthfulness and repented of his sins, and feared death the less for having done so. So he blessed himself with the sign of the Cross and, thinking he was about to die, commended himself to God; then he spurred forward. And as soon as he began to ride ahead he found that the bridge was as wide as he could wish. Many knights who wanted to enter the castle had been tested by this crossing. Sir Gawain was astonished to find the bridge so wide when it had looked so narrow; and it was a drawbridge, and by an ingenious device it rose by itself when he had crossed so that no-one then could enter the castle, for the river below flowed swiftly indeed.

The knight had now withdrawn beyond the second bridge, and once again the thought of crossing filled Sir Gawain with fear, for it seemed just as long as the first. And he looked at the river beneath, which was no less swift and no less deep, and it seemed to him that the bridge was made of ice, weak and fragile and rising high above the water. But because of the other he ceased to fear this bridge, and he rode on, commending himself to God; whereupon he found that the bridge was the strongest and finest he had ever seen, with statues all along the way; and when he had crossed it rose up just as the other had done. But when Gawain looked ahead he could not see the knight, and so he came up to the third bridge. Because of what he had now seen he felt no fear, and the third bridge was not like the others: all across it were marble columns, each one topped with a golden pommel. Then he looked at the gate ahead of him, and there he saw depicted Our Lord on the Cross, with His mother on one side

and Saint John on the other; all in gold they were, inlaid with precious stones that blazed like fires. And on the right he saw a beautiful angel, his finger pointing to the chapel of the Holy Grail. There was a precious stone in the middle of his chest, and letters written above his head saying that the lord of the castle was as pure and clean of all sins as the jewel. Suddenly Gawain saw at the gateway a huge and terrible lion, standing there on all fours, but as soon as it saw Sir Gawain it lay down on the ground, and he passed by quite freely.

Into the castle he rode and dismounted, and leaving his lance and shield propped against the wall he climbed the marble steps and entered a magnificent hall, set all around with images in gold. And in the middle he found a rich, high couch, at the foot of which was a handsome chessboard, finely wrought, and a golden cushion studded with jewels and beautifully embroidered; but the chessmen were not set up. Sir Gawain was gazing at the beauty and splendour of the hall when two knights appeared from a chamber.

'Welcome, sir!' they said.

'May God bring you joy and good fortune,' replied Sir Gawain.

They bade him be seated on the couch, and then had two boys remove his armour; and when that was done water was brought in two basins to wash his face and hands. Then two maidens came, and dressed him in a fine gown of golden cloth.

'Sir,' they said, 'be thankful for what is done for you here, for this is the lodging of good and true knights.'

'That I will,' said Sir Gawain. 'Many thanks.'

He was suddenly aware that, although the night was very dark, in the hall, without candles, it was as bright as if the sun had been shining, and he wondered where the light could be coming from.

Dressed in the fine gown, Sir Gawain was handsome indeed to behold: he had all the appearance of a worthy knight. Then the knights said: 'Sir, will you come now to see the lord of the castle?'

'I'd be glad to see him, sirs,' replied Sir Gawain, 'and I wish to present to him a most sacred sword.'

And so they led him to the chamber where the Fisher King lay. It was strewn with grass and flowers, and the king was lying in a bed hung on cords, with posts of ivory and a mattress of brocaded silk, and his coverlet was of sable with the finest of sheets; and on his head he wore a sable hat covered with red samite and emblazoned with a cross of gold. His head rested on a pillow perfumed with a balmy fragrance, and a jewel was set at each corner, shining with a brilliant light. And there in the room stood a pillar of copper, and on it sat an angel, holding a golden cross bearing a piece of the real Cross where God was crucified, as big as the Cross of gold itself, and this the worthy king worshipped; and in four golden candlesticks stood four tall candles which burned throughout the hours when light was needed.

Sir Gawain came up to the Fisher King and greeted him, and the king welcomed him with great joy.

'Sire,' said Sir Gawain, 'I present to you the sword with which Saint John the Baptist was beheaded.'

'Many thanks, sir,' said the king. 'Neither you nor anyone else could have entered this castle without the sword; and had you not been a knight of great worth, you would never have won it.'

He took the sword and held it to his lips and cheek, kissing it very gently and rejoicing at its touch. Then a most beautiful maiden came and sat at his head, and he gave the sword into her keeping. Two others sat at his feet, gazing at him with gentle eyes.

'What's your name?' said the king.

'Sire,' he replied, 'my name is Gawain.'

'Gawain, the light that is now about us comes to us from God out of love for you. Each time a knight comes to lodge at our castle, the light appears in this way. I'd give you a much finer welcome than I do if I could only help myself, but I've been languishing ever since the knight of whom you've heard came to lodge here. Because of just one thing he neglected to say this weakness has beset me, and I beg you in God's name to be mindful of it, for you should be glad indeed if you could restore me to health. But look: here's my granddaughter, whose land, her inheritance, has been seized from her, and it can be restored to her only by her brother – she's searching for him desperately. We've heard he's the finest knight in the world, but we can get no proper news of him.'

'Sire,' said the maiden to her grandfather the king, 'thank Sir Gawain for the honourable deed he did for me: when he came to our house he brought peace to all our land, and won the guardianship of our castle for a year's term. He left five knights to serve as my guard, but now that year is out and the great war has reopened, and if God doesn't help us and I can't find my brother, our land will surely be lost.'

'Damsel,' said Sir Gawain, 'I'd do everything in my power to help you if I had the opportunity. And there's no knight in the world I'd more gladly see than your brother; but I can give you no certain news of him, except that I came across a hermitage where there was a hermit king, and there I was told to make no noise because the finest knight in the world was lying there in distress. His name, the hermit told me, was Par-lui-fet. I saw his horse being cared for by a boy outside the chapel, and his arms and shield had been laid in the sun.'

'Sir,' said the maiden, 'my brother's name is not Par-lui-fet but Perceval: that was his name in baptism. And those who have seen him say he's the most handsome of knights.'

'Well truly,' said the king, 'I never saw a more handsome knight than the one who came to this castle, and I know he must indeed have been a good knight, for otherwise he could not have gained entrance. But I was poorly rewarded for his lodging, for I'm now of no help to myself or others. In God's name, Sir Gawain, be mindful of me tonight, for I've great faith in your worth.'

'Truly, sire,' said Sir Gawain, 'if it please God, I shall do nothing here for which I may be reproached.'

With that Sir Gawain was led into the hall, and there he found twelve aged, white-haired knights; yet they did not look as old as they were, for each was one hundred or more, though they did not look more than forty. They seated Sir Gawain to dine at a splendid table of ivory, and then sat down all around him.

'Sir,' said the foremost knight, 'remember what the king asked of you tonight.'

And Sir Gawain replied: 'May God keep me mindful.'

At that moment in was brought a loin of stag and other venison in great plenty, and rich golden plates adorned the table, with great lidded goblets of gold, and magnificent golden candlesticks bearing great candles. But the light of these was dimmed by the other light in the room. And suddenly two maidens appeared from a chapel: in her hands one was carrying the Holy Grail, and the other held the lance with the bleeding head. Side by side they came into the hall where the knights and Sir Gawain were eating. So sweet and holy a fragrance came forth that their feasting was forgotten. Sir Gawain gazed at the Grail and thought he saw therein a chalice, which at that time was a rare sight indeed; and he saw the point of the lance from which the red blood flowed, and he thought he could see two angels bearing golden candlesticks with candles burning. The maidens passed before Sir Gawain and into another chamber. Sir Gawain was deep in thought, so deep in joyful thought that he could think only of God. The knights stared at him, all downcast and grieving in their hearts. But just then the two maidens returned and passed once more before Sir Gawain. And he thought he saw three angels where before he had seen but two, and there in the centre of the Grail he thought he could see the shape of a child. The foremost knight cried out to Sir Gawain, but he, looking before him, saw three drops of blood drip on to the table, and was so captivated by the sight that he did not say a word. And so the maidens passed on by, leaving the knights looking at one another in dismay. Sir Gawain could not take his eyes off the three drops of blood, but when he tried to kiss them they moved away from him, and it grieved him deeply that he could not touch them with his hand or anything within his reach. Thereupon the two maidens passed once more before the table, and to Sir Gawain it seemed that there were three; and looking up it appeared to him that the Grail was high in the air. And above it he saw, he thought, a crowned king nailed to a cross with a spear thrust in his side. Sir Gawain was filled with sorrow at the sight and could think of nothing but the pain the king was suffering. Again the foremost knight cried out to him to speak, saying that if he delayed longer the chance would be lost forever. But Sir Gawain remained gazing upwards in silence, hearing nothing the knight had said. The maidens disappeared into the chapel with the Grail and the lance, the knights cleared the tables, left the feast and moved off into another chamber, and Sir Gawain was left there alone.

He looked around him and saw all the doors shut tight, and then, looking towards the foot of the couch, he could see two candlesticks burning before the chessboard with all its pieces in place; one set was of ivory and the other of gold. Sir Gawain began to move the ivory men, whereupon the gold pieces countered his moves and checkmated him twice. In the third round Gawain hoped to gain revenge, but seeing that he was heading for defeat once more he broke up the game. A maiden then came from a chamber and bade a boy remove the chessboard and the pieces and take them away.

Sir Gawain, exhausted from wandering for so many days in search of the castle where he now found himself, fell asleep on the couch and remained there until day had dawned, when he heard the loud blast of a horn. At that he donned his armour and went to take his leave of the Fisher King; but the doors were bolted fast against him: there was no entrance for Gawain. He could hear a most beautiful service being sung in a chapel, and it grieved him deeply that he could not hear mass. Just then a maiden came into the hall and said:

'Sir, you can now hear the service and the great rejoicing for the sword you delivered to the good king. It would have gladdened your heart to be in the chapel now, but your silence has lost you the right of entry. For this chapel is so holy – because of the sacred relics which lie within – that no-one can enter from noon on Saturday until the Monday after the mass.'

In his bewilderment Sir Gawain could make no reply, and the maiden said: 'Sir, may God keep you safe, whatever you may have done; for it seems to me that your only failing was to neglect to say those words which would have restored joy to the castle.'

With that the maiden departed, and once again Sir Gawain heard the horn sound, and a voice cried aloud: 'Let anyone who does not belong here be gone. The bridges are lowered, the gate is open and the lion is in its den. And after this the bridges must be raised again, because the King of Castle Mortal is besieging this castle, for which he will surely die.'

At that Sir Gawain left the hall, and at the foot of the steps he found his horse and arms ready for him. He mounted and rode out of the castle, to find the bridges high and wide, and galloped on beside a great river which flowed through a valley and into a forest. Rain and storm and thunder arose in the wood, so great that it seemed as if all the trees would be uprooted. So furious a tempest was it that Sir Gawain had to lay his shield over his horse's neck to save it from drowning in the torrential rain. In this dreadful plight he rode on beside the river as it coursed through the forest until he saw, in a meadow on the further bank, a knight and a maiden riding gracefully along; beautiful saddles they had, and the knight was carrying a bird on his wrist, with two hunting-dogs following behind, and the maiden wore a hat embroidered with gold. There in the meadow the sun was shining down beautifully, and the air was clear and pure. Sir Gawain marvelled that the rain should be driving down so hard along his path when in the meadow where the knight was riding the sun was beaming through with weather fair and tranquil; and he watched

them ride contentedly along. He could not call out to them because they were too far away, but looking along a nearer part of the riverbank he caught sight of the knight's squire, and he cried:

'Dear friend, how is it that the rain's pouring down on me but over there it's not raining at all?'

'Sir,' said the boy in reply, 'you've deserved it, and it's the custom in this forest.'

'Will the storm last long?'

'It'll stop at the first bridge you come to,' said the boy.

Then Sir Gawain left him, and the storm grew even stronger until he finally came to a bridge. He rode across and found himself in the meadow, where he could sling his shield around his neck again. Just then he saw before him a castle where he could hear a multitude of people rejoicing, and he rode on until he arrived at the castle and saw great crowds of knights and ladies and maidens. Sir Gawain dismounted; but nowhere in the castle could he find anyone who would speak to him: all were intent on their rejoicing. Sir Gawain presented himself here and there, but everyone ignored him. He could plainly see that he would gain nothing by staying, so he mounted once more and left. He met a knight at the gate and said: 'What castle is this, sir?'

'Can't you see?' replied the knight. 'It's a Castle of Joy.'

'In faith,' said Sir Gawain, 'they're not very polite here: no-one's spoken to me yet!'

'They can't be accused of discourtesy for that,' said the knight, 'for you've deserved it. They take you to be as negligent in deed as you are in speech. They saw you'd come through the Perilous Forest, and that's the road taken by all who've failed: it's obvious from your arms and your horse.'

With that the knight took his leave, and Sir Gawain rode on for a great part of the day, sunk in grief and bewilderment.

Perceval's Recovery

MEANWHILE THE SON OF THE WIDOWED LADY was still staying at the hermitage of his uncle King Pelles, and because of his distress from the suffering he had endured since his failure at the house of the Fisher King, he had made confession to his uncle and told him of his lineage and that his name was Perceval. But the good hermit, the good king, had named him Par-lui-fet, because he was a self-made knight. But one day, when the hermit had gone out to work in the forest, the Good Knight Perceval felt stronger and happier than usual, and hearing the birds singing in the forest his heart began to burn with chivalry, and he recalled the adventures he had found in the forest and the maidens and knights he had met; never had he felt such an eagerness for feats of arms as then: he had lingered there so long. And so, feeling a vigour in his heart, a surging in his limbs and a resolve in his spirit, he armed at once, saddled his horse and mounted, praying to God to lead him to an adventure where he might meet a worthy knight. Then he left his uncle's hermitage and rode off into the forest, deep and shadowed.

On he rode until he came to a glade wide and long and beautiful, and there he saw a tree green with leaves and spreading wide with many branches. There in its shade he dismounted, thinking to himself that two knights could joust handsomely on that ground, for it was a most fair and pleasant place. Just as he was thinking this, he heard a horse in the forest neigh three times very loudly, and he rejoiced at the sound.

'Oh God!' he cried, 'grant in Your gentleness that there may be a knight coming with whom I can test my strength and valour, for I don't know now what my strength may be, except that I feel a health in my heart and a rejoicing in my limbs. But if a knight has no courage in him, then another knight cannot properly test his chivalry. So I pray to the Saviour that if it be a knight coming this way, he may be strong and valiant in defending himself, for I long to attack him!'

At that moment he looked towards the edge of the clearing and saw the knight emerge from the forest and pass into the glade. He was fully armed, and bore a white shield round his neck emblazoned with a cross of gold, and his

lance was lowered. He was mounted on a great charger and advancing at a walk. As soon as Perceval saw him he set himself firmly in his stirrups, gripped his lance and with a burst of joy plunged in his spurs. He came at the knight in an impetuous charge, crying:

'I challenge you to joust, sir, and may you be a good knight, for more can be learned from good knights than from bad!'

And he struck the knight such a furious blow that he made him lose one of his stirrups, and smashed through his shield right on the boss. He went galloping past, leaving the knight bewildered at his demand, saying: 'Good sir, what wrong have I done you?'

Perceval fell silent, and his heart was filled with rage at having failed to unhorse the knight; but he would not be so easily overcome, for he was one of the finest knights in the world at defending himself in combat. He charged at Perceval as fast as his horse could bear him and Perceval charged too, and they struck each other on their shields with such force that the heads of their lances smashed through and rent their hauberks; Perceval struck the knight full in the chest and thrust a good two finger-lengths of lance into his flesh, and the knight made no mistake but thrust his lance right through Perceval's arm. The shafts flew into pieces, and as the knights passed they crashed into each other so hard that the mail of their hauberks stamped rings on their foreheads and faces, and blood burst from their mouths and noses and drenched their mail-coats. They drew their swords in a rage and the knight with the white shield shouted to Perceval:

'I'd like to know who you are and why you hate me so, for you've given me a grievous wound, and you're a fearsome opponent and a knight of great strength.'

But Perceval did not say a word; he flew at the knight, sword drawn, and the knight came at him, and they gave each other such terrible blows on their helms that they saw stars before their eyes, and the forest rang with the sound of their swords. The battle was fierce and terrible, for they were both great knights, and though the blood that poured from their wounds weakened them somewhat, their ardour and the rage they bore each other had so enflamed them that they were hardly aware of their wounds, and rained blows on each other mercilessly.

The Hermit King Pelles returned from working in the forest and was deeply distressed when he could not find his nephew at the hermitage. He mounted a white mule he kept there, whose forehead was marked with a red cross. This mule had belonged to Joseph of Arimathea when he was a soldier of Pilate, and he had bequeathed it to Pelles. The good Hermit King rode from the hermitage on this mule, praying to God to let him find his nephew. Through the forest he rode until he neared the clearing where the Good Knight was fighting. There he heard the ringing of the swords, and he raced towards the knights and set himself between them to stop the blows.

'Oh, sir!' he cried to the knight with the white shield. 'You're very wrong to

fight this knight: he's been lying sick in the forest for a long while, and you've wounded him sorely!'

'And he has wounded me, sir!' cried the knight. 'I would never have attacked him if he hadn't sought combat first! And he won't tell me who he is, or what cause he has to hate me!'

'And who are you, good sir?' said the hermit.

'The son of King Ban of Benuic,' the knight replied. 'My name is Lancelot of the Lake.'

'Oh, dear nephew!' cried the hermit to Perceval. 'This knight is your cousin! You should greet him with joy!'

He made them take off their helmets and open the hoods of their hauberks, and bade them kiss one another. Then he led them back to the hermitage where they dismounted together, and he called a boy to their service to help them gently from their armour. There was a maiden present who was a cousin of King Pelles and had been caring for Perceval in his illness. She gently bathed their wounds and washed away the blood, and she saw that Lancelot's wounds were graver than Perceval's.

'What do you think, damsel?' said the hermit.

'Sir,' she said, 'this knight will have to stay with us until his wound has healed, for it's in a dangerous place.'

'Is he in danger of death?'

'No,' she said, 'not from this wound, so long as it's well tended.'

'God be praised,' he said. 'And how does my nephew seem?'

'His wound will soon heal. No harm will come of it.'

The maiden, who was skilful indeed, nursed the knights' wounds and cared for them as well as she could, with the help of the Hermit King. But if Perceval had been carrying his shield, which he had left there at the hermitage, of red emblazoned with a white stag, then Lancelot would have recognised him and they could have avoided the combat, for he had heard tell of that shield at King Arthur's court.

When Perceval was restored to health and fully cured he left his uncle's hermitage, leaving Lancelot behind because his wound was not yet healed, but promising to return as soon as he could.

Fully armed, he rode on through a forest until, just as evening fell, he came to the edge of the woods and saw a castle before him, fine indeed and well situated. He turned towards it to find lodging, for the sun was setting, and rode inside and dismounted.

The lord came down to meet him, a great red-faced knight with an evil look and scars across his face in many places; he was the only knight there, alone with his retinue. As soon as he saw Perceval dismount he ran and bolted the gate, but Perceval came up to him all the same and greeted him.

'Before you leave here,' cried the knight, 'you'll have your just reward! You're my mortal enemy and rash indeed to come here, for you killed my brother, the Red Knight of the Forest of Quinqueroi, and I am Cahot the Red and

I'm waging war on your sister! I took this castle from her, and I'll take your life before you leave here!'

'I came to this castle,' said Perceval, 'to lodge with you, and it would be shameful of you to do me harm. Now give me lodging as a knight should give another, and in the morning when it's time to leave, let each do the best he can.'

'By my life,' cried Cahot the Red, 'my mortal enemy will never lodge here except as a corpse!'

And he ran up to his hall, armed himself as fast as he could, and clutching his naked sword he returned to where Perceval stood, his heart heavy at learning that the knight was waging war on his sister and had seized that castle from her. Perceval cast aside his lance and came at Cahot on foot, sword drawn, and gave him such a mighty blow on the hood of his hauberk that he smashed through the mail rings and cut away a chunk of flesh to send him staggering. Cahot the Red was filled with anguish when he felt himself wounded, and he came at Perceval and dealt him such a terrible blow on the helm that he sent sparks flying and made his neck bow and his eyes reel. He rained blows on Perceval's shield and split it down to the boss. Perceval felt the fearsome blows and saw that his enemy was a tough and powerful knight; he returned to the attack, aiming to strike him full on the head, but Cahot dodged aside and Perceval's blow caught him on the right arm and hacked it off at the shoulder, sending the arm with the sword flying to the ground. Cahot attacked him in a rage, trying to seize him with his left arm, but although he was desperate for revenge, his strength was grievously sapped. And Perceval, his heart filled with hatred for the knight, assailed him a final time and struck him full on the head with such a blow that his brains were sent scattering. His retinue and servants were watching from the windows of the hall, and seeing this mortal blow to their lord they began to shout to Perceval:

'Sir, you've killed the boldest knight in the kingdom of Logres, and the most feared by all his enemies. But we can do nothing about that; we know this castle belongs to your sister and is rightfully yours, and we'll not challenge you. You may do as you wish with the castle, but let us take our lord Cahot's body and lay it in a proper place, for the sake of his chivalry and because it's our duty.'

'Your request is granted,' said Perceval.

And so they bore his body to a chapel where they took off his armour and laid him to rest. Then they led Perceval into the hall, where they helped him to disarm and said: 'Sir, we present to you the keys of the castle.'

'I order you to guard it for me henceforth,' said Perceval. 'What's it called?'

'The Key of Wales, sir, for this is the entrance to that land.'

Perceval slept that night at his sister's castle which he had recaptured, and the next day when he departed, Cahot's retinue promised to guard the castle faithfully in his name.

He rode on until he came to a meadow where he saw pavilions pitched, and all he could hear was the sound of bitter grieving. But he would not turn back, and he rode up and dismounted amidst the pavilions, and laid aside his shield and lance. He could see a group of maidens wringing their hands and tearing their hair, and wondered what could be the matter. One of the maidens came forward; she was from the castle where he had killed the knight, and she said: 'May it be to your shame and ill-fortune that you've come here!'

Perceval looked at her and marvelled at her words; and she cried: 'My lady! My lady! Come and see the man who killed the finest knight in all your family! And you, Clamadoz, he killed your father and your uncle! Now we'll see what you'll do with him!'

Another maiden now stepped forward; she was the Maiden of the Cart, and she recognised Perceval by his red shield with the white stag.

'Sir,' she said, 'I bid you welcome. They may mourn, but I rejoice at your coming.'

She led him inside a pavilion and seated him on a fine couch, and bidding her two maidens disarm him, she dressed him in a rich gown. Then she led him before the Queen of the Pavilions, who was still lost in grief, and said: 'My lady, behold the Good Knight for whose coming these pavilions were set up, and for whom you were rejoicing until today.'

'Ah!' she cried. 'Is this then the son of the Widowed Lady?'

'Indeed it is,' said the maiden.

'Oh,' she said, 'he's killed the finest knight in all my family, who always defended me against my enemies.'

'My lady,' replied the maiden, 'this man could be your protector and defender now, for he's the finest knight in the world, and the fairest.'

The queen took him by the hand and bade him be seated beside her. 'Sir,' she said, 'whatever may have happened, my heart bids me rejoice at your coming.'

'Thank you, my lady,' he said. 'Cahot tried to kill me in his castle, and I defended myself as well as I could.'

The queen looked him straight in the face, and her heart lit up with such love that she almost threw herself upon him. 'Sir,' she said, 'if you'll grant me your love, I'll forgive you for killing Cahot the Red.'

'My lady, I'd gladly earn your love, and I give you mine.'

'How can I be sure of that?' she said.

'I'll tell you, my lady: I'd do everything in my power to help you against any knight in the world who tried to harm you.'

'Such a love,' she said, 'should be commonly borne by a knight to a lady. You might well do as much for another.'

'That may be, but a man offers his service more gladly in some places than in others.'

But the queen wanted Perceval to swear himself to her more than that, and the more she looked at him the more he pleased her and the more she burned and longed for his love. But Perceval could not think of loving her; he beheld

her with great pleasure, for she was beautiful indeed, but he said nothing to make her think that he loved her with a complete love. But she could not restrain her heart, or divert her gaze, or lose her desire. The maidens were astonished to see that she had forgotten her grief so soon.

But Clamadoz was coming. He had been told that this was the knight who as a boy had killed his father and had now killed his uncle, Cahot the Red. He burst into the tent to see Perceval seated beside the queen, who was gazing at him most tenderly.

'My lady!' he cried. 'You do great shame to all your line in seating our mortal enemy beside you! No-one should ever trust in your love or support!'

'Clamadoz,' said the queen, 'this knight has been received by me, and I must do him no harm, but give him lodging and care for him, for he's done nothing to earn accusations of murder or treachery.'

'My lady!' said Clamadoz. 'He killed my father, unchallenged, with the treacherous throw of a javelin, and I'll never rest until I've gained revenge; I accuse him here in your court of murder and treachery, and I beseech you to decide in my favour – not as a relative but as a stranger, for I see that kinship is meaningless here!'

Perceval looked at the knight, who was stalwart, of good height and fair of face, and said: 'Dear sir, I must free myself entirely of the charge of treachery, for never was my heart or my mind set against your father or any other man, and may God keep me from such baseness, as from other sins. I shall earnestly defend myself against your accusation.'

Clamadoz was about to throw down his gage, but the queen said: 'By my life, there'll be no challenge now! Tomorrow we'll see light and sense, and each shall make amends to the other!'

Clamadoz was filled with rage, but the Queen of the Pavilions honoured Perceval as highly as she could: this grieved Clamadoz deeply, and he swore that no man should ever have faith in a woman; but he was wrong to reproach her so, for she honoured Perceval because of the great love she bore him; she knew that he was the finest knight in the world, and the fairest. She could find in him no secret intimacy, however, either in deed or in word, and that grieved her much.

That night the knights and maidens lay down to sleep until the morning, when they went to hear mass in a chapel which stood amidst the pavilions. Just as mass had been sung, a very young knight rode up in full armour with a white shield slung around his neck. He dismounted amidst the tents and came, fully armed, before the queen.

'My lady,' he said, 'I have a grievance against a knight here who killed my lion, and if you don't grant me satisfaction for this, I'll despise you as much as I do him, and do you as much harm as I can. So I pray and entreat you, out of love for Sir Gawain whose vassal I am, to help me obtain amends.'

'What is the knight's name?' asked the queen.

'Clamadoz of the Shadows, lady, and I think I see him there.'

'And what's your name?' she asked.

'Meliot of Logres.'

Then Clamadoz came before the queen, saying: 'My lady, I beg you once more to grant me satisfaction of the knight who killed my father and my uncle.'

'I need to be gone at once, lady,' said Meliot of Logres. 'I don't know who this knight is pleading against, but I accuse him of villainy for killing my lion.' And taking a strip of his hauberk he said: 'I hereby offer my gage.'

'Clamadoz,' said the queen, 'did you hear what this knight said?'

'I heard him well. It's true I killed his lion, but it attacked me first and gave me the wounds for which I've been treated here; and you surely know that the one who came here last night has done me a greater wrong than I've done this knight! I pray you let me take vengeance first.'

'But you've heard,' she said, 'that the knight who's come here, ready armed, wishes to leave at once. So defend yourself first against his accusation. We'll consider the other after.'

'Many thanks, my lady,' said Meliot. 'Sir Gawain will be most grateful to you, for this knight killed the lion who protected me from my enemies, nor was the entrance to your land ever exposed while my lion guarded it. And he contemptuously hung the lion's head on my own gate.'

'My lady,' said Clamadoz, 'I'll do whatever he wishes, but I beg you then to grant me satisfaction of the other knight.'

'That I will,' she replied, 'for no-one shall have cause to reproach me.'

So Clamadoz armed and mounted his great charger; he looked a bold and valiant knight indeed. He made his way to the middle of the pavilions where it was good and level, and there he found Meliot of Logres fully armed upon his horse; a fine and skilful knight he was, despite his youth. The ladies and maidens gathered on every side.

'Sir,' said the queen to Perceval, 'I pray you, be referee for these two knights.'

'As you wish, my lady.'

At that moment Meliot came charging at Clamadoz and Clamadoz at him, and they struck each other so hard on their shields that they pierced them and tore through their hauberks with the heads of their lances; blood came streaming from the wounds. But the lances were unbroken, and the knights drew back to prepare for a second charge, and came back at one another at a terrible pace; and they struck each other with such fury full in the chest that their hauberks could not save them from being speared deep into the flesh; and they collided so hard that horses and knights came crashing down together in a heap. The queen and the maidens were deeply distressed, for they could see the two knights were sorely wounded. But they had climbed to their feet and were clutching their bare, drawn swords, for their lances were broken. With all the strength they could summon they assailed each other in a fury, and the queen cried to Perceval:

'Go, sir, and part those knights before one kills the other, for they're grievously wounded!'

And so Perceval went to separate them, and: 'Stop now, sir,' he said to Meliot of Logres, 'you've done enough.' And Clamadoz, knowing the wound in his chest was very deep, drew back likewise.

The queen now approached and said to her nephew: 'Clamadoz, you're sorely wounded. It grieves me, but there's nothing I can do; I've never seen a knight whose will for fighting didn't at some time serve him ill. A man can never attain all his rights.'

She had him carried on his shield into a tent, where he was stripped of his arms and his wounds were tended to: there was nothing to fear from one of them, but the other was dangerous indeed.

'I beg and entreat you once more,' he said to the queen, 'as my lady and my aunt, not to let the knight who killed my father leave here, unless he gives assurances that he'll return when I'm cured.'

'I'll do so,' she said, 'since that's your wish.'

And she came to Perceval and said: 'Sir, you must stay with us till my nephew's healed; you're well aware of the charge he's made against you, and I wouldn't have you go while under accusation.'

'My lady,' he said, 'I've no desire to make a speedy departure or go without your leave, and I'll always be ready to defend myself against reproach. But I can't stay here so long; I swear to you that I'll return within forty days or however long it takes his wounds to mend.'

'Sir,' said the Maiden of the Cart, 'I'll stay here as your hostage.'

'Oh, but beg him,' the queen cried to her, 'to stay here with you!'

'I can't, my lady,' said Perceval, 'for I left Lancelot sorely wounded at my uncle's hermitage.'

'Sir,' said the queen, 'I wish that staying here could please you as much as it would please me.'

'It should displease no-one to be with you,' he said, 'but every man must keep his word, and I promised Lancelot that I'd return as soon as I could – and no-one should lie to so fine a knight.'

'Then do you promise me,' she said, 'that you'll return by the time Clamadoz is healed to defend yourself against his charge of treachery?'

'And if he should die, my lady, would I be absolved of having to return?'

'Of course, sir, unless you'd return out of love for me, for your return would give me great joy.'

'My lady, there'll never be a day,' Perceval replied, 'when my service will not be freely given you, if I'm in a position to be of help.'

With that he took his leave and departed, fully armed, and the Maiden of the Cart commended him to God.

Perceval galloped swiftly away, and rode hard each day until he reached his uncle's hermitage. He expected to find Lancelot there, but his uncle told him that he had left, fully healed of his wound. Perceval was sorry not to find Lancelot, but he rejoiced to hear his uncle say that he had departed in good health and spirits.

Lancelot's Quest

WHEN LANCELOT LEFT THE HERMITAGE he rode on until he passed out of the forest and found before him a waste land, a land stretching far and wide where there dwelt neither beasts nor birds, for the earth was so poor and dry that there was no pasture to be found. Lancelot gazed far before him, and a city appeared to view; he rode on towards it at a swift pace, and found that the city was so huge that it stretched to every horizon. But he could see its walls crumbling round about, and the gates leaning with age. He rode inside to find the city deserted, its great palaces derelict and waste, its markets and exchanges empty, its vast graveyards full of tombs, its churches crumbling. Through the great streets he rode until he found a huge palace which seemed to be less ruined than the others. He drew rein before it, to hear knights and ladies lamenting bitterly and saying to a knight:

'Oh God! What a shame and sorrow it is that you must go and die, and your death cannot be delayed!'

Lancelot heard all this but could see no-one. But just then the knight came down from the hall: he was young and handsome, and was dressed in a red coat girdled with a rich belt of silk and gold; a beautiful brooch was pinned at his neck clustered with precious stones; his head was crowned with a golden hat; and in his hands he clutched a huge axe. As he approached he said to Lancelot: 'Dismount, sir.'

'Gladly,' said Lancelot, and he climbed down and tethered his horse to a silver ring set in the mounting-block. 'What do you want, sir?' he said to the knight.

'Sir,' came the reply, 'you must cut off my head with this axe, for I'm condemned to death with this weapon; if not, I'll cut off yours.'

'By my life!' cried Lancelot. 'What are you saying?'

'What you hear, sir,' said the knight. 'This you must do since you've come to the city.'

'Sir,' said Lancelot, 'only a fool would fail to see how to get the better in this game! But it would be to my shame to kill you without cause.'

'Truly,' said the knight, 'you cannot leave otherwise.'

'Dear sir,' said Lancelot, 'you look so fine and noble: how can you go so

calmly to your death? You surely know I'd sooner kill you than have you kill me, since that's the choice.'

'I'm well aware of that,' said the knight, 'but you must swear to me before I die that you'll return to the city in a year's time and offer your head freely, without contest, just as I offer mine.'

'Upon my soul!' cried Lancelot. 'Nothing you could say would dissuade me from deferring death rather than dying here and now. But I'm amazed you're so well prepared to die.'

'Sir,' the knight replied, 'a man about to go before the Saviour of the world must cleanse himself of all the sins he's ever committed, and I'm now truly repented of mine, and I want to die so.'

And with that he handed him the axe. Lancelot took it and saw how keen and sharp it was.

'Sir,' said the knight, 'stretch out your hand towards that church you can see.'

'Very well,' said Lancelot.

'Will you now swear to me on the relics in that church,' said the knight, 'that you'll return here a year from this day, at the hour at which you kill me, and offer your head freely, without defence, as I shall in a moment offer mine?'

'I swear it,' said Lancelot.

And with that the knight knelt down and stretched out his neck as straight as he could. Lancelot clutched the axe in both hands and said: 'For God's sake, sir knight, have mercy on yourself.'

'Willingly, sir. Let me cut off your head. Only thus can I find mercy.'

'That mercy I will not grant you,' said Lancelot, and he raised the axe and struck off the knight's head with such a terrible blow that he sent it flying seven feet from the body. The headless knight crashed to the ground, and as Lancelot threw down the axe he thought he would do ill to linger there, and he returned to his horse, took up his arms and mounted. When he looked back he could see neither the body of the knight nor his head, and he could not think what had become of them; but he heard a great, mournful crying of knights and ladies far off in the city: they were bewailing the Good Knight, and saying that he would be avenged, God willing, at the agreed time or sooner. Lancelot rode out of the city, hearing every word the knights and ladies said.

On he rode through a forest until he came upon a castle which lay across his path at the edge of a glade. At the entrance to the castle he saw an aged knight and two maidens sitting on a bridge. He rode that way and the knight and the maidens rose to meet him. Lancelot dismounted, and the old vassal said: 'Welcome, sir!'

And the maidens greeted him joyfully and led him into the castle.

'Sir,' said the vassal, 'we sorely needed you to come!'

Lancelot was led up to the hall and disarmed, and the maidens served him with the greatest kindness.

'These two girls,' the vassal said, 'are my daughters, and are in a sorry plight.

Certain men are trying to seize this castle from them, because they've no aid or support except from me, and I can provide no strong defence, for I'm old and frail. For a long while I've found no-one bold enough to defend me from our attackers, but you seem to be of such great valour that you'd surely go to my defence tomorrow, for our truce ends tonight.'

'What?' cried Lancelot. 'I came to this castle only to find lodging, and you'd engage me so soon in battle?'

'Thus, sir,' said the vassal, 'we'll test whether there's as much valour in your heart as there seems from your appearance; and in defending the fief of these maidens, my daughters, you'll win God's love and the world's honour.'

At that the maidens fell weeping at his feet, begging him to have mercy on them for God's sake, that they might not be robbed of their inheritance. And Lancelot, filled with pity, asked them to rise at once, saying: 'Damsels, I'll do all in my power to help you, but may the time be near.'

'Sir,' they replied, 'the day is fixed for tomorrow, and if by then we've not found a knight to be our champion, this castle will be lost to us for sure. This hateful attack is being levelled at us because we once gave lodging to Sir Gawain.'

Lancelot lay that night at the castle and was treated with all honour. The next day after hearing mass he armed, and as soon as he had done so, he heard three loud blasts of a horn ring out beyond the castle gate.

'Sir!' cried the vassal to Lancelot. 'The knight has arrived! He thinks there's no-one here to defend us.'

'But there is, by my life!' said Lancelot.

The knight sounded his horn once more, and Lancelot went down to find his horse saddled and he mounted at once. The maidens were at his stirrups, begging him in God's name to defend their honour, for if he failed, they would face a wretched flight to other lands. Once more the knight sounded his horn, and Lancelot would tarry no longer; out he rode, his lance in his hand and his shield slung at his neck. He could see the knight at the far end of the meadow, fully armed, waiting beneath a tree. Lancelot spurred towards him, and seeing him coming the knight cried:

'What do you want, sir knight? Have you come to do me harm?'

'Yes indeed!' cried Lancelot. 'For you mean to do mischief here, and I challenge you on behalf of the vassal and his daughters!'

And he struck the knight full on the shield, smashing through the boss with such a furious thrust that he pinned his arm to his side and felled both him and his horse. Then he leaped down and came running to the attack, sword drawn.

'Oh, sir!' cried the knight. 'Stand back! Don't kill me! Tell me your name.'

'What use is my name to you?'

'I'd gladly know it, sir,' he said, 'for you seem a fine knight indeed, as I've learned only too well in our first meeting!'

'My name, sir knight, is Lancelot of the Lake. And yours?'

'Marin, sir, of the Castle of Gomorret, and I'm the father of Meliot of Logres. And I beg you by all you hold most dear in the world not to kill me.'

'By all that I hold most dear in the world I will,' cried Lancelot, 'unless you abandon your hostility towards this castle!'

'Then truly, I shall,' said the knight. 'I promise they'll never have anything more to fear from me.'

'I'll not trust your word,' said Lancelot, 'unless you come with me to the castle.'

'Sir, you've wounded me gravely; I can't easily mount.'

So Lancelot helped Marin on to his horse, and then led him to the castle and made him present his sword to the vassal and the maidens and surrender his shield and his arms, and swear on holy relics that he would never again wage war upon them. With that he left the castle, while Marin made his way back to Gomorret, leaving the vassal and his two daughters to live in happiness.

Lancelot now journeyed through strange forests in search of adventure, and rode on until he found himself in open country outside a huge city which seemed to be of great importance. As he rode across the fields he saw a great company ride out amid a mighty noise of bagpipes and flutes and viols. They were coming down the road towards Lancelot, and when the foremost neared him they halted and redoubled their joy, crying: 'Welcome, sir!'

'My lords,' said Lancelot, 'who are you preparing to meet with such celebration?'

'Our masters will tell you that,' they said. 'They're following behind.'

And up came the provosts and the lords of the city to meet Lancelot. 'Sir,' they said, 'this whole city is overcome with jubilation for your sake, and all these instruments are sounding their joy at your coming!'

'Why should they sound for me?' said Lancelot.

'We'll tell you,' they said. 'This city has begun to burn in one quarter ever since the death of our king, and the fire will never be quenched until we find a king to be lord of our city and its fief for a year's term. At the end of that year he must cast himself into the fire, and then it will be extinguished. Until then it cannot be quenched, nor will it die. So we've come to meet you to bestow our kingdom upon you, for we've heard that you're a great knight!'

'My lords,' said Lancelot, 'I've no need of such a kingdom, and may God save me from the honour!'

'Sir,' they said, 'you can't be saved from it now that you've come to our land; and it would be a great pity if such a beautiful city were to fall to ruins to avoid the death of one man. And its fief is great indeed – it would be a high honour for you. And at the year's end you'll be crowned in the fire to save the city and its people and win high praise indeed!'

Lancelot was filled with awe by their words, but they crowded round him on every side and bore him into the city. Ladies and maidens stood at great stone windows to cry their joy, saying to one another:

'Behold, they bring the new king! In a year's time the fire will be quenched!'

'But God!' cried some. 'What a shame it is that such a handsome knight should die so.'

'Silence!' said others. 'It's a great joy that so fine a city as ours should be saved by his death, for all the kingdom will pray for his soul evermore.'

Rejoicing, they led him into the palace and said they would crown him. Lancelot found the palace strewn with reeds and hung with rich silken drapes, and all the lords of the city were standing ready to pay him homage; but he staunchly refused, saying he would never be their king or their lord in this way.

It was just then that a dwarf entered the city with one of the most beautiful maidens in the kingdom, and he asked what had caused such rejoicing and commotion. He was told how they wanted to make a knight their king and how he would not agree, and he was told about the fire, too; whereupon the dwarf and the maiden dismounted before the palace and climbed the steps, and the dwarf cried out to all the lords and the most powerful men of the city:

'My lords, since this knight has no wish to be king, I'll accept your crown most willingly, and govern this city at your pleasure and do all that you require.'

'In faith,' they said, 'since the knight has refused this honour and you wish to accept it, we grant it to you gladly. Now he may resume his journey, for we declare him free.'

With that they set the crown on the dwarf's head, and Lancelot, filled with joy, took his leave and commended them to God. But as he rode through the city in all his armour, the ladies and maidens whispered of how he was not willing to be king and die so soon.

He was glad indeed to leave the city behind, and he passed once more into a great forest and rode on until the sun went down; and then, looking ahead, he caught sight of a hermitage: it had been set up very recently, for the dwelling and the chapel were newly built. He turned that way to find lodging, and as he dismounted, the hermit, a young man without a beard or a moustache, came out of the chapel.

'Welcome, sir!' he said to Lancelot.

'I wish you good fortune,' he replied. 'But I've never seen one so young as you in a hermitage.'

'Sir, my only regret is that I didn't come here a long time ago.'

With that, he stabled Lancelot's horse and led him into the hermitage, where he took off his armour and made him as comfortable as he could.

'Sir,' said the hermit, 'can you give me news of a knight who lay for a long time at the house of a hermit king?'

'Oh, it's only a short while since I saw him.'

'Where was that, sir?' he said.

'At that very house, for the Hermit King cared for me and tended the wounds the knight gave me!'

'Then the knight is now cured?'

'Yes, sir,' said Lancelot, 'which is a great joy indeed. But why do you ask?'

'It's only right that I should,' he said, 'for my father King Pelles is his uncle, and his mother is my father's sister.'

'Oh, sir, then the Hermit King is your father?'

'Indeed he is.'

'Then I love you the more,' said Lancelot, 'for I never met a man who did me such honour as he. What's your name?'

'Joseus; and yours?'

'Sir,' he said, 'my name is Lancelot of the Lake.'

'Then we're closely related, you and I!'

'Truly,' said Lancelot, 'that gladdens my heart!'

Then he looked around the hermit's dwelling and saw a shield and a lance, a sword, a hauberk and javelins.

'Sir,' he said, 'why do you keep those weapons?'

'This forest is a lonely place,' he replied, 'far from any people, and there's no-one here but me and my boy. When robbers and villains come to attack us, we defend ourselves.'

'I didn't think,' said Lancelot, 'that anyone would kill or hurt a hermit.'

'And may God keep me,' said the hermit, 'from ever killing or wounding a man.'

'Then how do you defend yourself?'

'When robbers come we arm ourselves; if I can get hold of one with my hands he'll not escape, and my boy is tough and brave and will kill him at once or render him harmless.'

'By my life,' said Lancelot, 'I can see that if you weren't a hermit you'd do likewise!'

'True enough,' said the hermit's boy, 'for I think there's none as strong and bold as he in all the kingdom of Logres!'

That night the hermit lodged Lancelot as well as he could. But just as they had fallen asleep, four robber knights came riding up from the forest, for they knew that a knight was lodged there, and coveted his horse and arms. The hermit, who was in the chapel, spotted them first, and he woke his boy and told him to fetch his arms as quietly as he could. Then he armed at once and told the boy to do likewise.

'Shall I wake the knight, sir?' asked the boy.

'No, not until we have good reason.'

Then snatching up a piece of rope he opened the chapel door, and they ran outside to find the robbers in the stable, about to steal Lancelot's horse. The hermit shouted out at them, and the boy ran forward and brought one down with his lance; the hermit seized him and bound him to a tree so tightly that he could not move, while the other three set about defending themselves and tried to rescue their companion. Lancelot heard the commotion and jumped up in alarm and armed himself as fast as he could; but by the time he arrived the hermit had caught the other three and tied them up with the fourth.

'Ah, sir,' said the hermit to Lancelot, 'I'm sorry you were woken up.'

'It was very wrong of you,' he said, 'not to call on me before!'

'Oh,' said the hermit, 'we often have attacks like this.'

The four robbers begged Lancelot for mercy, imploring him to ask the hermit to take pity on them; but Lancelot said: 'May God never aid a man who has pity on thieves.'

And as soon as it was day, Lancelot and the boy led them out into the forest, their hands tied behind their backs, and hanged them in a wild place far from the hermitage.

Then Lancelot took his leave of the young hermit Joseus, saying that it was a great loss to the world that he was not a knight.

'But it's a great joy, too, sir,' said the boy, 'for many men may find a model in him.'

Lancelot mounted and Joseus commended him to God, and begged him to greet his father and cousin for him when he saw them, and Sir Gawain, too, who had met him in the forest as he came in tears to the hermitage.

Lancelot took to the road again. He journeyed on through great forests, finding many castles and hermitages, until he came at last upon a beautiful meadowland where flowers bloomed everywhere; and through it flowed a great river, clear and wide. Looking ahead, Lancelot caught sight of a big boat; on board were three aged, white-haired knights, and a maiden who seemed to be resting in her lap the head of a knight who lay upon a mattress covered with brocaded silk and blanketed with ermine. Another maiden was sitting at his feet. There was a knight in the boat fishing; the shank of his hook seemed to be of gold, and he was catching a great number of big fish, which he placed in a little craft behind the boat. Lancelot rode down to the bank as fast as he could and hailed the knights and maidens, who returned his greeting most courteously.

'My lords,' said Lancelot, 'is there a house or a castle near here?'

'Indeed there is, sir,' they said, 'on the other side of that mountain; a fine and handsome castle, and this river flows all round it.'

'To whom does it belong, my lords?'

'To the Fisher King,' they said. 'He gives lodging to good knights who come to this land. But lodging has been taken there by knights whom he has good cause to reproach.'

The knights sailed on down the river while Lancelot made his way to the foot of the mountain, where he found a hermitage beside a spring; and he thought to himself that, since he was about to go to so great and noble a house as that in which the Grail appeared, he would make confession to the holy man. So he dismounted and did so, owning to all his sins; and he said that he repented of all of them but one. The hermit asked him which sin that was.

'Sir,' said Lancelot, 'it seems to me the sweetest and most beautiful sin I ever committed.'

'Dear sir,' said the hermit, 'sins are sweet to commit, but the reward is bitter indeed; and no sin is beautiful or noble, though some are more base than others.'

'My tongue will tell,' said Lancelot, 'of the sin that my heart cannot repent. My lady, who is a queen, I dearly love more than anything in the world, and one of the finest kings alive has her for his wife. My desire for her seems to me so fine and noble that I cannot abandon it, and it is now so rooted in my heart that it can never leave me. And whatever is of most worth in me comes from that desire.'

'Oh, mortal sinner!' cried the hermit. 'What are you saying? Nothing of worth can come from such lust, and it will be most dearly bought! You are traitor to your earthly lord and a crucifier of the Saviour. Of the seven deadly sins you are burdened with one of the greatest. The joy it gives is pure deception, and you'll pay most dearly for it if you do not soon repent.'

'Never again, sir,' said Lancelot, 'will I confess it to any man on earth.'

'So much the worse!' cried the hermit. 'You should have confessed it long ago, and ceased your sinning forthwith, for as long as you hold to such ways you are an enemy of the Saviour.'

'Oh, sir!' cried Lancelot. 'There is so much beauty and worth and wisdom and courtesy in her that no man on whom she bestowed her love should abandon it!'

'The more beauty there is in her and the more worth,' said the hermit, 'the more she is to blame, and you likewise, for there is far less shame in a man of little worth than in one who ought to be worth much. And she is a blessed and sacred queen, sworn from the beginning to God, but now she has given herself to the Devil because of your love, just as you have done. My good, dear sir, abandon this folly of yours, repent of this sin, and each day I shall pray for you to the Saviour, that as truly as He gave forgiveness for His death to the man who pierced Him in the side with his lance, so may He forgive you for this sin you have clung to, so long as you confess yourself and are truly repentant. And I will take the penance upon myself.'

'I thank you, sir,' said Lancelot, 'but I've no desire to abandon my love, nor do I wish to say anything to you that my heart would deny. I will gladly do as great a penance as is laid down for this sin, for I wish to serve my lady the queen as long as she will have me as her love. And God is so gentle and full of kindness, as all holy men testify, that He will have mercy on us, for I've never been untrue to her, nor she to me.'

'Oh, my dear friend!' said the hermit. 'Nothing I say to you will be of any avail, but may God give both her and you the will to do the Saviour's bidding and save your souls. But now I must tell you this: because of the mortal sin that lies in your heart, if you lodge at the house of the rich Fisher King you will never see the Grail.'

'May God and His sweet mother guide me,' said Lancelot, 'by His will and pleasure.'

'May He indeed,' said the hermit. 'I, too, would have it so.'

Then Lancelot took his leave and mounted and left the hermitage. Night was near: he saw that it was time to find lodging, and there before him he could

see the castle of the Fisher King. He saw its bridges great and wide, for they did not seem to him as they had seemed to Sir Gawain. He gazed at the fine gateway where God was pictured, nailed to the Cross; and he saw two lions guarding the entrance, and thought that Sir Gawain must have passed between the lions, and so would he. He rode on towards the gate, and the lions on their chains pricked up their ears and watched him; but Lancelot passed through with no fear; and neither did him any harm.

He dismounted before the great hall and climbed the steps. Two aged knights came to greet him, and received him with the greatest joy, seating him on a couch in the middle of the hall and bidding two servants take off his armour. Two maidens brought Lancelot a rich gown and elegantly dressed him, while he gazed at the splendour of the hall, adorned with holy images and hung on every side with silken drapes. Then the two knights led him into the richest of chambers; and there lay the Fisher King, on a bed so rich and so finely decked that never was one more splendid seen; and there was a maiden at his head and one at his feet. Lancelot greeted him most highly and the king replied in comely words befitting such a noble man; and the room was filled with such a brilliant light that it seemed as if the sun were streaming in on every side, yet it was far into the night, and Lancelot could see no candle burning anywhere.

'Sir,' said the Fisher King, 'can you give me news of my grandson, the son of Alain li Gros of the Vales of Kamaalot, who is called Perceval?'

'I saw him, sire,' said Lancelot, 'just a short while ago at the house of his uncle, the Hermit King.'

'I've heard he's a fine knight indeed.'

'The finest in the world, sire,' said Lancelot. 'I myself have tasted his merit and valour, for he wounded me sorely before we recognised each other.'

'And what is your name?' said the king.

'Sire, my name is Lancelot of the Lake, the son of King Ban of Benuic.'

'Ah,' said the king, 'then you are of our line. You should be a fine knight indeed, and so you are, as I've heard tell. Lancelot,' he said, 'behold the chapel of the Holy Grail. It appeared to two knights who came here: I don't know the name of the first, but I never saw one so calm or so composed, nor one who looked a finer knight. But because of him I've fallen into languor. The other knight was Sir Gawain.'

'Sire,' said Lancelot, 'the first was your grandson, Perceval.'

'Oh!' cried the Fisher King. 'Take care that you speak true!'

'I do, sire,' said Lancelot. 'I ought to know him.'

'Oh, God!' cried the king. 'Then why did I not realise? Because of him I'm languishing, but if I'd known that it was he, I would now have been sound in limbs and body! I pray you, when you see him, tell him to come and see me before I die, and to go and aid his sister, for her men are being slain and her land is being taken, and he alone can win it back. His sister has gone in search of him through every realm.'

'Sire,' said Lancelot, 'I'll gladly tell him so if I find him anywhere; but it'll be a great stroke of luck if I do, for he goes under many disguises and conceals his name in many parts.'

The Fisher King honoured Lancelot most highly. The knights led him into the hall and seated him to dine at an ivory table. When they had washed, the table was laid with the richest vessels of gold and silver, and they were served with fine dishes of venison and boar. But the Grail did not appear at the feast. It did not appear, because Lancelot was not one of the three finest knights in the world, because of his sin with the queen; he would not repent of his love for her, for he thought more of her than of anything else and could not restrain his heart. When they had eaten they rose from the tables, and two maidens attended upon Lancelot as he went to his bed; he lay that night on the finest of couches, and they would not leave his side until he had fallen asleep.

He rose next morning as soon as he saw day break and went to hear mass. Then he took his leave of the Fisher King and the knights and maidens, and rode out of the castle between the two lions, praying to God that he might soon see the queen, for that was his greatest desire. He rode on until he had left the castle far behind, and passed into the forest, dearly hoping to meet Perceval, but he was not to hear news of him for quite some time.

The Castle of Marvels

MEANWHILE SIR GAWAIN HAD BEEN JOURNEYING ON, and one morning, between nine o'clock and noon, he came riding up a hill and saw a massive oak tree, thick with leaves, giving plenty of shade. He could see a shield hung on the oak, and beside it a good, straight lance. He hurried on towards the tree until he noticed a small, dark palfrey beside it; he was astonished by this, for it did not seem right to him: arms and a palfrey – usually a lady's mount – did not go together. Had it been a charger he would have supposed that some knight, roaming the country in search of honour and glory, had climbed the hill. But then he looked beneath the oak and saw a girl sitting there, who would have seemed most beautiful to him if only she had been happy; but her fingers were thrust into her tresses and tearing out her hair: she was going wild with grief. She was grieving for a knight, and was kissing him over and over on the eyes and lips and forehead. Sir Gawain came closer and saw that the knight was wounded, with his face cut all over and a terrible sword-wound in his head, and down both his sides blood flowed in great streams. The knight had fainted many times from his pain and now was lying motionless, and when Sir Gawain arrived he could not tell whether he was alive or dead.

'How does he seem, dear girl?' he said.

And she replied: 'You can see his wounds are dangerous: he'd die of the very smallest.'

'Good friend,' said Gawain, 'try to wake him, please; I want to ask him about the affairs of this land.'

'I'd sooner be flayed alive!' said the girl. 'I've never loved a man so much, and never will as long as I live. Now that he's sleeping and at rest I'd be a wretched fool to disturb him.'

'Then truly, I'll wake him if I can!' said Sir Gawain, and turning his lance around he nudged him on the ankle with the butt. It did not disturb the knight to be woken, for Sir Gawain shook his spur so gently that he did not hurt him. Instead the knight thanked him, saying:

'A thousand thanks, sir, for waking me so gently that I've suffered no harm. But for your own sake I beg you, go no further: you'll be a fool if you do. Take my advice and stop here.'

'Stop? Why should I?'

'No knight who's ever gone this way, by road or field, has ever come back, for this is the border of Galvoie, and no knight can cross it and return. I'm the only one who's ever done so, and look at the state I'm in: I won't last the day. I met a knight, bold and strong and fearsome: I've never tested myself against his equal. So turn back.'

'In faith,' said Sir Gawain, 'it would be foul cowardice in me if I turned back having taken this path. I'm going on until I find out why no-one can return.'

'I see,' said the wounded knight, 'you're eager to increase your honour. But I ask this of you: if God should grant you the honour which no knight has ever had – and I don't think any ever will – please return this way and see if I'm alive or dead. And if I'm dead, then in the name of charity and the Holy Trinity I beg you take care of this girl, and see that she suffers no shame or harm. Please do so, for God never made one more noble or kind-hearted.'

Sir Gawain granted his wish, promising that, if he were not prevented by capture or some other misfortune, he would return to him and give the girl such assistance as he could. With that he left them and rode on without stopping, over plains and through forests, until he caught sight of a mighty castle, one side of which was a sea-port with a fleet resting at anchor. This noble castle was worth little less than Pavia. On its other side lay a vineyard, and beneath it flowed the great river which girded its walls, enclosing the castle and town on every side. Sir Gawain rode into the castle over the bridge, and when he had climbed to the strongest part of the city he found, beneath an elm tree in a courtyard, a sweet girl, whiter than snow, gazing at her face and lips in a mirror. She had made a crown around her head with a thin circlet of golden thread. Sir Gawain dug in his spurs and cantered up towards the girl, but she shouted to him:

'Easy, sir, easy! Go gently now! You're riding like a madman. There's no need to hurry and wear out your horse: it's foolish to rush for nothing.'

'God bless you, girl,' said Sir Gawain. 'What made you so quick to tell me to go easy?'

'Oh, I had good reason, knight, truly I did; for I know exactly what you're thinking.'

'What's that?' he said.

'You want to carry me off across the neck of your horse.'

'True enough, girl!'

'I knew it,' she said, 'but curse the thinker of such a thought! I'm not one of those simpletons that knights sport with and carry off on their horses when they go in search of chivalry. And yet you *could* take me with you, if you dared do what I ask.'

'What's your wish?' asked Gawain, remembering his vow to the King of the Watch that he would grant whatever was asked by the first maiden who had a request of him.

'Go and fetch my palfrey from that garden,' she replied. 'If you do I'll go with you – and mishap and hardship and grief and shame will befall you in my company.'

'Is anything needed but courage, friend?' said Gawain.

'I don't think so, vassal,' she replied.

'Where shall I leave my horse if I go? He won't be able to cross that plank.'

'No, he won't. Give him to me and cross on foot. I'll keep your horse for you. But come back quickly, for I couldn't keep hold of him if he refused to be calm, or if he were taken from me by force before you came back.'

'That's true,' he said. 'But I shan't hold you to blame if he escapes or is snatched from you.'

So he gave her the horse and set off, but decided to take all his arms with him, for if there were someone in the garden who refused him the palfrey and forbade him to take it, there would be trouble and combat before he brought it back. And just as he crossed the plank he saw a great crowd of people gathered together; they stared at him in dismay and cried:

'May a hundred demons burn you, girl, for being so wicked! You've sent so many worthy men to lose their heads. What a grievous shame! You want to fetch the palfrey, knight, but you don't know what'll befall you if you touch it! Oh, knight! Turn back!'

So said all the men and women, but it was not going to change his mind; Sir Gawain headed straight for the palfrey, and was just reaching for the bridle when a great knight, sitting beneath a lush, green olive tree, said: 'Don't lay a finger on it. I advise you to be gone, for if you take that palfrey you'll find a fearsome challenge.'

'That won't stop me, sir,' said Sir Gawain, 'for the girl by the elm tree with the mirror sent me for it, and if I don't take it back I'd be damned on Earth as a cowardly good-for-nothing.'

'Then you'll suffer for it, brother,' said the knight, 'for by God the sovereign father, no knight has ever dared take the palfrey and escaped the grim fate of being beheaded.'

Sir Gawain would not linger a moment more. He drove the palfrey, whose head was black on one side and white on the other, across the plank before him. It had no trouble in crossing, for it had often done so and was well schooled in it now. Sir Gawain took it by its silken rein and came straight to the elm tree where the girl was gazing at herself in her mirror; she had cast her mantle and wimple to the ground so that she could see her face and body freely. Sir Gawain presented the saddled palfrey to her and said: 'Come now, girl, and I'll help you to mount.'

'May God never let it be said,' she replied, 'that you held me in your arms. If your bare hand touched any part of me I'd think myself disgraced. I'd rather have the flesh flayed from my bones! And God grant that I see what I expect: disaster befalling you before the day is out! Go where you like: I'll follow your every step until you've suffered some grave disgrace and mis-

hap. I'm sure I'll make you come to grief – you can't escape it any more than death!'

Sir Gawain heard every word the haughty girl said, but made no reply. He just gave her the palfrey and she returned his horse. Then he bent down, meaning to pick up her mantle from the ground and drape it round her; but the girl, who was never slow in saying shameful words to a knight, said: 'Vassal, what business have you with my mantle? Your hands aren't fit to touch anything I wear.'

So the girl mounted, and donned and fastened her clothes herself, and said: 'Now, knight, go where you please, and I'll follow you everywhere, until I see you disgraced because of me – and that'll be today, if it please God!'

Sir Gawain, feeling humbled and embarrassed, was silent, unable to find a word in reply. He mounted, and they set off; and with his head bowed he turned back along the path towards the oak where he had left the girl and the knight who was in sore need of a doctor. Sir Gawain knew more than any man about healing wounds, and he saw a herb in a hedgerow which was very good for taking the pain from a wound, and he went and picked it; then he carried on until he found the girl beneath the oak tree, lamenting; and as soon as she saw him she said: 'Dear sir, I think this knight is dead now: he hears nothing any more.'

Sir Gawain dismounted, and found that the knight had a firm pulse, and his mouth and cheek were not very cold.

'No, girl,' he said, 'this knight's alive; and I've brought a herb which will relieve the pain of his wounds as soon as it touches him; no finer herb can be set upon a wound, and if it were bound to the bark of an infected tree, the roots would recover and the tree would return to leaf and flower. We'll need a wimple of fine cloth to make a bandage.'

'Take the one I'm wearing,' she said without hesitation. And she took the wimple from her head, and it was very fine and white; and Sir Gawain cut it up as necessary and bound the herb on all the knight's wounds. Then Gawain stayed motionless until the knight gave a sigh and spoke, saying:

'May God reward the one who's restored my speech, for I was greatly afraid of dying without confession. Demons came here in procession, seeking my soul. I know a chaplain near here, and if only I had something to ride I'd go and confess my sins and take communion – then I'd no longer fear death. So do me this service, I pray you: give me the packhorse of that squire who's trotting this way.'

Sir Gawain turned and saw a squire coming, of most unpleasant appearance: his hair was red and stood stiffly on end like the spines of an angry porcupine, and his eyebrows were the same; and he had a great slit of a mouth, and a wide beard, forked and curled, and a short neck and a swollen chest.

Sir Gawain said to the knight: 'God help me, sir, I don't know who this squire is, but I'd rather give you seven chargers than his packhorse, whoever he may be.'

'I tell you,' said the knight, 'he's intent on one thing only: to do you harm if he can.'

Sir Gawain went to meet the squire and asked him where he was going. And he, being far from amiable, replied: 'What business is it of yours, vassal? Whatever my path may be, I wish ill-fortune on your body!'

In an instant Sir Gawain gave him his just deserts, striking him with his open palm; and, his arm being armoured and his will to strike keen, he toppled him and emptied his saddle; and when the squire tried to rise he staggered and fell down flat again.

'You hit me, vassal!'

'Indeed I did,' said Gawain, 'and I'm sorry, but you spoke most offensively.'

'Well, you'll pay for it! You'll lose the hand and the arm that dealt that blow, for it'll never be forgiven you!'

While this was happening, the wounded knight's heart, which had been so weak, returned to him, and he said to Sir Gawain: 'Leave that squire: you'll never have an honourable word from him. But bring me his packhorse: I need to make confession – I shan't stop until I've received the last sacrament.'

Sir Gawain took the packhorse at once and gave it to the knight; his sight had now returned and cleared, and he saw Sir Gawain and recognised him for the first time. Gawain took the girl and, like the kind and courteous knight he was, set her upon the dark palfrey; and while he was helping her into the saddle, the knight took Gawain's horse and mounted, and began to send him charging hither and thither in all directions. Sir Gawain saw him galloping about the hill and laughed in amazement; but as he laughed he said:

'By my faith, sir knight, you're foolish to make my horse leap about like that! Dismount and give him to me, for you could easily reopen your wounds.'

But he replied: 'Hold your tongue, Gawain! You'd better take the packhorse, for you've lost your charger! I like the way he goes, and I'm taking him with me for my own!'

'What! I come here to help you and you'd do me wrong? Don't you dare take my horse: it would be treachery.'

'Gawain, I'd like to tear your heart from your belly with both hands!'

'This reminds me of a proverb,' Gawain replied. '"Do some men a good deed and your neck will bleed"! I'd like to know why you'd have my heart, and why you're taking my horse; for never in my life have I done you any harm. I've never seen you before, as far as I know.'

'Yes, you have, Gawain. And you did me a great disgrace. Don't you remember the man you humiliated by making him eat with the dogs for a month, with his hands tied behind his back? I tell you, that was a foolish deed! But now you're paying for it!'

And Gawain, recalling an incident from many years before, remembered the knight's name and said: 'Are you then Greoreas, who abducted the girl and had your way with her? Yet you knew full well that in King Arthur's land girls

are protected; the king has given them a safeguard, and watches over them and ensures their safe conduct. The punishment I dealt you was for the sake of justice, which is imposed throughout the king's land.'

'And now *you* must suffer the justice that *I*'ll exact: I'm taking your charger Gringalet, for that's the best revenge I can have for now; and you'll have to make do with the squire's packhorse – you've not much choice, I'd say!'

With that Greoreas left him and raced off after his sweetheart, who was riding swiftly away. And the haughty girl laughed at Sir Gawain and said: 'Oh, vassal, vassal, what are you going to do? It may well be said of you now: "There's one born every day"! By God, it's great fun following you! If only the packhorse were a mare! Then your disgrace would be greater still!'

Then Sir Gawain, having no choice, mounted the stupid, trotting packhorse. It was an ugly beast, with a bent spine, a thin neck, a fat head and long, limp ears, and all the imperfections of age: its lips sagged, its eyes were cloudy and dim, its hooves covered in sores, and its flanks were hard and slashed by spurs. The reins and bridle were made of old rope, and the saddle, which had seen better days, had no blanket. And the stirrups were so short and weak that he did not dare stand up in them.

'Oh,' cried the girl, plaguing him, 'what a noble escort you look for a girl! Give your horse a bit of a spur and test him – but watch out: he's like lightning! I'll follow you, yes, and I'll never leave you till total disgrace has befallen you – as it surely will.'

'Dear friend,' he replied, 'it isn't right for a girl to speak so impolitely when she's past the age of ten; she should be well-mannered and courteous, if she has the wit to learn.'

'What! You want to teach me lessons, do you, Sir Hapless? I don't need instruction from you! Ride on and hold your tongue, for you're equipped now as I wanted you to be.'

And so they rode on till evening, and neither of them said a word. Sir Gawain went ahead and she rode behind. He didn't know what to do with his packhorse: it went at a walk whether he liked it or not, for if he dug in his spurs he had a dreadful ride: it shook up his insides so much that he couldn't bear to have it go above walking-pace.

On the packhorse carried him through wild and lonely forests, until he came to a flat land beside a deep river, so wide that no mangonel or catapult could have thrown a stone across. On the further bank, overlooking the river, very well appointed and immensely strong, stood a castle on a cliff, with a great palace set upon a sheer rock, built entirely of grey marble. There were a good five hundred open windows in the palace, and all were filled with girls and ladies, gazing out before them at the meadows and flowery gardens. Many of the girls were dressed in samite, and most wore silken gowns of different colours, all brocaded with gold. From outside they could be seen from the waist up, with their shining heads and comely bodies.

The most evil woman in the world, who was now riding ahead of Sir Gawain,

came straight down to the river. There she stopped and dismounted from her little mottled palfrey; and on the bank she found a boat, fastened and padlocked to a stone. But there was an oar on board, and on the stone lay the key to the lock. The evil-hearted girl climbed into the boat and drew her palfrey in after her, as she had done many times before.

'Vassal,' she called to Gawain, 'dismount now and climb in here with your packhorse – it's as skinny as a chicken! – and take up the anchor. I tell you, you'll be in a sorry plight unless you cross this river quickly – or can swim fast!'

'What, girl? Why?'

'You haven't seen what I can see: if you had you'd flee with all speed!'

Sir Gawain looked round and saw a knight riding towards him across the meadow, fully armed. 'Who's that?' he asked. 'He's mounted on my horse, which that traitor stole this morning after I healed him of his wounds!'

'I wouldn't tell you if I thought it was good news!' said the girl. 'But since I'm sure it's not I shan't hide it from you: he's Greoreas's nephew! He's sent him after you, and I'll tell you why: Greoreas has commanded him to track you to your death and to take him back your head! That's why I advise you to climb aboard and flee, unless you want to die right here!'

'I certainly won't flee because of him, girl. I'll wait for him.'

'Well I shan't stop you!' said the girl. 'Oh, what a fine charge you'll make in front of all those beautiful girls at the windows! They'll love it, with you mounted on that mighty packhorse!'

'Whatever it may cost me, girl, I'm not going to shirk this. I want to win back my horse.'

And he turned his packhorse to face the knight who was spurring across the sandy riverbank. Sir Gawain prepared to meet him, and braced himself so firmly in the stirrups that he snapped the left one clean off; and the packhorse wouldn't move: for all his spurring he couldn't make it stir.

'Oh!' he cried. 'A packhorse is no mount for a knight when he wants to do battle!'

And the knight gave Gawain such a blow with his lance that it bent like a bow and snapped clean across, leaving the head in his shield. And Sir Gawain struck him above the boss, and with such force that it smashed through both shield and mail-coat and brought him crashing down in the fine sand. Sir Gawain reached out and seized his horse and leaped into the saddle. This adventure was so sweet to him that he had never felt happier in his life. He rode back to the girl who had climbed into the boat – but there was no sign either of the boat or of her. He had no idea what had become of them.

While he sat there thinking about the girl he saw a skiff coming from the castle, guided by a pilot. And when the pilot reached the bank he said: 'Sir, I bring you greetings from the girls at the windows yonder; and they send you word not to withhold my rightful possession.'

'God bless you and all that fair company,' Gawain replied. 'What is it you want from me?'

'I saw you topple a knight here whose horse I should rightfully have. Unless you mean to do me wrong you ought to hand the horse to me.'

And Gawain said: 'It would be a great hardship for me, my friend, to give up what you say is yours, for I'd have to continue on foot.'

'Shame upon you! Those girls will think you most disloyal now, refusing to return what is rightfully mine. Whenever a knight's been unhorsed on this bank I've always claimed his mount. And if I didn't get the horse I was given the knight.'

'I'll not refuse you the knight, my friend: you're welcome to him!'

'That's no gift!' said the pilot. 'I'd never be able to take him if he decided to defend himself! If you've got it in you, go and capture him and bring him to me; then you can keep what's rightfully mine.'

'Friend, if I dismount and go on foot, can I trust you to keep my horse in good faith?'

'Certainly,' he said. 'I'll keep him and return him faithfully, I swear it.'

So Gawain climbed from Gringalet and entrusted him to the pilot, and set out, sword drawn; but the knight had no need of further trouble, for he was badly wounded in the side and had lost a good deal of blood.

'It's no use pretending, sir,' he said, in great difficulty. 'I've such a grievous wound that I can do without receiving worse; I've lost a gallon of blood – I submit to your mercy.'

'Get up, then,' said Sir Gawain.

And the knight struggled up, and Gawain led him back to the pilot, who thanked him deeply. Then Gawain asked him to tell him about the girl he had led there, and where she had gone.

'Forget about her, sir,' the pilot replied. 'She's not a girl: she's worse than Satan! On this bank she's caused many a knight to be beheaded. Come now and accept such lodging as I can offer, for it's no good staying here on the riverbank: it's a wild place, and full of strange marvels.'

Sir Gawain did as the pilot advised. His horse was taken aboard, and he climbed in after, and they set out and sailed to the other bank. The pilot's house was close to the water, and was such that a count could have disembarked there: he had every comfort in that house. The pilot led his guest and his prisoner inside, and gave them the finest welcome that he could. Sir Gawain was served with everything befitting a worthy man: he dined on plover and pheasant and partridge and venison, and the wines were strong and clear, white and red, new and old. Sir Gawain's host and lodging that night were much to his liking: he deeply appreciated the pilot's hospitality.

Next morning he rose as soon as he saw day break, as was his custom, and the pilot rose likewise to look after his guest. They went together and leaned at the windows of a turret, and Sir Gawain gazed out over the countryside, which was beautiful indeed, and saw the forests and the plains and the castle on the cliff.

'Kind host,' he said, 'who is the lord of this land and the castle?'

But the pilot replied: 'I don't know, sir.'

'Truly? You astonish me: you're a retainer of the castle and it brings you a handsome living, yet you don't know who its lord is?'

'I promise you,' he said, 'I don't know and have never known.'

'Then tell me, who defends the castle?'

'It's very well guarded, sir: there are five hundred bows and crossbows always at the ready. If the castle were ever threatened they'd shoot ceaselessly and never tire, so ingeniously are they arranged. And I tell you this: there's a queen at the castle, a noble, rich and wise lady of the highest lineage. She came to live in this land with a great treasure of gold and silver, and built the mighty castle you see before you; and she brought with her a lady whom she dearly loves: she's her daughter, and a queen likewise. She, too, has a daughter, who does nothing to debase or shame her line, for I don't think there's a girl of fairer looks or manners beneath heaven. And the hall, let me tell you, is protected by magic and enchantment. In that great hall a clerk versed in astronomy has created unheard-of marvels; for no knight can enter there and live if there's any vice in him. No coward or traitor or perjurer can survive: all die there in an instant. But there are many squires from many lands serving at the castle as a training for arms – well over five hundred. And there are old ladies without husbands or lords: they've been wrongfully deprived of their lands and inheritance since their husbands died. And with the two queens are orphaned girls who are kept with great honour. All these people go about their lives at the castle, nursing a wild and impossible hope: they're waiting for a knight to come and support them, who'll restore the ladies to their lands, give husbands to the girls, and make the squires knights. But all the sea will turn to ice before they find a knight who can stay in that hall, for he'd have to be handsome and wise, worthy and bold, noble and loyal, and clean of all baseness and wickedness. If such a knight came he could be lord of the castle, and cast out the enchantments of the hall.'

This news enthralled Sir Gawain. 'Let's go down,' he said. 'Have my arms and my horse brought to me at once. I'm not dallying here – I want to go!'

'Where, sir? Oh, stay – God keep you – today and tomorrow and longer still!'

'Bless your house, good host, but that shall not be. I'm going to see the girls and the marvels of the hall!'

'No, sir! Please God, you'll not do such a foolish thing. Take my advice and stay.'

'Do you take me for a faint-hearted coward? God forsake my soul if I ever take such advice.'

'In faith, sir, I'll hold my tongue, for I can see I'll be wasting my breath. Go, since you want to go so earnestly – though it grieves me. But I'll guide you there – and I tell you, no escort could be more valuable to you than I.'

Then Gawain called for his horse and his arms again, and he armed and mounted and set off, the pilot leading him faithfully to where he did not wish him to go.

They rode on until, at the foot of the steps before the hall, they found a one-legged man sitting all alone on a bundle of straw. He had a false leg made of silver, inlaid here and there with gold and precious stones. His hands were not idle: he was holding a knife and was busy sharpening a stick of ash-wood. He did not address the two riding past him, and they said nothing to him. The pilot drew Sir Gawain to him and said: 'Sir, what do you make of that one-legged man?'

'His false leg's not made of poplar, that's certain,' said Sir Gawain. 'It looks beautiful.'

'Truly,' said the pilot, 'he's rich indeed, with great and handsome revenues. You'd hear news now that would distress you much if I weren't escorting you.'

They climbed up to the hall. One of the doors was of ivory, magnificently carved; the other was of ebony, and likewise sculpted on its face; and both of them shone with gold and jewels. The paving in the hall was of many colours: green and red, indigo and deep blue, finely worked and polished. And in the middle of the hall there stood a bed, and not one part of it was wooden: every bit of it was gold, except the cords on which the mattress sat, which were made of silver, and wherever they interlaced there hung a bell; and across it was spread a huge coverlet of samite; and on each of the bed-posts was mounted a garnet, which yielded more light than four brightly burning candles. The bed stood on grotesque carved dogs with grimacing cheeks, and the dogs were mounted on four casters, so smooth and swift that the bed could be sent from one end of the hall to the other at the push of a single finger. No bed like it was ever made for any king or any count. And there it stood in the middle of the hall. And all around the hall's marble walls were windows, four hundred closed and a hundred open, with glass so clear that anyone watching could see all who entered the hall as soon as they came through the door.

'Dear host,' said Gawain, 'I can't see anything here to make a man afraid! I'm going to sit on this bed and rest for a while: I've never seen one so luxurious.'

'Oh, good sir! If you go near that bed you'll die the most dreadful death that any knight has ever known! Turn back, sir – leave this castle – leave this land!'

'For all the world I shan't give up sitting on this bed and seeing the girls I saw from across the river!'

'There's no chance of your seeing them! Though, God save me, they can see you clearly at this very moment – through those windows: their chambers are on the other side.'

'Well if I can't see the girls I'll at least sit on the bed. Such a bed can have been made for one thing only: to have a worthy man or noble lady lie upon it. And – by my soul – I'm going to sit on it, whatever may befall me!'

The pilot saw there was no stopping him, and said nothing more; but he had no desire to stay and see him sit on the bed, and he took his leave, saying: 'Sir, your death upsets me deeply. No knight has ever sat upon that bed and left it alive, for it is the Bed of Marvels! May God have mercy on your soul!'

With that he left the hall. Sir Gawain, armed as he was, with his shield hung at his neck, sat down upon the bed. And the moment he did so, the bed-cords made a deafening din as all the bells began to ring until the whole hall resounded; then all the windows opened, and the marvels and enchantments were now uncovered and revealed, for down through the windows flew arrows and crossbow-bolts: more than seven hundred smashed into Sir Gawain's shield, and he didn't know what had hit him – the enchantment was such that no man could see where the bolts and arrows came from or the archers who had loosed them. Gawain would not have been there then for a thousand marks! The windows closed in an instant, without anybody's touch. Sir Gawain began to pull out the bolts embedded in his shield, and they had wounded him in several places and he was losing blood. But before he had drawn out all of them he was presented with another test: the bed suddenly began to career about the hall on its casters, smashing from wall to wall; and while Sir Gawain was busy clinging on, a door was kicked open, and a ravenous lion, ferociously strong and wondrously huge, leaped from a vault and in through the door and hurled itself at Gawain in a furious attack. Its claws ripped into his shield as though through wax; but Gawain wrestled free and drew his naked sword and dealt the beast such a blow that he cut off its head and its forefeet together. That very instant the bed stopped its mad careering and all was still. And Sir Gawain was jubilant, for the lion's feet were left hanging on his shield by the claws.

Having killed the beast he sat down on the bed again, and his host came running back into the hall, his face beaming, and said: 'You've nothing more to fear, sir, I promise you! Take off all your armour now, for you've cast out the enchantments of the hall for evermore, and you'll be served and honoured here by young and old – may God be praised!'

Then a stream of squires appeared, dressed in the finest tunics, and they all went down on their knees and said: 'Good sir, we offer you our services: we've longed for your coming!'

Then they began to disarm him, while others went to stable his horse. And while he was being disarmed a most beautiful girl entered, with a circlet of gold upon her head, and her hair was as bright as the gold or brighter. Her face was white, and illumined by Nature with a pure red hue. She was lithe and fair, with a comely figure and a tall, fine bearing; and behind her came other girls, all of considerable beauty. Sir Gawain gazed in wonder, and rose to meet them, saying: 'Welcome, young ladies!'

The first of them bowed to him and said: 'Good sir, my lady the queen sends you greetings, and commands all her people to acknowledge you as their rightful lord. I shall be the first to offer you my service in all faithfulness, and these girls here all hold you as their lord and have long desired your coming. They're overjoyed to see you, the finest of all worthy men.'

And with that they all knelt before him, vowing to serve and honour him. Then the girl said: 'My lady sends you this gown to don before she sees

you, for she thinks you'll have suffered great toil and hardship. So put it on and see if it fits you: wise men guard against the cold after being hot, for it endangers and benumbs the blood.'

And Sir Gawain replied, like the most courteous knight in the world: 'May that Lord in whom no good thing is lacking guard my lady the queen – and guard you, too, for speaking so kindly and being so courteous and fair. Give her my deepest thanks.'

'I shall, sir,' said the girl, 'most willingly. In the meantime put on this gown and enjoy the view from the windows; or if you like, climb the tower and look at the forests and meadows and rivers until I return.'

With that the girls turned away; and Sir Gawain donned the gown, which was rich indeed, all lined with ermine, and set off with his host to survey the land. They climbed a spiral staircase at the side of the vaulted hall, until they reached the top of the tower and saw the country all around, fairer than any man could describe. Sir Gawain gazed at the river and the meadowlands and the forests, teeming with game, and turned to his host and said: 'By God, I'd love to live here and go hunting in those forests!'

'Sir,' said the pilot, 'you'd better say no more of that. For it was decreed that whoever came to be lord and protector here would never be able to leave this house. So it's no good talking of hunting, for this is where you stay: you'll never leave here again.'

'Silence, host!' he cried. 'You'll drive me out of my mind! I tell you, if I couldn't go out when I wanted I could no more live here for seven days than for seven score years!'

And with that he came down from the tower and back into the hall. Lost in anger and vexation, he sat down on the bed again, crestfallen, until the girl who had been there earlier returned. When Sir Gawain saw her he rose to meet her, angry as he was, and greeted her. She saw that his countenance had changed, and realised that something had disturbed him. But she did not dare refer to it; instead she said:

'Sir, whenever you wish my lady will come and see you. And dinner is ready now, and you may eat.'

Sir Gawain replied: 'I've no wish for food. A curse upon my body if I eat or make merry before I hear news I badly need.'

The girl returned at once in consternation, and the queen summoned her and asked her for news, saying: 'Dear granddaughter, how did you find the good lord whom God has sent us?'

'Oh, my lady, honoured queen, I'm dying of grief for the good, kind-hearted lord; for the only words he'll utter are of anger and rage. When I first saw him I found him so polite and fair of speech that one could never tire of listening to his words or gazing at his joyful face. Now suddenly he's changed and would gladly be dead, I think.'

'Don't worry, granddaughter. He'll soon calm down when he sees me. However great his rage may be, I'll cast it out and set joy in its place.'

So saying, the queen came to the hall, accompanied by the other queen, her daughter, who was only too pleased to go; and with them they took a good 250 girls and at least as many squires. As soon as Sir Gawain saw her coming, holding her daughter by the hand, his heart told him that she was the queen, guessing with ease by her white tresses which hung down to her hips, and by the white mottled silk she wore, finely embroidered with golden flowers. He was not slow to go and meet her, and he greeted her, and she him. And she said:

'I am lady of this palace, sir, second to you. I yield the lordship to you, for you've well deserved it. But are you of King Arthur's household?'

'Yes indeed, lady.'

'And are you one of the Round Table, who are the most esteemed in all the world?'

'Lady,' he said, 'I wouldn't dare to say I'm one of the most esteemed; I don't consider myself one of the finest, nor do I think I'm one of the worst.'

'That is a most courteous reply, good sir. But tell me now of King Lot: how many sons did he have by his wife?'

'Four, my lady.'

'Tell me their names.'

'Gawain was the eldest, lady, and the next was Engrevain, the proud one with strong hands; the other two are named Gaheriet and Guerrehet.'

And the queen said: 'Those were indeed their names. I would to God they were all together here with us! But tell me now, do you know King Urien?'

'Yes, lady.'

'Has he a son at court?'

'Yes, lady, he has two, of great renown: one of them is named Sir Yvain, the courteous and polite. I'm happier all day if I see him in the morning, for I find him so wise and generous. The other is also called Yvain, but he's not his full brother: that's why he's called the Bastard. He outfights any knight who does battle with him. They're both at court, and are most worthy, wise and courteous knights.'

'And King Arthur, good sir,' she said, 'how is he faring now?'

'Better than ever: in finer health and spirits, and stronger.'

'In faith, sir, that's as it should be, for King Arthur is a child: why, he's surely no more than a hundred years old – no, he can't be. But I'd like you to tell me just one thing more, if you will: how is the queen, how is she faring?'

'Truly, lady, she's so courteous and beautiful and wise that God never made so fair a lady. There has never been a lady of such renown since God made the first woman from Adam's rib. And she's justly renowned: all goodness stems and passes down from her. No man does any good or honourable deed who hasn't learned it from my lady. No man, however unhappy, leaves her with his grief intact.'

'Nor will you, sir, leave *me* so.'

'I believe you, lady,' he said, 'for before I saw you I didn't care what

happened to me, such was my despair and grief. But now I'm as happy as I could ever be.'

'In the name of God who gave me life,' said the queen with the white tresses, 'your happiness will double yet, and your joy will increase constantly and never fail. And since you're now at ease and happy, dinner is ready, and you may eat whenever you wish and wherever you like.'

'Lady, has any knight dined here in this hall before?'

'No, sir, none that ever left again or stayed alive so much as half an hour.'

'Then I shall dine here, my lady, by your leave.'

'I grant you that, sir, willingly. You shall be the first knight who has ever dined here.'

With that the queen departed, leaving 250 of her most beautiful girls with him. They dined there with him in the hall, and served him and ensured his comfort, providing for his every wish. And squires served him joyfully at dinner; two knelt before him, one of them cutting meat for him and the other pouring wine. Sir Gawain seated his host at his side. And the dinner was not short: it was deep black night and many great torches were burning before the meal was over. There was lively conversation all the while, and afterwards much dancing before they took to their beds, as they rejoiced with all their hearts for their lord whom they dearly loved.

And when he decided to retire he lay down on the Bed of Marvels. Beneath his head one of the girls placed a pillow, which made him sleep most peacefully.

* * *

When the time came to wake next morning, a gown of ermine and samite had been prepared for him, and the pilot came and roused him, and arranged his dressing and washed his hands. And Clarissant was there, too, the fair, honourable, wise and courteous granddaughter of the queen. And when she went into her grandmother's chambers, the queen asked her: 'Has your lord risen yet?'

'Yes, lady,' she said, 'some while ago.'

'Where is he, dear granddaughter?'

'He went to the tower, my lady; I don't know if he's come down yet.'

'Granddaughter, I shall go to him; and if it please God, he shall have only joy and happiness today.'

With that the queen rose, anxious to go and see Gawain, and she and her daughter found him high up at the windows of a tower, watching a girl and a fully armed knight riding across a meadow. The two queens came, side by side, to where Sir Gawain was standing with his host.

'Sir,' said the queens together, 'a happy rising. May that glorious Father who made His daughter His mother grant you a good day.'

'May the one who sent His son to Earth grant you joy, lady. But come to this window if you will, and tell me who that girl can be who's riding this way: there's a knight with her, carrying a quartered shield.'

The lady, looking down at them, said: 'It's the one who accompanied you here last night – may an evil fire consume her! But don't concern yourself with her – she's an arrogant and wicked woman. And forget about the knight she's brought with her. He doesn't fight for amusement's sake: I've seen him kill many knights at this landing-place.'

'Lady,' said Sir Gawain, 'I wish to go and speak to the girl, by your leave.'

'No, sir! Leave her to her own affairs – she's a terrible girl! Please God, you'll never leave this hall for such a pointless cause. And you must never leave here at all, unless you wish to do us wrong.'

'Oh, come now! That distresses me! I'd think myself ill-rewarded if I could never leave. God keep me from being a prisoner here!'

'Lady,' said the pilot, 'let him do as he wishes. Don't hold him back against his will or he might die of grief.'

'Then I'll let him go,' said the queen, 'on condition that, if God guards him from death, he'll return here tonight.'

'Have no fear, lady,' said Gawain. 'I'll return if I can. But I beg a favour of you: please don't ask my name until seven days have passed.'

'If that's your wish, sir, I'll refrain from asking,' said the queen, 'though if you hadn't forbidden it, your name would have been the first thing I'd have asked you.'

And so they came down from the tower, and squires came running to arm him. Then they fetched his horse and he mounted, fully armed, and rode down to the landing-place accompanied by the pilot, and they both climbed into the boat. Oarsmen rowed them from the bank and across to the other side, and Sir Gawain stepped forth.

The other knight said to the pitiless girl: 'Tell me, my dear, this knight coming towards us – do you know him?'

'No,' the girl replied, 'but I know he's the one who brought me here last night.'

'God save me,' he said, 'he's the very man I've been looking for! I was afraid he'd escaped me, for no knight crosses the border of Galvoie to boast that he's passed through this land!'

Thereupon the knight, without a challenge, set his shield on his arm, thrust in his spurs and charged. And Sir Gawain headed for him and struck him such a blow that he wounded him gravely in the arm and side; but it was not a mortal wound, for his mail-coat held together so well that the lance-head could not fully break through; but a finger's length of the tip pierced his body and bore him to the ground. He climbed to his feet and saw, to his dismay, the blood flowing down his hauberk. He attacked Sir Gawain with his sword, but he was soon so tired that he could hold out no longer and had to cry for mercy. Sir Gawain received his assurances, and then handed him to the waiting pilot.

Meanwhile the evil girl had climbed from her palfrey. Gawain came up to her and greeted her, and said: 'Remount, dear friend, for I'm not going to leave you here. You're coming with me across the river.'

'Oh, knight!' she cried. 'How high and mighty you are now! You'd have had a battle on your hands if he hadn't been tired by old wounds of his. He'd have put an end to your lies and silenced your prattling tongue. Have you ever been checkmated in the corner of the board? That's how silent you'd have been! Do you really think you're of greater worth than he? The best man doesn't always win! But listen: if you left this landing-place and came with me beneath that tree, and did something that he did for me when I desired, then I'd admit you were his equal, and wouldn't despise you any more.'

'If it's only that far, girl,' he said, 'I've no reason to refuse your wish.'

And she whispered: 'God grant you never return from there.'

And with that they set off, she in front and he behind. And the girls and ladies in the hall tore their hair and rent their gowns in dismay, crying: 'Oh, alas! Alas! Why do we not die, when we see our lord going to his death? That evil girl goes at his right hand, leading him to the place from where no knight returns! Alas! We're accursed just when we thought our luck was blessed!'

The girl and Sir Gawain arrived at the tree.

'Tell me now,' he said, 'have I done my duty, or do you want me to do something more? I'll do it if I can, rather than lose your favour.'

And she replied: 'Do you see that ford, where the banks are so high? My love used to cross there, and I don't know any lower spot.'

'Dear girl, that's impossible; the bank's too high at every point.'

'You're afraid!' cried the girl. 'I didn't think you'd have the heart to try, for this is the Perilous Ford, which no-one dares cross on any account, unless he's exceptional.'

Sir Gawain instantly rode his horse to the bank. He saw the deep water below and the sheer bank beyond; but the river was narrow enough, and Sir Gawain felt Gringalet had cleared many greater ditches; and he had often heard that whoever could cross the deep water of the Perilous Ford would be renowned as the finest knight in the world. So he drew his horse away from the river and came galloping back to leap across; but he failed, for he didn't take the jump well, and came down in the middle of the ford. But Gringalet swam on until he got all four hooves on land, and gathering himself for a mighty leap he launched himself on to the great, high bank. Once there, he stood stock still, unable to go another step, and Sir Gawain dismounted of necessity, for he saw that Gringalet was exhausted. He decided to take off his saddle, and turned it upside down to dry. Then he removed the saddle-cloth and wiped the water from Gringalet's back and flanks and legs.

After a good rest he put the saddle on again and mounted once more, and rode on at a walk until he caught sight of a knight out hunting with a sparrowhawk; and in the field before him were two small retrievers. The knight was more handsome than any tongue could tell. Sir Gawain rode up and greeted him and said:

'Good sir, may God who made you fairer than any living man give you joy and good fortune.'

And the knight was quick to reply: 'You are the fair one, sir, and good and worthy. But tell me, how did you come to leave the evil girl alone over there? What happened to her companion?'

'Sir,' replied Sir Gawain, 'a knight with a quartered shield was with her when I met her, but I defeated him in combat.'

'And what became of him then?'

'The pilot took him away, for he said he should be his prisoner.'

'True enough. That girl was once my love, but she would never deign to call me her sweetheart. And I promise you, I never kissed her except by force, and never had my way with her for I loved her against her will. I had robbed her of a love of hers whose company she used to share; I killed him and led her off and strove in every way to serve her. But my service was fruitless, for she sought the chance to leave me as soon as she could, and took for her love the knight you've just vanquished. And he's no joke, that knight! Today you've done something that no knight has ever dared do; and your valour has made you the finest and most praised knight in the world. It took the greatest courage to leap into the Perilous Ford, and I tell you truly, no knight has ever come through it before.'

'Then the girl lied to me, sir,' said Sir Gawain. 'She said her sweetheart crossed it every day out of love for her.'

'She told you that? She must be possessed by a host of demons! That devil – God confound her! – meant to drown you in the deep and roaring water. But promise me something now: that you'll tell me truthfully all I wish to know, and in return I'll promise to tell you the truth about anything you ask me.'

They exchanged these promises, and Sir Gawain was the first to start questioning, saying: 'Tell me about the city I can see over there: who does it belong to, and what's it called?'

'I can certainly tell you that, friend, for it belongs to me entirely: I owe no part of it to any man born – I'm vassal to God alone. It's called Orqueneseles.'

'And what's your name?'

'Guiromelant.'

'I've often heard that you're most worthy and valiant, and lord of a very great land. And what's the name of the girl of whom no-one has a good word to say?'

'I can assure you, sir, she's greatly to be feared, for she's full of scorn and evil. That's why she's called the Haughty Maiden of Nogres – her birthplace.'

'And who is her love who's gone to be the pilot's prisoner?'

'He's an extraordinary knight, and he's known as the Proud Knight of the Narrow Pass; he guards the border of Galvoie.'

'And what's the name of the handsome castle where I ate and drank last night?'

At that Guiromelant turned his back in sorrow and began to move away. But Sir Gawain reminded him: 'Sir, sir, remember our promise and tell me.'

Guiromelant stopped and turned his head, and said: 'Be gone; I declare you free of your promise, and you absolve me of mine. I'd planned to ask you news from there, but it seems you know as much about that castle as you do about the moon.'

'I stayed there last night,' said Gawain, 'and lay upon the Bed of Marvels. There's none like it in the world; no man has ever seen its equal.'

'By God,' he replied, 'it's great fun listening to your fantasies: like being entertained by a storyteller! I see it now – you're a minstrel! Why, I thought you were a knight and had done some feat of prowess yonder! Come now, tell me truly: what did you see at the castle?'

And Sir Gawain told him: 'Sir, the moment I sat upon the bed there was a great commotion in the hall. Without a word of a lie, the bed-cords groaned and the bells upon them rang, and closed windows opened by themselves and crossbow-bolts and smooth arrows smashed into my shield. And in it were stuck the claws of a huge, bristling lion that had been chained in a vault: it leaped at me and struck at my shield and plunged in its claws so hard that it couldn't pull them free. If you doubt my words, look: the claws are still hanging here! I cut off its head, thanks be to God, and its feet, too. What do you think of these marks of proof?'

With that, Guiromelant jumped from his horse and went down on his knees and clasped his hands together, and begged Gawain to forgive his foolish words.

'I forgive you,' he said. 'Remount now.'

And Guiromelant did so, filled with shame for his foolishness, and said: 'God save me, sir, I didn't think any knight would ever have the honour that's befallen you. But tell me, did you see the white-haired queen? Did you ask her who she was and where she was from?'

'I never thought to ask her that,' he replied, 'but I saw her and spoke to her.'

'Then I'll tell you,' said Guiromelant. 'She's King Arthur's mother.'

'By God and His power, King Arthur's not had a mother for sixty years or more!'

'But it's true, sir: she's his mother. When his father Uther Pendragon was buried Queen Ygerne came to this country, bringing all her treasure, and built that castle on the rock with its rich and beautiful hall. You doubtless saw the other lady, too, the other queen.'

'Indeed I did,' said Sir Gawain.

'She was the wife of King Lot and the mother of the one whom I wish every misfortune.'

'Who's that, sir?'

'Sir Gawain.'

'Indeed? I know Gawain well, and I've heard he's not had a mother for at least twenty years.'

'But she's his mother, you may be sure. And when she came here she was

with child; the child was the noble and beautiful girl who is my love and, sad to say, the sister of Gawain – may God bring him the deepest shame! I swear he wouldn't escape with his head if he was within my reach as you are now: I'd behead him on the spot! And his sister herself couldn't stop me tearing his heart from his chest with my bare hands – I hate him so much!'

'Upon my soul,' said Sir Gawain, 'if I loved a girl, then for her sake I'd love and serve all her family.'

'You're right, but when I remember how Gawain's father killed mine, I can't feel any goodwill towards him; and Gawain himself killed one of my closest cousins, a valiant and worthy knight, and I've never had the chance to take revenge. But do this favour for me now: return to the castle and take this ring to my love and present it to her as a gift from me; and tell her I believe her love for me is such that she'd rather her brother Gawain died a foul death than that I should hurt my smallest toe! Send my love my greetings and give her this ring from me, her sweetheart.' Sir Gawain set the ring on his little finger, and Guiromelant said: 'In return I'll tell you the name of that castle, as you asked: it's called the Rock of Canguin. Do you wish to ask me anything else?'

'No, sir, only that I may leave.'

Then Guiromelant said: 'Before you go, sir, tell me your name if you don't mind.'

And Sir Gawain said: 'Before God, my name shall never be kept from you. I am the one you hate so much. I am Gawain.'

'You are Gawain?'

'Yes, truly, the nephew of King Arthur.'

'Then you're very brave or very foolish to tell me your name when you know I hate you mortally! If only I had my helmet and shield! If I were armed as you are I'd cut your head off instantly – nothing would stop me! But if you dare to wait for me I'll fetch my arms and return to do battle with you, and bring three or four men to watch our combat. Or if you wish, we'll wait for seven days, and on the seventh we'll return here fully armed; and you will summon the king and the queen and all their people, and I shall assemble all the knights from my kingdom. Then our battle won't be fought in secret: all who come will witness it. For a battle between such worthy men as we are deemed to be shouldn't be fought without witnesses; it's only right that ladies and knights should be present, for when one of us is vanquished and everybody knows of it, the victor will have a thousand times more honour than if he alone knew.'

'Sir,' said Sir Gawain, 'I'd gladly do without all this. If I've done you any wrong I'll willingly make amends acceptable both to your friends and mine, so that all is just and fair.'

But Guiromelant said: 'I can't think what justice there can be if you won't do battle with me! I've suggested two courses of action; now choose which one you like: either wait for me here, if you dare, while I go and fetch my arms, or summon all the people of your land to come here in seven days. At Pentecost

King Arthur will be holding court at Orquenie, I'm told, which is only two days' ride from here.'

And Sir Gawain replied: 'Then God save me, I swear by this hand that I'll send him word before I sleep a wink.'

'Gawain,' he said, 'I'm going to take you to the finest bridge in the world. This river's very deep and swift, and no man alive could cross it or jump to the other bank.'

But Sir Gawain replied: 'I'm not going to seek any bridge, for the treacherous girl will think it cowardice. No, I'll keep my promise to her and go straight across.'

Without another word he thrust in his spurs and his horse leaped nimbly across the water; and when the girl who had so misled him saw him coming, she tethered her horse to the tree and came towards him on foot. And her heart and will had now changed, for she greeted him in all humility, and said that she had come to plead for mercy, admitting her guilt, for she knew she had made him suffer greatly.

'Good sir,' she said, 'listen now, and I'll tell you why I've been so haughty towards all the knights who've come to share my company. That knight – God damn him! – who was talking to you on the other bank, he ill-bestowed his love on me: I hated him – he'd caused me great pain by killing the knight I adored. Then he thought to woo me; but his efforts were vain, for at the first opportunity I escaped from him and joined company with the one from whom you took me today. Losing him doesn't bother me at all, but ever since death took my first love from me I've been mad and spoken haughtily and acted wickedly; I didn't care who I crossed – I tormented them deliberately, because I wanted to find one whose temper was such that I could drive him and anger him into cutting me to pieces, for I've yearned for death for a long time. Mete out justice now, sir; such justice that no girl who ever hears of me will dare speak shamefully to a knight again!'

'Dear girl,' said Sir Gawain, 'why should I punish you? God forbid that you suffer any harm from me. Mount now, without delay, and we'll go back to the castle. The boatman's at the landing-place, waiting to ferry us across.'

'I'll do exactly as you wish, sir,' said the girl.

Then she climbed into the saddle of her little palfrey with its long mane; and they rode down to the pilot, who ferried them across the river without the slightest trouble.

The ladies and girls, who had been lamenting bitterly for him, saw them coming. All the squires at the hall, too, had been out of their minds with grief. But now their rejoicing was the greatest ever seen. The queen was awaiting him outside the hall, and had commanded all the girls to take each other by the hand and to dance and celebrate. And so they began their rejoicing to greet Sir Gawain, singing and dancing all around, and he came and dismounted in their midst. The ladies and girls and both the queens embraced him joyfully, and the girl he had brought was greeted with joy, as well: everyone served her willingly – but for his sake, not for hers. They went then to the hall and all sat down. Sir

Gawain took his sister and seated her beside him on the Bed of Marvels, and whispered to her softly:

'I bring you a golden ring from across the river, mounted with a brilliant green emerald. A knight sends it to you as a love-token.'

'I believe it, sir,' she said. 'But if I love him at all it's from a distance, for he's never seen me, nor I him, except from across the river.'

'Oh! He's boasting that you'd rather your brother Sir Gawain were dead than that he had hurt his toe!'

'What! How could he say such a foolish thing? My brother doesn't even know I'm born, and has never seen me. Guiromelant's quite wrong: by my soul, I wouldn't have my brother harmed, any more than myself.'

While they were talking together, the aged queen said to the other queen, her daughter, who was seated beside her: 'What do you make of the lord sitting next to my granddaughter? He's been whispering to her for a long while; and I'm delighted, as we both should be: it's a mark of great nobility that he's drawn to the fairest and wisest in the hall! I wish to God he'd married her, and that she was as pleasing to him as Lavinia to Aeneas!'

'Oh, lady,' said the other queen, 'may God so incline his heart that they may be like brother and sister; that he may love her so dearly, and she him, that they may be as one flesh.'

The lady meant by her prayer that Gawain should love her and take her for his wife; she had not recognised her son.

Sir Gawain spoke with his beautiful sister for a long time; then he called to the boy who seemed the brightest and most able of all the squires in the hall, and went down to a chamber, taking only the boy with him. There Sir Gawain said to him: 'I'm going to tell you a secret, and I advise you to keep it: you'll profit greatly if you do. I'm going to send you to a place where you'll be received with joy.'

'Sir, my tongue will be torn from my throat before a single word you want hidden escapes my lips.'

'Then, brother,' said Sir Gawain, 'you're to go to my lord King Arthur – for I'm his nephew, Gawain. The way is neither long nor hard, for the king has established court for Pentecost at the city of Orquenie. When you come before the king you'll find him in low spirits; but when you give him my greetings he and all the court will be filled with joy. You're to tell the king that, since he's my lord and I'm his vassal, he mustn't fail to appear before me in the meadow below this castle on the fifth day of the feast of Pentecost. And he's to bring all the company that has gathered at his court, nobility and common folk alike, for I'm committed to battle with a knight, Guiromelant, who hates me mortally. You're to tell the queen, too, that she must come for my sake, and bring all the girls and ladies who are at court that day. But one thing worries me: have you a good hunting-horse to take you there swiftly?'

The boy replied that there was a fine one, sturdy, fast and strong, that he could take for his use.

'Excellent!' said Sir Gawain.

The boy took him quickly down to the stables and led out some strong, well-rested hunting-horses, one of which was ready to ride and travel, for he had had it newly shod, and it lacked neither saddle nor bridle.

'Go now, boy,' said Sir Gawain, 'and may the lord of all kings be your guide.'

So he sent the boy on his way, and led him down to the river where he told the pilot to ferry him across, and the boy was soon on the right road for the city of Orquenie.

Sir Gawain now returned to the hall, where he spent the night in great joy and pleasure, for everyone loved and served him. The queen had baths of hot water prepared in five hundred vats, and bade all the squires go in to wash and bathe. New robes were ready when they left the baths: the cloth was woven with golden thread and the lining was of ermine. The squires stayed in the chapel until after matins, standing all the while, never kneeling. And in the morning Sir Gawain, with his own hands, fastened the right spur on each of them and girded their swords and dubbed them. He was now accompanied by fully five hundred new knights.

Meanwhile the boy had reached the city of Orquenie, where the king was holding a court befitting such a high feast-day. Those who watched him gallop through the streets, the crippled and the sick, said: 'He's come on urgent business! He must have brought some message to the court from afar. Whatever his news may be, he'll find the king deaf and dumb – he's so full of grief and anguish, having lost the one who defended us all and brought us so much good.'

Throughout the city the poor people were lamenting thus for Sir Gawain whom they dearly loved.

The boy found the king seated in his hall, with a hundred counts and a hundred kings and a hundred dukes seated around him. The king was deep in mournful thought, seeing the great host of nobility but no sign of his nephew; and such was his distress that, at the very moment the boy arrived, he fainted and fell. The first to reach him and help him to his feet was certainly not idle, for everyone rushed to his aid. The lady Lores was sitting in a gallery, and saw the alarm that had stricken the hall. She hurried down from the gallery and ran to the queen who, seeing her troubled face, asked her what was wrong.

'Oh, noble queen! I've just seen a messenger arrive, and the king has never been so dismayed by a message! All his men are grieving equally: he must have brought some news that's upset all the court. The king has fainted!'

The queen turned pale; and her ladies and girls lamented loudly, tearing at their dresses and their hair: no man ever saw such bitter grieving.

But in the hall the king had recovered from his faint, and the boy came up to him and said: 'God bless you, sire, and all your good company. I bring you such greetings as befit a king from your nephew, Gawain.'

And hearing this, King Arthur leaped to his feet; the news was such a joy to him that he took the boy in his arms and swept him from his hunting-horse.

'Friend,' he said, 'may God guard and aid my dear nephew Gawain! I love him no less than myself. Tell me, how is he? Is he in good health and spirits?'

'I left him well and happy, sire, in a castle he's conquered: there's none more splendid in all the world. And he summons you, as his uncle and his lord, to aid him. He's accepted a challenge to single combat, and he begs you to come without fail and guard him against treachery. He wants to rebut Guiromelant's boast that he'll dishonour him. I tell you truly, neither you nor Gawain has a more mortal enemy.'

Never was a grieving court so soon restored to joy. Everyone's heart, without exception, exulted at the news, knowing that the one held to be the most courteous of the age, unsurpassed by count or king, the most great-hearted, most valiant and the finest at arms, was alive. Harps sang and hurdy-gurdies churned and the whole hall rang with music. No man could describe the sweet melodies they made.

Lady Ysave of Carahet heard the rejoicing in the hall, and from the gallery where she was sitting she ran straight to the queen and said: 'My lady, I think we're about to hear *good* news! The king has greeted the messenger with joy; it's a most reassuring sign!'

The queen left in such a hurry that she didn't think to don a mantle. She ran to the hall and hurried in, with all the ladies and maids rushing after her and entering the hall in disarray. The king leaned towards the boy and said: 'Go to the queen quickly, friend, and tell her the news that's delighted me.'

The boy went to her without more ado and said: 'May God who dwells above and sets the good at His right hand protect you and your dear company, lady: so Sir Gawain wishes.'

The fair-faced queen replied: 'God save you and give him joy and happiness! Is he safe and in good health?'

'Yes, lady, and full of joy. And as your dear friend he bids you go to his aid by the faith you owe him, with all the girls and maids and ladies who have come to this court.'

'My lords,' said Kay the seneschal, 'we should all thank God that Sir Gawain is alive; we were more dejected at his absence than joyful at the presence of the rest! It's true what they say: no-one knows what a worthy man is worth until he's gone! There were a good thirty thousand of us grieving and downcast, but God has brought light and day to us, now that the one who's full of courtliness is alive and well.'

With that he ordered that two trumpets be sounded, and water was brought in basins of fine gold and bright silver, and everyone in the hall sat down to dine. Never has such a splendid feast lasted a shorter time or been received with such joy: their love for Gawain drove them to finish their feast with speed. And then you'd have seen so many mules and chargers and palfreys saddled! Everyone was terrified of not being packed in time. King Arthur mounted and rode from the city with fully thirty thousand knights and fifteen thousand ladies and girls and maids: no man has ever seen such an army raised as rode that day

from Orquenie. The baggage-train was of an astounding length: the line stretched out across the plains, and those at the rear had to camp a league from the place where the foremost lodged, in a meadow beside a river.

They set out again early the next day; and the boy led them through forests and fair open land, with plenty of feasting all the way, straight to the castle where Sir Gawain now was lord. The king reached there on the seventh day, and the boy came to him and said: 'There is the castle, sire, that your good nephew has won.'

The king dismounted, and ordered all to pitch their tents and pavilions. And the Welshmen among them, most skilled in the craft, built a great number of lodges in the Welsh manner, of interwoven branches; and they made shelters for their horses, too, by taking boughs from the forest and stripping off their leaves. Yvain, King Urien's son, and Gifflet, the son of Do, arrived escorting the queen. And in their company, which was well endowed with ladies, came three thousand knights, and none of them lacked a fine warhorse; and behind them came the huge convoy of wagons – none so great was ever seen. The queen dismounted at her tent, already pitched for her.

Meanwhile, from the upper chambers of the castle hall, Queen Ygerne saw the great host stretching all along the meadow. She was terrified at the sight, and her heart was faint and trembling. She took her daughter by the hand and said:

'Norcadet, we've lived a long while, and now our time has come, for we're besieged! I've never seen so many men amassed, so many shining helmets and shimmering shields. Look at all the swords and lances! And are they ladies or fairies down there on the riverbank?'

'God help me, I don't know, dear lady. But I've never seen girls or ladies in such a throng, and leading an army and going off to war!'

Just then Sir Gawain and his sister Clarissant came from a chamber, and as soon as she saw him Ygerne rushed to him and said: 'Dear friend, look at the mighty army besieging us, all along the meadows! And look – on that side there are only girls and ladies! Sir, you asked a favour of me: that I shouldn't ask your name for seven days, or enquire about your lineage. I refrained completely, but now the seventh day has passed, and I'd like to know your name.'

'I shall indeed tell you, lady, for I've never hidden my name from anyone. It is Gawain.'

She embraced him on the instant, and smothered his lips and face with kisses. And her daughter was beside herself, her heart leaping and soaring for joy, such joy as had kept her wide awake on the day she gave him birth, and she kissed his face and breast.

'My good, dear friend,' said Queen Ygerne, 'by the faith I owe almighty God, I am the mother of King Arthur, and this is my daughter: she is your mother.'

But when Gawain's sister Clarissant, standing there beside him, heard this, she rushed to her chamber and began to grieve desperately – because her brother

knew all about her love for Guiromelant, the very one who had challenged him to battle.

'Gawain, dear grandson,' said Queen Ygerne, 'you can see our plight: they're besieging us without a doubt. For the love of God, what are we to do?'

'My lady, there's no danger. That's King Arthur, your son!'

'Is that true?'

'Yes, lady. Have no fear.'

'I can't wait to see him! I've never been so happy in my life!'

And Gawain said: 'By your leave, my lady, I'd like to cross the river and speak to him.'

She could not stop kissing him. He had many a willing kiss from his grandmother and his mother alike; then he left the ladies and mounted a swift horse, and took ten worthy and able knights with him across the river.

Kay was the very first to see him, as he came from the tent of King Do. He galloped with all his might to King Arthur's pavilion and joyfully announced: 'Here comes your nephew, sire!'

Without a word the king mounted a palfrey, in too much haste to wait for another horse, and rode to meet his nephew with all the speed his mount could summon. And as soon as he reached him he kissed him twenty times before he had said a word.

'Great joy awaits you, sire,' Gawain said at last, 'for your mother is longing to see you and speak to you.'

The king smiled at the knights and then said: 'My dear nephew, by the faith I owe my father's soul, I haven't had a mother for fifty years!'

'With respect, sire, yes, you have – I can say so in all truthfulness. When Uther Pendragon died, Ygerne fled with a great treasure, seeking the loneliest land there was, until she found this place. And with the great wealth she'd brought she had this castle built and made it her home. I know of none finer. And when my father King Lot lost his life, my mother – your sister – came to this castle and lived with her mother and yours, relinquishing all our land. She was left with child, and bore a daughter who's there in the castle – a beautiful, comely and most worthy girl.'

The king and all those present were overjoyed at this astounding news. And the queen kissed Gawain sweetly, as did a hundred other ladies and girls of worth. And as for King Arthur's mother, up in the castle hall, listen now to what she did that night.

With her in the castle she had five hundred newly dubbed knights, all of high lineage, of excellent families, and wise. She gave orders that all their arms – which were wonderful, smothered with precious stones – should be placed at all the windows of the chambers and the hall and on the battlements, so that the jewels, truly, shed as brilliant a light on King Arthur's host as if it had been noon. They were astounded by the light, and thought a spell had been cast on them; and the king was stricken silent, thinking he had been bewitched, and greatly fearing that Gawain had been tricked by sorcery. But Gawain

managed to convince the king that he should go with four companions, secretly summoned, and take Queen Guinevere and just three of her maids; and they slipped down to the river, passed across, and hurried on to the castle. And Queen Ygerne, her head crowned with flowers, received her son King Arthur with indescribable joy, and welcomed the gracious Queen Guinevere, too, with the greatest happiness.

The mood was different in the king's camp. No sooner had the king gone than Kay the seneschal arrived with three others for private consultation with his lord, and when they found the king missing from his tent they were horrified. As for the girls and the ladies and maids, they went to look for the queen in her pavilion and were filled with dismay. The whole host was in turmoil – they had never been so distraught: all the men were grieving for their lord and all the women for their lost lady. Such was their despair that, if day had been approaching rather than night, they would certainly have fled in consternation and disarray. They all armed rapidly, donning their mail-coats. The army kept guard earnestly that night, for fear of being taken by surprise.

As soon as day broke King Arthur heard mass, and then rode back to his army with the five hundred newly dubbed knights of the castle; and he brought with him fifty beautiful ladies and girls. The whole host were amazed when they saw their lord King Arthur coming. If he had arrived a moment later they would all have been striking camp and setting fire to the lodges, but they were so overjoyed at seeing him return that all such plans were forgotten. He dismounted at his pavilion, and the queen at hers with many gracious ladies. Then Sir Gawain told the king exactly why he had summoned him: how he had agreed to do battle, and that it was due to be fought that day. Then he made confession to one bishop Solomon, who addressed many good words to him, giving him kind instruction. Sir Gawain humbly confessed all his sins; and when the holy man heard them, and saw that he repented from the heart, he gave him absolution in the name of God and Holy Mary. Then he blessed him with the sign of the Cross, and told him to have complete faith in God; now that he was truly confessed he had nothing to fear, for God would always protect him when he called on Him with a good heart.

With that their talking ceased. And thereupon there was no fine charger anywhere in the king's host that was not brought and presented to Gawain. And he could boast likewise that there was no fine sword, helmet or lance in the entire army that was not offered to him. He would not change his arms for anyone's, but he did take one of the horses: he was called Guilodien, and there was no finer, bolder horse in all this earthly world; his dappled coat was so sleek and fine that they did not add a saddle-cloth. They clad Sir Gawain in his armour splendidly, with a smooth padded doublet of cotton beneath, and equipped him with all the arms he would need both for attack and for defence: everything was perfect – he needed nothing more or less. Gifflet and Yvain, who loved him dearly, armed him with great skill.

As soon as he was ready Sir Gawain looked towards the Perilous Ford and saw a great company of knights emerge from behind a hill: they numbered a good three thousand. First he caught sight of the heads of their lances, and then he saw their pennons and banners; then their shining helms and dazzling shields, and then the heads of the worthy knights and the heads of their swift horses. They advanced at a walk in serried ranks across the plain, until they reached a tree close to King Arthur's army, and there they halted. And behind them Gawain saw another company advancing, in fine and impressive order, and there were as many knights in this company as in the first. And then a third company appeared, the most splendid ever seen, and without a lie there were four thousand of them, each equipped with a handsome shield and a good, straight lance. The plain was broad and long and level. And the one at their head did not let a single knight break rank or any horse move ahead of another: they advanced in tight formation. Then the three companies joined together into one, and King Arthur's men estimated their numbers at ten thousand. And after them came another company: at least three thousand ladies and girls of worth, with bright and shining faces. Before them came musicians playing tunes on the hurdy-gurdy, and harpers playing sweet airs on their harps. They came joyfully to the tree where they saw their knights gathered, and dismounted alongside them, in the middle of the plain.

King Arthur in turn commanded fifteen thousand of his men to arm and assemble in battalions; whatever happened, he did not like to think that his army might be caught off guard. They did the king's bidding without delay. Meanwhile the queen sat down beneath a clump of trees in the middle of the plain, accompanied by a good three thousand of the most worthy and beautiful ladies and girls living at that time. The plain was filled with ladies and knights, magnificent arms and horses. No man has ever seen, or will ever see, so many all together.

Sir Gawain called to Gifflet and Sir Yvain. 'Go,' he said, 'out into the plain. In that great company by the tree I think you'll find the one who's challenged me to battle. You needn't ask for a description: you'll know him as soon as you set eyes on him, for there's no nobler or more handsome knight in the world – nor one more fierce. Tell him that I'm ready to fulfil my promise.'

They mounted at once and galloped straight to Guiromelant's army. And every knight in all the isles of the sea who bore any hatred for King Arthur had come to face him in that host. Sir Gawain's messengers soon found Guiromelant: he was standing on a sumptuous cloth from Africa, resting his arms on the shoulders of two knights, while boys and squires knelt before him, lacing on his iron leggings. He wore a long gown, half deep purple cloth and half rich padded stuff, as is necessary with armour; and his forehead was protected with quilt to stop the chain-mail being driven into the flesh. No-one has ever seen a more handsome creature of human shape; no man could possess more beauty. There was a chamberlain before him who had dressed him in his hauberk, and two squires were taking the greatest care that nothing needed altering or adding or

removing. They had soon arranged everything perfectly, wanting nothing to be amiss and hamper him in battle.

As soon as his knights saw Gifflet and Sir Yvain coming, they made the crowd give way. The messengers dismounted, and Guiromelant addressed them, saying: 'Welcome, worthy knights.'

Yvain replied most courteously: 'You've forestalled us, sir: we should have greeted you first. Sir Gawain has sent us to tell you that he's ready to fulfil his pledge without delay.'

And he replied: 'As God's my witness, so am I! But tell me your names if you will.'

'Gladly,' said Gifflet. 'His name is Sir Yvain, and he's the son of King Urien. And my name is Gifflet, the son of Do.'

Guiromelant replied immediately: 'Sir Gawain is courteous indeed, it seems: he's sent me the two knights I most desired to see in all the world. But you're to tell him from me that I'm his most deadly enemy. Listen! I swear to you, Sir Yvain, that if I can overcome him in battle, the whole world together couldn't save him: I'll have his head before I leave him.'

'That will never happen, sir, if it please God,' said Sir Yvain, 'for he's such a wise and worthy man, and so are you, that the battle you've undertaken will be judiciously abandoned, and peace made to the honour of both parties.'

'So help me God who made the world,' replied Guiromelant, 'I consider you so worthy and wise that I shall send no messengers to Gawain but you. But you're to tell him this: I'm ready to fulfil our agreement. Go now: I've nothing more to say.'

And so they mounted and set off, and returned to the king's pavilion where Sir Gawain was waiting for them, fully armed. Sir Yvain told him: 'Your adversary sends you this message pure and simple: he's ready to fulfil his promise at once.'

'Then what is there to do but mount?' said Sir Gawain.

Yvain held his stirrup and Sir Gawain mounted Guilodien, fully armed. And as soon as he was in the saddle he took his shield by the strap and slung it round his neck. There were at least ten squires before him, each holding a lance, waiting to see which one he would choose. He examined them carefully, and chose one with a stout, square shaft of ash and a bright, sharp head of steel. Upon it he fixed a rich pennon, subtly embroidered with gold; the lovely lady Guilorete had sent it to him as a love token, and it was sure to boost his courage when the time came.

Out he rode from the king's army, and Guiromelant from the other side as swiftly, lance in hand and shield shining in the sun. He looked every inch a knight, and his horse was clad in yellow samite at the rear and red at the head.

The plain was beautiful and level, and incredibly full of knights and ladies. More than a thousand girls made their way through the ranks to sit and get a better view of the combat.

They wasted no time in talking; as soon as they entered the field and saw each other, without any oaths or discussion of terms, the two knights fixed their shields on their arms like the skilled warriors they were and set them firmly between their chests and the necks of their swift horses; then they lowered their pennons and thrust in their spurs. Both horses surged forward, faster than a bolt loosed from a crossbow; and there were no ruts or rocks to upset their charge – to all who watched it seemed they would surely fly! Their riders were not sparing with their spurs; and when they were about to meet, to give greater power to their blows they supported their lances on their shields and struck with such force that they pierced their hauberks, tearing clean through the chain-mail and the tunics next to their skin. Their horses were charging with such fury that the knights, as they passed, couldn't help but collide so heavily, bodies and shields together, that they grazed all the skin from their faces and knees, and all four, knights and mounts, came crashing to the ground in a heap. But they were great and splendid knights and leaped nimbly to their feet, and drew their naked swords and raised their shields high. They came at each other in a fury, and dealt such fearsome blows with their swords that they struck sparks from their helmets and smashed leather and wood from their shields. They hated each other mortally. Blow after mighty blow they struck, and won and yielded ground in turn. But they recovered so fast from every blow that the watching host were amazed they could endure so long. Neither had any intention of leaving the other as long as he had breath left in him. These fine and valiant knights were locked together till noon.

And then, truly, as soon as that hour arrived, Sir Gawain recovered his courage and strength and vigour. He shook off his weariness and the effects of the heat, and once past noon he felt stronger and fresher than he had at the start. With his strength revived, he came swiftly with his naked sword in hand and attacked Guiromelant in a fury. He struck him on the helm and stove it in right on the forehead; he would have cut right through to his head if his sword had not slipped; but it came down on his shield with such might that it sliced a great wedge off the side. Gawain prepared to strike again, and Guiromelant did likewise; and such was their fury that with the hewing of their sharpened blades all that remained of their shields were the straps and nails. Blood flowed down to their heels from their flushed, stained bodies; for with no shields left to protect them they rained mighty blows on each other's mail-coats and wounded each other terribly: they cut and hewed the tender flesh beneath their shirts with the great and awesome blows they dealt. But it was Guiromelant who tired and weakened. For every blow he gave Gawain, Gawain returned three. The king's host, who had earlier been downcast, could rejoice again, seeing the good knight Gawain harrying the other and driving him back, and they began to whisper that he would soon have vanquished him. And those who loved Guiromelant, and had earlier been rejoicing, were now dismayed; all his people were lost in grief.

But whoever had the better or worse of the combat, Clarissant's sorrow was

the same. If either of them were disgraced or killed, she would surely die. She came before the king her uncle and fell at his feet and begged him to have mercy.

'For the love of God, sire,' she cried, 'end this battle between my brother and Guiromelant! Give him to me as a husband, for he's bestowed his love on me, and I've granted mine to him; I'll never take another on any account!'

The king replied with sympathy, but said: 'I can't, dear niece, I tell you truly, and my heart is so much the sadder. It's a custom of chivalry that once a knight has entered the field of battle, and has his helmet laced on and his right spur fastened, he must not be drawn from the combat unless he requests it. But go to your brother now, quickly, and beg him to stop the battle, and to give Guiromelant to you as a husband since you love him. He's a noble man of high renown, and such a fine and handsome knight that there's no king or count who could surpass him; it would be a great shame if anything but good befell him.'

Then Clarissant set out eagerly; and it was a most courageous deed she did, as she ran before that great assembly to the combat in the middle of the plain, and begged Sir Gawain for mercy, to stop the battle for the love of God, and to give her Guiromelant for her husband: he would be doing her a great honour if he did, for she would then have a fine man for her love. And Sir Gawain instantly replied:

'God help me, sister, I'd rejoice in my heart if he could be persuaded, but I'll not grant your request until he's withdrawn his accusation of treachery.'

The king delayed no longer but went straight after his niece. The debate lasted a long while, with Clarissant weeping constantly. Sir Gawain promised that, if Guiromelant retracted his accusation, he would certainly grant him his sister's hand. 'But if he won't withdraw the charge, let him don his mail-coat again tomorrow and return to battle armed as he is now.'

They agreed to this, and nothing more was said. Then Sir Gawain departed, riding slowly off towards his lodging in the castle, while King Arthur had Guiromelant disarmed at once, and mounted him on a palfrey and led him away with the fair Clarissant.

And then, at the crack of dawn next morning, the king told his niece to dress; and when she was ready she was led to the church, looking fair and elegant and beautifully attired; and the worthy knight Guiromelant received her from an archbishop's hand. There were many bishops and priors and abbots at the wedding, and much laughter and merriment. The musicians made a glorious sound and the whole court rejoiced: it was a great service indeed.

But before they had left the church Gawain returned to the king's camp, fully armed. Sir Kay ran to him, and asked him why he was armed at such a happy hour. And Sir Gawain answered: 'I'm going to do battle. Is the king up yet?'

'Oh, sir! You've put yourself out for nothing! Peace has been made! He's married your sister!'

'Married? You don't mean it?'

'I tell you, sir,' said Kay, 'they're still in church, listening to the holy service.'

'How could my uncle deal me such an insult? Giving my sister to the man who was charging me with treachery! Marrying her without my consent! You can go and tell the king that I shall never be his vassal or return to him, until he comes and seeks me in a distant land with three thousand knights of worth!'

With that Gawain turned and rode swiftly away. And Sir Kay went straight to the church and was not slow to speak; he said: 'I have to tell you, sire, you've lost your nephew. He's sworn never to return to court, because you've given his sister to his enemy before he'd withdrawn his charge. He'll no longer hold you as his friend or his uncle or his lord.'

When the king heard this he was stricken with the deepest anguish he had ever felt in his life; he nearly went out of his mind with grief. The king and his noble company were all downcast; the joy they had been feeling fled away and they were lost in sorrow. Guinevere was woebegone, and Ygerne fainted; and Clarissant held herself to blame, grieving bitterly that Gawain had left the king's court because of her impulsive act.

The king gave orders for his palfrey to be saddled at once, and told the squires to fill the chests and load the ponies. They cleared the lodgings straight away, taking mantles and cloaks and robes, goblets and blankets, and filling coffers and cases with golden cups and drinking-bowls. No-one was left behind, knight or girl or lady. Guiromelant and his wife and the three queens mounted, and princes, barons, dukes and counts set out with King Arthur. But there was no laughter or joy in the king's host; they could not have been more sorrowful. Nothing could comfort them now that they had lost Gawain. No-one has ever seen so many nobles all together in search of a single knight: they were reckoned to number sixty thousand. And the king rode on, deep in troubled thought; and the queen went, too, as distracted as he.

* * *

Meanwhile Gawain had been riding steadily through a forest, until he suddenly found himself by a river, deep and wide and swift. He looked at the high, rocky bank and saw no ford or bridge where he could cross. He carried on down the river's edge, looking for a plank or a boat or a crossing. On he rode along the bank, fully armed and deeply troubled.

Then his thoughts began to turn, and he remembered the lance he had been seeking; but he did not know where chance had now led him: all he knew was that it was a day in Lent. He told himself he had been a fool, and felt he had delayed too long; he was desperate now to fulfil his vow, but there was no-one to approach to ask the way. He decided to ride on until he met a knight or girl who could give him the information he needed. And so he turned away from the bank and began to clamber up a rock. He goaded his horse with his spurs and finally reached the top.

He gazed far along the riverbank, and suddenly saw something to raise his spirits, for just at the edge of a forest he caught a glimpse of a lofty tower. Gawain set off towards it at once, happier now and greatly cheered. He rode on until he reached the castle, where he found the drawbridge lowered. He passed through the gate – it was wide open – and dismounted. More than a hundred boys appeared, all eager to serve him, and gave his horse to the master of the stables who provided him with oats and hay. They led Sir Gawain to be disarmed in an antechamber, paved with marble and strewn with fresh grass. They brought him a brand-new gown lined with grey and white fur, and then, without the slightest delay, the boys led him from the chamber to the hall.

There they found a most handsome, white-haired nobleman sitting on a bed; he was certainly not a penitent or an ill-bred man, or a servant or a layabout: his gown alone was worth a hundred marks, and his hat was not made of straw but of rich sable covered with silk, and on top of the hat was a beautiful circle of gold, studded with jaspers and sardonyx and other precious stones. He was lying on the bed, leaning on his elbow; and it seemed indeed that he could have lived in great happiness, for he would have been a lord of great riches, if his body had not been maimed, rendering him helpless.

He greeted Gawain as soon as he approached, and Sir Gawain, filled with joy as he realised where he was, returned his greeting. And the good man entirely forgot his troubles and received Gawain at his side. Together they talked of many things, for they were comfortable and at ease, and everyone in the house was happy, lord and knight alike.

When the cooks had prepared and arranged the dinner, the servants brought two basins of hot water to wash their hands, and a towel for their drying. And as soon as they had dried their hands, two servants brought trestles of cypress-wood on which they placed the table, spread with a tablecloth of the purest whiteness. The whole hall was equally white, for there were many candles burning there, radiating a brilliant light.

Thereupon they sat down to dine; but they had not been seated long before they saw a boy come from a chamber. In his hand he was holding a white lance with a rounded shaft. He came across the crowded hall and passed before Sir Gawain. And the lance-head bled, and did not stop bleeding until he had passed through the hall. And after him Gawain saw a beautiful girl come from the same chamber, and he couldn't take his eyes off her, so delightful did he find her. In her hands she was carrying a small silver trencher, and she passed before all the people there, following the lance. And next Sir Gawain saw two boys holding candlesticks laden with candles. Gawain was burning to ask who these people were and from what land. And while he was thus absorbed he saw, coming through the hall behind the boys, another girl, slim and straight, of lovely appearance, but grieving desperately. Between her hands she held aloft the Holy Grail for all to see. Gawain saw it quite clearly, and longed to know why she was weeping so bitterly. As everyone watched she went swiftly past and straight into another chamber. And when she had disappeared with

the Grail, four servants followed carrying a bier covered with a royal silk, and on the bier there was a body. And on the silken covering lay a sword which was broken across the middle. But anyone who did not already know would have found it hard to see the break, for the sword looked quite intact. The four carried the bier onward and passed through the hall.

None of the people gathered there addressed them in any way; nor did the bearers say a word. Gawain was filled with wonder. All four servants with the bier passed into a chamber. But they had only just vanished and been gone but an instant when the boy reappeared carrying the white lance with the head that bled – though it had neither flesh nor veins; and the girl with the silver trencher passed again before everyone; and the two boys reappeared with the candlesticks; and back came the bejewelled Grail, carried by the weeping girl; then the bier, after only the briefest pause. That night they passed through the house three times, so that everyone in the hall saw them with perfect clarity. And Gawain, too, saw them and was lost in wonder.

And then he remembered how he had failed before; and he drew close to the worthy man and, with the utmost eagerness, asked the significance of the Grail and the lance, and why the girl was crying; and why the bier was being carried thus; and why the burnished sword was lying on the top. And the one who was full of nobility replied that he would certainly tell him – if he was worthy to know such things. Then he called four boys and said:

'Go; bring me my good sword.'

They did so; and know this: it was broken. Two of the boys gave it to him, placing the pieces in his hands. He took the sword and passed it to Sir Gawain, who was so eager to find out the truth, and said to him, without further explanation:

'If you can mend this blade and make the pieces join together so that the sword is whole again, you'll be able to know the truth and significance of the bier and the Grail and the lance, and why the girl weeps.'

Without a moment's hesitation Gawain took the pieces and put them together; and they joined perfectly as though they were one again: everyone who saw it thought it was repaired. Then the lord said:

'Take the blade by the point and pull. If you don't pull one piece from the other, you can be sure I'll tell you the secret and the purest truth about the Grail and the lance and the bier.'

And Gawain took the sword and pulled; and he broke one piece from the other at the first tug. The lord said:

'Ah, Gawain, you have not yet achieved enough as a knight to be able to know the truth about these things; for I promise you, the one who'll come to know the truth will be esteemed and praised as the finest knight in the world. But you may well yet come to know the truth, and win by your chivalry glory and influence above all others.'

While he was speaking Sir Gawain listened, and with such intense attention to his every word that he fell asleep upon the table.

Gawain stayed fast asleep until he awoke next day; and he was astounded to find himself in a marsh with his weapons and armour beside him and his horse tethered to a tree. He was dismayed and downcast to find himself there. And he was distressed and furious with himself at having failed to learn the truth about the mysteries: it pained his heart most bitterly – he wouldn't have missed that at any price. His whole body shivered and shook with anguish.

He took up his arms and came to the elm where his horse was tethered, and mounted and set off, deep in troubled thought.

The Broken Sword

MEANWHILE PERCEVAL, HAVING LEFT his uncle's hermitage, had journeyed long through a great forest until one day, about noon, he emerged into a beautiful country, richly farmed on every side, filled with wheat and barley like the lands of the abbeys of Citeaux or Clairvaux. Perceval wondered to what country he had come, for it was at least two years since he had seen a land so abundantly endowed with all good things, so plentiful and populous. Then he caught sight of a splendid castle, of which all the walls and battlements were whiter than new-fallen snow. It had five handsome towers, all identical: one in the middle and four all round. But they were not all the same colour: the one in the centre was red and the others were whiter than snow settled on a bough. The sea beat at the wall's foot, and a river flowed on the other side, full of salmon, pike, perch and sturgeon. There was a great township inside the walls, nobly peopled with knights and serving-men, burgesses and merchants, liberal, courteous and well-bred, trading in furs of white and grey, in silk, samite and the finest cloth, in Byzantine and Norman coin, in horses and vessels of gold and silver, in pepper and wax, in cloves and spices of many kinds, most precious and expensive. Never has there been such plenty in any city. It all came by sea from Alexandria and Slavonia, from Babylon, from Mecca and Calabria, from Jerusalem and Caesarea, from Acre, which stands at the ocean's edge, and from far beyond the Saracen lands: the abundant riches of the castle came from all over the world.

There were two abbeys in the town, magnificently housed, with beautiful churches, handsome towers and splendid belfries, richly roofed with lead. Perceval, ravished by the sight, spurred his horse on until he reached the bridge, which stood upon vaulted arches and was so designed that it could be raised permanently at night; and there were crenellated barbicans at each end; and many other fine fortifications, all newly built, surrounded the whole castle.

Perceval rode through the gate, gazing about him in delight, and there in the streets he saw many knights and servants and townsmen and girls and rich young ladies, most nobly dressed. He did not stop until he reached the great

hall; then four boys came running to meet him, and helped him from his horse at once and took his shield and lance, and without delay they led him into the handsome hall.

A young lady came to meet him, and she was of the greatest beauty; and twenty knights accompanied her. They all greeted Perceval and honoured him most highly, for they thought him very handsome and of noble bearing. They seated him on a carpet embroidered with silver flowers, and disarmed him, and brought him a short mantle of silken cloth lined with ermine.

Meanwhile the young lady confided in a girl, whispering to her secretly so that no-one else could hear: 'I've never seen a man in this mortal world who more resembled Perceval, my sweet friend whom I love so much and who suffered such danger on my account, winning back all my land for me, and vanquishing my enemies, Engygeron and Clamadeus.'

'Before God, my lady,' the girl replied, 'I do believe it *is* Perceval!'

And thereupon the young lady took him by the hand and seated him beside her on a rich silken cloth decorated with wheels. Perceval was in no way disconcerted and had no desire to hold his tongue; he was quick to ask her the name of the castle, and her own. The girl was only too pleased at this, for she didn't want him to stay silent.

'Sir,' she said, 'all who live in these parts call the castle Beaurepaire. And my name is Blancheflor. And now,' she said, 'tell me *your* name, good sir.'

Perceval gave a sigh, and blushed; and he looked anew at the girl and became so lost in thought that for a while he couldn't utter a word. But finally he replied, saying:

'Young lady, I shan't make a long sermon out of telling you my name. God preserve me, I'm called Perceval: I was born and raised in Wales.'

When the girl heard this her heart leaped for joy, and she couldn't hide her feelings but began to smother him with kisses. And knights and servants and girls and squires came to see the knight, and Blancheflor said to them:

'This is the good, the worthy, the noble Perceval, who rescued my land when Clamadeus was waging war on me! You're to treat him as your lord.'

Then there was jubilation in the hall, and the news spread through the city and the whole town rang with joy: there were more than thirty thousand souls rejoicing for Perceval. The bells rang in all the churches, and silken cloths adorned with gold were hung from the windows, beautifying the place still more. The celebration lasted all that day, not ceasing until late at night as the moon shone down serenely. The hall was filled with a brilliant light, for so many candles were blazing there that no-one could tell their number.

Now Perceval was a lord indeed; now he had everything he could wish; now his heart had no cause for sorrow; now it was filled with joy and happiness; now he no longer knew any sadness; now he could see his beautiful love, who was fairer than a flower upon a sapling; now he had the one of whom he had dreamed when he found the three drops of blood in the frozen snow.

They called for water, and it was brought at once in silver basins; great cloths were spread upon the tables, with knives and salt-bowls and rich and costly cups. Such abundant riches appeared there that no man's tongue could tell them all and no clerk's pen could ever record them. Perceval sat beside Blancheflor, whose colour was finer than a rose in bud, and he was more than contented, for before his eyes was the one he had thought he would never see again.

After they had eaten at their leisure they had the cloths removed; and the gentle-hearted Blancheflor had Perceval's bed made in the richest of chambers, lined with wooden panelling. And in the hall there was a high, clear, ringing music, wonderful to hear.

The celebration continued till nearly midnight, and then everyone departed, retiring to their houses in the town. The great hall was left quite empty; only the household now remained, and they took Perceval and laid him down in a magnificent and costly bed. And Blancheflor, filled with happiness and joy, lay down to rest in a chamber next to his. Then the candles, which burned brightly in the chambers and lit the whole palace, were taken away. And all who had been serving there that night went to bed and fell asleep, for they were very tired and weary.

But though they might sleep, Perceval stayed wide awake, still overwhelmed at having found his love. Nor had Blancheflor's thoughts drifted: she rose without delay and donned a white gown of ermine and left her chamber. All alone, without a chambermaid, she came to Perceval's bed, drew back the blanket and lay down beside her love.

She whispered to him: 'Don't think it wicked or foolish that I've come here: I've longed for you so much! And I tell you in all truthfulness, I would never take a husband if it meant being untrue to you.'

Perceval took her in his arms, for he greatly desired the pleasure of her embrace, and he found it pleasing indeed. He kissed her a hundred times without stopping.

They spoke of many things, and asked each other all kinds of questions. 'My lady,' he said, 'when was this castle rebuilt? The walls seem brand-new – the towers, too – and there are many ladies and girls and knights and burgesses and serving-men, all rich and well-to-do. It's well peopled with all kinds of folk, and the town and country are beautiful.'

'In faith, sir,' she said, 'this castle was badly damaged after it had been besieged by Engygeron – as you know very well, for it was you who raised the siege and delivered me and my land. But I couldn't be married to you then, for that was not yet your wish. So I remained alone and lost, while you set off for other lands in search of adventures to enhance your glory. And truly, I wished then that I were dead and buried, and that my soul had left my body! My heart was quite distraught, until the people of this land, who had fled because of the war, heard the news and came back to the castle; their return delighted me! Then I sent for craftsmen, a host of masons and carpenters, and

had the walls rebuilt and new towers constructed. There: that's the story; now I've told you everything. And in the morning you'll marry me and the land will be yours; and you'll keep it in peace: there'll be no war. There are a thousand knights who'll all accept you as their lord.'

'Truly, my love,' said Perceval, 'I can't do that yet, for I've undertaken a journey that I wouldn't give up for all the wealth of Rome. But as soon as it's done I'll come straight back to you.'

'Sir,' said Blancheflor, 'I don't know what will come of this, but it isn't right for such a worthy man as you to abandon what he's vowed to do – not even for his love's sake. When you left me the other year I remember you told me you'd go and find your mother, and that once you'd seen her you'd return to me without delay. So I waited for you from then till now, and I'll wait again, for I'd rather suffer agony, and have my heart made dark and sad, than go against your will. I'll do just as you wish, since I can't hold you back by force or pleading. And even if I could it would be a great wrong if I did so and angered you, for a lady shouldn't do anything to displease or annoy her love. If she's come to love him with a noble love that's true and sure, then she should bear the pain that wrings her heart.'

Then she embraced him tightly and kissed him sweetly twenty times, and with a heart full of sorrow she said: 'There's nothing for it: you'll leave when you wish. But stay just two days more, and then you can go freshly equipped.'

Perceval agreed to this, but unwillingly, for he was eager to be on his way.

Then day began to break, and Blancheflor rose, grieving bitterly in her heart at what had been said, but she showed no outward sign of it. She returned to her own bed; and in spite of all her troubled thoughts she fell asleep at once, for she was very tired after staying awake all night. And Perceval, too, fell fast asleep.

The weather was beautiful and calm, and the sun shone brightly through the windows, filling the handsome hall with light. And soon the bells rang, summoning people to mass. Perceval awoke when he heard them; and his fair love Blancheflor sent a maid to him with a gown of silk embroidered with gold. Perceval was delighted, and rose and donned the gown; and without more ado he left the chamber and entered the great hall, and found it filled with knights and ladies who greeted him with the high honour that they owed their lord who had rescued them from the terrible plight into which Engygeron had plunged them. Then the fair Blancheflor appeared from her chamber, clothed in white samite adorned with golden flowers and silver stars; her mantle was made of the same cloth and richly lined with ermine; no man of woman born ever beheld such a beautiful girl. Perceval went to meet her; they greeted each other, and then went to the church together to hear mass. And everyone who saw them side by side was filled with wonder, and said that if you searched all the lands and seas you could never find a couple as beautiful as those two.

When mass was over they returned to the hall, where feasting and merry-making began such as no-one could describe; the festivities and gaiety lasted

all day long, without interruption. There was not a word of sadness, of poverty or of growing old, only of joy and happiness. Everyone present was blissfully happy.

Perceval stayed thus for three days, for his sweetheart begged him so earnestly. And when the fourth morning came Blancheflor rose, grieving bitterly that he meant to leave; she began to weep, imploring him to postpone his journey just one more day for her sake. But Perceval said he could delay no longer. He called for his arms and armed at once, and then bade that his charger be brought to him; it had been well cared for, and was richly harnessed with a brand-new saddle. And that was that. He kissed his love, whose heart was distraught and full of sorrow: her eyes filled with tears and her heart with sighs, but she stood there in silence.

Perceval addressed her most tenderly, saying: 'In God's name, my love, don't be so upset and sad at heart, for by Saint Gilles of Provence, I'll return to you as soon as I can!'

Blancheflor said not a word in reply, for her heart was so gripped by grief and sorrow that she couldn't have spoken at any price. The hall was packed with ladies and knights and townsfolk: they numbered more than four thousand. The highest among them spent a long while in consultation with him, begging him not to refuse to marry Blancheflor, who was beautiful and wise and rich. Perceval said he couldn't do so yet, but asked them not to be displeased, for he would return from the task he had undertaken just as soon as he could. Then he wouldn't leave the lady and the land for the rest of his life.

That was the end of their debate, and Perceval mounted his charger. A red quartered shield with a lion rampant of silver, newly made and decorated, was presented to him, and he hung it at his neck. Then, clutching a lance of apple-wood with a great, sharp head of steel, Perceval took his leave, commending them all to God. And he rode from the castle and was on his way.

Blancheflor was left desolate and mournful, and everyone with her grieved bitterly for Perceval; knights, townsmen and servants, ladies, girls and children all wept and lamented. To the one who had suffered martyrdom and accepted the agony of the Cross to free His people from Hell, to the almighty King of all, they commended him a hundred thousand times.

* * *

The good and loyal knight Perceval rode for fifteen days and met with no adventure worth relating, until he passed into a vast and beautiful forest. And high up in a tall tree, so high that he couldn't have been touched even with a lance, a child was sitting on a branch. In his hand he was holding an apple, and from here to Rome you wouldn't find so beautiful a being. He didn't look so much as five years old, too young to be without his mother. Perceval looked long at him, and turned his horse towards the tree. He halted beneath it and

greeted him, and the child was quick to return his greeting. Perceval asked him to climb down, but he said he would not.

'You have no authority over me,' said the child. 'Although you're a knight I owe you homage for nothing I possess, and if I do I renounce all rights to it and yield it to you. Many words have reached my ears and truly had no effect on me: yours affect me not at all.'

'So it seems,' said Perceval. 'But tell me, am I on the right road for the house of the Fisher King?'

'You may well be, gentle friend; but I don't think I'm yet so learned as to be able to answer all your questions.'

'In faith,' said Perceval, 'none of the things I want to ask requires great thought before you reply. I want to know your name, and where you're from, and why you're sitting on that branch, and if you can tell me anything about the Fisher King. That's all.'

The child replied that he would tell him nothing about any of those things – neither truth nor falsehood. But he should know this much: 'You could go tomorrow to the pillar on Mount Dolorous, where you'll hear news, I believe, that will delight you.'

Then he stood up on the branch and climbed swiftly to a higher one; he hardly lingered there at all, but climbed from branch to branch right to the top of the tree, which was wondrously high. Perceval watched in astonishment. And unseen by Perceval the little child vanished from the tree, leaving him down below, peering all around. Unable to see any sign of him, Perceval set off on his way again, just as the day was fading. He slept that night at the house of a hermit, who received him most happily and gave him all he could provide.

Morning came, and before the sun had fully risen Perceval armed once more and took to the road. He drove his horse hard until almost noon; then he caught sight of Mount Dolorous far off in the distance: it was the most beautiful mountain in all the world, and so colossally high that Perceval was filled with wonder.

He reached the mountain's foot and paused awhile and then dismounted, for he saw that his horse was sweating and tired from the swift ride, and he took off the bridle and saddle and left him to graze and rest. Then he looked up and saw a girl approaching from the top of the mountain; she was riding a greyish palfrey which bore her swiftly along. He greeted her, and she replied most graciously and said:

'In God's name, sir, have mercy on yourself and me.'

'How do you mean, dear girl?'

'Don't go to the top of this mountain: it would be the utmost folly! No-one goes there and returns alive! My love went there this morning, the most esteemed of all men living in the world, and I don't know what's become of him. I've searched high and low but can see no sign of him at all, and my heart is dark and sad. A lady I met told me he'd lost his mind and rushed away like

a man turned wild. Now I'm all alone and lost in this distant land. I don't know what to do or say; my heart is filled with grief and despair! But if you'll remount and avoid this mountain, I'll gladly come with you and serve you at your will.'

Perceval wouldn't lie to her: he swore that he would not depart, which grieved her deeply, for she was terrified of the great forest, so vast and lonely. But she crossed the plain and rode on until she disappeared into the wood. Then Perceval took his bridle and remounted, and rode on alone to the top of Mount Dolorous.

And there he found the pillar. He gazed at its magnificent workmanship: it was made of copper, and polished from head to foot; and it was as high as a crossbow-bolt could fly. It was surrounded by fifteen crosses, all at least sixty feet in height and made of solid stone to last forever. No human soul has seen so fine a piece of work: Perceval was astounded. Five of the fifteen crosses were red, five were whiter than snow on a branch, and the rest were a beautiful shade of blue; and all the colours were natural. Perceval gazed long at them, and then at the pillar, golden and tall and beautiful, and saw a ring attached to it. Around it was written in letters of fine silver – and in Latin, not a word of any other language – that no knight should dare to tether his horse to the pillar unless he was the equal of the finest knight in the world. Perceval dismounted and took the reins and tied them to the ring. He left his horse standing quietly, and propped his shield and his sharp, steel-headed lance against the pillar. Then he stood quite still, and took off his helmet as he waited to see if anything would happen. And suddenly a girl appeared, riding a white mule. To describe her beauty would take the longest day of summer. She rode steadily up and dismounted on the green grass before Perceval. She greeted him graciously in the name of God who never lies, and bowed to him with a true and humble heart. Perceval returned her greeting, gazing at her in wonder. The girl said nothing more, but walked straight up to the fine charger tethered to the ring and stroked his head and neck with her mantle, giving him the kindest and gentlest of welcomes.

'Sir,' she said, 'I know beyond all doubt that the whole world should worship and honour and bow to you and your horse, more than to any saint at any altar, for there is no knight to be found in all this world to equal you, who have brought your horse to Mount Dolorous and tethered him to the pillar's ring. You can now boast that you have greater honour than any knight of woman born has ever had in all his life!'

'Say what you like, friend,' said Perceval, 'but there are a good many finer than I. It would be quite wrong of me to consider myself the best.'

'You speak most nobly, sir,' she said. 'But enough: you must come down now to my pavilion. You'll be treated with all possible honour, before God you will!'

They mounted and set off, and rode straight down to her beautiful, rich pavilion, pitched on a heath below the mountain in the shadow of a fir. There they dismounted, and were received with joy by knights and a host of beautiful

girls and ladies; and a bevy of servants came and disarmed Perceval from head to toe most courteously. Then the lady with the shining face led him into the pavilion and gave him a splendid gown of green samite bedecked with fur. The squires now hurried to set up the tables, and they all sat down to dine. By the time they had eaten and the tables had been cleared, the sun was fading and night fast approaching. In that grassy spot, so pleasant and broad and long and fair, Perceval and the young lady sat down together on the green grass while the squires made the beds in the pavilion. Perceval was questioning her, asking her kindly to tell him her name and where she was from, and why she had pitched her pavilion there beside the mountain, so wild and forbidding.

'My name,' she said, 'is the Lady of the High Peak of Mount Dolorous. I've a castle just beyond the mountain, but ten days ago a boy brought me word that he'd been at the court of King Arthur, where a good fifty of his finest knights made a vow that they would come to the pillar on Mount Dolorous; that's why I had my pavilion pitched here: I wanted to see the cream of all knighthood. But enough of them: if you'd like to hear the true story of the pillar, I'll gladly tell you.'

'Indeed I would,' said Perceval.

'Then listen, sir. When King Arthur was born, he was the most beautiful creature that Nature had ever made, applying all her powers to his creation. The king his father was told that three ladies had been present at his birth. The mistress of the three said that Arthur would have esteem and valour and wisdom and prowess greater than any man of woman born. When Uther Pendragon heard this he rejoiced in his heart. One day he was in his castle in the forest of Gloucester, sitting at a window overlooking a lake. He was gazing at the water and the meadow and the beautiful forest when a girl appeared before him, most splendidly dressed.

'"Sir", she said to him, "the other day I went out riding, and as evening fell I found a girl sitting in a beautiful meadow beside a stream from a spring; I sat down beside her to rest awhile, and we began talking of one thing and another, until finally she told me that you had a son who would be held in greater esteem and awe than his father who was a king and an emperor. I've been searching for you to tell you this, so that you may cherish the child, who'll be of great service to many men".

'The king had a magician called Merlin, and while the girl was talking he'd been standing nearby, listening but not saying a word. The king saw him and called to him, saying: "Wise sir, do you know anything about this?"

'"Sire", said Merlin, "I know indeed that he'll be of very great might, and of higher nobility than any Christian man before him. In his household he'll have many kings and princes and barons, and a hundred more in his company as good as he at enduring the fiercest battle. I trust this will not displease you, sire".

'Uther Pendragon began to laugh with joy at what he'd heard, for he trusted Merlin more than anyone in his land, great and wide and filled with worthy men

though it was. Then the king summoned Merlin to tell him one thing more: how he could identify the finest knight in his land at enduring battle and combat, and the most endowed with all knightly qualities. Merlin said he would tell him, but he needed a fortnight's respite; and he left the court and began searching the forests and mountains and heaths and plains, until he found this great peak. Then he set to work and made the crosses and the pillar – by the art of necromancy. My mother was then still young, and she became his mistress; and he built for her the beautiful house which is now my castle. When the time came for him to return to Uther Pendragon, he found him at Carlion in Wales. There in his hall, in the presence of a thousand knights or more, he told the king he'd found a pillar to which no-one could tether his horse except the finest knight in all his land. The king was delighted; and he led several fine knights of high esteem to the pillar, but ill befell them there. Merlin left the court and came to live with my mother – and became my father. You shouldn't doubt my words, for I've told you the story as true as the Paternoster. But enough: night's upon us; let's go and sleep and rest.'

Squires and serving men appeared bringing wine, and they drank; and without much further talking the young lady went to her bed in a beautiful chamber made for her in the pavilion. And in a rich and luxurious bed, most handsomely prepared, the worthy Perceval lay down. He slept all night without stirring, until God, the lord of all things, made the blazing sun appear to light up the world. Then the brave and mighty knight rose and dressed, and clad himself in all his armour. With his helmet laced, his shield slung round his neck, his sword at his waist and his lance in hand – sullied only with dark, congealed blood – he mounted his fine charger; and the young lady mounted likewise and they set out from the tent.

They rode on through the valley until they found a broad path through the great, leafy forest.

'Sir,' she said then, 'tell me, if you will, to which land you're going.'

'I'm going to the court of the Fisher King,' he replied, 'if I can find the way.'

'Take the path you see ahead. Have no doubt – it'll lead you straight there. If you ride swiftly and keep to the path you'll be there tomorrow morning.'

With that she took her leave. And Perceval commended her to God and rode swiftly away.

He rode on along the wide, beaten track until noon. Then a great swirl of cloud began to churn the air, and thunder and lightning and rain swept down with such violence that Perceval could barely see for the mighty storm. All the beasts of the forest shook with fear of the tempest, and even the hugest trees were torn down on every side. Until three o'clock neither the storm nor the wind abated. But Perceval battled on, not stopping despite the terrible weather, and rode on until night fell. And when the moon appeared, the night became so calm and soft and tranquil that never since the day he was born had he seen a night so clear. And the stars gleaming in the firmament shone so sharply that

each one could be clearly seen. Perceval rode on through the beautiful moonlight. All his heart and mind were set on recalling what he had seen before when the good king had given him lodging and the bleeding lance had appeared. And he longed above all to know about the Grail – the rich and precious Grail, so beautiful and glorious and encrusted with gems. Pondering deeply on these things he rode along, and swore that if he ever found that house again, he would ask the king the truth about them all.

He was still thinking about this when he looked ahead and saw, a long way off, a huge and leafy oak, right in the middle of his path. And on the tree were more than a thousand candles – of miraculous size, it seemed to him; twenty or thirty on every branch. Perceval didn't linger but rode straight on towards the tree, which seemed to be ablaze with candles; but with each approaching step, the dazzling light faded away to nothing. By the time he arrived he found not a single candle, large or small. But he caught sight of a chapel beyond the tree, and through the open door he could see a candle inside, burning. He dismounted, leaving his horse standing quietly by the wall. Then he entered the chapel and looked up and down, and saw not a mortal man or woman or any living thing; but on the altar there lay a slain knight. Over him was spread a cloth of samite, richly dyed, embroidered with many golden flowers, and before him burned a single candle, no more, no less. Perceval listened hard for approaching footsteps, but none came. He suffered this frustration for a long while, neither happy at having to linger there nor wanting to leave, until midnight drew near. Then he stepped out of the chapel to unbridle his horse. But he'd not gone two paces from the door when the light which had lit the chapel was suddenly snuffed out. Perceval was well aware of it, but refused to be alarmed, and didn't shake or tremble. He mounted without delay and soon left the chapel and the tree far behind.

Pondering deeply in his heart upon the wonders he had seen, he rode on until he came to a beautiful oak tree, tall and wide. The grass beneath it was long and thick, and he dismounted at once and unbridled his horse, and left him there to graze till daybreak.

Then he mounted again and journeyed on all morning. He found himself crossing a dismal waste of barren ground. Suddenly he heard a great horn sound three long blasts far off in the distance; he turned that way immediately and headed on with all speed, eager to find its source, until he saw a pack of dogs in pursuit of a huge boar, and four hunters following behind on fine hunting-horses. Perceval rode to meet them and greeted them most courteously, and one of them drew rein and asked him where he was going. Perceval replied that he was searching for the house of the rich Fisher King.

'By God the Creator,' said the huntsman, 'we're all in his service; and if you cross the peak you can see ahead; you'll find the hall and the tower beside the river, not a league and a half away!'

At that Perceval left him and rode on, overjoyed at the news. Then he saw a girl coming straight towards him, mounted on a dappled palfrey. She was richly

dressed in indigo samite embroidered with silver flowers, and had a fine, pure beauty. She rode down at an easy pace, and as soon as Perceval met her he greeted her nobly in the name of God who never lies.

'May He bring you joy and honour,' the girl replied. 'Now tell me, please, where you lodged last night.'

'In the forest,' he said; and he told her about the tree and the brilliant light, and how he had been in the chapel with the body of the dead knight, and how, when he stepped outside to unbridle his horse, the candle had been snuffed out.

'Truly,' said the girl, 'this is of great significance. You are to learn the truth about the lance and the Holy Grail.'

Perceval was elated; and he told her how he had seen the child in the tree, so very young that he did not believe he could yet have left his mother. 'Dear girl,' he said, 'I wish you could tell me why he wouldn't speak to me, and why he disappeared.'

'I couldn't, sir, before God,' said the wise girl, 'but everything you've told me is a sign of the holy secret of which you'll soon hear news.'

With that she promptly rode away, and for all his calling after her she would not say another word. So he set off towards the court of the Fisher King, following the path that the huntsmen had shown him, over the mountain-top.

He rode on until he caught sight of the castle standing near the river; then he spurred his horse on eagerly. As soon as Perceval entered the castle servants came from all sides and greeted him with the utmost joy. They disarmed him and dressed him in a long mantle; then they passed through the great hall and led him into a chamber. Never had its like been seen: it was not painted as other chambers are, for looking up he saw the ceiling illuminated with gold and tiny silver stars; but there was no other decoration: on the walls round about there was no blue or vermilion, or green or red or any other colour – they were lined instead with panels of gold and silver. And there were images worked into the gold, inlaid with a thousand precious stones which filled the chamber with light. Anyone entering that room could not fail to wonder who could have created such a place, and Perceval was spellbound.

He found the king sitting inside, and greeted him nobly in the name of the king of Paradise; and the good king replied like the kindly man he was, and seated him at his side. Perceval was dying to see the Grail for which he had been striving so long, and the lance, too, with the bleeding head. His heart was set upon it, but he did not see it yet. The good king gently asked him to tell him where he had slept the night before; Perceval replied that it was in the forest, and told him straight away about the chapel he had found, and how he had gone inside and seen the knight lying upon the rich cloth; and how, the moment he went out, the candle had been extinguished.

'And sire,' he said, 'I found a child in a great, leafy tree, sitting high up on a branch, who vanished after saying just a word or two. And he told me no secrets about anything except Mount Dolorous: he told me that there I would encounter

something very pleasing to me – and that was true, indeed: what I saw and heard delighted me, for there are many wonders in that place.'

The king heard this and sighed, and asked him if he had seen anything else that had puzzled him. And Perceval replied: 'No, sire; but if it's no trouble to you, I'd gladly ask about the child in the tree. What was the significance of his climbing from branch to branch, right to the very top? And I'd like to know about the slain knight in the chapel, and the tree of candles: all these things have mystified me.'

The king was silent, and Perceval fell to thinking. All the knights then washed, and the king invited Perceval to eat with him from his own bowl. They had not been seated long when a girl, fairer than an April flower upon a sapling's branch, appeared from a beautiful chamber. She was holding the Holy Grail in her hands. She passed before the table, and was followed a moment later by another girl dressed in white, embroidered silk. She was carrying the lance which dripped blood from its tip. And a boy followed after her, carrying a naked sword broken clean in half across the middle. He laid it on the table, on the corner by the king. Perceval was in turmoil, not knowing what to ask first – about the Grail or the lance, or the broken sword. The king kept summoning him to eat well, asking him repeatedly. And back came the girl, holding in her hands the Grail, so glorious and holy; and behind her came the one with the lance. Perceval leaned towards the king, and said to him:

'Truly, sire, I'd dearly love to hear the truth about the Grail which has passed before us twice, and also about the lance that bleeds; who does it serve and what is done with it? And tell me about that broken sword, and if it will ever be repaired?'

The king replied: 'Dear friend, you've asked me a very great deal, but I'll tell you the truth about it all. I'll tell you first about the child, for that is the beginning. I tell you, with all certainty, that he was a divine being, and felt such hatred for you, because of the dreadful sins with which you were stained, that he wouldn't say a word to you. And know this: he gave you an important lesson when he climbed from branch to branch to the top of the great tree, and I'll tell you why. When God first made the Earth and all the creatures in it, the birds and fishes and wild beasts, they were made with their faces always earthward, searching for their food. But God didn't wish to make man thus; instead He raised man's face to see the vast height of the firmament and the riches with which the Lord God lit the whole world He had made. And so that he should remember the one who had made him so beautiful and so noble, like Himself, God made man in no-one's likeness but His own. And now they repay Him by straying from His commandments and devoting themselves to sin. The child who vanished from the tree and mounted heavenwards was showing you symbolically that you should think of the Creator high in Heaven, and without delay, so that He may be sure to receive your soul and place it in His Paradise; for, my good dear friend, you've been enmeshed in folly for a long while. He's a fool indeed who forgets God for the sake of earthly

gain, for then he loses the praise and riches that God promises to His faithful. But of the tree of candles, which so astonished you, and of the chapel and the body of the dead knight, and of the lance and of the Grail, you'll hear me say neither good nor ill until you've eaten.'

With that he fell silent: for the moment he would say no more. Perceval was so on edge that he could neither eat nor drink, and the good king very gently summoned him again to dine. Perceval was very troubled, and said to the king:

'Before dinner's finished I'd be very glad to hear at least about the broken sword.'

And the king replied: 'Since you're so eager I'll tell you. If some worthy man – a man full of chivalry and free of wickedness, who loved and honoured God and Holy Church – if such a man laid his hand upon the sword and set the pieces together, I think that in a moment it would be whole again. Look: here it is. Take it, I pray you, and join the two pieces. If you can do so, I'll tell you about the knight at the chapel, and then about the rich Grail and the lance, and anything else you wish. Have no fear: you'll hear about the adventures which have been so strange and taxing, and when you hear them you'll be amazed. But first, I beg you, place your hand upon the sword, for by you, I believe, it will be repaired.'

So Perceval took the pieces and put them together; and the steel blade joined so finely that the day it was made it had not seemed better burnished or more handsome. But just by the join there remained a very small notch; and the king said:

'Listen, dear sir. You've striven hard at the art of arms, I know you have. From this test I know for sure that, of all men now living in the world, there is none of greater worth than you in combat or in battle; but you've not yet done enough to have God bestow on you the praise, esteem and courtesy, the wisdom and the chivalry, to enable us to say that of all knights you were the most endowed with all high qualities.'

Perceval was so lost in astonishment that he did not know what to say; and he sighed so deeply that all those seated at dinner marvelled. But the king looked at Perceval and flung his arms around his neck with the utmost joy, and said:

'My good, dear friend, be lord of my house! I willingly bestow upon you everything I have, and henceforth will hold you dearer than any man alive.'

Perceval was greatly comforted by the Fisher King's words, but he felt a sinner indeed since he could not know the truth about the Grail. But he eagerly asked the king to tell him where it was being taken and who was served from it, and why the lance bled. The king replied immediately, saying:

'After dinner you shall hear things that will delight you, but I shall not speak about the Grail, nor will you know the secret of the lance – not until the notch in this sword has been repaired by your hands. But I'll tell you this: I know of

no man in the world who can learn these things but you; but make sure you don't lose that prize through sin. And if you do fall into sin and anger God, then confess and repent and do thorough penance. And know this, too, and never doubt it: if you can return here, it may well be that you'll repair the notch, and then you could ask about the Grail and the lance; and then you would know the profound truth, the secrets and the divine mystery.'

Perceval sighed, and wondered what sin or offence prevented him from learning the secrets of the Grail; but the king would reveal no more, except that he made him realise that it was a dire sin he had committed towards his mother when she had fallen dead at the foot of the bridge on the day he left her. And he said that until he had atoned for that sin, and others, the secrets of the Grail would not be told or revealed to him. Then four servants opened the door of a chamber and carried the king away to his bed; others removed the table and made a bed for Perceval beside the fire, most rich and splendid: it was set upon a silver frame, and the sheets were fine indeed. And there Perceval lay down and slept very deeply.

But at midnight bells rang out so loud and clear that Perceval, who had been asleep awhile, started up, wide awake. He peered ahead, and saw a light so bright that, in the fields on the fairest summer's day, none brighter is ever seen. Then he heard a song so sweet that it seemed to him quite glorious, and it grieved him deeply that it was so short-lived, that beautiful, precious song of God and His sweet mother. Perceval laid his head down again, but heard a voice that cried out to him, saying:

'Perceval, I have been sent to you. Go tomorrow, my good, dear friend, and seek the house where you were born, and go to the aid of your sister who is at the mercy of strangers. I commend you to God.'

With that the voice departed, leaving Perceval pondering on the thought that he was to suffer still more toil before he saw the Grail again. He was longing to be off once more, for he had no wish to stop until he could learn all the mysteries of the Grail. But he laid his head down again, and after a while he fell asleep, and slept and rested till daybreak.

When it was light he awoke, but was astonished to see neither hall nor house; instead he found himself in a beautiful meadow beneath a flowering bush, and his horse beside him, saddled and bridled. And hanging from the saddle-bow was a magnificent sword, with a pommel of gold and a scabbard of golden thread from Venice, just like the one he had received on his first visit to the Fisher King. He was quite bewildered; but at last he stirred himself and armed and mounted.

'Truly,' he said to himself, 'I don't think any earthly man has experienced such wonders! By the Saviour, I was lodged last night, I remember clearly, at the house of the rich Fisher King; and I saw the Grail and the ever-bleeding lance, and the broken sword which I joined together – except for the notch which has still to be repaired. And now I find myself here all alone! By your grace, my dear lord God, show me the way to my mother's house.'

Thus praying, Perceval rode through the meadow until he saw a crenellated ring of wall, and was filled with wonder, for one half of the wall was red and the other white. Perceval swore that before he went on he would learn who was within; and he rode around it until he found a gate. He thought he would be able to enter, but the gate was shut fast. So he cried out, calling for it to be unlocked, but no-one said a word; yet he could hear loud sounds of rejoicing inside, with pipes and organs, harps and hurdy-gurdies playing; and the melodies were so beautiful and sweet that Perceval forgot every trouble he had known since the moment he was born. Then he called out again, saying:

'Open the gate! Let me come in and see your rejoicing!'

But he heard not a word in reply.

'In faith,' he said, 'I see they scorn my call.'

And he drew his new sword at once, and hammered on the gate with the pommel; but at the third blow he dealt, such terrible thunder and lightning fell that it seemed like the end of the world; and the sword of fine steel broke in half across the middle. Perceval was distressed indeed to see his good, new sword broken, just as the other had broken so easily before. Then suddenly a man with hair as white as snow came to the gate. He opened the wicket just a crack and saw Perceval clad in iron, and said:

'What do you want, vassal, shouting and hammering at our gate? The devil who drove you to it has brought you much misfortune! Your sword now needs to be repaired, I see, for it's broken across the middle; and you've thus lengthened by seven whole years your toil to see the lance that bleeds; nor, I promise you, will you learn the secrets of the Grail until all your sins are washed away by confession, with true repentance and deeds of penance, which will free you of all evil.'

'Oh, good sir!' cried Perceval. 'Open your wicket-gate wide, for I can see so great a light shining inside that it seems a glorious place to be – I can see everyone laughing with joy!'

'Vassal,' the white-haired man replied, 'you'll see no more till you return here. But if you can return, it may well be that you'll witness all our joy, and know the certain truth about the Grail, and why the lance bleeds – those things for which you've toiled so hard.'

'Oh, sir!' cried Perceval. 'Tell me if my sword will ever be repaired!'

'Yes,' the worthy man replied. 'The one who made it knows the hazard which caused it to be broken. Take it to him, and it'll be repaired; but no-one else will ever do so.' Then he said: 'Wait here: I'll be back with something that will help you, for I feel very sorry for you.'

He went at once, and was soon back at the gate, carrying a small, round, neatly written letter. It looked as if it could be swiftly read, but anyone who tried would find it a tiring task, for if he read all year he would not have finished it. He handed it to Perceval.

'Vassal,' he said, 'you may be sure of this: you'll never be tricked or defeated by an enemy, nor will any man, however lost or wild his mind, fail to recover

his senses if he lays this letter on his head. Vassal, you're seeking something so holy that it will never be attained by any man unless he is clean of all sins, and you are deeply stained with them. You have seen quite openly the earthly Paradise; we, hereafter, shall have the celestial Paradise of ultimate glory. All men should desire to win the perfect joy which lasts forever. Go, you shall know no more for now; but remember the letter I gave you, friend.'

With that he turned away. And Perceval, having listened to the worthy man's words, held the round letter in his hand and said: 'Wherever I may go from here, I'll hang this from my neck; I'll do it now.'

He did so, and then gathered up the pieces of his good sword and slid them into the scabbard. Then he turned his horse about and set off, riding swiftly across the meadow. But, chancing to glance back, he could see no sign of the ring of wall; he had not yet ridden a bow-shot's length, yet all he could see was open ground.

* * *

He drove his horse on swiftly until, towards evening, he left the meadowland behind. He now beheld rich pasture and ploughed fields and vineyards and rivers and townships of many kinds, populous and supplied with great riches. Perceval was astonished, and said:

'This is a marvel. Last evening when I came this way I found the land waste and deserted, and now it's teeming with all kinds of wealth.'

And he looked ahead and saw a fortified tower, two hundred feet high, surrounded by a wall with many splendid turrets; and below it was a town more noble and beautiful than any as far as Constantinople. Then Perceval turned his gaze and saw, just outside the town, a great house in the middle of a lake: in no romance or any lay will you hear of one so delightful. He saw a peasant sowing corn in a field, and rode straight to him and asked him who was the lord of the castle. And the peasant replied:

'Go there, sir: they're all waiting for you, and will receive you with jubilation!'

So he rode on at once, without delay, wondering what he meant. And everyone at the castle was filled with joy when they saw him, and rushed to meet him with crosses, in procession, saying:

'Sir, you've restored to us everything we'd lost: thanks to you we've recovered our riches and our meadowlands, our goods and all our pasturelands, and all temporal wealth!'

Perceval, baffled by their words, was led with much rejoicing to take lodging in the castle. And when they had disarmed him, a beautiful girl brought him a fur-lined robe, a surcoat and a mantle to wear, with a splendid purse on a belt which was fastened with a golden buckle inlaid with rich jewels; and when Perceval was thus arrayed there was not a more handsome man in all King Arthur's kingdom, nor any so bold and strong. Then a lady appeared from

a chamber, and Nature never made a fairer, wiser or more courteous creature. She had the comeliest body and a charming face; she was tall and young and elegant, upright in bearing and shapely, with fine shoulders, a slender waist, and hips as wide as one would wish. Her hair shone bright as gold – it seemed indeed to be threads of gold, it was so fair; and her forehead was whiter than snow; she had sparkling eyes, wide and laughing, and warm, red lips. The colour of her cheeks was a thousand times brighter than a rose on a May morning: white blended with red so perfectly that it was a marvel. She was dressed in two layers of samite, one green and one red, and on her head she wore a chaplet emblazoned with two lion cubs. Her name was Escolasse. As soon as Perceval caught sight of her he stepped forward to greet her – but she did not give him time to do so: she greeted him first.

'Sir,' she said, 'you've restored us to wealth and honour and freed us from great misery through your unmatchable valour and goodness. Welcome to this house! And welcome you shall be, if I can make you so.'

'Lady,' he replied, 'I'm glad I've been of service. But upon my soul, I don't know what I've done for you!'

'Sir,' she said, 'you've been to the house of the Fisher King and asked about the Grail, which has brought us great benefit, for in this kingdom every river and spring was dry and the land was waste and barren; now they're full of health once more. And when you asked why the lance bled, you repaired the whole country, so that now it's rich and plentiful, well stocked with all the good things of which we were in dire need before. You've brought help to us all! But when you were there the first time and saw the Grail and the bleeding lance, you would have learned the truth and all its meaning if you'd asked at once, and the rich king would have been healed of the wound which brings him grief and anguish; but I think that, if you devote unceasing energy and thought, you may yet earn the right to learn the perfect truth.'

With that the young lady took Perceval's hand and led him to a window to entertain him with conversation until nightfall when supper would be ready. Perceval leaned there and looked down at the beautiful lake below the castle and noticed again the house that stood in the middle; and he saw the flame of a great furnace, bluer than azure, rising from a chimney. He asked the girl how a fire came to fling forth such a flame; and she replied:

'I'll tell you, sir. In that house on the lake lives an aged smith. A king gave him the house in return for three swords: he has a forge there where he made all three. One of them consumed his efforts for a whole year, and it was sharp and solid, magnificently made; and he said that it would never be broken except by one hazard which he alone knew: by that hazard the splendid sword would be broken, and it would never be repaired except by him. And that strange, deep blue flame has never since gone out; yet no fire is kept there, and he's never since wished to forge again: were he given a coffer full of gold he still would not return to forging, for he knows he won't live long after he's repaired that other sword. I'm telling you the truth, and I tell you this: at the foot

of his bridge are two serpents in chains, and no man of woman born could pass through his gate and return with life and limb, though the doors are always open. Now hear, dear friend, why the serpents have been placed there: it's so that, if someone came to this land to repair the sword, the evil serpents would kill him as soon as he tried to enter the forge. Unless he flew like a bird, I promise you, he'd be torn to pieces!'

When Perceval heard this he was overjoyed, for it seemed he had found the place where the pieces of his sword would be joined once more. Then he questioned the girl again, saying: 'Lady, tell me the name of this castle; it's a delightful place.'

'It's called Cothoatre; and the house below is called the Lake. Let's go and have supper now, for it's time.'

So they went and washed, for all was ready, and dined at the high table. That night Perceval was served most handsomely, and after supper they went to their beds. Perceval's was spread with two sheets from Constantinople, and at each corner there hung a little golden bell, so perfectly tuned that when they rang together they made a delightful melody. Any man, however ill, who lay upon that bed would be released from all pain. Perceval lay down, and found it rich and beautiful indeed; and the girl whispered sweetly in his ear that if he wanted pleasure she would lie there with him in the bed, for he had deserved it. She looked so lovely to Perceval that he did not know whether to refuse or accept – and he trembled in every limb as he remembered the quest he had undertaken for the Grail.

'In faith,' he said, 'I think she means to deceive me, or else she always asks knights for love, and I'm not the first! But a man should always fear sin, both in word and deed, if he wants to conquer Paradise.'

Perceval shivered at the thought, and said to the girl: 'Fair lady, I've no need of that just now. But truly, I refuse you only because it would be a great sin if I ruined your virginity or mine.'

The girl was filled with shame, and said: 'As God's my witness, sir, I said what I said to fulfil your wishes. Now that I see your desire is to shun the sport I offered you, it is my desire as well.'

At that she left without another word, and went to her chamber to sleep. Perceval, thinking about the Grail and nothing else, fell asleep, and slumbered on until daybreak when the watch sounded the dawn.

Then he arose at once, impatient to be off. The girl came and begged him earnestly to stay, for she would honour him most highly if he would accept her service. But no plea or promise could persuade Perceval to delay. She led him to a handsome chapel to hear mass, where they were told about Our Lady, the jewel of them all. After mass she had food brought to him: a roast salted capon; and when he had eaten Perceval quickly armed, girding on his broken sword, and then mounted at once with his shield and his lance. To see him safely on his way the girl mounted, too, and all her people with her. Perceval noticed an axe hanging on a hook, and he went and took it; then he rode down through

the castle with Escolasse at his side. As he passed through the streets all the people came thronging, and bowed low to him on every side and loudly cried:

'Sir, you've restored our joy and prosperity: how can we help feeling grief when you leave so soon?'

Perceval, with the axe in his hand, left the castle and rode towards the house in the middle of the lake. Outside the gate, at the head of the bridge, were chained two serpents, huge and fierce and hideous. No man ever beheld such a perilous passage. But he advanced towards them swiftly and dismounted. And the girl cried:

'Sir, what do you mean to do?'

'To repair my sword, lady, by overcoming these serpents and entering this house!'

'Oh, gentle knight! Do you want to die?'

'It's no use trying to stop me. I want to know if there's a man here who can repair my sword, for I was told that if it were broken it would be mended here.'

Hearing this, all the people present begged him to have mercy, warning him to stay away from there. But Perceval would not delay a single moment. He advanced towards the bridge, holding his shield before his face and praying earnestly. He clutched the axe in both hands and stepped on to the bridge to meet the demon beasts. When the serpents saw him coming they turned wild, rearing up in rage and lashing and clawing at the sandstone slabs of the bridge. Then they surged towards him, blazing in their eagerness; Perceval waited until they had reached the full extent of their chains, and then charged at them in a fury, brandishing the great axe, and struck one such a blow that he sent both its feet flying. It recoiled in horror, but the other flung itself at Perceval and plunged both feet into his shield; no weapon, however sharp, could have smashed through with such ease. When Perceval, alert as ever, saw that its claws had broken through, he thrust the beast back with the shield and threw the strap off over his head. It was a fine ploy, for hampered by the shield it could not use its legs, and Perceval, seeing the serpent's plight, swung his axe and sliced clean through its neck to send the black and hideous head flying into the water. But the first serpent lashed its tail at Perceval, and sent him crashing to the ground two yards behind; then it coiled itself into a ball and grasped so firmly with its hind legs' claws that it fixed them in a marble stone; then out it snaked in a lashing attack; but Perceval leaped up with his axe and with an awesome blow he hacked through the serpent's throat and chest and down into its bowels, and from its loathsome body a red smoke belched. Perceval took the shield that the serpent had seized and pulled it from its claws; he hung it at his neck by the strap, and stood staring at the marks of the serpent's blow.

When Escolasse and her people saw that Perceval had killed the two hideous serpents, the anguish they had felt turned to joy. And they brought him his horse and he mounted and set off, and rode through the gate of the house on

the lake and found its master. Perceval greeted him with great respect – as was proper, for he saw that he was very old.

'God save you, sir,' said Perceval.

But hearing this, the old man, white with age, was distraught and said: 'Curse your coming! I know what it is you want! Did you enter here on wings?'

'No,' said Perceval. 'I defeated the two crested serpents. I battled with them and killed them both, thanks be to God; show me now, without delay, where I can find the smith who used to forge here.'

'What do you want with him?'

'God save me,' said Perceval, 'he must repair my sword.'

When the lord of the house heard this he trembled and turned pale; and he saw the sword at Perceval's side which he himself had made, and knew very well where it had been broken.

'Vassal,' he said, 'you have greatly sinned in breaking your sword, which I made many years ago. You broke it at the gate of Paradise, I see; and I tell you, unless I repair it, it will remain forever broken.'

With that he unlocked a wicket-gate and said: 'Dismount, vassal, and give me your sword. I'll join the pieces together; and there will never be any risk of it breaking again, whatever blow may be struck with it.'

Perceval handed him the sword at once. And the aged lord took a great pair of bellows and blew on the ever-burning fire. He took the pieces and set to work, and reforged the sword so perfectly that there was no sign that it had ever been broken. He burnished it with exceeding care, and repaired the inscription; then he returned it to its scabbard and said:

'I'll tell you now, vassal: you should be counted the finest knight in the world. You've been through many perilous tests, I know, and many winters and summers, too, for the sake of the Grail – but you've more to go through yet, I think. And I can tell you this as well: I've not much longer to live.'

So saying, he handed him the sword. Perceval girded it on and courteously took his leave; then he mounted and set off on his way, passing back through the gate and over the bridge. The young lady Escolasse and her people came to meet him, giving him a joyful welcome, and they detained him as long as they could; but try as they might they could not keep him: he set out once more, and they accompanied him and guided him to a great road.

There Perceval bade them farewell, and Escolasse made her way back to her castle. With his shield at his side, Perceval rode on without further delay; but he had not gone far from the castle when he heard bells ringing in all the churches, for Triboet, who had repaired his fine, sharp, sturdy sword, was dead.

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Perceval rode hard all day, following a path through a great forest, until he saw a cross and a small church, old and ruined. He dismounted there, tethered his horse to a stake, laid down his lance and shield and composed himself; then

he entered the chapel. He appealed over and over to the mother of God, for her image was upon the altar, praying that she might keep him from harm and misfortune, and grant that he might find the lance that bled unceasingly, and the Grail. Then he returned to his horse and removed his bridle, and wiped his head and flanks with his silken surcoat; and he tossed him some grass in place of hay, scything it with his sword. Then he lay down beneath a thorn-bush, still fully armed, and soon he was fast asleep.

Suddenly a demon appeared in the semblance of a girl, the most beautiful seen in any land, and she was mounted on a black mule. She kept saying: 'When will I find my love? I've been seeking him so long!'

Perceval awoke and raised his head, surprised to hear the voice. The evil creature dismounted and said: 'Perceval, dear friend, you've caused me a great deal of trouble: I've been seeking you for more than a year! I tell you truly, if you wish to know all the secrets of the Grail and the bleeding lance, you'll learn them swiftly through me, and be free of the toil you've suffered so long – if you'll do my will completely and lie with me, for I adore and desire you so much that I'm dying for your love! I tell you, dear friend, I'm the Fisher King's daughter, and for love of you I'll reveal all the truth about the Grail to you tomorrow, for it's in my possession; and have no doubt: you'll also know the truth about the sword that you repaired except for the notch; just do as I wish, and quickly!'

The demon was desperate to make Perceval sin, to destroy his chastity and prevent him knowing about the Grail. For the Devil goes wild when he sees a man committed to doing good. The demon kept pressing him in his effort to deceive him, but Perceval said:

'I can see you've a lot to learn, young lady: you're misguided, and pursuing foolish goals, unworthy of a girl as beautiful as you. Remember your honour, and remember God, and the Holy Cross where He was crucified.'

And Perceval made the sign of the Cross; and the moment the demon saw that sign he flew off through the forest, creating such a tumult, such a tempest, that for a league and a half on every side all the birds and beasts shook with fear.

Perceval, seeing this astounding sight, drew his sword and marked a circle on the ground around his horse and himself; then he lay down in the middle, fearing nothing now, and slept securely till dawn.

When he saw day break he rose, not wishing to linger, and saddled and bridled his horse. Then he crossed himself and mounted.

He rode on all that day and all that week. He suffered a good deal of toil and hardship, but pressed on until he came to the passes of Valbone, to the tall, wild forest surrounded by mountains. He recognised the pass very well, for it was near that spot, while out on his hunting-horse with his javelins as a boy, that he had met the five knights and asked the first if he was God or an angel. Yes, he recognised the area well, for near there, as he realised, stood the house where his mother had lived. He wanted to go there right away, and he rode on and was filled with joy when he caught sight of his boyhood home. He

rode up at once; but the bridge was raised, for his beautiful sister was seated at dinner – and grieving bitterly, weeping over and over: she hated her life; when she thought and pondered on her lot she found nothing at all to please her. Perceval arrived at the gate and called out at the top of his voice.

'God help me!' said the girl. 'Who can that be, crying so loudly?'

She came down to the courtyard with her household running after her. And when she saw Perceval she recognised him instantly, for all that he was older now and armour-clad, and tears of joy streamed down her radiant face as she cried: 'Dear brother, welcome!'

She could not wait to lower the bridge, and she released the chain and brought it down and Perceval rode across. His sister kissed him more than a hundred times before he had dismounted; and all the servants offered a hand to take his horse, and stabled him splendidly with plenty of fodder, for their labouring had provided enough barley, oats and feed to last a hundred horses for months.

When Perceval was disarmed, his sister gave him clothes to wear which were worth at least a thousand silver marks. Perceval washed his hands in two basins of pure gold, and then sat down to dinner. His sister had plenty of venison to offer; nor was the wine scarce – it was plentiful and clear, as if it had been drawn from a pool in a great vase; the boys and servants had so much that the cups were always full. After Perceval had eaten all he wished, he sat down at the fireside with his sister and began to talk of the matter that weighed so heavily upon his heart: his mother's death.

'It was fully ten years ago,' his sister said. 'When she saw you leave to become a knight she collapsed and fainted, and passed away there and then.'

'I know,' said Perceval, 'and it grieves me deeply. And what became of her body?'

'An uncle of ours, a hermit who lives nearby in this wood, carried her to his hermitage for burial.'

His sister had a delightful bed made for Perceval in the hall, for he wanted to lie down and rest, being very tired and weary. And down he lay, and all around him lay the servants, who loved him dearly; and his sister went to her chamber and slept most happily that night.

Perceval, fearing that he might stay too long out of love for his sister, arose when day had dawned. His sister, who was already awake and dressed, asked him why he had risen so early, and where he was planning to go. And Perceval said:

'By the faith I owe you, I want us both to mount now and ride to my uncle's hermitage; for this may be the only time I go there: I don't know if I'll ever return to these parts.'

With that he bade that her mule and his horse be harnessed. Then he armed swiftly, and when he had done so his horse was brought to him promptly, as commanded. The servants asked him if his sister was going with him, and he said: 'Yes, but we'll be back this evening, if it please God.'

And, weeping, each of the servants said: 'God grant that it be so.'

Perceval and his sister rode through the forest together until they came to the hermit's chapel. Perceval called at the wicket-gate – the hermitage was all enclosed for fear of wild beasts – and the hermit, who had been deep in prayer, rose and opened it. He recognised his niece at once and welcomed her with embraces. He asked her what had brought her there, and why she was accompanied by an armed knight.

'Sir,' she said, 'I've joyous news, for the Lord God has brought me help by sending me the brother I thought I'd lost! Here he is – it's Perceval, dear uncle!'

'The boy who brought your mother such distress,' said the hermit, and he sighed from the heart. Then he seated Perceval at his side and said to him: 'My good, dear friend, your mother lies nearby; I had her brought here and buried before my altar.'

So saying, he rose and led Perceval into the chapel, which was very beautiful, and showed him the tomb: it was covered with a silken cloth and yielded a fragrance of indescribable sweetness. Perceval began to weep as he remembered his mother, and he prayed to God in His gentleness to have mercy on her soul; and he said:

'Oh, dear mother, the sins I've committed towards you have so burdened me that I shall never expiate them or gain God's love, unless He will look on me with pity.'

And he told the hermit of all the toil and hardship he had suffered in the quest for the Grail.

'Dear friend,' said the hermit, 'abandon all evil vices: he is a miscreant and a hypocrite who thinks to gain God's love and glory through proud and boastful ways. No! It takes suffering, fasting, prayer and true repentance. Such are the arms with which a knight should arm himself if he wishes to love God and be worthy and valiant. Think of this: a knight's sword has two cutting edges – do you know why? It should be understood, I tell you truly, that one edge is for the defence of Holy Church, while the other should uphold all temporal, earthly justice, protecting the rights of Christian people. But know this: Holy Church's edge is notched and blunted; only the earthly edge is sharp – oh, sharp indeed! Yes, every knight cuts and hews the poor and holds them to ransom, though they've done him no wrong. Yes, that side of the sword is very sharp! And a knight who carries such a sword is deceiving God; and if he fails to mend his ways, the gate of Paradise will be closed to him. God keep you,' said the hermit, 'from such a sword, which might damn your soul.'

At the end of his sermon the hermit said a beautiful, glorious, most holy prayer, imploring God to keep him from affliction. Then Perceval politely took his leave at once, and the hermit, with great affection, blessed them with the sign of the Cross.

* * *

After seeing her safely home Perceval bade his sister farewell. She was distressed to see him go, swearing she would die of grief at being abandoned once more, and the whole household wept with her inconsolably; but he promised to return as soon as he could, and bade her behave nobly and to stop grieving, for he could not postpone the work he had undertaken. He thrust in his spurs and was gone.

For a long while he wandered through a vast forest. But when he emerged on the other side he looked ahead and in the middle of a plain he saw a castle, of which all the walls and battlements were of smooth-hewn stone. But before the bridge was a barrier of fresh-cut oak, its bark still on. Perceval spurred forward, for night was fast approaching, and saw, riding ahead of him, five knights. They were fully armed and equipped, but their arms were battered, their gold shields pierced, their helmets split and dented, their horses exhausted, and their swords notched and bent. Four of them were wringing their hands and lamenting bitterly, for they were gravely wounded, with blood spilling from their bodies: they had been in a grim battle indeed. And they were grieving desperately for the fifth, for he was wounded through the body by four spears and in the head by two swords, which had bitten through his helmet and down to the bone. They were certainly not galloping, but riding at a walk. Perceval was shocked to see them in such a state, and before he left he wanted to know what had befallen them. And he was amazed, too, to see the land laid waste and desolate: all around the castle there was not a cottage or a house to be seen.

Perceval hailed the knights with friendly words, and one of them, most kindly and soft in speech, said: 'May God through His power keep you from harm and send you the fullest joy, as He most certainly can.'

'Noble and kindly knight,' said Perceval, 'before I go, please tell me what's been happening.'

'Never, sir,' he replied, 'has such misfortune befallen anyone. But come and lodge with us tonight and I'll tell you everything; for you won't find lodging anywhere else within a long day's ride of here.'

And Perceval said: 'Many thanks.'

So they rode on towards the castle and the gate was opened for them. The people of the castle saw the loss they had suffered with the wounds to their lord, and cried: 'Alas! Oh, he's suffered strife and torment for so long!'

Such was their lament; and the four sons carried their father into the hall, and removed his armour and bandaged his wounds, and treated him with an ointment – and themselves likewise, for they needed it: their bodies were covered in wounds.

They laid their father in a bed beside the fire; then he tried to speak, calling his four sons to him and saying: 'Make our guest comfortable and honour him. If I could I'd welcome him with joy, for he looks very like the boy I once made a knight.'

When Perceval heard these words, he realised that this was the worthy man

who had bestowed upon him the order of knighthood, established in the world by God to uphold justice and to protect Holy Church. He looked again and recognised him now, but nonetheless asked him his name. And the worthy man replied at once:

'Dear guest, my name is Gorneman de Gorhaut.'

Perceval felt both joy and sorrow: joy at hearing his name, but sorrow at his wounds. 'Sir,' he said, 'it's a great calamity to me that you're wounded; and all my happiness will be turned to grief until I've taken revenge upon the one who wounded you: he'll find a fearsome adversary if I can track him down! Avenging you is my solemn duty, for I'm the boy you equipped with arms and dubbed a knight. So tell me the whole story from beginning to end: explain why you've been done such grievous harm.'

With a great struggle Gorneman heaved himself on to one elbow and said: 'Let me tell you the dreadful story. It's been going on for a long while; nor will it cease as long as this castle stands – and until I'm destroyed. Every single morning I find forty mighty knights, well armed, on horses big and strong and swift, with lances chisel-sharp. Every single day my four sons and I have to do battle with them: they've killed all my people. Every morning they come and attack me at the gate, and they're terrible and furious; and I have to go out against them, with no support except my sons here. But that's not the whole story. Listen: each and every day we have to fight them until we've destroyed them and left them dead in the field; then when evening comes we return home, but the following morning, by some miraculous power, we find them all quite safe and sound, and the battle begins all over again! So we spend our lives in torment, and have done so for a long time now, and will do so still, that's certain. We're in despair! We fought them today as ever, but our efforts will have been in vain, for they'll be back tomorrow to join battle yet again! But I'm so gravely wounded that I shan't be there – my sons will have to go, just the four of them, to withstand their attacks.'

'My good, dear sir,' said Perceval, 'I swear to you by this hand that I'll go with your sons tomorrow to defend both them and you, for it's only right that I repay the great service and kindness I found in you before. I knew nothing of the world except what my mother had told me – and I still know little enough! When I saw the Grail and the lance which bleeds incessantly, I was dreadfully cautious and asked nothing about them, which has caused me a great deal of pain and anguish. If I'd asked then, I'd have known the whole truth; but I hadn't the sense! But since then I've searched and scoured and found it once more, and asked to be told the truth; and the king would have told me, but first I had to mend a splendid sword which was broken across the middle, and when I came to join the pieces a notch remained in the blade. And the king said I could ask as much as I liked, but I'd learn nothing until I'd repaired and mended the notch in the sword; and he also said I'd done something that made me unworthy of knowing the secrets either by word or sign. It worries me, for I can't think of any sin, great or small, that I haven't now confessed and

atoned for – except one: I gave a promise of marriage to a beautiful and lovely girl; she was your niece, I know, for she told me so: it was Blancheflor of Beaurepaire. It's only right that I recognise that sin. I brought an end to a war in which she was embroiled, and she loved me with a true heart and wanted me to take her and make her my wife. And I promised to be her love and to marry her and to do no wrong with any other. Now I remember: that's the sin, I think, with which I'm most tainted.'

Gorneman reached towards Perceval, and said, like the worthy man he was: 'Dear friend, seek God's pardon and set your mind on marrying Blancheflor as soon as you leave here. God is so full of mercy that He grants the requests of anyone who prays to Him with a true heart. And go willingly to hear mass: whoever hears that precious service can see with his own eyes the body of Jesus Christ when the priest consecrates the host and holds it in his hands – the very same, no more, no less, as was born of the Virgin and crucified. If you believe this firmly, and fulfil the promise you made to Blancheflor when you undertook to marry her, you'll repair the notch and learn all the secrets of the lance and the Grail.'

Perceval took in every word; and he bowed his head and prayed to God to grant by His power that he might deliver his host from the ones who meant to destroy both him and his land. Then they washed and took to their beds.

Perceval lay down to sleep but felt no joy or comfort, being so worried about his host. He would be distraught indeed if he could not free him from his suffering and torment.

When day broke the four brothers, despite their wounds, were quick to rise; and so was Perceval, still deeply troubled though he was. When he saw the four knights armed to meet the attack of the forty, who had already come and were awaiting them outside the gate, Perceval called for his arms. They were brought immediately, and presented to him on a carpet of rich silk; and two boys knelt before him to arm and equip him. Now all five were fully armed – and there was nothing to mock in their appearance! Like noble souls they heard the mass of God and His sweet mother; then each of the sons took his leave of his father, who was still gravely wounded.

'My sons,' he said, 'may it please God to lead you back, for I ask nothing more than to see you again, safe and sound!'

With that Perceval mounted outside the chapel door, and gently called to the four knights, saying that bread and wine should be brought for them and that each should eat a sop. A boy brought them clear, bright wine in a large cup, while another cut bread and dropped it into the vessel, which was not of aspen or fir but of the finest silver. Each knight ate and drank of the wine just once, that was all; then the gate was opened and they all rode out, their helmets laced. The enemy knights came charging at them like wild things, and Perceval, his lance levelled, rode to meet them at full speed, with all the brothers following him as fast as their horses could go. And Perceval thrust his lance of apple-wood and struck the first knight such a blow that he smashed through

his shield, tore through his mail-coat and rammed the head clean through his body – and may his soul be sent to the hundred devils of Hell! Then he struck another so mightily that all his armour was of little use, as he drove both head and shaft through his chest, parting body and soul before he hit the ground. But the match was very far from even: there were still thirty-eight against five in the contest, and all thirty-eight were more than eager. Perceval killed eight with his lance before it shattered; and then they harried him hard indeed, hammering at him with their swords of steel like smiths upon an anvil. Perceval, now with drawn sword, was frothing with rage and fury, and beheaded one of his fiercest attackers; he was giving them awesome treatment! And the four brothers were proving their worth, throwing themselves into the thickest press. Perceval struck one knight such a blow that he smashed off his helmet along with an ear, and his sword turned red as it plunged into the brain; he sliced another to the nape of the neck; in all he severed seven heads. But he was sorely hurt as they struck and smote at him; they broke and battered rings from his mail-coat and smashed and split his helmet. But the four brothers were not half-hearted: they were all dealing mighty blows. They had been badly wounded before, but this time a good deal more: all their helmets were split, their shields smashed, their hauberks pierced and their bodies wounded from head to foot. One of them was caught by a sword-blow to the scalp, and the other three pulled him from the fray before returning to the combat. So now there were only four of them; but they battled on and struck at the enemy until only twenty of the forty remained, and they withdrew and paused awhile to rearrange their arms. But Perceval charged after them, shield held firm before his breast; and the three brothers were at the ready, and galloped after Perceval, determined to do well. Battle was joined again, and as the afternoon passed and evening approached still Perceval spurred his horse on, determined to kill the enemy, and the three brothers were right behind him; but the fourth was helpless, and watched the combat motionless. Perceval charged in to hew his enemies with his steel sword; but they, who had little fear of death and little love for Perceval, rained a storm of blows upon him, wounding him most fearfully. And the three brothers gained nothing: such were their wounds that the enemy knights cast them to the ground with their entrails spilling out; and then they turned on Perceval in a terrible assault, though now there were only four of them. They were sure they would bring him down, but he returned to attack them in a fury, and beheaded one and clove another to the chin. With that the remaining two cried out:

'Oh, Perceval! It's useless! Tomorrow the attack will begin again: your exhaustion's all for nothing! Tomorrow, before you wake, we'll all be back at the castle together to recommence battle: of that you can be sure!'

'May you all be damned!' cried Perceval. 'But come what may, before I leave here the battle will end for you as it has for your companions!'

'We don't fear you in the slightest – nor do we fear death.'

At that Perceval spurred his horse and clutched his sword, and beheaded one

and hacked an arm from the other and sent him toppling from his horse: all were now dead and slain. Perceval went to his companions and did enough to enable them to mount, bandaging their wounds which were giving them grave pain, for they kept splitting open and bleeding. Then they began to say:

'Good sir, we can go home now and give you and your horse rest and comfort for the night; and in the morning you can be on your way. I don't think any of us will see beyond noon tomorrow. And even if we recovered we'd face a terrible plight once more. Those last two knights told you the position: the battle will begin again tomorrow. We won't have the strength to return, and they'll destroy us and burn our castle to ashes.'

'God save you from that!' said Perceval. 'But tell me, do you know how they come back to life?'

'No indeed! And we fear the danger too much to stay: anyone who stayed to find out would die without question!'

But Perceval said: 'However terrible the danger, I'm not leaving here until I know their secret.'

'Oh, sir, do you want to die?'

'I shan't leave for anything,' he replied. 'Go now.'

They saw that their words and warnings were vain, and they rode away, silent and grieving for Perceval.

Perceval dismounted and sat down on a rock, while the wounded brothers spurred on towards the castle, not drawing rein at all. They crossed the bridge and passed through the gate, each carrying a grievous wound for which they expected no cure by any medicine or potion. They dismounted, and when they had disarmed they told their father of Perceval's great deeds of prowess, and of the jousts and charges he had made during the battle.

'And we promise you, we would all have been killed on the spot, but Perceval drove them to defeat. But now he's stayed behind to find out how they return to life! It's a terrible loss, that a man so full of noble qualities should stay to receive certain death! But no words of ours could persuade him to return with us. As for ourselves, we're finished: in the morning our end will come, for we've no strength left. And our hearts should break with utter grief for the death of the bravest man who ever rode a horse.'

'Oh, Perceval!' cried Gorneman. 'What a loss it will be if you die! If you stay out there, no-one can save you!'

And tears began to stream from his eyes and down his cheeks. All night, unceasingly, they cried their lament for Perceval.

Meanwhile Perceval was holding his horse by the bridle and sitting on a marble stone beside a tree, overlooking the dead. He had no wish to sleep, but his body began to shiver because of the cold, and he paced about, back and forth, and so stayed awake until midnight had passed. He surely cannot have enjoyed it much, but he was about to witness a marvel.

As he peered ahead towards the foot of a hill he saw a light appear, accompanied by such a tremendous groan that the ground shook and trembled.

Perceval was filled with awe, and he raised his hand and made the sign of the Cross in the name of the heavenly Father: the sign the Devil fears most. Then he saw an open door, the source of the shining light. And through the door came a tall old woman. She was carrying two small casks of handsome ivory, bound by hoops of pure, bright, brilliant gold, embedded with many precious stones: all King Arthur's wealth could not have matched the value of those casks. And never was there such a hideous creature as the old woman who carried them. Her eyes were fouler than any beast's: one, red and tiny, was buried in her head; the other seemed stuck out on a stalk, and it was huge and dark as dregs. Her tresses hung like two skinned rats, her neck was thin, her face all hairy, and she was gnarled and hunch-backed. Never was iron or steel blacker than her face and hands; and her skin and flesh looked so dry and wizened that she'd have burned like tinder if you'd set fire to her. Her mouth was a yawning maw, splitting open from ear to ear.

'God,' said Perceval, 'what foul demon sired such a loathsome creature? Is it by charm or magic that she's so hideously formed? She seems to have hung in the smoke of Hell-pit – she's blacker than any iron.'

But Perceval's courage was unimpaired. He wanted to know more about the old woman and the casks; so he sat there in silence while she, thinking to go about her business in secret, limped up the path and in among the dead, and put down the casks that were hung about her neck. The ugly, twisted hag now picked up the head of one of the corpses lying in the field, beheaded by Perceval that night, and placed it on the body. Perceval watched with rapt attention as she took the stopper from one of the casks and poured into her palm a drop of liquid clearer than any rose water. She dabbed her finger in the drop, and rubbed it on the dead knight's lips. And thereupon all his veins and joints were full of life, and his wounds were healed, every one, as though he had never been hurt at all; and he was up on his feet again before you could count to three. The potion had the power to restore the dead to life, for with it Christ was anointed and embalmed when He was laid in the sepulchre. The old hag replaced the heads of four more and brought them back to life. She rubbed the potion on another's lips, and up he leaped. Perceval was dismayed, and said to himself that he would soon be in a sorry plight if he dallied any longer. So he leaped into the saddle, took up his shield and drew his sword, thrust in his spurs and rode towards the hag crying: 'The potion you've used to restore them to life will do you little good!'

The old woman was astonished, and cried: 'What foul devil has brought you riding here? You're Perceval! I know you well, and I've always known you're the only man on Earth I need to fear! You don't yet know who is served from the Grail or what is done with it, or why the lance bleeds, and never, as long as I live, will you learn one jot about them, I swear it!'

'May you be damned!' cried Perceval. 'And for eternity! I've endured so much toil in the quest. Now answer me this: why has Gorneman been attacked and assailed so many times?'

'A fine question!' she replied. 'It was commanded by the King of the Waste City, who cannot and will not believe in God. By the power of demons and devils he made me set these strange and terrible men here. He wanted to destroy Gorneman utterly because he made you a knight, and because if you follow Gorneman's guidance you'll do such a deed as will undo the Devil's work: for by you God's friends, whom the Devil has been striving to destroy, will be restored to joy and well-being. So with the potion in the casks I'm returning to life all who lie here, and I'll keep doing so until Gorneman is finished! That's why the sodomite tyrant sent me here – he wanted to stop you learning anything about the Grail!'

'Oh God!' cried Perceval. 'I've sought it for so many Aprils and Mays and achieved precious little – I've not been able to learn a thing!'

'Nor will you, truly,' said the hag, 'as long as I live!'

'Glorious God,' thought Perceval, 'what an evil old woman this is. I don't know if she's telling the truth or if it's just boasting and trickery.'

While he was thinking this, the hag bent down to one of the dead and anointed him, and up he leaped. Then Perceval spurred towards them, clutching his whetted sword, and with a single blow he struck off the old woman's head and sent her body crashing to the ground. Thereupon the six who had been restored to life came charging at Perceval in mortal fury, and they and he began to rain blows upon each other's helmets. Perceval beheaded three, but the other three came to the attack, cursing him for having killed their lady. Perceval did not spare his blows, and cut one of them clean in two; but the other two fought back so well that they killed his horse beneath him and brought him to the ground, and struck at him ferociously; but Perceval leaped to his feet and attacked them in a fury, slicing through the head of one before slaughtering the last. Then he sat down and rested for a long while beside his horse, who lay dead before him on the battle-ground. His sword, which shone as clear as ice, was smeared and stained with blood. He picked up the splendid, precious casks, and said:

'Oh dear and glorious Father God, how beautiful these vessels are! But I don't care a jot for the gold and jewels, though they're worth King Arthur's land and treasure; I'm going to see if I can do as she did with the potion, and restore them to life and health.'

With that he picked up one of the rich casks, poured a drop of the balm into the palm of his hand, and gently moistened his finger in the drop. Then he said: 'I'll try it on this one, who did best of all in the battle yesterday, and wounded me the most.'

And he came up to the knight and dabbed the potion on his lips. Up he jumped at once, feeling no ill. He saw Perceval before him and stepped towards him. He was still holding his drawn sword, and he struck Perceval so mightily that he cut through his helmet and the hood of his hauberk, and from his forehead the red blood ran.

'God blind the man,' cried Perceval, 'who would ever heal you again! Well

might the proverb apply to me: "who seeks folly finds it"! You don't care about my forgiveness – you've repaid me wretchedly!'

At that the knight returned to the attack, and harried Perceval so fiercely that he inflicted heavy wounds. But Perceval recovered vigour and will and drove himself so hard that he robbed the knight of strength and breath. The knight fell back in retreat, so full of despair that he had neither the heart nor the power to beg for mercy. Now you can clearly see that a sinner who despairs, and thinks he has committed so many sins that he cannot have forgiveness, is a fool; for God is full of pity and mercy to any man who wants to make peace with Him and begs His forgiveness with a true heart. The knight did not dare to cry for mercy, and the one who was so highly praised for his courage and prowess bore down on him and dealt him such a blow that he severed his head, and his body crashed to the ground. Then Perceval sat down and took the casks once more; he carefully poured a little of the balm and this time dabbed it on his own lips; and at once he felt as lithe as any fish, bursting with health and vigour, and said: 'I wouldn't give up this potion for all the world! It has healed and cleansed me of my wounds.'

And he carefully stopped the casks – and not with hemp or oakum, but with two rich, cut rubies; and emeralds and chalcedony, sapphires, diamonds and topaz were thickly inlaid in the golden hoops and collar-bands.

Meanwhile Gorneman saw dawn break and was fearful and dismayed. He arose and had a palfrey saddled, and told his sons there was no time to lose.

'Come on, get up, get up! Stir yourselves and mount and let's be off!'

'Truly, sir, we can't, for we're sorely wounded. We'll soon be condemned to torment: we can't escape it, for we'll be assailed by the wild devils who're sure to have killed our dear friend Perceval. It'll be our last battle, and there'll be no deliverance, for we've little strength or power left.'

Gorneman was white with grief when he saw his sons so broken. At the thought of Perceval he shook in every limb with rage and sorrow; he would gladly have died.

But suddenly, at the foot of the bridge, there was Perceval, calling out. His voice was heard by a girl as she sat, weeping with despair; and she said: 'Oh, Holy Mary! Who was that calling?' She came to the battlements and cried: 'Who's there, in God's name?'

'It's me, young lady, Perceval. I've put an end to the great torment your people have been suffering. Open the gate for me.'

At this the girl ran straight to the hall and told them the news that Perceval was at the gate. Gorneman was so filled with joy that he forgot about his wounds. He came running to the gate and opened it with all speed, and was astounded to see Perceval carrying the casks. In jubilation he led him to the hall, where he said: 'What's happened to your horse? Why have you returned on foot?'

'He was killed,' replied Perceval, 'but I promise you, thanks be to God, I've gained more than I've lost.'

And Perceval recounted the whole story from beginning to end. He told how the old woman had come and what had happened then: how she had revived the dead, and how he had taken the casks from her and killed the knights who had returned to life. He told everything, and especially about the balm. Then he said: 'Please, dear sir, send for your sons,' for he longed for their cure most earnestly.

The gentle and pious Gorneman had his sons carried down to the hall on two large couches, side by side. The knights were overjoyed when they saw their guest, but they were so terribly wounded that they were fainting with pain. Perceval took his balm, and pouring a little into his hand, he set about healing the wounded knights, placing a little in the mouth of each. And as soon as the potion touched their lips, they were all fitter than a river fish swimming in the Oise or Seine! Every wound was healed and they felt neither pain nor sadness. Now the rejoicing began! If God had descended from Heaven and appeared in person He would not have been embraced more fervently than Perceval was by Gorneman and his sons! They sat together then and addressed him fondly, saying:

'Sir, stay with us awhile and take your ease.'

But Perceval replied: 'No, it's no use; I'm not going to stay. I want to go to my sweetheart Blancheflor, your kinswoman. And I'll be most grateful if your father will take me to her, for I want to marry her. I shall live more chastely then; and the man who lives a holy life and keeps himself pure and preserves his chastity will find it to his advantage: for he's loved and cherished in this life and his soul will be secure in the next. So I'll leave tomorrow morning.'

'I'll go with you,' said Gorneman, 'and honour you in every way I can. Meanwhile there's no-one here who'll fail to serve you with whatever you desire.'

Perceval thanked him deeply. Then the table was set and they sat down to dine; and when they had eaten and drunk and the cloths had been cleared there was great rejoicing and singing in honour of Perceval, and all day long they laughed and talked of joyful things. And when evening came they sat down to supper: they had five or six dishes of meat and as many of fish. And when it was time to sleep and rest, the boys did not dally but made the beds most handsomely. In a panelled room, painted gold, they made a gorgeous bed with a grey coverlet and a rich silken quilt. Perceval was soon asleep, for he was very weary.

Everyone in the castle slept securely, feeling no fear or terror now: their fear and dread had gone. And truly, the ivory casks that Perceval had won shed such a brilliant light in the hall that it was as bright as noon; Perceval awoke suddenly and was astonished by the light, but he sensed there was no danger, for since the light was coming from the casks he knew that it must be holy. So he fell asleep again, and slept until day broke and the watch sounded the dawn. Then Perceval awoke, but he was still tired and weary, for it was a long

time since he had had pleasant lodging; and he lay in bed all the first part of the morning until the bell was rung for mass to be sung in a chapel. Then he summoned the servants, who came running to him and dressed him. And Gorneman and his sons dressed, too, and they all went to hear mass together, which filled their hearts with joy – for truly, the man who loves God and hears mass knows great joy indeed.

As soon as mass was over, Perceval, eager to go and fulfil his promise, said to Gorneman: 'Sir, please keep your word and come with me to Beaurepaire, to Blancheflor who seems to me the flower of all womanhood.'

'I shall be only too happy,' said Gorneman. 'But we'll have a little breakfast before we leave.'

And Gorneman ordered plovers and pheasants and pies to be brought at once, and they washed their hands and ate. Then they set off hurriedly and mounted, and Gorneman wisely took both the casks, for it would not do to forget them. Then off they rode, and a great crowd gathered to see them go.

They journeyed on without delay until they caught sight of Beaurepaire. It was quite the richest and most handsome place that anyone has ever seen, and excellently fortified. A river bearing a fleet of boats flowed along one side, and on another were great, thick forests full of game; and then there were meadows and open ground, and farmland, fishing lakes and pasture, gardens and fine arable, and vineyards and orchards, rich and wide. And on another side it was bounded by the sea, crashing at the foot of its walls. Perceval recognised it at once, but Gorneman was bewildered, for he had not been there since Clamadeus had laid waste the land. Perceval sent two boys on horseback to tell Blancheflor he was coming, and that he would keep his promise forthwith to take her for his wife. They set off swiftly, and rode through the thronging streets until they found the girl sitting at the door of the hall: she was dressed in samite, glittering with gold, and surrounded by a great crowd of her people. The two boys dismounted and stepped towards the girl – and then stopped, so stunned by her beauty that they could not say a word. The girl bowed her head towards the ground, and carried on thinking of Perceval like the lovesick girl she was.

'Oh God!' she said. 'My love has been away so long! If he'd set his heart on me as I have mine on him, he wouldn't delay in returning. But I'll continue to wait, for his wish is my wish, too. The hope I have in him comforts me in my pain.'

The two messengers now regained the power of speech, and they stepped forward and swept back their hoods. They stood side by side and then knelt and said: 'Lady, your friend the worthy Perceval sends you greetings.'

The lady was amazed. And when she heard them say that he was coming with her uncle Gorneman, she was so lost in joy that if her fingernails had been pulled out she would have been none the wiser! She was about to run off through the streets to meet him when her maids caught hold of her.

'Oh, lady!' they said. 'All your dignity is lost when you're so carried away!'

But the girl replied: 'I can't help it, leave me be! If you were in love you wouldn't reproach me for this. But yes,' she said, 'I'll take your advice.'

Then she had her finest clothes prepared; and her people were not idle, but adorned the streets with silk and samite. So much richness was draped at the windows that it seemed like an earthly paradise, and they spread carpets on the ground, not caring that they might be harmed. Knights and clerics and burgesses all dressed themselves in gowns of gold-embroidered cloth; and the sons of these burgesses equipped themselves splendidly and set about a festive joust; and elsewhere bears and lions, boars and leopards went fighting through the streets. And a cavalcade of more than ten thousand rode from the town to meet Perceval. Those who were jousting had draped their horses with silken cloths of many kinds, and there was a great scaffold for spectators on every side. And the drummers were not dressed in cheap stuff but in samite embroidered with golden thread, and were mounted on palfreys with brand-new harnesses, rich and handsome. The jousting was magnificent, and created such a din that the whole town shook and rumbled. Blancheflor was mounted on a mule harnessed more richly than any mule has ever been, and everyone gazed at her in wonder: she was dressed in a deep red silken gown lined with new ermine. Escorted by a host of knights and ladies she rode through the gate, and as she came to the open country Gorneman called to Perceval, saying:

'Sir, my niece certainly can't be ill-disposed towards you, when she welcomes you so magnificently!'

Perceval turned his horse towards her, and as soon as she caught sight of him she felt embarrassed and turned pale. Perceval was worried when he saw her so subdued, and spurred his horse towards her and greeted her; and she, sighing, returned his greeting, and gazed at him adoringly. And Perceval took her by the hands and then embraced her, for he loved her deeply; and he called her his very sweet love, and she called him her dear sweetheart; and then he began to embrace her at the waist, for Love was spurring him. Thereupon the crowds on horseback rode up and all greeted Perceval, crying:

'Welcome to the one who delivered us from destruction and misery! You've brought us all wealth and comfort and honour!'

They crossed the bridges to the town and rode in through the gates. I don't believe any emperor or king was ever received with such splendour as was Perceval. The cooks prepared supper when the time came, and when it was ready the horn was sounded, and the knights and ladies and lords washed their hands and went to dine. The dishes were not scanty: there were waggon-loads of wine and meat! Everyone had all he wished, and that night there was no doorman or guard: anyone could enter and carry off as much wine and meat, and candles, too, as he liked. The town and the castle shone with the lights from the feasting: the light was so brilliant, indeed, that it seemed as if all the houses were on fire.

When they had eaten their fill and the tables had been cleared, Perceval stood

up at once and spoke, addressing the knights who held land as Blancheflor's vassals.

'Sirs,' he said, 'I've come to ask to take your lady as my wife in good faith, as I should: it seems to me that more good should befall me if we're joined in the sacrament of marriage than if I put my body, and she her beauty, to foolish use.'

When the barons heard this they replied: 'Noble sir, if you do so, you'll have brought us joy forever! If she is your lady and you are her lord, we shall never know sorrow or pain again.'

'I'll do so tomorrow,' said Perceval. 'I swear it by this hand.'

The girl heard this and sighed with joy, for she would not have exchanged Perceval for all the empire of Greece or Rome.

Soon they had the beds prepared. In a rich room hung with tapestries and wonderfully painted with gold, they made six soft and beautiful beds with fine and costly sheets. Perceval went to sleep in one, and in the others lay Gorneman and each of his four sons. And over his bed was spread a rich coverlet more speckled than a goshawk's feather shed at the fifth moulting. The fairy Blanchemal had made it, and no-one who slept beneath it would suffer sickness of mind or body.

Meanwhile Blancheflor lay down in her beautiful chamber surrounded by her maids. Much to her delight they all fell into a happy sleep, but she did not: for Love was calling and goading her, not letting her rest at all; and she began to think such sweet thoughts about Perceval that she decided to go and talk with him, and nothing was going to stop her.

'But no, I daren't go.' – 'Why not?' – 'Because he'd love me less for doing so, and think me loose and forward.' – 'If I don't go he'll think I'm leaving him out of excessive pride, and that I'm feeling very sure of myself now that he's promised to marry me!' – 'However he may reproach me, I'm going.'

She sat up in bed and donned a mantle, and slipped away from her maids, passed into the hall and headed on. She no longer cared who saw her; Love had emboldened her so much that she thought whatever she did was for the best. She came to Perceval's bed, naked beneath her mantle, and leaned on the edge. Perceval, who had heard her coming, took her in his arms and held her tightly beneath the sheets and kissed her sweetly. They took great pleasure in each other; and they could feel at ease with their kissing and embracing, for it went no further. They preferred to wait until they could be together without sinning.

And that was how they spent the night; and then, when they saw the dawn, she crept back to her bed and lay happily until the day was bright and fair.

Then the tournament, the jousting and commotion began again. Every lady and high townsman's wife dressed in a brand-new gown; and the chief seneschal bade them all start celebrating in earnest. Perceval, hearing the festive sounds, rose at once and donned a beautifully tailored gown that had been prepared for him, of deep red silken cloth. He was an astonishingly handsome

knight: with blond and curly hair, and shining eyes and a bright face, and a straight nose and a forked chin; and he had a small scar on his forehead that suited him so well that it was a delight to see; his body was slim, and his arms were long and stout and strong, powerful in nerve and bone.

'God,' they all said, 'what a handsome, tall and gracious knight!'

Blancheflor had risen, too, the worse for having been awake so long: she had slept very little, having been with her love and awake all night. Her maids dressed her in garments resplendent with gold and jewels. Her gown was of blood-red silken cloth all covered in stars, and fringed with such bright and dazzling gems that they seemed to be aflame.

The people assembled before the hall with a great noise and rejoicing, then moved on to the church, where bishops, prelates, abbots and monks all eagerly awaited a glimpse of Perceval, who was now riding through the street with Blancheflor behind him and a great crowd of people following close after. Perceval dismounted at the door of the church and came to the girl with outstretched arms and lifted her down; and Gorneman hastened to accompany his niece at her right hand. The archbishop conducted the service, taking them both by the hand and joining them in lawful marriage. And so it was that Perceval took Blancheflor as his wife, and the people were filled with joy. Back they came to the palace, where jongleurs played lays and songs and the merry-making knew no bounds. And storytellers told splendid tales to ladies and to counts – and were well rewarded, for all the squires and knights went out of their way to take off clothes to give to them: tunics, surcoats and fur-lined gowns; there were some minstrels who were given five brace of gifts, or six or seven or nine or ten: they arrived as paupers and left rich men! But such practice is a thing of the past, for we've seen a good many celebrations for a knight – at his marriage or his dubbing – where lords have promised minstrels their gowns on a certain day, but when they came for them they left empty-handed, for the lords had used them as payment to their boys, their tailors, their waggoners or their barbers! Damn lords who make such a promise! The world's becoming very stingy now, because no-one's respected if he isn't rich. A curse on worldly wealth! But let's return to Perceval.

The rejoicing at Beaurepaire went on until day waned and night returned, when the knights and ladies, dukes and counts, archbishops and princes all sat down to supper. It was excellent, quite sumptuous, and ablaze with so many magnificent candles that they lit up the whole town.

And later, in Blancheflor's chamber, shining and afire with gold, they had a glorious bed prepared. The archbishops of Rodas and Dinas Clamadas and Saint Andrews in Scotland each took a cross and went to bless the bed. And those who made the responses were no common clergymen, but the bishops of Cardoeil and Cardigan and Cardiff and Saint Aaron in Wales: the dioceses of all these men were under Blancheflor's suzerainty at that time. And in all Britain no queen or king, with the sole exception of King Arthur, had so beautiful a land as Blancheflor had then; and she had made Perceval her lord

and thus the lord of all that land. And when the bed had been blessed on every side, and the sign of the Cross had been made over it – both with crosses and with fire – Perceval and the lady lay down together while the people departed and went their separate ways. They lay together arm in arm, skin against skin, beneath the sheets.

Then Blancheflor shook and trembled, and so did he, like a leaf, for they felt unsure: they were both afraid that through bodily pleasure they might lose what the elect have in the great joy of Heaven, and they wanted to save themselves from the perils and torment of Hell. Perceval sighed and lamented as he held Blancheflor in his embrace. She, brought up to be mindful of all good and honour, spoke like a lady afire with love for God, saying:

'Perceval, my sweetheart, let's beware of the Devil having power over us. Chastity is a holy thing; but just as the rose surpasses other flowers in beauty, so virginity surpasses chastity, truly. And the person who possesses both will have a double crown before God in Paradise.'

Perceval agreed entirely, and said: 'My love, let's not cast our lives away, for I too believe that, though chastity is priceless, virginity surpasses all, just as topaz is worth more than crystal, and fine gold more than base metal; and whoever possesses both together will surely win the joy and delight of Paradise.'

With that they rose from their bed and went down on their knees with clasped hands, and turned at once towards the east. They both had their hearts turned to God, inspired by goodness and loyalty and faith, which commanded them not to sully virginity but to be full of charity and humility and to remember God; for then they would win everything. Then they lay down, but did not touch each other in such a way as to have carnal love; they fell asleep without delay.

They had been asleep for a long while when, just as day began to break, Perceval awoke drowsily and stretched a little. Then he listened, and heard a voice and saw a brilliant light. The voice said:

'Perceval, dear brother, you have married a wife who is full of goodness. Now know this, in truth: I have come from God to declare to you that if you now shrink from seeking the bleeding lance and the Grail, for which you have toiled so hard, you will lose your valour and your strength and all the rewards which are to fall to you and your line. I can tell you no more: I commend you to God.'

With that the voice departed, leaving Perceval deep in thought for a long while. He waited until it was time to rise, when boys came and clothed him; and the ladies dressed Blancheflor most graciously. And truly, she lay down a maiden and arose a maiden.

Perceval and all the lords went to the church to hear mass; and after mass he summoned all the knights and lords to him and received the fealty and homage of those who were to be his vassals, who accepted him as their lord with goodwill.

'Sirs,' he said, 'I command you always to do for Gorneman as you'd do for me, and I ask him to be my bailiff and to guard my wife and my land, for I have to go in search of the Grail, which I've been seeking for a long time. I don't wish to dally longer: bring me my arms and my horse!'

When Blancheflor heard Perceval's words she almost died of grief: he was leaving her so soon, and she had thought he would be staying with her in peace now as a worthy man does with his wife. But the lady loved him so deeply that she did not dare to contradict whatever he wished to do or say; she had loved him with such a pure heart from the moment she first saw him and realised his courage, that her love never failed however far he might be from her, nor did his absence ever make her less enamoured.

The Conquest of the Castles

SO PERCEVAL SET OUT ONCE MORE, and soon found himself upon a path which was little trodden. He followed it through the forest until, at the edge of a glade, he saw a magnificent wooden cross. He could see two hermits at the Cross; one was making a great commotion, and was clutching a fistful of twigs with which he kept beating the Cross, as furiously as if he meant to knock it down; and he went on beating it as long as his breath lasted. But the other hermit was on his knees with clasped hands, worshipping the Cross a hundred times over without stopping. Perceval stared at the hermits for a good while, baffled at seeing one beating it so earnestly and the other so intent on its worship. Then he rode swiftly down towards them, and demanded to know of the hermit if it was folly or wisdom that drove him to beat the Cross. He was just about to tell him when Perceval's attention was suddenly seized by something else: for out of the forest ran a beast as white as new-fallen snow, bigger than a hare but smaller than a fox: out into the glade she raced in alarm, for she bore a litter of twelve in her belly who were yelping like a pack of hounds, and she fled across the glade in terror, horrified by their baying. Perceval leaned on the butt of his lance, gazing at the beast in wonder; and he felt great pity for her, for she looked gentle and very beautiful, with eyes like two emeralds. She turned to Perceval for protection, and was just about to leap on to the neck of his horse when the litter burst from her belly: out they came, alive, as dogs. She scrambled across the ground and huddled as close to the Cross as she could; but her brood surrounded her and attacked her and tore her to pieces with their teeth; but they could not eat her flesh or pull her away from the Cross. And thereupon they turned raving mad and went racing off into the woods like wild things. Perceval beheld this amazing sight and was filled with wonder: he had never seen anything like it. And the hermits came to where the beast lay in pieces, and each took a share and placed it in golden vessels. They collected the blood as well as the flesh, and kissed the spot where she had lain, and then made their way back into the forest. Perceval dismounted, and kneeling before the Cross he kissed it and worshipped it, and likewise the ground where the beast had been killed, just as he had seen the hermits do; and thereupon a fragrance rose from that spot and from the Cross,

so sweet that none could ever equal it. Then Perceval set off on his way again, amazed by the adventure.

Night was setting in, and he hurried on in search of a house where he could stay and find lodging and have something to eat, for he was certainly in need of it. Night fell and it turned pitch dark. Then suddenly Perceval saw a brilliant light and headed towards it, thinking it a promising sign. As he drew near he found an open gateway covered with broom, and the courtyard beyond was enclosed by a fence; and there inside the house he found thirteen hermits. They were of very pale complexion, and had no great abundance of food for their supper: they had cut a loaf of bread into thirteen pieces, and each of them was breaking his piece before him. A servant stood before the foremost hermit, holding a burning candle; and he began to serve him, while another cut his bread, which looked coarse, not made of wheat. They were all taken aback when they saw Perceval sitting armed upon his horse. But he greeted them, and asked them for lodging out of charity.

'I've been searching for lodging for a good while, but without success.'

'You'll have very little to eat,' said a servant, 'and so will your horse.'

And the one who was lord and master of the hermits gestured to Perceval to dismount. Then the servants took his horse and led him to the stable and gave him a little fresh hay. And when Perceval was disarmed they bade him sit by the fire, where he was served with what little they had; but he ate even less, for he had nothing to his liking – he did not relish the bread.

And just as he was about to finish, a girl entered, carrying an astonishingly handsome shield: all white it was, with a red cross; and in the Cross was such a relic as should certainly not go unmentioned: for in it was embedded a piece of the holy wood on which the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, suffered torment. And an inscription on the shield revealed that no-one could find the Grail or the lance with the head that bled ceaselessly, except the first to be able to remove the shield from the neck of the beautiful girl; but it was at his peril that any man touched it unless he was the boldest man in the world, both in word and deed, and confessed of all his sins: any other would be destroyed and killed by a thousand stones, and nothing could protect him. The girl had carried it through many lands, searching for the knight who was to bear it, for it had never been collected from the pillar where the Maidens of the Cart had left it in King Arthur's hall. Perceval hurried to help her dismount, and in so doing his first thought was to take the shield from her neck: it was very light, but so strong that it feared no blow from any lance. And when the girl saw he had taken it, she threw herself to the ground, knowing at once that he was the worthiest knight in the world – for confession, which washes away sin, had greatly increased his worth. The girl, without any bidding, went and sat with Perceval, and had two casks full of wine and two rabbit pies unloaded from her horse. The hermit made a sign that they should sit and eat upon a cloak by themselves. The pies and wine were placed before Perceval; but he said to a boy:

'Dear friend, take these pies and casks and give them to the monks to share.'

'Sir,' he replied, 'they don't eat meat and they don't drink wine. And I promise you, they don't talk while they're eating. But eat now with good cheer, and you too, dear lady.'

The servants had made a couch of fresh grass and hay, and when the hermits' meal was done the master of the hermits lay down upon it fully dressed, for he had no quilt. And each of the hermits lay propped against the couch to rest. Then the servants went to attend to Perceval, and made him a bed which offered little comfort, and another for the girl.

When night had passed and they saw day break, the hermits did not delay but went straight to a chapel where their master donned his vestments and sang the holy mass. And Perceval listened most attentively, with all his heart, as did the girl who had brought the shield. And when the hermit had sung the mass, Perceval thanked him for his lodging and asked the servants for his equipment, and armed. The girl held before him the shield with the mighty powers and the precious relic. Perceval had never borne a shield as fine as that: now he feared neither weapon nor fire, for they could never harm him. Perceval did not delay but mounted and hung it at his neck; then he took his leave of the hermits and departed at once. And the girl rode off another way, commending him to God.

But when Perceval had ridden a stone's throw he suddenly thought: 'By Saint Peter, I'm a fool! I didn't ask where the shield I've won came from, or who sent it to me.'

And he looked along the path the girl had taken, wanting to ask her about the shield, but she was nowhere to be seen; he spurred back along the path, but could not find her. He thought it a true marvel that she was not to be found; he hunted for her for a long while, but could find neither scent nor track. He decided she had been whisked away by a fairy or a phantom, and he began to cross himself at this wonder: he could see for three and a half leagues in all directions, but there was no sign of her.

Deeply troubled, he descended a valley and passed into a wasteland. And then he was shocked as he recognised the country: he was near King Arthur's city of Cardoeil – yet all around he found the people in great fear and dismay. He wondered much why this should be, and asked the lowly people why they were so alarmed and the land so afflicted.

'Is King Arthur not still alive?' he said.

'Oh yes, sir,' they replied, 'he's there in yonder castle. But he's never been so distressed and fearful as he is now, for a knight is waging war on him against whom no man can endure.'

Perceval rode on until he came before the great hall, and dismounted at the foot of the steps. Lancelot and Sir Gawain came down to meet him and greeted him with the greatest joy, as did the king and queen and all the court. They had him disarmed and dressed in a splendid gown, and those who had not seen him before gazed upon him gladly, the more so when they saw that he bore the

shield that had so long hung on the pillar. And so the court, which had been so troubled, was cheered a little by Perceval's coming.

But that very day, as the king was seated at dinner, four knights burst into the hall fully armed, each bearing a dead knight before him with arms and feet cut off; and although the bodies were still in full armour, the mail-coats were black, as if they had been struck by lightning. They laid the knights down in the middle of the hall and said to the king:

'Sire, you were shown once before the disgrace that's being done to you, yet still it goes unchecked. The Knight of the Dragon is destroying your land and killing your men and is now advancing as close as he can; and he says he'll never find a knight at your court brave enough to meet him in combat.'

The king was filled with shame at this news, and Lancelot and Sir Gawain likewise, who grieved in their hearts that the king had not let them go. The four knights now departed, leaving the bodies in the middle of the hall, and the king bade that they be taken away and buried with the others. Throughout the hall a great murmur arose, with everyone saying they had never heard of a man who killed knights so cruelly or in such numbers; and they said that Sir Gawain and Lancelot should not be reproached for not going, for there was no knight in the world who could vanquish such a man unless God worked a miracle, for he could throw fire and flame from his shield whenever he wished.

While the murmuring continued among the knights in the hall, a maiden entered, and behind her was the body of a dead knight in a litter. She came before the king and said: 'Sire, I beg you to do me justice in your court. Sitting beside you I see the son of the Widowed Lady. He shouldn't refuse what I'm about to ask of him, for the dead knight whom I've so long borne in this litter is the son of his uncle Elinant of Escavalon.'

'Damsel,' said Perceval, 'take care that you speak true. I know that Elinant of Escavalon was my uncle on my father's side, but I knew nothing of his son.'

'Sir,' she said, 'he deserved to be known for his great worth, and it was because of his courage that he was killed. His name was Alain of Escavalon, and the Queen of the Circle of Gold loved him with all her heart, for he was the fairest knight she had ever seen of his age. And because of the great love she bore him, she had him embalmed after he had been killed by the Knight of the Dragon, who's so ruthless that he's destroying all the lands and isles. He's challenged the Queen of the Circle of Gold and has already killed many of her knights, and now she's locked herself in her castle, not daring to leave, and she wishes all knights to know that whoever takes revenge upon this man will have the Circle of Gold; she would never part with it before, and it would be the greatest honour ever bestowed on any knight. Sir,' she said to Perceval, 'it's only right that you should strive to avenge your uncle's son and win the Circle of Gold, because if you kill that terrible knight you'll have saved King Arthur's land, which he's threatening to destroy, for he hates Arthur more than any king on Earth.'

'Damsel,' said Perceval, 'where is this Knight of the Dragon?'

'In the Isle of the Elephants, which was once the richest and most beautiful land in the world. But now he's destroyed it and no-one dares live there. The isle is below the castle of the Queen of the Circle of Gold, so she sees him every day as he bears knights unharmed from the forest and then kills them and dismembers them, and it grieves her deeply.'

Perceval was filled with wonder; and he thought that since the task of seeking vengeance was laid on him, he would be greatly reproached if he failed to do so. He took his leave of the king and the queen and left the court. Sir Gawain and Lancelot went with him, saying they would guide him there if they could, and Perceval cherished their company. But the king and the queen were greatly afraid for Perceval, and everyone agreed that no knight had ever ridden into such grave peril, and that it would be a great loss to the world if he died. The king sent word to all the holy men and hermits of the forest of Cardoeil bidding them pray for Perceval, that God might protect him from this demon knight.

Lancelot and Sir Gawain rode with him through a strange country, and found the forests deserted and the lands on every side destroyed and waste. The maiden followed him with the dead knight, and they journeyed on until they came upon a castle in the middle of open meadows, surrounded by rushing rivers and rings of wall, and within loomed great, windowed halls. And as they approached the castle they saw that it was turning, and faster than any wind; and above the battlements were archers of copper loosing arrows with such power that no armour in the world could withstand their shots. With them were men sounding horns, horns so loud that it seemed as though the earth were quaking. And down below at the gateway were lions and bears in chains roaring with such fury that all the forest and the valley rang. The knights drew rein and gazed at this wonder.

'My lords,' said the maiden, 'there you see the Forbidden Castle. Sir Gawain, and you, Lancelot, draw back. Go no nearer the archers, or your death is assured. And you, sir,' she said to Perceval, 'if you wish to enter the castle, give me your lance and shield; I'll take them ahead as a guarantee, and you can come behind me. Conduct yourself as a good knight should and you'll pass into the castle. But your companions may as well turn back, for it's not yet time for them to enter: the only one who may proceed is the knight who is to conquer the demon knight and the Circle of Gold and the Grail and the false law of the castle.'

It grieved Perceval to hear her say that Sir Gawain and Lancelot could not go with him even though they were the finest knights in the world. He sadly took his leave of them, and reluctantly they departed. They stopped awhile to watch the good knight ride on; and they saw the maiden display Perceval's shield – the white shield with the red cross, containing a piece of the True Cross – to the men of the castle; and she cried out that it was now borne by the knight who was waiting behind her. Perceval sat shieldless in his saddle, clutching his drawn sword; and he planted himself so firmly in the stirrups that

he made them stretch and his horse's back bent beneath him. Then he looked back at Lancelot and Sir Gawain.

'My lords,' he cried, 'to the Saviour of the world I commend you!'

And in reply they prayed that the one who suffered on the Cross might be protector of his body and his life. Then Perceval thrust in his spurs and his horse charged forward with all the speed it could summon towards the Turning Castle, and Perceval struck the gate so violently with his sword that he drove it a good three finger-lengths into a marble pillar. The lions and bears in chains who guarded the gate fled to their stalls; the castle suddenly stopped turning; the archers stopped shooting; and there were three bridges before the castle which rose up as soon as he had crossed them. Lancelot and Sir Gawain beheld this wonder and wanted to ride on to the castle when they saw it stop turning, but a knight cried to them from the battlements:

'Sirs, if you come nearer the archers will shoot, the castle will turn and the bridges will be lowered again, which would bring you grave distress.'

They drew back at once, and there in the castle they could hear the greatest rejoicing that ever a man had heard; many were saying that the knight who had come would save both their lives and their souls, if it pleased God to let him conquer the knight who bore the Devil's spirit. And so Lancelot and Sir Gawain turned back, full of sorrow that they could not enter the castle, for they could see no other way in but there.

Virgil, that mechanical necromancer, had built the castle by his magic art, and it was prophesied that the castle would not stop turning until the coming of a knight with a head of gold, the gaze of a lion, the navel of a virgin girl, and a heart free of all wickedness and full of faith and belief in God; and it was prophesied, too, that all the people of that castle would worship the Old Law until the coming of the Good Knight; and the moment he appeared they all ran to be baptised, and firmly believed in the Trinity and adopted the New Law. And so there was great rejoicing in the castle because they had been redeemed from death, when they had feared that they would never be saved and would die in sin because of their false law.

Perceval was overjoyed to see the people of the castle turn to the holy faith of the Saviour; and the maiden said to him: 'Sir, you've done well indeed; but now you must finish your work, for these people will never leave the castle as long as the Knight of the Dragon is alive. And you mustn't delay, for the longer you tarry, the more lands he'll destroy and the more people he'll kill.'

Perceval took his leave of the people of the castle, who cheered him in their joy. They were greatly afraid for him in his coming battle, but said that if Perceval overcame the knight, never would so fine an adventure have befallen any man.

The maiden went in front, for she knew the place where the evil knight lived, and they rode on until they came to the Isle of the Elephants. The knight had dismounted beneath an olive tree, having just killed four knights from the castle

of the Queen of the Circle of Gold. She was there at the windows of her palace and had seen her knights being killed, and was grieving deeply, crying:

'Oh God! Will I never find anyone who can take revenge upon this fiend who's destroying my land and killing my men?'

Then, looking up, she saw Perceval and the maiden coming, and the queen cried to him: 'Sir, unless you've greater strength and power than other knights, don't come near this demon! But if you feel in your heart you can vanquish him, I'll give you the Circle of Gold which is here in this castle, and believe in the Law which is newly founded; for I can see by your shield you're a Christian. And if you can overcome him, I shall know then that your Law is of greater worth than ours, and that God was born of a woman.'

Perceval was inspired by her words. He crossed and blessed himself and commended himself to God and His sweet mother; and he blazed with rage and courage like a lion. He saw the Knight of the Dragon mounted now, and he gazed in wonder at his size: never had he seen such a colossal man. And he saw the shield at his neck, huge and black and hideous; and at its centre he saw the dragon's head, belching fire and flame with terrible force, so foul and ghastly that its stench filled the fields. The maiden retreated to the castle, leaving the knight in the litter in the middle of the field; and she said to Perceval:

'Sir, your uncle's son was killed in this plain. Now avenge him as best you can; I leave him to you, for I've done enough to free myself of all reproach.'

And with that she departed.

The Knight of the Dragon saw Perceval advancing all alone, and was filled with contempt for him. He did not deign to take up his lance but came straight at him with his sword drawn: huge it was, and red as blazing coal. Perceval saw him coming and charged towards him, lance lowered, as fast as his horse could go; he aimed to strike him full in the chest with his lance, but the knight thrust out his shield against it, and the flame that burst from the dragon's head burned the lance right down to his fist. The knight went to deal him a blow on the head with his sword, but Perceval covered himself with his shield, and the sword of the demon knight could do it no harm, for Joseph of Arimathea had sealed some of Our Saviour's blood and clothing in the boss. When the knight saw he had damaged neither Perceval nor his shield he was filled with shame, for never before had he struck a knight without giving him a mortal blow. He turned the dragon's head towards Perceval's shield, aiming to destroy it with fire, but the flame that burst from the dragon's head was blown back as though by a wind and could not reach Perceval. The knight was enraged and rushed past him and came up to the litter of the dead knight, and turning his shield with its dragon's head towards it, he set it on fire and burned the knight's body to ashes.

'From burying this man,' he cried to Perceval, 'you are absolved!'

'That grieves me,' he replied, 'but I'll have revenge if it please God.'

The maiden who had been carrying the dead knight was at the palace windows beside the queen, and she cried to Perceval: 'Sir, now the disgrace will be greater and the wrong done will be deeper if you fail to take revenge!'

Perceval was grieved indeed by what had been done to his cousin; but he beheld the knight who bore the strength of the Devil and did not know how he could gain revenge. But he charged at him with his sword drawn and dealt him such a blow on his shield that he smashed it right down to the dragon's head, and the fire leaped on to the sword and it became red and blazing like the blade of his enemy. And the maiden cried to him:

'By my life, sir, now your sword is as strong as his! Now we'll see what you can do! I've been told in truth that the knight can be killed in only one place and by only one blow, but alas, I can't tell you how.'

Perceval gazed at his sword, wrapped in the demon's flame, and was amazed. Then he struck the knight so fiercely that he made his head bow down to his saddle; the knight drew himself up again, enraged that he could not harm him, and struck Perceval such a terrible blow that he broke through the hauberk on his shoulder and cut into the flesh and burned it down to the bone; but as he withdrew the blade Perceval struck him with such force that he cut off his hand while it still clutched the sword. The knight let out an anguished roar, and the queen and the people of the palace heard it and were filled with joy. But the knight was not yet beaten: he came rushing at Perceval and flung more fire at his shield; but it was to no avail: he could do it no harm. Perceval saw the dragon's head, ghastly, foul and terrible, and met it with his sword and thrust it into the roof of its mouth as straight as he could. The dragon's head uttered such a deafening cry that all the plain and forest rang, and it turned upon its lord in a rage and consumed him in flame and burned him to ashes, and then vanished with the speed of a thunderbolt.

The queen was overwhelmed with joy, and came down to meet Perceval with all her knights. They saw that he was sorely wounded in the shoulder, and the maiden said that he would never be healed unless he treated the wound with some of the ash of the dead knight. They led him into the castle, and took off his armour and bathed his wound to help it heal, and put ash from the dead knight on it as a cure. Then the queen called for all the knights of her land, and said:

'My lords, behold the knight who has saved my land and defended your lives and mine! It was prophesied that the Knight with the Head of Gold would come, and that by him we would be saved; and now behold, he has come! The truth of the prophecy cannot be denied, and I would have you be at his command.'

And they replied that they would, most willingly. She led Perceval to where the Circle of Gold was kept, and with her own hand she placed it upon his head. Then she presented to him the sword with which he had destroyed the demon and the knight who bore it on his shield.

'Sir,' she said, 'let all those who will not be baptised and believe in the New Law be killed with your sword; I present it to you.'

She herself was the first to be baptised, and all the others followed after.

Perceval stayed at the castle until he was cured. Word spread through every

land that the Knight of the Circle of Gold had come and had killed the Knight of the Dragon, and there was great rejoicing everywhere. The news reached the court of King Arthur, and everyone there was most intrigued when it was said that the Knight of the Circle of Gold had defeated him, for they had no way of knowing who the knight was.

* * *

After leaving Perceval to conquer the Turning Castle, Lancelot and Gawain had passed through many strange lands as they made their way back towards Arthur's court. It was a beautiful, clear day when they found themselves entering a vast forest, and from time to time the sun would stream down upon their shields; but suddenly Lancelot remembered the knight he had killed in the Waste City: he realised that the day of his return was near. As they arrived at a cross where paths forked and branched out through the forest, Lancelot said:

'I must leave you now, Gawain, and keep my promise in an adventure of mortal danger, and I don't know if I'll ever see you again; for I killed a knight, which grieved me deeply, and I had to swear before I killed him that I would return to offer my head as he had offered his. Now the day is near when I must return there, for I've no wish to earn reproach by failing to keep my word. But if God lets me escape alive, I'll follow you with all speed to King Arthur's court.'

Sir Gawain embraced him as he took his leave, and prayed to the Saviour of the world to protect his body and his life so that they might meet again soon. Lancelot would gladly have sent his greetings to the queen if he had dared, for she was dearer to him than anything in the world, but he did not want Sir Gawain to have any suspicion of his love lest he should bear him ill will. But that love was so deeply rooted in his heart, no matter what danger it might bring him, that he could not abandon it; rather did he pray to God each day to deliver him from this perilous adventure so that he might see the queen again.

On he rode until he arrived about noon at the Waste City, which he found as deserted as the first time. On every side stood derelict churches, and magnificent palaces that had crumbled to ruins, and great, deserted halls. And Lancelot had scarcely entered the city when he heard a great wailing and lamentation of ladies and maidens, though he could not tell where it was coming from. They were all saying together:

'Oh God! We've been betrayed by the one who killed the knight, for he doesn't return! The day has now arrived when he should come to keep his promise. We should never believe the words of knights. The others before him have failed us, and now he'll do the same for fear of death: he beheaded the fairest and finest knight in this kingdom, and he should now be beheaded likewise, but he's trying to avoid his fate.'

So said the maidens; Lancelot heard them all too well, but wondered where they could be, for he could see no-one anywhere. He rode up to the palace where he had killed the knight and dismounted, tethering his horse to a ring fixed in a marble stone. He had hardly done so when down from the palace came a knight, tall and fair and strong and assured; dressed he was in a splendid tunic of silk, and in his hand he held the axe with which Lancelot had beheaded the other. And as he came he sharpened it with a whetstone so that it might cut all the better. Lancelot saw him coming and said:

'Good sir, what are you going to do with that axe?'

'Truly,' said the knight, 'you'll find out just as my brother did!'

'What?' cried Lancelot. 'Are you going to kill me, then?'

'You'll know,' replied the knight, 'before you leave. Didn't you agree to put your head at stake, just as my brother did? Otherwise you couldn't have left here. But come forward now and kneel down and stretch out your neck, and I'll cut off your head. And if you won't do so of your own free will, you'll find yourself forced to it – even if there were twenty of you you would. But I know you've returned for no other reason than to keep your promise, and you'll not now refuse.'

Lancelot realised that he was about to die, but he wanted to be true to his vow. He lay down on the ground with his arms outstretched, and prayed to God for mercy. Then he remembered the queen.

'Oh, my lady!' he cried. 'I shall never see you again! If I could have seen you just once before I died it would have given me so much comfort, and my soul could have left me more contentedly. That I shall never see you again distresses me more than death. A man must die when his time comes, but I swear to you that my love will never fail you, and that my soul will love you in the other world as much as my body loved you here.'

Then tears flowed from his eyes, and never in all the time he had been a knight had he wept for any sorrow that had befallen him, save on this occasion. He picked three blades of grass and with them he took communion. Then he crossed and blessed himself, and knelt and stretched out his neck. The knight raised the axe. Lancelot heard the blow coming and ducked and the axe sped past. The knight said:

'Sir knight, that was not how my brother behaved: he kept his head and neck still. So must you.'

And Lancelot, filled with shame, sighed deeply and prepared himself for death. The knight raised the axe for the second blow. At that very moment two maidens appeared at the windows of the palace, and they recognised Lancelot at once. And just as the knight was about to strike, one of them cried:

'If you would earn my eternal love, throw down the axe and declare the knight free! If you don't, my love is denied you forever!'

In an instant the knight threw down the axe and fell at Lancelot's feet, begging him as the truest knight in the world to have mercy on him.

'It's you who need to have mercy on me!' said Lancelot.

'Sir,' he replied, 'I'll not kill you; rather will I aid you against all the knights in the world, even though you killed my brother.'

The maidens now came down from the palace to meet Lancelot. 'Sir,' they said, 'it's only right that we should love you more than any knight in the world. At least twenty knights came here just as you did, and each one killed a brother of ours, or an uncle or a cousin, by cutting off their heads, just as you beheaded the knight; and every one of them swore to return on the day declared. All of them broke their promise, for none had the courage to return; and if you had failed as they did we would have lost this city forever, and the castles which belong to it.'

The knight and the maidens led Lancelot into the palace, and in the forest outside the city the greatest rejoicing in the world could be heard.

'Ah, sir!' said the maidens. 'Now you can hear the townspeople and those who used to dwell in the city rejoicing for your coming, for now they can return!'

Lancelot leaned at the windows of the hall and watched the city fill with the fairest people in the world, and the great halls were brimming, and clerks and priests were coming in great processions, worshipping and praising God and pouring blessings on the knight who had enabled them to return to their churches and their homes. Lancelot was treated, you may be sure, with the utmost honour.

* * *

When Perceval was finally healed of his wounds from his battle with the Dragon Knight, he left the castle of the Queen of the Circle of Gold. All the land was now at his command, and the queen said that she would keep the Circle of Gold for him until he wished to collect it. He left it with her willingly, not wanting to carry it with him, because he had no idea which way he would go.

He followed a path through a vast forest, ever hopeful that he would come once more to the castle of the Fisher King.

But as he emerged from the forest it was another castle he found before him: the Castle of the Copper Tower, where there dwelt many people who worshipped a tower of copper and believed in no other god. This copper tower stood in the middle of the castle, and at all hours of the day it let out such terrible roars that it could be heard for many leagues around; and there was an evil spirit within who gave the people answers to whatever they wished to know. At the gateway stood two men made by sorcery, holding great iron hammers which they drove and dashed together with such fury that nothing in all the world could pass between them without being utterly destroyed. But everywhere else the castle was walled and barred, making entry impossible.

Perceval gazed at the castle's defences and its perilous entrance and was filled with awe. But he summoned up his courage and crossed a bridge and rode towards the guardians of the gate, whereupon a voice cried out above the

gateway, saying that he should go on with no fear for the copper men, for they had no power to harm so good a knight as he. He took great comfort in the voice's words; and as he approached the hideous copper figures they stopped their hammering, and he rode straight into the castle where there dwelt so many heathens. There in the middle of the castle he saw the Copper Tower, huge and terrible, and all around it the people had gathered to worship it together, and it was uttering such terrifying roars that nothing else could be heard. The people of the castle stared at Perceval in amazement, wondering how he could have entered; but no-one addressed him, for they believed so firmly in their evil faith that if any man had wished to kill them while they were at worship they would have let him do so and believed themselves safe. They were not used to fighting, for the entrance to the castle had always been impregnable, and the demon in which they believed provided them with such plenty that they wanted for nothing. When Perceval saw they would not address him he drew aside and summoned them to gather round. Most of them came but some would not; and the voice cried that he should make them go through the gate where the copper figures stood, for then he would surely see who would believe in God and who would not. Perceval drew his sword and rounded them up and drove them before him, and those who would not go could be sure of death. He herded them through the gateway where the terrible statues were striking their hammers of iron, and of 1,500 only thirteen remained who did not have their brains beaten out by the hammers; but those thirteen came to believe firmly in Our Lord. The evil spirit that dwelt in the Copper Tower burst out like a thunderbolt, and the tower came crumbling down in ruins – nothing of it remained. Then the thirteen survivors sent for a hermit from the forest and had themselves baptised; and the bodies of the dead heathens were cast into a stream called the river of Hell which flows into the sea, and at whose estuary the waters are so terrible and perilous that hardly any ship passes that way without foundering.

The thirteen stayed at their castle – which was called thereafter the Trial Castle – until the New Law was firmly established, and led good lives indeed; and no-one could go inside to join them without being killed or cut to pieces unless he believed staunchly in God. When the people of the surrounding land had come to a firm belief, the thirteen men of the castle went out and set up hermitages throughout the forests to gain forgiveness for having once upheld the false law, and to win the love of the Saviour of the world.

Perceval had now become a soldier of Our Lord, and God was showing him plainly that he loved his chivalry. And He had further work for him, and did not let him rest. Perceval left the Trial Castle without delay and rode on.

The day was drawing to a close when he passed into a wild, dark forest, ugly and forbidding, where there were no leaves or greenery to be seen or birdsong to be heard; and the ground was scorched and hideous, cracking open into huge crevices. He had not gone far before he met the Maiden of the Cart, who greeted him with the greatest joy.

'The first time we met, sir,' she said, 'when Clamadoz challenged you to battle before the Queen of the Pavilions, I was bald! Now you can see I have hair once more!'

'Yes indeed,' said Perceval, 'and it seems to me a most beautiful head of hair.'

'Sir,' she said, 'I used to carry my arm hung from my neck in a sling of golden silk, because I thought the service I did you at the house of your uncle the Fisher King had been ill-bestowed; but now I see clearly that it was not. So now I carry both arms alike; may you be blessed for having proved your worth by the goodness of your heart and by your origin from your noble line, whom you resemble in all their good ways. And you may prove your worth again,' she said, 'for, sir, I daren't approach that castle.' And Perceval followed her gaze, and saw a huge and hideous fortress at the foot of a lowering mountain. 'It's the castle of the Black Hermit, and archers defend it who shoot with such force that none can endure their shots; and they won't cease, it's said, until you go there. But I know why they will then stop: they'll want to trap you inside the castle to kill and destroy you; but no-one there has the power to harm you save the Black Hermit himself, though he'll do battle with you willingly.'

Without another word Perceval turned towards the castle of the Black Hermit, the Maiden of the Cart following behind. The archers of the castle drew their bows and let fly with terrible power, but Perceval rode swiftly on. They did not recognise him with his white shield with the red cross, and thought he must be some other knight, and many bolts they sent smashing into his shield. Up he came to the drawbridge: it was raised, and beneath it a river ran, foul and terrible. But as soon as he reached it the bridge was lowered. At once the archers stopped shooting, for they knew then that it was Perceval; and the gate was opened to receive him, for the men within felt sure they had the power to kill him. But as soon as they saw him they lost their resolve and were all downcast and powerless, and said they would leave this affair to their lord, who was powerful indeed and had ample strength to kill a man. Perceval, fully armed, entered a great hall and found it filled with a people ugly to behold. The one they called the Black Hermit was standing in the middle of the hall, fully armed.

'Lord,' said his men, 'you'd better defend yourself, for you'll have no counsel or aid from us! We're your men to guard and protect you, and we've done so many times. Now defend us in this hour of need!'

The Black Hermit was mounted on a huge black horse and was magnificently armed. As soon as Perceval saw him he charged at him with such fury that he filled the hall with thunder. The Black Hermit charged, too, and they struck each other with such force that the Black Hermit smashed his lance, and Perceval struck him such a furious blow over his shield that he sent him crashing from his horse, and as he fell he shattered two ribs in his belly; and when the men looking on saw him fall they threw open the cover of a great pit in the middle of the hall, from which belched the foulest stench ever smelt; and

they took their lord and flung him into this chasm of filth. Then they turned to Perceval and surrendered the castle to him, and put themselves entirely at his mercy.

Thereupon the Maiden of the Cart appeared, and to her they returned the heads sealed in gold and the heads of the king and the queen. All the people of the Black Hermit's castle were now obedient to Perceval's will and swore to him that no passing knights would ever again be assailed and tormented as they had been thitherto: now they would be received with gladness as they were elsewhere. So it was that Perceval left the castle with joy in his heart, having converted it to a devout and total faith in the New Law.

As he took his leave of the Maiden of the Cart she said to him: 'I pray, sir, that God will guide you now to the house of your uncle, the Hermit King Pelles. He will explain the meaning of your adventures, and will have news that will distress and astound you.'

Perceval was troubled by this but shared her prayer; and that very day he came indeed, by God's will, to his uncle's hermitage. King Pelles greeted his nephew with the utmost joy, and Perceval told him of the great adventures that had befallen him since his departure.

'Uncle,' he said, 'I wonder much about a little white animal I came across in a forest; she had a litter of twelve in her belly which barked and yelped inside her. In the end they burst out and killed her beside a cross, but they never tasted her flesh. Two hermits collected her flesh and blood in golden vessels, while the dogs that had been born from her ran off into the woods, demented.'

'Nephew,' said the king, 'it's a sure sign that God holds you dear when such things appear to you. That sweet and gentle beast in which the twelve dogs were barking signifies Our Lord, and the twelve dogs signify the Jews of the Old Law, whom God created and made in His image. After He had created them He wanted to see how much they loved Him, so He cast them into the wilderness for forty years – but their garments never wore out, and He sent them manna from Heaven. There they dwelt without harm or misfortune, as happy as they could have wished. Then one day they held their council, and the greatest amongst them said that if God became displeased and took back the manna they would have nothing to eat, and it couldn't last forever. They replied that they would hide away a great part of it, so that as soon as God became angry with them they would have plenty to sustain them. But God, who hears and sees all, took back the manna of Heaven; and when they came to their underground caves, expecting to find what they had stowed away, it had all been turned by the will of God into lizards and snakes and vermin; and then they saw they'd done wrong and all dispersed through unknown lands. Dear nephew, the twelve dogs who tore their mother apart but couldn't eat her flesh, and who fled away and turned wild, are the Jews whom God nourished and who were born into the Law which He had established, but would not believe in Him or love Him; instead they crucified Him and broke His body as basely as they could. The hermits who gathered the beast's flesh

and blood in their golden vessels signify the deity of the Father, who will not suffer the flesh of the Son to be diminished.'

'Dear uncle,' said Perceval, 'it's only right that they should suffer such an ill reward, for they crucified the one who made them. But tell me about the two hermits: one had been kissing the Cross and worshipping it with the greatest joy, while the other had been beating it, weeping with the bitterest grief in the world. I'd have been angry with him if he hadn't been a holy man.'

'The one who struck the Cross,' said the hermit, 'believes in God just as much as the one who worshipped it. One worshipped it because on it was placed the holy flesh of the Saviour of the world, who would not turn away from death; that hermit was rejoicing because by His death the Saviour redeemed those who loved Him from the anguish of Hell, and they would otherwise have suffered there always. The other was beating the Cross and weeping for the pain that God had suffered there, an indescribable pain, so great that the rocks split*. That's why he beat it and reproached it, because the Saviour had been crucified there, just as I would hate a lance or a sword with which you'd been killed. Whenever he thinks of the pain that God endured he comes to the Cross as you saw. Both of those hermits dwell in the forest; the one who kissed and worshipped the Cross is named Jonas, and the one who beat it is called Alexis.'

Perceval listened eagerly to his uncle's words, and then told him how he had fought with the demon knight who bore the dragon's head on his shield which threw fire and flame, and how it consumed its master in the end.

'Nephew,' said the hermit, 'I rejoice to hear this news of yours, for I'd heard that the Knight of the Circle of Gold had killed him.'

'That may well be so, sir,' said Perceval, 'but truly, I never saw so terrible an enemy.'

'Dear nephew, none but a good knight could have vanquished him. And just as the demon on the shield burned its lord to death, so does one demon torment another in the other world.'

'Uncle,' said Perceval, 'I came by way of a turning castle, where there were copper archers shooting, and bears and lions in chains at the gateway. But as soon as I rode up and struck the gate with my sword, the castle stopped turning.'

'Nephew, the Devil had nowhere more completely in his power than that castle, for it was the entrance to his fastness; and never would its people have been converted had it not been for you.'

'I was very sad that Sir Gawain and Lancelot couldn't enter with me; I'd have dearly loved their company, and they'd have been of great assistance.'

'If they'd been as chaste as you,' his uncle replied, 'they would have entered, for they're the finest knights in the world but for their lust. Nephew, since you became a knight you have greatly advanced the Law of the Saviour, for you've

* Matthew 27:51.

destroyed the falsest religion in the world: the people at the Copper Tower worshipped the Devil. If they had survived and you had failed they would never have been destroyed until the world's end.

'But listen, nephew: now you must accomplish another task: you must recapture the castle of the Fisher King. Yes, all the people of the land which belonged to your grandfather the Fisher King have abandoned the New Law; but most have done so only because of the strength and power of the king who has seized the land – the King of Castle Mortal, who is my brother and your uncle. Oh, it's a grievous shame that one of such holy descent should prove a traitor! Now you must settle this affair: it can be accomplished by no man on earth but you, for the castle and the land of the Fisher King are your inheritance. But nephew,' he said, 'the castle is now greatly strengthened: there are nine bridges newly built, with three knights, huge and strong, defending each; and your uncle is within, guarding the castle. Since he took it the Fisher King and his entire household – knights and priests, boys and maidens – have disappeared, and no-one knows what has become of them. And the chapel in which the Holy Grail used to appear is completely empty. The hermits of the forest yearn for your coming, for no longer do they ever see a knight pass by who believes in God. If you can accomplish this task and reconquer the castle, you are sure to win favour in God's eyes.'

'I'll go, uncle,' said Perceval, 'indeed I will; the castle shouldn't be in the hands of this intruder.'

'Good nephew, I have here a mule, very white and very old, and you're to take her with you: she'll follow you most willingly; and you shall carry a banner, for the strength of God is much greater than your own: twenty-seven knights guard the nine bridges, all picked and tested men of great courage, and no-one should believe that any knight could overcome so many unless Our Lord worked a miracle. And I beg you, be ever-mindful of God and His sweet mother; and when you're hard-pressed, mount the mule and take up the banner, and the strength of your enemies will diminish, for nothing confounds the enemy so swiftly as the power of God. It's well known that you're the finest knight in the world, but you mustn't trust in your strength and chivalry alone against so many, for you wouldn't be able to withstand them.'

Perceval was attentive to all his uncle said, and had the utmost faith in his wisdom.

'Dear nephew,' said the hermit, 'there are two lions at the gateway – one red and the other white. Trust in the white, for he is on God's side; and look to him whenever your strength flags, and he will look at you likewise, and you'll know his mind at once; do what you see in him, for he will think nothing but good, and you will not otherwise succeed in conquering the nine bridges. May God grant that you do conquer them, so that you may save your life and advance the Law of Our Lord, which your uncle is doing all in his power to suppress.'

And with few more words Perceval left the hermitage, carrying the banner as his uncle had advised, with the mule following behind him.

On he rode towards the land which had belonged to the Fisher King, until he met a hermit coming out of his cell. He stopped as soon as he saw the Cross on Perceval's shield, and said: 'Sir, you're clearly a Christian, and I've not seen one for a long time. The King of Castle Mortal is driving us all from the forest, for he has rejected God and His sweet mother, and we daren't dwell here against his decree.'

'By my life,' cried Perceval, 'that you will! God will guide you there first and me after. Are there more hermits in this forest?'

'Yes, sir, twelve, and they're waiting for me at a cross up ahead; we're all going to the kingdom of Logres and leaving our cells and chapels here for fear of the wicked king who's seized the land, for he won't allow any who believe in God to remain.'

Perceval followed the holy man to the Cross where the hermits were meeting. There he found his cousin the young hermit Joseus, the son of King Pelles, and he greeted him with the greatest joy. Then he bade the hermits turn back with him, saying that he would protect them with God's help, and he begged them most tenderly to pray that Our Lord might permit him to win back his rightful inheritance.

He neared the castle, with its great defences at the entrance. Some knew for certain that Perceval would conquer it, for it had long before been prophesied that the one who bore that shield, the white shield with the red cross, would win the Grail from one who rejected God. The knights saw Perceval coming with the company of hermits; a fine sight it was, and they were filled with awe. At a distance of two bow-shots from the bridge stood a chapel, and Perceval halted there with his company and tethered his horse and mule outside and entered. The hermits followed him. Inside was a tomb of exceptional beauty; and as soon as Perceval fixed his eyes upon it, its seal broke and it opened, and the stone lid rose so that they could see the body that lay within. A fragrance of the purest sweetness issued forth; and they found letters inside which testified that the body was that of Joseph of Arimathea. As soon as the hermits saw this, they said to Perceval:

'Sir, now we know for the first time that you are the Good Knight, the chaste and most sacred!'

Perceval left the chapel and mounted his horse once more, fully armed. The hermits blessed him and commended him to God. And clutching his lance he rode down towards the three knights who guarded the first bridge; they came rushing towards him and smashed their lances on his shield; then he struck one with such fury that he sent him plunging into the river below, and though the other two struggled long with him, he overcame them and cut them to pieces and flung their bodies into the water. The knights at the second bridge now came forward and battled hard, for they were fine knights indeed. Then Perceval's cousin Joseus told the other hermits that he would gladly have

gone to his aid if he had not thought it a sin, but they said to him that he need have no fear of that, for it would be a great deed to destroy the enemies of Our Lord; so Joseus cast off his grey cloak, and wearing only his cassock he seized one of Perceval's attackers, lifted him on to his shoulders and hurled him into the water. Perceval now killed the other two and flung them in the river like the rest; but by the time he had conquered the two bridges he was weary indeed. Then he thought of the lion of which his uncle had spoken, and looking towards the gate he beheld a white lion, standing on its hind legs and peering at him. Perceval gazed at its eyes and knew at once what the lion was thinking: that the knights at the third bridge were so bold and strong that they would never be beaten by a single knight without the aid of God, so he should ride on the mule and carry the banner. Perceval saw the white lion's thoughts and drew back, and Joseus did likewise. But as soon as they left the bridges behind they looked back and saw that the first bridge had been raised. Perceval went to his mule, which bore the mark of a red cross on her forehead, and mounted, and took up the banner and clutched his drawn sword. And when the white lion saw him returning, it broke from its chains and ran between the knights to the bridge that had been raised, and lowered it at once. Up rode Perceval, sword in hand, upon the white mule, and he attacked the knights who guarded the third bridge and dealt one such a blow that he sent him crashing into the water. Now Joseus came forward, aiming to seize the other two, but they cried for mercy, vowing to do Perceval's will and believe in God and abandon their evil lord; and the knights at the fourth bridge did likewise. Perceval took Joseus's advice and let them live, and they gave up their arms and surrendered the bridges. It now occurred to Perceval that, although the power of God was great indeed, a knight of worth should put his own strength to the test for God; even if all the knights in the world were against God and His will, He would vanquish them in an hour, but He wishes men to labour for Him just as He suffered for His people. So Perceval rode back and climbed from the mule and gave the banner to Joseus; then he mounted his horse once more and returned to attack the knights at the fifth bridge. They defended themselves vigorously, for they were brave knights indeed, and fought fiercely against Perceval; but Joseus the hermit came to join him and assailed them in a fury, and Perceval cut them down and slaughtered them, sending them toppling into the river that rushed beneath the bridges.

When the knights at the sixth bridge saw that all before theirs had been conquered, they cried to Perceval for mercy and yielded to him and surrendered their swords. The knights at the seventh bridge did likewise, and when the red lion saw that the seven bridges had been conquered and the knights at the last two bridges had surrendered to Perceval, it leaped forward in a fury to the limit of its chain, and attacked one of the knights and killed him and devoured him; the white lion flew into a rage and rushed at the red, and tore it to pieces in an instant with its teeth and claws. Then it rose up on its hind legs and looked at Perceval; and Perceval gazed back and saw that the lion was thinking that the

knights who guarded the last bridges would be harder to conquer than the others, and would never be destroyed save by the will of God and by the lion himself; and that Perceval should not befriend them, whatever they might promise, for they were treacherous; he should go and mount the white mule, for she was a creature of God, and Joseus should carry the banner, and all the hermits, who were worthy men indeed, should advance at their head to dismay the treacherous king; and when the castle was conquered, then his end would be near.

Perceval had great faith in the lion's thoughts, and he climbed from his horse and remounted the mule, while Joseus took up the banner. Then the company of the twelve hermits, most fair and holy, advanced towards the castle; and the knights at the last bridges saw Perceval advancing with them, and Joseus carrying the banner. They had already seen them attack and destroy their comrades; and the power of Our Lord, the dignity of the banner, the virtue which lay in the mule and the holiness of the good hermits as they offered their prayers to Our Lord all beset the knights' resolve so much that they could scarcely keep control of themselves. But the treachery could never leave their hearts: they were grieved at seeing their kinsmen slaughtered, and they thought to themselves that if they could plead for mercy and escape from there, they would never rest until they had murdered Perceval. And so they came forward, and looking most humble they cried for mercy and promised to do his will, but begged him to let them go alive and unharmed. Perceval looked to the lion for guidance, and saw that the lion thought they were treacherous and disloyal, and that if they were dead their lord would be defenceless. Perceval cried that he would never have mercy on them, and advanced upon them with his drawn sword; they were too terrified to defend themselves, and he almost refrained from killing them when he found no attempt at resistance. But the lion had no such qualms, and leaped at them and tore them to pieces and tossed their limbs and bodies into the river. Perceval left the lion to deal with them, and was pleased with the way he did so; never had he seen a beast he loved so dearly.

Meanwhile the King of Castle Mortal was standing on the battlements. He had seen the lion destroy the last of his knights and realised he was now defenceless. So he climbed to the highest part of the walls and lifted the skirt of his hauberk; then, gripping his drawn sword, he plunged the blade right through his body and tumbled over the wall and into the river, swift and deep; Perceval and all the hermits saw him, and were astonished that he should have killed himself in this way.

It is no surprise if out of three or four brothers there is one who is bad; but it is a great sorrow when a single wicked one injures the greater good of the others. Just as Cain murdered his brother Abel, it is a grievous pity when relatives who should be united betray each other. This wicked king had been treacherous, despite being a brother of the good King Pelles and of the Widowed Lady of Kamaalot, the mother of Perceval. All this family had been in the service

of Our Lord, from beginning to end, except for this wicked king who had come to such a sorry end.

Perceval now rode into the castle, and the worthy hermits with him; and as soon as they entered they thought they could hear voices singing '*Gloria in Excelsis Deo*,' and the sweetest praise for Our Lord. They found the halls rich and beautiful indeed, magnificently adorned; and the chapel where the relics had been kept they found open. But they were empty; and the hermits prayed to God to send them soon the Holy Grail and the relics that had been there before.

The aged knights and the priests and maidens of the Fisher King's household had all departed when the King of Castle Mortal had seized the castle, having no wish to be in his power. But God had protected them and guided them to safety; and knowing that the Good Knight had reconquered the castle which was rightfully his, He now sent back all who had been in the Fisher King's service. Perceval greeted them with the greatest joy, just as they greeted him; and they seemed indeed to be ones who had come from a place where God and His will reigned.

And that night the Fisher King himself returned to the castle; and there in the hall, bathed in radiant light, he summoned Perceval to sit at his side and eat from his bowl, most generously and freely.

They had not been sitting long before a lovely girl, whiter than a flower on a sapling's branch, appeared from a chamber; in her hands she was holding the Holy Grail. She passed before the table. And a moment later another girl came, fairer than any ever seen, dressed in a white silken cloth; she was carrying the lance that dripped blood from its tip. And a boy followed after, carrying in his hands the sword still imperfectly repaired; gently and carefully he laid it on a corner of the table by the king. Perceval was very much on edge, and began to say to the king:

'Sire, I've been in your house twice before, but however much I asked you about the affairs of this land, you wouldn't tell me anything; and I almost repaired a sword that was broken across the middle – a fine, a wonderful sword indeed. I see it before me now.'

The king said this: 'Before God, my friend, you've suffered a great deal to accomplish what you've done. But don't be upset or aggrieved. Just take hold of this sword, and it will be joined and made whole.'

Perceval leaned forward and grasped the sword without hesitation. Then he cast his eyes upon it, and saw the notch in the blade and was overcome with anguish. He rubbed his hand up and down the sword – no-one intervened or bade him stop – and then brandished it four times so violently that he almost shattered it. And thereupon the notch was repaired: he had joined it completely, perfectly. He took it by the blade and presented it to the Fisher King in full view of everyone. The king beheld it and was filled with indescribable joy.

'All your toil,' he said, 'is well rewarded, when God declares you worthy to know the truth about all these things!'

Perceval was exultant. Now he felt no grief or sorrow; instead his heart overflowed with joy: he almost burst out singing. The king threw his arms around his neck and said: 'My good, dear grandson, be lord of my house. I willingly bestow upon you everything I have, and henceforth will hold you dearer than any man alive.'

At that the boy who had brought the sword stepped forward and wrapped it in a silken cloth and carried it away; and Perceval was greatly comforted by the great joy and honour that God had sent him that day. The king looked at him and said:

'Eat, dear grandson, and may God who was crucified for our sins grant you every honour and forgiveness.'

At complete leisure they had all the food and wine they could have wished for; no prophet or divine ever drank the like. And just as they were about to rise from dinner, there passed once more before the royal table the lance and the Grail, and a beautiful silver trencher, splendid and handsome, carried by a girl most elegantly. When they had passed the tables, they returned to the chamber from which they had come. Perceval, observing this, sighed, and looked at the king and said at once:

'Dear grandfather, tell me freely now what you promised me before dinner.'

'Come close to me,' the king replied, 'and I'll tell you whatever you wish to ask.'

'I long to know,' said Perceval, 'about the lance and the Grail and the trencher that I've seen: tell me first who is served from them, and where they come from.'

'Grandson,' replied the king, 'I'll tell you first about the lance. Without a word of a lie, it is the holy lance with which Longinus struck Christ when He was hung upon the Cross. And the precious, holy blood which flows from its head is the holy, precious blood that ran from God's side when Longinus pierced Him to the heart. The blow that God received on the Cross was well struck indeed; for through death He overcame the Devil and delivered us from the torment of Hell. That death saved us, you understand, from the evils brought upon us by Adam and Eve when they bit into the apple.'

Perceval leaned on his elbow and listened intently to the Fisher King's words; and he wept at the agony that God had suffered: not for all the Roman Empire would he have stopped. And he said to the king: 'Sire, you've told me about the lance. Now I want to know about the Grail and the trencher, if it's right to ask.'

And the king, governed always by gentleness, granted his every wish, and said: 'When God hung on the holy, glorious Cross and His side was pierced and they withdrew the lance-head, blood ran from the wound right down to his foot. Joseph of Arimathea turned black with grief at the sight of Jesus tortured, and he took this holy vessel and caught the blood therein. The Grail, dear grandson, is Joseph's vessel. And the silver trencher carried by the girl was used

to cover the holy vessel so that the blood should not be left exposed. Such, truly, is the Grail, which passed through here with the lance. I've told you the truth about all this: not a word I've said has been a lie. And if there's anything more you wish to know, I'll tell you the truth likewise.'

And Perceval, most eager to hear all, said: 'Sire, please tell me how the Holy Grail came to this country: I long to know that more than anything.'

'Listen then,' the king replied. 'When God was hung upon the Cross, Joseph took Him down with the help of Nichodemus, a smith, the finest that there was. For this he was imprisoned, cast into a dark, black dungeon where he suffered terribly; they wanted him to rot and starve to death. He stayed there for forty days with nothing to eat or drink; but the Lord God sent the Holy Grail to him: he saw it two or three times a day as it visited him in the dungeon, and through the Grail's sweet power he never felt any pain or ill. And the emperor's son Vespasian, although he had not been a Christian, freed him from the dungeon. By God's will the Grail remained in Joseph's keeping. But the time came when a messenger of Our Lord commanded Joseph to bequeath the sacred vessel to me, and bade that I should carry it into the West. I did so, and came to settle in this country and built this house; and Joseph, who was my dear brother-in-law, came to join me here before he died: he lived here at this very house; and when he was dying and departed this life the Grail remained – as it always will, if it please God, as long as I am here.'

Perceval listened with gladness to the story of the Grail, and praised Our Lord for the miracle. Then he said: 'Dear grandfather, tell me also about the beautiful girls who carry the Grail and the trencher; I'm sorry if I'm tiring you with my questions, but all the riches in the world wouldn't give me such joy as this.'

'The girl who carries the Grail,' the Fisher King replied, 'is a maiden and a virgin – otherwise, God save me, she would never have held it in her hands. She's my own daughter – and is certainly no disgrace to me! And the girl who carries the trencher is of royal birth, and wise and courteous indeed: she's the daughter of King Gon of Sert. Now you've heard the stories of the Grail and the lance. And it's time to sleep; let's retire to our beds.'

'Oh, good sir!' cried Perceval. 'Please don't object: I want to know how the sword I've twice repaired was broken.'

'Very well,' said the king. 'I'll tell you: listen, and I'll explain. The sword that you've repaired – for which you should be deeply happy – is the one with which the Mortal Blow was struck. Never will such a grievous and evil blow be dealt, and we're still suffering for it – I and all this kingdom. King Gon of Sert, my brother, the peer of any emperor, was besieged in the castle of Quingragrant by Espinogre, a man of great strength accompanied by a mighty host of knights and men-at-arms. My brother Gon rode out to do battle with him, and fought so well that he routed his whole army. But Espinogre had a nephew of great boldness, who had vowed that he would kill my brother that

day; and he did so – by trickery and a foul misdeed. When he saw his side being routed he cast aside his arms and, being well practised in wickedness, stripped a dead enemy of his arms and donned them himself and rejoined the battle, clutching the splendid sword of which you've joined the pieces. He headed for my brother, who had no fear of him, being sure that he was one of his own men, and who, with his helmet off and his mail-hood down, was riding back towards his household who had fought brilliantly that day. And Espinogre's nephew, intent upon his evil plan, struck my unsuspecting brother on the head with his sword and clove him in two right down to the saddle. At this grievous blow the good sword broke in half. And the killer rode off with all speed, throwing away the half he held. He returned to his army who greeted him with the utmost honour, while the men of the castle carried back King Gon of Sert, cloven, cold and dead. And with his body, in deepest sorrow, they also took the sword, broken across the middle, which the knight had thrown down in the press. They carried him to the castle laid out on his shield, with no blanket or serge to cover him. When they had washed and dressed him as well as they could they laid him in a bier and brought him here to me, along with the sword. One of my nieces told me how it had wrought the death of her father, and assured me that if I kept the pieces until a knight came here and repaired the sword, then my brother, whom I loved so dearly, would be avenged by him. But I was so stricken with grief that I took the pieces she had given me, and scythed through my thighs and severed every nerve. That's why I've been helpless ever since, and always will be until revenge is taken upon the false-hearted wretch who treacherously killed the finest knight who ever lived.'

Perceval, hearing the Fisher King's story, responded with a sincere and humble heart, saying: 'Truly, grandfather, he did an evil deed. Tell me the knight's name. The task of vengeance falls to me – I want to know his arms and emblems, too. And as a loyal knight I swear to you that if I can track him down I'll bring him back dead or captive – unless he kills me: that will be his only escape.'

'Dear grandson,' said the Fisher King, 'may the one who forgave Longinus give you the strength and power to do it. The killer's name was Partinial the Wild. He's the Lord of the Red Tower and the land thereabouts. He has wonderfully handsome arms – of silver, emblazoned with two maidens painted in blue. My suffering would be ended if revenge were taken on him, but he has no respect for any knight alive.'

'Sire,' replied Perceval, 'we who ride through the land in search of renown are used to suffering all manner of ills, and with Our Lord's support I'm sure I'll succeed.'

'May He guard you from misfortune,' said the king. 'Let's go and sleep now, for it's well past time, and I think you're tired and in need of rest.'

'Truly, sire, I won't sleep until you've told me the truth about the tree I saw bedecked with candles; and about the altar I saw in the chapel where the dead

knight lay: please tell me his name! I've got to know! And the candle in the chapel that was suddenly extinguished – tell me truly, who snuffed it out?'

And his grandfather, sincerely eager to fulfil his wishes, said kindly: 'Hear the truth, then, about the tree of candles. It's the tree of enchantment. The lights which look like candles from afar are fairies who lead astray all who've put their faith in God. And the fact that you went to the tree and saw nothing was a sure sign that you were to accomplish the strange adventures of this land. No-one will ever hear of that tree again, for you chased away the fairies forever as you rode up to the tree. Now it's time to go to our beds and rest awhile.'

'Oh, sire,' said Perceval, 'tell me first about the chapel and the body!'

'I promised to tell you whatever you wished,' said the king, 'so it's only right I do so. Believe me, then, when I say that the chapel was built at the command of Brangemor of Cornwall, the mother of King Pinogres who was so cruel and violent. She became a nun at the chapel, but for less than a day, for then she died: her son Pinogres killed her and beheaded her, burdening himself with a terrible sin. She was buried beneath the altar, and not a day has passed since then without a knight being killed there. More than a thousand have been killed by a hand that ambushes them: no-one knows who their killer is, only that they're killed by a hand with black and swarthy skin. It's the same hand that snuffs out the candle.'

'That's an amazing story,' said Perceval. 'Can no-one rid the chapel of this horror?'

'Dear grandson,' replied the king, 'there's a cupboard in the chapel containing a white veil; and a knight willing to do battle with the Black Hand should know that if he were to drench the veil in holy water and sprinkle it over the altar and the body and the chapel, he would bring an end to the evils of the place. But any man who wanted to fight the Black Hand would need to be brave indeed, possessed of all knightly qualities.'

And with that he rose to his feet and said: 'Go to your bed now, grandson, and sleep, for I can see you're tired from staying awake so long; I fear all the talking I've done has exhausted you, though you seem to have listened with delight. The beds are ready: go and sleep now, if you will.'

Then Perceval rose at once and said: 'I'll do as you say, sire, without fail.'

* * *

Perceval slept in a luxurious bed that night, and next morning he rose early and, after hearing mass sweetly sung in the castle chapel, he took his leave of the Fisher King, vowing that he would not rest until he had found the knight Partinial and taken revenge for the terrible blow, the source of so much suffering.

With his sword girded on and his lance in hand, he rode on all morning, but met no-one at all. Then he passed into a forest and wandered on until late in the

afternoon, when he came to the forest's edge. As he passed from the woods the sky began to turn pitch black, though the day was not yet done; and the air was whipped into dusty whirlwinds, and rocks and thunderbolts fell from the sky, so huge and thick and fast that it might have been the end of the world. Perceval and his horse alike received some mighty blows. He did not dare keep his eyes open, and covered his head with his shield; and the rocks that fell upon it made such a crashing din that it was terrible to hear. The thunderbolts and lightning flew until the air and sky seemed ablaze on every side. The forest was toppling and crashing all around. Perceval could see neither fortress nor tower, nor any house, and his horse was going wild at the storming din. Then suddenly the weather cleared, and there before him he saw a chapel. He turned his horse towards it and spurred on urgently. He entered; he was soaking wet and weather-beaten, but greatly relieved to be inside: he swore before God that he had never seen such a storm.

Just then he glanced towards the altar and saw a dead knight lying upon it, with a candle burning beside him; and a moment later he saw, coming through a window, a hand, and it was black right up to the elbow: it was dark and hideous indeed, and it snuffed out the candle. And as soon as the candle was out the air turned dark and dreadful, and Perceval could see no more in there than if he had been down a well. But he refused to be dismayed: he knew he had to fight the hand and prepared to do battle. For a moment he stood in utter darkness, seeing nothing; then suddenly in the flash of a lightning bolt he spotted the hand and darted forward and thrust his lance at it, but the hand seized it in a mighty grip and smashed it to splinters in an instant. Perceval stepped back and drew his sword and leaped towards the hand; but just as he was about to strike he saw a head looming in at the window, followed by its body as far as the waist, and it flung a blazing firebrand, fully twelve feet wide, which scorched Perceval's face and brows. Then Perceval invoked God by His several names, for he knew very well that it was the Devil he had seen. He raised his hand and made the sign of the Cross upon his forehead; and at once he heard a mighty din come crashing from the sky and a lightning bolt rent the very walls asunder. Then Perceval looked up and saw a colossal demon, blazing with fire, with arms as black as coal: it was clearly this demon's hand that had come through the window. And in the same moment he saw a veil lying in an open cupboard – the very veil, he was sure, that the Fisher King had described. He darted towards it, but just as he was about to take it a huge black hand barred his way and a terrible voice cried:

'Knight, you were insolent to enter here – and you've made a grave mistake in staying! Tomorrow it'll be *your* body lying on the altar!'

Perceval uttered not a word in reply, but he raised his hand and made the sign of the Cross. A thunderbolt crashed down, and the demon leaped back through the wall and sprang on to the chapel roof in dire fear of the sign of the Cross; and the lightning bolt struck a wooden beam and sent it bursting into flames and the whole chapel caught fire – nothing could prevent it. But Perceval,

still undaunted, came straight to the cupboard to take the veil; but again the hand stopped him, and the voice howled:

'Perceval, cease this folly! Don't believe the Fisher King: you'll be crazy if you do! Be off with you or you'll die here! I've struck down many knights who've fought me – there's one left dead here every day! Make sure you're not left with them!'

Perceval made no reply at all, but advanced towards the cupboard to take the veil. The demon moved to stop him, seizing him by the left hand; but Perceval clutched his sword in the right and strove and struggled to strike the black hand; but to no avail – every blow he dealt failed. He was locked in a terrible battle now, the demon striving with all his might to stop him taking the veil and to inflict all possible pain. He seized Perceval by the hand and pulled and wrenched, sure that he would overpower him. But Perceval made the sign of the Cross with his sword to prevent the demon harming him; and instantly the demon fled in terror as thunder and lightning burst from the sky, the most fearsome ever seen, miraculously wrought by God when the sign of the Cross was made. Perceval crumpled, stricken with awe; and he should not be blamed for that, for no man born encountered such a perilous day in all his earthly life. Beside the altar in the chapel he lay unconscious, stunned by the mighty lightning bolt that had crashed down and dumbfounded him. And meanwhile the fire was spreading everywhere – there was not a rafter, beam or batten left unburnt. Just in time he recovered his senses, and came straight to the cupboard and threw it open and drew forth the white veil. And he did not treat it with contempt, but held it with all reverence. Then he took a vase, brim-full of holy water, and plunged the veil deep in it; then he carried the veil outside and processed all round the chapel, sprinkling the walls, as though it were Ascension Day, Christmas, Easter or Pentecost.

When he had sprinkled every side he entered the chapel again, and dipping the veil in holy water once more he sprinkled the chapel inside; and as he did so, the fire was extinguished, and the storm, which had done so much damage that night, abated. But all the country far and wide had been burnt and consumed by scorching fire.

When Perceval saw that the storm was done he returned the veil safely to the cupboard. Then he hurried back to the body that lay upon the altar, and examined it closely to see if he had seen the man before; but it was impossible to tell, for it was so hideously hacked and battered by the demon that it was as black as pitch. He had never seen such a hideous corpse, and would have dearly loved to find a priest to bury it: he would willingly have lent a hand.

Perceval lay in the chapel until morning, for there was no light at all until day began to break; and just as it did so, the candle began to burn – and it did not go out: nor will it ever until the world's end. When Perceval awoke he was startled by the light from the burning candle. He stared long at it, wondering how it could have been lit – until he realised that it was surely an act of God. Then he noticed a bell hanging in a little belfry and, thinking that if it was rung

someone would come, he pulled at the bell-rope. It was not long before a frail old man in a grey cloak appeared. He must have been a hundred years old: his beard had grown right down to his waist and his hair was so long that it touched his heels. Perceval greeted him at once, and the old man returned his greeting, saying:

'I wish you good fortune, sir, for you're the finest knight of more than three thousand who've come here and fought to destroy the terrible marvel.'

'Good sir,' said Perceval, 'do you know where I might find a priest who could bury this body? I wouldn't like to leave him before he's interred.'

And the worthy man replied: 'I'm a priest myself, have no doubt; and I've buried three thousand already, all strangled to death by the Black Hand. But now you've brought this adventure to an end: no more evil will befall this place.'

So Perceval helped the aged priest to prepare the burial. They laid the body in a wooden bed and covered it in a rich sheet of green and indigo silk, and the worthy man placed a cross of gold at the body's head between two elegant golden candlesticks. Then he rang the bell, and two brothers, who dwelt nearby as monks, arrived with a chalice of engraved silver. The priest now began the holy service, to which Perceval listened with deep devotion. And when the service was done the priest came to the dead knight and commended his soul to God. Then the brothers took the body and carried it to a cemetery surrounded by a row of trees; there are many cemeteries in the world, but none as beautiful as this; and all the trees were heavily laden, for on them hung the arms, lances and shields of all those defeated and slaughtered by the demon. The priest walked softly ahead of the bier, and the two who bore it halted beneath a tree where no armour hung, and there they laid it down. Next to the tree was a marble tomb, and they sprinkled it with holy water before laying the body inside; and over the tomb they laid a massive slab of heavy marble, richly inlaid with enamel.

On their way back Perceval, eager to learn about the cemetery and the arms that hung upon the trees, began to question the priest. And the old man told him the true story from beginning to end, saying:

'In this great cemetery I've buried all who died fighting the hand. They all lie in marble tombs, and on each tree hang the arms and shield of the one who lies beneath. Queen Brangemore began the graveyard, and by my life, it was an accursed beginning, for never has a day gone by without a knight being killed here by the hand. The first to be buried was Brangemore herself, and the knight we've just buried will be the last, for no man will ever again be that demon's victim.'

'But where did all these handsome tombs come from?'

'Since the queen was killed,' the hermit replied, 'not a day has passed without a tomb, made to measure for the knight who'd died, being found beneath the tree where he was to lie. And by the faith I owe Christ, the name of the dead knight was written on each one.'

Perceval said that before he left he would go and look at all the inscriptions on the marble slabs.

'So help me God,' said the hermit, 'it'll be noon before you've finished!'

And he left him and went to the chapel to disrobe. Perceval spent all day until nightfall reading the inscriptions; and he found a good number that caused him sorrow. Had he recognised anyone from King Arthur's court it would have been the greatest sorrow of all. But finding no knight of Arthur's he returned to the chapel.

'If you will, sir,' said the old priest, 'accept our lodging and our charity tonight, in the name of the Holy Trinity.'

'Gladly,' said Perceval, 'but I must fetch my horse and bring him here.'

'Your horse is already in the house, and his food has been provided: two basins full of barley; and he has good hay, and a litter of straw that's belly-deep!'

Perceval entered the house, and the worthy man gave him a grey woollen garment – one just like the ewe wears, without any dye or colouring. When the brothers had set up the table – crude though it was – and spread the cloth, they laid it as best they could with barley bread and water, and with cabbages they had cut in the garden; that was all they had to eat, and with that they quelled their hunger.

When they had eaten, the old priest drew his stool close to Perceval and asked him about himself: who he was, and from what land, and what he was seeking in those parts. And Perceval began to tell him, saying:

'I'm a knight, sir, of the Round Table; and I'm wandering in search of chivalry and honour.'

'Honour?'

'Yes indeed, sir.'

'How do you do that?'

'When I go seeking adventures – and I often encounter fearsome ones – I do battle with many knights, and kill and defeat and capture many, and thus I strive to enhance my reputation.'

'Dear friend,' said the hermit, 'that's an astonishing thing to say: you think you win honour and esteem by vanquishing a knight? God help me, you rather win the plainest damnation for your soul! And a man who loses his soul loses everything.'

Perceval was dumbfounded by the worthy man's words. 'By Saint Peter, sir,' he said, 'how then can I save my soul?'

'I'll tell you,' the priest replied. 'If you want to save yourself you must abandon the paths you've followed so long and pacify your heart. A man who kills and murders others and devotes himself to doing ill wins only his own downfall, for he will be in Hell everlastingly.'

Perceval was truly shocked by the worthy man's words, and took them deeply to heart.

Next morning he rose early, and went to the chapel without delay, where the worthy man sang the mass. Then Perceval went to him and confessed all his

misdeeds; and as penance the priest emphatically charged him to beware of ever committing such a sin as to kill a man except in self-defence; and Perceval swore he would not. Then he took up his arms and departed, commending the worthy man to God.

Galahad

PERCEVAL RODE OUT INTO OPEN COUNTRY BUT MET no-one; then he passed back into the forest and rode on, his head bowed in thought. Suddenly a knight came thundering through the trees, lance lowered, as fast as his horse could go; and he struck Perceval as he passed and sent him crashing to the ground and seized his horse by the reins. Perceval leaped up swiftly and drew his sword, and began to race after the knight to recover his mount, distraught and furious at being felled. He gave chase right along a valley, not slowing for a moment; but the knight was riding away so fast that a thunderbolt wouldn't have caught him. Perceval lost sight of him and sat down beneath an oak, irate, downcast and troubled, and began to say to himself:

'This morning I unburdened myself of all my sins, wanting to mend my wrongful ways, and now I've lost my horse! I'm in a mess without a mount – I look a proper fool! I don't care what the priest said: I'd pursue that knight to the end of the earth to take revenge! But I'd have to find out his name first – I don't know who he is.'

Such was Perceval's lament as he leaned against the forest oak, sad, dejected and frustrated. While he sat there crestfallen, not knowing what to do, he saw a horse coming straight and swiftly towards him; it lacked neither saddle nor stirrups nor harness: it was a handsome horse indeed, and it galloped up to Perceval like lightning, whinnying and pounding its hooves. And it was as black as any berry. Perceval was roused from his troubled thoughts, and leaped up to catch it as soon as he saw it; the horse baulked and reared, but Perceval grabbed the reins and jumped into the saddle. He was jubilant, and delighted with his fine mount, and said he had had a great stroke of luck in finding this splendid, God-sent horse.

And so it was that he rode on until he found himself in the Waste Forest, where he chanced to meet a knight whose arms he didn't recognise; and taking him for an enemy he charged him and struck him so hard in the chest that he shattered his lance. The knight struck him back, and once again Perceval found himself unseated and crashing to the ground. His own lance being likewise shattered, the knight drew his sword and dealt Perceval such a blow that he split

open his helmet and the hood of his mail-coat, and had the sword not turned in his hand he would surely have killed him. Perceval didn't know whether it was day or night.

This combat took place outside the hermitage of a recluse, and when she saw the victorious knight riding away she called out to him: 'Go, and may God be your guide! Truly, if this knight had known you as well as I, he wouldn't have been so bold as to attack you!'

The knight heard this and, seemingly alarmed at being recognised, dug in his spurs and galloped away with all the speed his horse could summon. Perceval remounted as fast as he could, but soon realised he would never catch him; and he turned back, utterly woebegone, and returned to the recluse, hoping to learn something about the knight who had escaped him.

When he arrived at the chapel he beat at the recluse's little window: she was wide awake and opened it at once, and leaned out and asked him who he was. He said he was a knight of King Arthur's court and his name was Perceval the Welshman. When she heard his name she was filled with joy, for she loved him dearly, and rightly so, for he was her nephew. She called to her household and bade them open the door to the knight outside and give him food if he needed and as much as they could, for he was the man she loved most in all the world. They did her bidding, and unbarred the door and admitted Perceval and disarmed him and served him food. He asked if he was allowed to talk to the recluse that evening, and they said:

'No, sir, not until tomorrow after mass.'

He accepted this, and lay down in a bed they prepared for him, and slept all night long, for he was quite exhausted.

When day broke next morning Perceval rose and heard mass, and once he was armed he came to the recluse and said: 'In God's name, lady, tell me about the knight who passed this way yesterday: you said you recognised him – I'm longing to know who he was.'

She asked Perceval why he was so keen to know, and he said: 'I'll never be at ease until I've found him and challenged him to combat. He's done me such dishonour that unless I can pay him back I'll be ashamed!'

'Ah, Perceval!' she said, 'what are you saying? You want to fight with him? Are you so eager to die like your brothers, whose high-handedness brought them to their deaths? Truly, if you die so, it'll be a grievous pity and a disgrace upon your line. And do you realise what you'll lose by fighting this knight? I'll tell you. The great Quest of the Holy Grail is under way, and you are one of its company, are you not? If it please God, it will soon be brought to its conclusion. And a much greater honour awaits you than you imagine, if only you refrain from doing battle with that knight. For we in this land and in many other places know that in the end there will be three supreme knights who, above all others, will achieve the glory and honour of the quest: two will be virgins and the third will be chaste. One of the two virgins will be the knight you seek and the other will be you, and the third will be Bors de Gaunes. By

these three knights will the quest be accomplished. And since God has this honour in store for you, it would be a pity indeed if you sought your death in the meantime! And you'll be hastening it for sure if you fight with him, for he is without doubt a much finer knight than you or any man known.'

'From what you say about my brothers, lady,' said Perceval, 'it seems you know who I am.'

'Indeed I do, and so I should, for I'm your aunt and you're my nephew. Don't doubt it just because I'm living here in this poor place: I'm the woman known as the Queen of the Waste Land. Once you'd have seen me in a different state, for I was one of the richest ladies in the world, but that wealth never pleased me as does my present poverty.'

Perceval was moved to tears by her words, and he remembered her now and recognised her as his aunt. He sat down before her and asked her news of his family.

'What?' she said. 'Don't you know about your mother? She died the moment you rode off to Arthur's court. That very same day, as soon as she'd made confession, she died of grief that you'd left her.'

'I know,' said Perceval, 'and she's often appeared to me in my sleep and said she's more reason to rebuke me than to praise me, for I treated her so badly. God have mercy on my soul, for it grieves me deeply. But since it's happened I must bear it, and it's the fate that befalls us all. But tell me, in God's name, do you know who he is, the knight I'm seeking?'

'By my life I do,' she replied. 'Let me explain. You know, don't you, that since the coming of Christ there have been three great tables in the world. The first was the table of Christ Himself, where the apostles ate together many times. At that table souls and bodies were sustained by the bread of Heaven, and the brothers who sat there were united in heart and soul. That table was established by the spotless Lamb who was sacrificed for our redemption. After it, another table was made in its likeness and in its memory: the table of the Holy Grail, which in the days of Joseph of Arimathea, when Christianity was first brought to this land, saw such great miracles as should be remembered forever by the godly and the godless alike. And after that came the Round Table, established by Merlin – and with great significance, for in its name should be understood the roundness of the world and the circular motions of the planets and the stars in the firmament. The Round Table represents the world indeed, for to it come knights from every land where chivalry is known. And when God grants them such grace that they become companions of that fellowship, they count themselves more blessed than if they'd gained the whole world, and forsake mothers, fathers, wives and children for its sake. You've seen this in your own case, for ever since you left your mother and were made a companion of the Round Table you've had no desire to return, captivated as you were by the closeness and fraternal love that unites that brotherhood.

'When Merlin established the Round Table, he declared that its companions

would come to know the truth about the Holy Grail, entirely hidden in his own time. "Three knights", he said, "will achieve the quest, two of them virgins and the third chaste. One of the three will surpass his father as the lion surpasses the leopard in strength and courage, and will be master and shepherd of all the others, who'll go mad with frustration in their search for the Grail until Our Lord with wondrous suddenness sends him among them". Hearing this, King Arthur's court said: "Well then, Merlin, if he's as great as you say, you should make a special seat where none should sit except he, so much bigger than the rest that everyone will recognise it". "I shall", Merlin said, and he made a seat of surpassing size and magnificence, and kissed it – out of love, he said, for the Good Knight who would sit there; and he told them: "This seat will give rise to many wonders, for any man who sits therein will be killed or maimed until the True Knight comes to take his place; and for this reason it shall be called the Perilous Seat".

'Now I've told you, dear nephew,' said the noble recluse, 'why the Round Table was created, and the Perilous Seat, too, where many knights unworthy to sit therein have perished. Listen now: it was on the day of Pentecost, when all the companions of the Round Table were gathered with their lord King Arthur, but with the Perilous Seat left empty, that an astonishing thing occurred: just after the first course had been served, all the doors and windows closed by themselves – no-one had so much as touched them; and while they all sat amazed an aged man of most noble bearing appeared, dressed in a white robe – but nobody had seen him enter. And he was holding by the hand a knight in red armour, and he said to the king: "King Arthur, I bring you the Desired Knight, born of the high lineage of King David and of Joseph of Arimathea, through whom the enchantments besetting this and other lands will be cast out. Behold him here".

'"If this is the one we've awaited", said the king, "who'll bring to an end the adventures of the Holy Grail, we'll give him a more joyful welcome than any man has ever known!" And with that the old man led the knight straight to the Perilous Seat beside Lancelot, and raising a silken sheet that had been lain across it he uncovered letters, freshly engraved, and read them aloud so that all could hear: "This seat is Galahad's". And turning to the knight he said: "Sit here, sir, for this place is yours". And the knight sat down in the Perilous Seat – unharmed.

'When the people in the hall saw the knight seated in the dread place where so many terrible wonders had occurred, they were astounded; and seeing he was so young a man they couldn't think how he could be granted such grace unless it were by the will of Our Lord. A boy ran with the news to the queen, saying: "My lady, great wonders have occurred in the hall!" And when she asked him what he meant, he replied: "A knight has overcome the trial of the Perilous Seat!" And all the queen's ladies said: "Ah, God! This is a sign that he's the one who'll bring to an end the adventures of Britain and heal the Maimed King!"

'You know, don't you, nephew, that it was on the day of Pentecost that the apostles were all gathered behind closed doors, and the Holy Spirit descended among them as a flame of fire? And it was on the day of Pentecost that Our Lord came to comfort them. In just such a guise came the knight who is to be your comfort, your master and your shepherd. Just as Our Lord came in the likeness of fire, so did the knight come in arms of fiery red. And just as the doors of the apostles' house were closed at the coming of Our Lord, so were the doors of the palace shut when the knight appeared. Now you know why I say you should never fight him: you're brothers together in the company of the Round Table – and you wouldn't survive against him, for he's a much finer knight than you.'

'Lady, dear aunt,' said Perceval, 'you've said enough to make me never want to do combat with him. But in God's name tell me where I may find him, for if I could share his company I'd never want to leave his side.'

'Go from here to the castle called Gort,' she replied, 'for he has a cousin there with whom he'll doubtless have taken lodging tonight. If she's willing to tell you which way he went, follow his path as fast as you can. If she can't say, go straight to the castle of Corbenic, where the Maimed King lies, and even if you don't find him there you're sure to have reliable news.'

Perceval could not wait to leave, and said: 'Lady, so many things are pressing me that I can't bring myself to stay! I beg you, let me go at once.'

She could not persuade him to stay that night, and Perceval set off into the forest, so vast it was a wonder, and evening was already setting in.

And it was then that the black horse, which he had been so pleased to chance upon, suddenly surged forward with awesome speed and noise, destroying everything in its path, uprooting trees and smashing branches, until it came to a cliff fully six hundred feet in height. It galloped right to the very brink, and Perceval, awe-struck, saw a river below, so deep that no stone could plumb its depths, and the horse was about to fling itself in to bring Perceval to his death. Perceval realised he had been deceived, and in fear of the Devil he did as God had instructed him and raised his hand and made the sign of the Cross. The horse abhorred the sign he had made and reared up on its hind legs to hurl Perceval into the river and drown him; but it flung him only flat on the ground behind, and launched itself from the cliff and plummeted, spinning, down into the river. If a tower had been demolished and cast down in a heap it would not have made such a thunderous din as the horse hitting the water. Perceval was deeply shocked, realising it was a demon that had borne him there; and he blessed himself with the sign of the True Cross more than a hundred times.

He clambered down the mighty cliff and finally reached the riverbank; but then he was even more dismayed, for he found the river was perilous indeed, impossible to cross without a boat: he had not seen a grimmer ford since the day he was born. And on the other side loomed a rock so high that the whole world could be surveyed from the top. He didn't know what to do or which way

to turn. Even were he to swim the river there would be no way to climb the rock, for he could see it was sheer indeed. So he stayed where he was until night came.

It brought him no pleasure or comfort. Rain fell, thick and fast, in a torrent. And from a cloud he saw a whirlwind with three heads appear, and they were huge and hideous, all hurling scorching fire; and each head's mouth had a demon's tongue and the teeth and face of a leopard. Perceval averted his eyes and made the sign of the Cross, and the demon swept away, setting all the forest and mountain ablaze; Perceval was filled with fear and again blessed himself with God's sign. Then suddenly he saw a boat covered in black samite; and a girl was leaning at its side, by all appearances deeply vexed at having been at sea so long. The boat sped swiftly to where Perceval was sitting on the bank, downcast and perturbed; and as it reached the shore the rain ceased and the whirlwind disappeared, and the girl stepped gently and elegantly from the boat.

When Perceval saw her approach he went eagerly to greet her. And the girl said: 'Perceval, my dear, I've come here from a distant land to find you! But it seems you don't recognise me!'

'By the faith I owe God,' replied Perceval, 'I don't remember ever meeting you.'

Then she came and took him by the hand and said: 'You've never seen me before, Perceval? Look closely.'

And Perceval looked at her body and her face, and was sure it was his sweetheart Blancheflor; and he said: 'Well met indeed, lady! How did you get here? I've never been so pleased to see anyone!'

Then he took hold of her at once and embraced her – it wasn't just a courteous kiss! And she bade her retinue pitch a rich and splendid pavilion for them; and they spread a sumptuous quilt in the middle of the tent, and beside it a table laden with the most delectable dishes imaginable. When they had stripped him of his arms Perceval sat down to dine. But there was no grace said by any prior, no blessing or genuflexion by any clerk. When they had eaten their fill, the lady and Perceval spoke together; he said to her:

'Sweetheart, tell me, in the name of love, what are you seeking in such a strange and distant land?'

'You!' she said. 'I need your help most urgently, for a wicked knight named Arides of Escavalon is striving with all his might to do me harm: he's destroying and laying waste my land, and says that you're lost, or have become a monk or friar, and he wants to take me as his wife. But I wouldn't marry him for all the money in the world, nor wrong you in any way; for my life is devoted to being your wife.'

'My love,' said Perceval, 'mountains, rocks and valleys won't save him from death at my hands if I can find him! I'll never fail you all the days of my life – I swear it.'

The lady thanked him, feigning deep affection. And when it was time to

sleep she said: 'My love, you may go to bed whenever you like, and lie with me if you wish – I dearly desire it!'

Perceval said he would do just as she wished. The young lady lay down on the rich bed, and Perceval lay beside her; and it pleased him greatly, for he had not seen her for a long time. He felt her naked body. She wanted him to lie with her and to do all he pleased: she was far from coy or reticent. Then Perceval looked up and saw his cruciform sword, and seeing the shape of the Cross he crossed himself, and thus thwarted the demon in the bed – for it was the Devil indeed, you may be sure, who in the semblance of Blancheflor wanted to lure him into sin. When Perceval made the sign of the Cross by God's miraculous inspiration, the Devil leaped up instantly and swept away the pavilion and the bed. Perceval was left all alone, shocked and anguished; and he stretched his hands heavenward and cried:

'Dear Lord who became a mortal man, thank you for your protection here! It was the very same Devil who tried to drown me!'

Then he put on his clothes and shoes and hurriedly armed. And he looked towards the water where the boat had been, but could see no sign of it: there was nothing to be seen in any direction. Then the moon began to shine, which comforted and cheered him, and he spotted the boat sailing down the river and back out to sea the way it had come; and a mighty storm blew up, with thunder, rain and lightning, and rocks fell from the clouds in an endless hail around the boat. For as long as he could see the boat the thunder, rain and lightning fell, but as soon as it was lost to view the storm abated. Perceval rejoiced at this, but he was deeply disturbed by what he had seen.

'Lord God,' he said, 'have mercy and deliver me from this place with my body and soul secure, and I promise I'll strive henceforth to earn your love.'

And there on the shore Perceval sighed and grieved until daybreak, imploring the sovereign father God to cast His divine power over him.

While he was thus immersed in prayer he saw a boat coming with a white sail unfurled; it had no rudder or oars to guide it, but it was surrounded by an air of the utmost joy. It was richly adorned with drapes; but there was no-one aboard except one old man. As the boat touched shore this worthy man, who was well aware of Perceval's plight, stepped out and greeted him in the name of the high master, saying:

'Dear friend, the Lord of the Trinity, who guides sinners back to the right path, has sent me here to comfort and console you: I've no desire to cause you pain, for you've suffered much already. I bring you comfort from Him. You need have no fear or doubt, for Jesus Christ the Saviour, who created Heaven and Earth, has sent me here to find you. Come aboard with me, and have no fear about anything you've seen.'

'Wait a moment, please, dear sir, and tell me first about the black horse that bore me here; and about the young lady who made me lie beside her beneath this cliff, naked, skin to skin.'

The white-haired man replied: 'I promise you, the horse that brought you

here last night was the Devil, who longed to plunge you into Hell where his fellows are. I tell you, friend, when you vanquished the Black Hand at the chapel, and then confessed your sins to the priest and assumed penance and repentance, the Devil was deeply vexed at having lost you; and he returned to get you, and saw to it that you lost your horse in the valley in the forest, to make you despair. He then made you mount him, didn't he, in the shape of a fine black horse? And he'd have made you pay dearly, for he'd have drowned you here if God hadn't taken pity on you by having you make the sign of the Cross to work your deliverance. And when he failed to drown you, the horse leaped into the water, baffled and defeated, for he had no force or power left over you: he nearly went mad with grief. But he sent another demon here in the shape of a girl, and the demon told you she was your sweetheart Blancheflor whom you left at Beaurepaire. She lied; she was the Devil, who wanted to drag you down to the shadows of Hell.'

'Truly,' said Perceval, 'I know his ruse would have worked on me if I hadn't blessed myself with the sign of the Cross. That saved me from the Devil, and I saw him sailing away in thunder across the sea, back to where he came from. I was left here; and now I'll go with you wherever you like: it's only right I should when you say you're sent from God.'

'Don't dally, friend,' said the worthy man, 'for you'll be under God's protection for as long as I'm your escort. I'll guide you happily, I promise you, to the road you'll want to take.'

With that they boarded the boat, and the wind filled the sail and bore them away so swiftly that they seemed to be flying over the waves. Perceval looked around the deck but could see nothing clearly because the night was very dark. He went and leaned at the ship's side, and prayed to Christ to guide him to a place where his soul would be safe. And after making this prayer, he fell fast asleep until morning.

When he awoke he looked across the deck and saw a knight, sitting, fully armed; and after a moment this knight recognised him as Perceval the Welshman, and ran and embraced him joyfully. Perceval was taken aback, unaware till now that this other knight had been aboard, and he asked him who he was.

'What?' said the knight. 'Don't you recognise me?'

'Not at all,' said Perceval, 'and I didn't know you were here.'

At this the knight smiled, and took off his helmet. Then Perceval recognised him: it was Bors de Gaunes, the knight of whom the recluse had spoken; he had seen him each time he had been to Arthur's court, and it would be hard to describe the joy with which they greeted each other now. Bors began to tell him how he had come to board the ship, and Perceval for his part told Bors the adventures that had befallen him by the river where the Enemy had appeared to him in the shape of a woman and enticed him to the brink of mortal sin.

And so it was that these two companions were united as Our Lord had planned, awaiting the next adventures He chose to send them. And meanwhile

they sailed hither and thither across the sea just as the wind took them, and Perceval said that the only thing lacking for the recluse's promise to be fulfilled was the presence of the third knight, Galahad.

They were just coming into shore when Bors caught sight of a knight in red arms riding down to the water's edge accompanied by a maiden, and he hailed him from afar, crying: 'Welcome, Sir Galahad! We've waited for you so long, and now you've come to us, thanks be to God! Come aboard at once, for nothing remains but to pursue the high adventure that God has prepared for us!'

The knight in red asked the maiden if she would dismount.

'Yes, sir,' she replied. 'But leave your horse here, as I shall mine.'

He dismounted at once and unharnessed both his horse and the maiden's palfrey. Then he made the sign of the Cross on his forehead and, commending himself to Our Lord, he boarded the ship and the maiden followed after. Bors greeted them with the utmost joy, and explained to Perceval that this was the son of the great Sir Lancelot. Then a mighty wind struck up and in an instant the ship was skimming across the sea once more, and before they knew it there was no land to be seen, either near or far.

Bors had removed his helmet and Galahad now did likewise, together with his sword; but he would not lay aside his hauberk. Seeing how beautiful the ship was, both within and without, he asked the two companions where such a handsome vessel had come from. Bors said he had no idea, but Perceval recounted as much as he knew, telling him about his adventure by the river, and how the priest had bidden him come aboard. Galahad said it was a strange place for them all to meet, and they laughed; and then Bors said to Galahad: 'If only your father Sir Lancelot were here it would be perfect!'

But Galahad replied that that was impossible, for it was not Our Lord's will.

They spoke together of their adventures until the middle of the afternoon, and Perceval asked Galahad's pardon for their encounter in the forest outside the recluse's cell. Soon they were far from the kingdom of Logres, for the ship had been travelling under full sail all night and all day. Then they passed between two rocks and came upon a wild island hidden away in a secret cove. And as they sailed in they caught sight of another ship moored behind a rock which they could only reach on foot.

'Good sirs,' said the maiden, 'aboard that ship is the adventure for which Our Lord has brought the three of you together. You must disembark and board that other craft.'

They willingly agreed, and jumped ashore and helped the maiden from the boat before mooring it to prevent the tide carrying it away. Then they clambered over the rocks, one after the other, and made their way to the other ship. They found it to be even finer than the first, and were amazed to see neither man nor woman aboard. They went closer to see what they could find, and as they looked at the ship's side they saw letters inscribed in Chaldean, spelling out a grim warning to any who thought to go aboard. This is what it said:

> 'Hear you, man who would board me: whoever you may be, take care that you be full of faith, for faith is precisely what I am. So be sure, before you step aboard, that you be stainless, for I am faith and true belief, and as soon as you abandon your belief I shall abandon you entirely: you will have neither aid nor support from me; I shall fail you utterly, no matter how small your failing.'

The three knights looked at each other in amazement. Then the maiden said to Perceval: 'Do you know who I am?'

'No indeed,' he replied, 'I don't think I've ever met you before.'

'I'm your sister,' she said, 'and do you know why I've made myself known to you? So that you'll trust my words the more when I tell you – the dearest person in the world to me – that, if your belief in Christ is not total, you shouldn't think of setting foot in this ship, for you would perish instantly. This vessel is such a precious thing that anyone boarding it stained with vice is in the gravest peril.'

Perceval looked more closely and realised that it was indeed his sister; he was overjoyed and said: 'Truly, dear sister, I shall board this ship, and do you know why? So that, if I prove to be an unbeliever, I may die a traitor's death, and if I am full of faith as a knight should be, I may be saved.'

'Then step aboard,' she said, 'with confidence, and may Our Lord be your guard and defence.'

Hearing this, Galahad, who was closest to the ship, raised his hand and crossed himself and stepped aboard. The others followed without delay and, looking up and down the ship, they declared that no vessel on land or sea could compare to it for perfect beauty. Then, right in the middle of the deck, they saw a sumptuous cloth spread like a canopy over a broad and beautiful bed. Galahad stepped forward and lifted it and looked beneath; and at the head of this splendid bed, the most beautiful he had ever seen, lay a magnificent golden crown, and at its foot lay a sword, shining, glorious, with several inches of its blade drawn from the scabbard. It was truly an exceptional sword; for its pommel was a stone containing every colour to be found on earth, and each colour possessed a special virtue; and its hilt was composed of two ribs, each from a very rare beast. The first was from a kind of serpent, found mostly in Caledonia, called the papalust, whose special quality is that if a man holds any of its ribs or bones he is protected from all heat; and the second rib came from a fish living only in the Euphrates river called the ortenax, and if any man holds one of that fish's ribs he has no thought of joy or sorrow: his whole mind is fixed unswervingly on the purpose for which he took it up. Such were the properties of the ribs which formed the hilt, and they were covered in a rich red fabric embroidered all over with letters saying:

> I am a wonder to behold and to comprehend. For no man can or ever will take hold of me save one, and he will surpass in chivalry all who ever were before him or will ever follow after.

So said the letters on the hilt; and the knights looked at each other and said: 'Truly, there are wonders on this ship.'

'In God's name,' said Perceval, 'I'm going to see if I can hold this sword.' And he laid his hand upon it, but could not clasp the hilt. 'By my life,' he said, 'I do believe the inscription's true!'

Bors in his turn tried his hand, but to no avail; and they said to Galahad: 'Sir, try to take the sword. Since we two have failed, it's clear that success will fall to you.'

But he refused, saying: 'These are the greatest wonders I've ever seen.'

Then he looked at the blade, partially drawn as it was from the scabbard, and saw other letters inscribed upon it, red as blood, saying:

> None should be so bold as to draw me from this sheath, unless he be more able and more daring than any other, for if he draws me otherwise he will be killed or maimed without a doubt.

'By my life,' said Galahad, 'I wanted to draw this sword, but the warning's so dire I'll not touch it.'

Perceval and Bors agreed, and Perceval's sister said: 'Good sirs, the drawing of the sword is forbidden to all men but one. Let me explain: this ship landed in the kingdom of Logres at a time when deadly war was being waged between King Lambar, a good and noble Christian, and King Varlan, who'd been an infidel all his life. The armies of Lambar and Varlan clashed on the shore where the ship had landed, and Varlan was on the point of defeat, his men being slaughtered. In fear of death, the infidel Varlan leaped aboard this ship; but when he found this sword he drew it and strode back ashore; he searched out King Lambar, the man in all Christendom with the most ardent faith and belief in Christ, and raised his sword and dealt him such a mighty blow upon the helm that he clove both him and his horse in two. This was the first blow struck with this sword in the land of Logres, and it loosed such a plague of miseries upon both their kingdoms that the earth would yield nothing to the farmer: no corn or any other crop would grow, no tree bore fruit, and hardly a fish was to be found in any river. The two kingdoms together came to be called the Waste Land, laid waste as it was by this dreadful blow.

'When King Varlan saw the keenness of the sword he decided to return for the scabbard. He came back to the ship and sheathed the sword; and the moment he did so he fell dead beside this bed, proving that any who drew it would be killed or maimed. The king's body remained here until a maiden cast it overboard, for there was no man bold enough to board the ship because of the dire warning written on her side.'

'Truly,' said Galahad, 'that's an amazing story, and I can well believe it, for I don't doubt that this is a more wonderful sword than any other.'

And with that he stepped forward to draw it.

'Ah, Galahad!' Perceval's sister cried. 'Wait a little longer! We've yet to examine its wonders fully!'

He drew back at once, and they began to study the scabbard. It seemed to be made of nothing other than a serpent's skin, yet it was red as a rose petal, and there were letters inscribed upon it, some gold and some blue. But they were most amazed of all when they noticed the belt; for it was surely not befitting such a magnificent sword: it was made of coarse, cheap material, rough hempen tow, and looked so feeble that they were sure it couldn't take the weight of the sword for an hour without breaking. And the letters on the scabbard said:

> The man who carries me will perform greater deeds than any other and will be beyond all danger, so long as he is as clean of sin as he ought to be. I must not be taken into any place where there is uncleanness or sin; if I am, the bearer will be the first to repent. But if he keep me cleanly he may go where he will without any fear, for the man at whose side I shall hang by this belt can suffer no bodily harm. But no man should dare to remove this belt: no man present or future has the right; it may be unfastened only by the hand of a woman, who shall replace it with another, made from the thing she values most, and this woman must be a virgin all the days of her life, both in deed and in desire. Should she have lost her virginity, she may be sure she will die the basest death that any woman can.

When they had read the inscription they began to laugh in astonishment, and declared that what they had seen and heard was truly a wonder. Then Galahad said: 'I think we should go and look for the maiden who's to replace this belt; unless we do, we shouldn't take this sword from here.'

They said they had no idea where to find her, but nonetheless would take up the search, since there was no alternative; and when Perceval's sister heard their troubled words she said: 'Don't be alarmed, sirs, for before we leave here the new belt will be set in place – and it will be fittingly beautiful.'

And so saying, she opened a casket she was holding and brought forth a belt magnificently woven of silk and threads of gold and strands of hair – hair so fair and shining that it could hardly be distinguished from the gold; and it was studded with precious stones, and fastened with two golden buckles of incomparable splendour.

'Here, sirs,' she said, 'is the belt it should bear, made with what I cherished most: my hair. And it's no wonder that I cherished it, for on the day of Pentecost when you, sir,' she said to Galahad, 'were made a knight, I had the most beautiful head of hair of any woman in the world. But as soon as I learned that this adventure was in store for me and that I had to fulfil it, I had my hair cut and made into the braids you see here.'

'God bless you for it!' said Bors. 'You've saved us much hardship!'

And with that she stepped up to the sword, removed the belt of hemp, and fastened the other with such skill and ease that it seemed she had done it every day of her life. Then she said to the companions: 'Do you know the name of this sword?'

'No indeed,' they replied.

'Then know,' she said, 'that it is called the Sword of the Strange Belt.'

'Sir,' they said to Galahad, 'we pray you, in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ and for the greater glory of all knighthood, gird on this Sword of the Strange Belt, as long desired by the kingdom of Logres as the return of Our Lord was desired by the apostles.'

For they were certain that by that sword the perilous adventures which they daily encountered, and the awesome wonders surrounding the Holy Grail, would be brought to an end.

'Let me first be sure,' said Galahad, 'that I've a right to it, for it'll be a certain sign that I haven't if I cannot clasp the hilt.'

They agreed that that was true; and he took hold of the hilt; and his fingers safely and perfectly encompassed it. Seeing this, the companions said: 'Now we know, sir, that it belongs to you. No-one can deny your right to gird it on.'

And Galahad drew it from its scabbard; and it was so beautiful, so burnished, that he saw his face reflected in the blade, and he prized it more highly than anything could be prized in all the world. Then he slid it back into the scabbard, and Perceval's sister unfastened the sword he had been wearing and, with the belt of silk and hair and gold, fastened this other in its place. And when she had hung it at his side she said:

'Truly, sir, now I don't care when I die, for I consider myself the most blessed of all maidens, having made a knight of the worthiest man in this earthly world. For know this: you were not by rights a knight until you were endowed with the sword which was brought to this land for you alone.'

'Damsel,' Galahad replied, 'for the great boon you have done me I am your knight for evermore. And I thank you deeply for all you've told us.'

'Now we can leave this ship,' she said, 'and return to our own.'

And with that they clambered from the ship and on to the rocks, where Perceval said to Galahad: 'There'll never be a day when I fail to thank Our Lord that I was present at the completion of such a high adventure as this: it's the most wonderful I've ever seen. But there's another mortal blow I've heard of, struck by another sword, that I have vowed to avenge. Until I've done so I cannot stay with you. I pray our paths may cross again soon.'

Galahad and Bors embraced him, wishing the same reunion, and returned to their ship and boarded; and Perceval watched the wind fill their sail and the ship glide swiftly from the shore. Then he set off across country, praying to God to guide him to where he might find Partinial the Wild, the Lord of the Red Tower, and do battle with him as he had promised the Fisher King.

* * *

He had gone but a short way from the sea when he caught sight of a castle crowned by five rich and handsome turrets. It stood beside a river surrounded by fields and woods and meadows: it wanted for nothing. Nor did it need fear

attack, for the most earnest assault could not have harmed it: it was so well-placed and strong, enclosed by walls and palisades, that it feared no siege-engines or mangonels or storming. The people of the castle lived pleasantly indeed, for their lord kept and guarded them so well that they had no neighbours who could threaten them. Nor was there anyone who did not hate them, for their lord was more wicked, cruel and ruthless than any man alive. Of the castle's five turrets the one at the centre was the tallest of all, and stood proudly and handsomely indeed, quite wondrously so; and it was redder and brighter than the finest gold. The moment that Perceval beheld it he said:

'That will be the Red Tower; it must be, by my life. There, surely, dwells the one who's caused so much pain for the king who guards the Holy Grail.'

And he drove in his spurs and galloped up to the gate. Two green and lustrous pines were planted outside. On one hung a rich and handsome shield, of silver emblazoned with two elegant maidens painted in blue. Perceval stared at it fixedly, and realised that it was the shield of the one who had caused the Fisher King so much pain and anguish. He longed to know why it had been hung there; and just as he was thinking this a boy came through the gate, and Perceval called to him at once and said:

'Don't keep it from me, friend: what's this castle called? Who is its lord?'

'It's called the Red Tower, sir, and the lord's name is Partinial. He's so fearsome in battle that no knight who comes this way and takes down his shield can survive against him. He's killed 104 worthy knights of renown since he received his arms. As soon as anyone lays a finger on that shield his time is up, his life is over!'

'Indeed?' said Perceval to himself. 'He's a cruel and treacherous knight indeed if he'll kill a man for so little cause.'

And he rode forward and took down the shield, and swinging it by the strap he battered it against the pine until he smashed it to pieces. At that, with all the breath he could summon the boy blew a horn he had hanging at his neck. Partinial heard it and was filled with joy. Sure that someone had come and taken his shield he armed immediately, leaped on to his charger, took an oak-wood lance, gave his mount free rein and rode straight out through the gate. He was carrying no shield, for he expected to use the one that had been hung upon the pine. He nearly died of anguish when he saw it smashed upon the ground, and he charged towards Perceval, crying:

'Vassal! Vassal! You've got a shock in store for you today! You never saw such a precious shield, and you'll be sorry you took it, for it'll cost you your honour and your head!'

When Perceval heard these threats he set his lance in its rest and thrust his sharp steel spurs into his horse's flanks, and they charged at each other as fast as their mounts could go and struck one another with all their might. Partinial struck Perceval upon his shield and smashed right through it; and Perceval, determined to joust well, thrust six feet of his lance's shaft straight through Partinial's shoulder. Both knights came crashing to the ground.

Partinial was in grave trouble with the deep wound he had been dealt; but he was undismayed, and leaped to his feet with his sword drawn; and Perceval likewise jumped up again, ready and eager to defend himself. It was the bitterest combat ever seen. They were both masterly and well-tried in battle, and with their slashing swords, drawing blood with every blow, they dealt each other many fearsome cuts and wounds. Partinial clutched his sword with both hands and gave a fine account of himself – anyone who saw him would have surely said that no finer knight had ever lived. But such was Perceval's response that all the people of the castle declared they had never seen his equal.

The battle lasted from six till noon. They exchanged countless cuts and blows with their steel blades, until neither knight had shield, helmet or mail-hood left to protect him. They were both in grave difficulty, each in turn forced to his knees or full-length on the ground. Neither man would shrink at all, but one had to be the victor; and that victor, through the power of the King of glory, was Perceval. With a final mighty blow he brought Partinial to the ground beneath him, and cried that the battle was over and that he must declare himself his prisoner. But the one who did not believe in God said that he would never descend to yielding himself captive to any knight, and that Perceval need not think he would ever plead for mercy.

'In that case,' said Perceval, 'if I don't kill you, may God never forgive me.'

And he threatened him with instant death if he refused to submit to imprisonment. But Partinial replied: 'I'll never yield as long as I live. If you want to kill me, do it here and now.'

'Then kill you I will, by my life,' said Perceval, 'but it grieves me.'

And he struck him such a blow that he severed the head clean from the body. He left the body there in the grassy field; but he took the head and hung it from his saddle-bow, saying that he would take it to the Fisher King who had done him so much honour. He mounted at once, and set off without delay, leaving Partinial's headless body outside the gate.

* * *

He headed towards the house of the Fisher King, calm now and untroubled; but he did not know how he would find it or ever get there. He rode on, day by day, until one morning, emerging from a vast and bewildering forest, he saw Galahad and Bors crossing the path ahead of him. There is no need to ask if they were pleased at the meeting! They greeted each other with jubilation, and they asked how he had fared, and Perceval showed them Partinial's head and told them the story of how he had avenged the Fisher King.

'And have you returned to his castle? Have you found what we're seeking?'

'No indeed,' he replied, 'but I feel in my heart we shall not part again until we've completed this quest.'

'God grant that it be so,' said Galahad.

And so chance had reunited the three companions; and they rode on for a

long while until finally, one day, they came to the castle of Corbenic. And when they had been admitted and the Fisher King recognised them, the rejoicing was great beyond imagining, for everyone knew that their arrival would bring an end to the adventures which had so long beset the castle. The news spread high and low until all the people of the castle came running to see them; and Perceval presented Partinial's severed head to the king, holding it on high and declaring, so that all could hear, that it was the head of the one who had caused the Fisher King such distress. The king looked at the head and recognised it at once; and he took Perceval in his arms with the utmost joy and kissed him more than ten times and said:

'You've brought me the greatest comfort by taking revenge upon this man who was my enemy and had plunged me into misery. Now, by God the Creator, all my sorrow and pain are turned to happiness. I shall fix this severed head upon a stake, in honour and remembrance of the one who took revenge upon the treacherous killer of my brother.'

He bade that a stake be fixed at the top of the castle keep and that the head be stuck upon it, and his bidding was done at once. Then they disarmed Perceval, Bors and Galahad, and every man and woman there rejoiced to a degree unprecedented. The king called for the tables to be made ready, and the servants spread the cloths immediately and set the knives and salt-bowls. When all had washed they took their seats, Perceval sitting beside the king. And thereupon the lance and the Grail appeared, carried by two girls most elegantly; and as they passed before the tables they were spread and arrayed with the most delectable dishes.

And then, when the hour of vespers came, the sky turned dark and a strange and mighty wind struck up and wailed throughout the palace, blasting with such a furious heat that many thought they would be burnt and others collapsed in terror. At that moment they heard a voice, crying:

'All who are not to sit at the table of Christ must go at once, for the time has come for the true knights to be fed with the food of Heaven.'

Thereupon they all departed, leaving the three companions with the king to see what Our Lord would reveal to them. A moment later they saw, coming in through the door, nine armed knights, who took off their helmets and came to Galahad and bowed to him and said: 'Sir, we have made great haste to join you here at the table where the high food of Heaven is to be bestowed.'

He replied that they had made good time, for he and his companions had only just arrived. And so they all sat down together in the middle of the hall, and Galahad asked them where they were from. Three said they were from Gaul, and three from Ireland and three from Denmark.

And at that moment they saw – descending from Heaven, so it seemed – a man in a bishop's raiment, with a crozier in his hand and a mitre on his head, borne on a magnificent throne by four angels; and they seated him at the table on which stood the Holy Grail. His forehead was marked with letters which said:

'Behold Josephus, the first Christian bishop, consecrated by Our Lord at the spiritual palace in the city of Sarras.'

When the knights read this they were filled with wonder, for this Josephus had passed away many years before. Then he spoke to them, saying: 'Ah! knights of God, servants of Christ, do not be amazed at seeing me before you with the holy vessel; for the same service that I performed on earth I still perform in heaven.'

And so saying, he drew close to the silver table and went down on hands and knees. After a long pause he suddenly heard the chamber door fly open; he and all the others looked round and saw the angels who had borne him there processing into the room. Two were carrying candles, the third a cloth of red samite, and the fourth a lance which bled so copiously that the drops were falling into a casket he was holding in his other hand. The two placed the candles on the table, the third laid the towel beside the holy vessel, and the fourth held the lance directly above the vessel so that it could gather the blood that trickled down the shaft. As soon as they had done this, Josephus rose and lifted the lance a little higher and covered the vessel with the cloth.

Then he acted as if he were about to consecrate the mass. After composing himself for a moment, he took from the holy vessel a communion host in the form of bread; and as he raised it on high there descended from above a figure in the shape of a child, his face as radiant and glowing as any fire; and he entered into the bread, so that all those present in the hall distinctly saw the bread assume the substance of human flesh. After holding it aloft for a long moment, Josephus placed it back in the holy vessel.

Having performed the function of a priest at the mass, he came up to Galahad and kissed him and bade him in turn kiss his companions. Then he said to them: 'Servants of Christ, who have toiled and suffered so much to behold the wonders of the Holy Grail, be seated now at this table, and you shall be fed with the most sublime and perfect food that ever passed a knight's lips, and by Your Saviour's own hand. You will know that your labours have been worthwhile, for today you'll receive the highest reward ever bestowed upon any knight.'

At that very instant Josephus vanished; they had no idea what had become of him. They sat down at the table in trepidation, their faces wet with tears. And then, as they looked towards the Grail, they saw rising from the vessel a man, quite naked, bleeding from his hands and his feet and his side; and he said to them:

'My knights, my servants, my loyal sons, who have attained the life of the spirit while still in the flesh, and who have sought me so long that I can hide myself from you no longer, it is only right that you should see some of my mysteries and my secrets, for now you have done enough to earn a seat at my table, where no knight has eaten since the days of Joseph of Arimathea. The knights of this castle and many others have been fed with the grace of the holy vessel, but never as intimately as the three of you shall be now. So come and

receive the glorious food that you have so long desired and for which you have suffered so much.'

With that He took the holy vessel in His hands and came to Galahad, who went down on his knees; and He gave him his Saviour. And Galahad, his hands clasped in homage, received the host with joy, as did Bors, Perceval and the other nine knights; and to each and all it seemed that the host placed in his mouth was a piece of bread. When they had all received this food sublime, so wonderfully sweet that it seemed their bodies now contained all the sweetness the heart could ever crave, the One who had fed them said to Galahad:

'Son as clean and undefiled as earthly man can be, do you know what this vessel is that I am holding in my hands?'

'No,' he replied, 'unless you tell me.'

'It is the dish,' He said, 'in which Jesus Christ made the sacrament at the Last Supper. This is the dish which has served and gladdened the hearts of all those faithful to me. This is the dish whose sight has been a torture to the wicked. And because it has given such sublime delight to those it has served, it is rightly called the Holy Grail*. Now you have beheld what you have desired and yearned so long to see.

'But you have not yet seen it as openly as you one day will. Do you know where that will be? In the city of Sarras, in the spiritual palace; that is why you must go from here and accompany this holy vessel, which is to leave the kingdom of Logres tonight, so that neither the Grail nor its attendant wonders will ever be seen here again. It is leaving, because the people of this land pay it neither due honour nor due service. They have turned to base and worldly ways, even though they have been nourished with the grace bestowed by this holy vessel. Because they have repaid this honour so dismally I am now divesting them of it. So I want you to go in the morning down to the sea, where you'll find the ship on which you received the Sword of the Strange Belt. But so that you should not go alone, I would have you take Perceval and Bors with you. And I would not have you leave this land without healing the Maimed King: I want you to take some of the blood from this lance and anoint his legs, for thus and thus alone can he be cured.'

'Ah, Lord,' said Galahad, 'why won't you let the other nine knights come with us?'

'Because,' He replied, 'I would have you be the image of my apostles. For just as they ate with me at the Last Supper, so have you eaten with me now at the table of the Holy Grail. And you are twelve just as the apostles numbered twelve, and I the thirteenth, your master and your shepherd. And just as I sent them out across the world to preach the true law, so do I send you forth by separate ways – and all of you will die in this service.'

* The same untranslatable play on words – linking 'agreer' ('to delight') with 'graal' – occurs here as appears in Robert de Boron's account of the Grail's provenance, above, p.20.

With that He gave them His blessing – and then vanished: they did not know what had become of Him, except that they saw Him rising Heavenward.

Then Galahad stepped up to the lance that lay upon the table and dipped his hand into the blood; and then he came before the Fisher King and anointed his legs just where they had been pierced. And in that very instant the king rose from his bed and walked, entirely whole and sound in body once more. He was to live a long time thereafter, not in the world but in an order of white monks.

Around midnight, after they had spent a long while praying to Our Lord to guide their souls to safety wherever they might go, a voice appeared in their midst saying:

'My true sons and my friends indeed, leave this place and go where adventure takes you and where you think you may do most good.'

And hearing this they all replied in one voice: 'Father in Heaven, may you be blessed for calling us sons and friends! Now we know our toils have not been in vain!'

With that they left the palace and went down to the courtyard where they found arms and horses waiting; they armed and mounted at once and rode from the castle.

The three rode on until, in less than four days, they reached the sea and found a ship at the shore – the very ship in which they had found the Sword of the Strange Belt – and saw the letters on the hull declaring that no-one should board it unless he was a firm believer in Christ. They stepped aboard, and at once they saw, lying across the bed that had been made in the middle of the deck, the silver table they had last seen at the castle of the Fisher King. And standing upon it, draped in a veil of red samite, was the Holy Grail. The companions beheld this wonder and spoke of their good fortune, that the object they most adored would be accompanying them to their journey's end. Then they crossed themselves and commended themselves to Our Lord, and the wind, which until then had been calm and serene, blasted into the sail with an awesome force and bore the ship from the shore and on to the open sea, where it blew ever stronger and drove them on at a mighty speed.

A long while they sailed so, not knowing where God was taking them. And each time Galahad lay down to sleep or rose from his bed he prayed to God that whenever he asked for release from this life He would grant it. So many nights and so many dawns did he make this prayer that at last the divine voice said to him:

'Have no fear, Galahad, for Our Lord will grant your wish. Whenever you ask for bodily death you shall have it, and will live in the spirit and have everlasting joy.'

Perceval heard this request, which Galahad had so often repeated, and was amazed, and begged him to explain why he so desired death.

'I'll tell you,' he replied. 'The other day, when we beheld some of the mysteries of the Holy Grail, and I saw the hidden secrets revealed to no-one but the ministers of Jesus Christ, and witnessed what the heart cannot conceive nor

the tongue describe, my heart was filled with such sweetness and joy that if I had passed away at that moment I know that no man could have died in such total happiness. For before me was such a mighty company of angels and spiritual beings that I was transported from the earthly to the spiritual plane and shared the bliss of the glorious martyrs and the beloved of Our Lord. I hope death will bring me to an equal or an even better place to behold that joy: that is why I made that prayer. And I hope to pass from this world, by Our Lord's will, while gazing on the wonders of the Holy Grail.'

Thus it was that Galahad announced to Perceval his approaching death as the heavenly voice had promised him.

The companions sailed on for a long while, until one day they said to Galahad: 'Sir, you've yet to sleep on this bed that was prepared for you.'

He said he would do so, and lay down and slept for a long time; and the moment he awoke he looked before him and saw the city of Sarras. Then a voice came amongst them and said:

'Leave this ship now, knights of Christ, and take this silver table and carry it into the city; and do not set it down until you reach the spiritual palace where Our Lord consecrated Josephus the first bishop.'

And so, with Perceval and Bors in front and Galahad behind, they carried the table from the ship and on towards the city. But when they came to the gate Galahad was very wearied by the table's weight. In the gateway he saw a man on crutches, waiting for passers-by to give him alms, and as Galahad drew near him he said:

'Good man, come here and help me carry this table to the palace.'

'Oh, sir!' the man replied. 'What are you saying? It's a good ten years since I could walk unaided!'

'Don't worry,' said Galahad. 'Stand up now, and have no fear, for you are healed.'

No sooner had Galahad said this than the man made an effort to stand; and as soon as he did so he found he was as fit and strong as if he had never had an infirmity in his life. He ran to the table and took hold of a corner alongside Galahad; and as they entered the city he told everyone he met of the miracle God had wrought for him.

When they arrived at the palace they saw the throne that Our Lord had prepared for Josephus, the first bishop, long before; and the people of the city came flocking in wonder to see the cripple who was newly healed.

Now when the king of Sarras, whose name was Escorant, saw the three companions, he asked them where they were from and what it was they had brought upon the silver table. They replied in all truthfulness, and told him of the wonder that was the Grail and of the power that God had invested in it. But the king was treacherous and cruel, descended as he was from a cursed line of infidels, and he whispered that he did not believe their words and took them for base tricksters; and as soon as he saw them disarm he had them seized and thrown in prison.

A whole year they lay imprisoned, never let out of the dungeon; but Our Lord did not forget them: from the moment of their imprisonment He sent the Holy Grail to keep them company and to nourish them daily with its grace.

At the end of that year the day came when Galahad appealed to Our Lord, saying: 'Lord, I have dwelt long enough in this world. I pray you, deliver me from it, and soon.'

That very same day, King Escorant was lying ill, on the point of death, and he summoned the companions before him and begged their forgiveness for so mistreating them. They pardoned him most willingly, and he died upon the instant. And once he had been buried the people of the city were lost in dismay, for they did not know whom they could make king. They deliberated for a long while, and as they sat in consultation they heard a voice saying:

'Take the youngest of the three companions: he will be a fine protector, and give you guidance as long as he is with you.'

They followed the voice's command, and made Galahad their lord and crowned him. And his first decree was that an ark of gold and precious stones be made to cover the silver table and to house the holy vessel. And every morning, as soon as he rose, he and his companions came before the Grail to pray and worship.

At the end of the year, on the very anniversary of his coronation, Galahad and his companions rose early; and when they came to the spiritual palace and looked towards the holy vessel they saw a man of noble appearance, in a bishop's vestments, kneeling before the table and making confession, and surrounded by such a host of angels that he might have been Christ Himself. After a long while he rose and began the mass of the glorious Mother of God. And when he came to the sacrament and raised the paten from the holy vessel, he called to Galahad, saying:

'Come forward, servant of Christ, and your eyes will behold what you have so fervently desired to see.'

And Galahad stepped forward and looked into the holy vessel. And the moment he did so he began to tremble violently as his mortal flesh gazed upon the spiritual mysteries. Then he raised his hands to Heaven and said:

'Lord, I worship you and thank you for fulfilling my desire, for now you have revealed to me what the tongue could not describe nor the heart conceive. Here I behold the spring of all courage, the source of all prowess! Here I see the wonder above all wonders! And since, my good sweet Lord, you have granted my wish and allowed me to see what I have always longed to behold, I pray you, let me now, in this state of utmost joy, pass from this earthly life to the life celestial.'

As soon as Galahad's prayer was done, the worthy man in the bishop's garb took the body of Christ from the table and offered it to him. He received it with all humility and deep devotion. And when he had done so, the worthy man said to him: 'I am Josephus, the son of Joseph of Arimathea, sent by Our Lord to be your companion. And do you know why He sent me rather than

another? It is because you resemble me in two ways: you have beheld the wonders of the Holy Grail as I have done, and you are a virgin as am I.'

As soon as he had said this, Galahad knelt before the table; and moments later he fell face down upon the flagstoned floor: his soul had already left his body. It was borne away by angels, rejoicing and praising Our Lord. And no sooner had Galahad passed away than a great wonder occurred. The two companions clearly saw a hand descending from Heaven – though they did not see the body it belonged to – and it clasped both the holy vessel and the lance and carried them away to Heaven, and no man since, however bold, has ever dared claim that he has seen the Holy Grail.

When Perceval and Bors saw that Galahad was dead they were filled with the utmost grief. Their love for him was such that, had they been less good and noble men, they might well have given way to despair. The people of that land, too, grieved and mourned most deeply.

His grave was dug right where he died; and as soon as he was buried, Perceval retreated to a hermitage outside the city and assumed the habit of a monk. Bors stayed with him; but he remained in worldly garb, for he planned to return once more to King Arthur's court. Perceval lived at the hermitage for a year and three days before he passed from this world, and Bors had him buried with Galahad in the spiritual palace.

Then Bors, finding himself alone now in this distant land bordering on Babylon, left Sarras fully armed and made his way to the sea and boarded a ship. So fair was his journey that before long he reached the kingdom of Logres, where he rode day by day until he came to Camelot where King Arthur was holding court. They greeted him with unprecedented joy, for they thought they had lost him forever, so long had he been gone from the land.

And after they had feasted, the king summoned the clerks who were recording the adventures of the knights of the court; and when Bors had related the adventures of the Holy Grail as he had witnessed them, they were set down in writing and preserved in the library at Salisbury, from where they have been translated from Latin into the vernacular.

And that is the end of the story. Nothing more is said of the adventures of the Holy Grail.

Sources

Joseph of Arimathea The opening lines are from the anonymous *The High Book of the Grail (Perlesvaus)*; the main body of this chapter is from the prose version of *Joseph of Arimathea* attributed to Robert de Boron.

The Welsh Boy The opening paragraphs are again taken from *The High Book of the Grail*; the rest of this chapter is from *Perceval – the Story of the Grail* by Chrétien de Troyes.

The Fisher King This continues the story from Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*.

Sir Gawain's Quest Begins From the anonymous *High Book of the Grail*.

Perceval's Recovery From *The High Book of the Grail*.

Lancelot's Quest From *The High Book of the Grail*.

The Castle of Marvels From Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval* and the anonymous First Continuation; the latter begins when Gawain's messenger arrives at Arthur's court (page 155).

The Broken Sword From the anonymous Second Continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval* and Gerbert de Montreuil's Continuation; Gerbert takes up the story after Perceval's failure to repair the broken sword (page 180).

The Conquest of the Castles The encounter with the yelping beast, and Perceval's acquisition of the shield with the red cross, are from Gerbert de Montreuil's Continuation; the episodes involving the conquering of the castles are from *The High Book of the Grail*; the repairing of the broken sword is from Gerbert; the Fisher King's revelations, and Perceval's adventure with the Black Hand, are from the Third Continuation by Manessier.

Galahad This chapter principally comes from the anonymous *Quest of the Holy Grail*; the episodes involving the demon horse and lady and Perceval's battle with Partinial are from the Third Continuation.

A complete translation of *Joseph of Arimathea* is available in Robert de Boron's trilogy *Merlin and the Grail* (D. S. Brewer, 2001, reprinted in 2003); Chrétien de

Troyes' *Perceval* and its four Continuations are translated as *Perceval – the Story of the Grail* (D. S. Brewer, 1982, reprinted in 1986); the full translated text of *The High Book of the Grail* was published by D. S. Brewer in 1978 and reissued in 1996; a complete translation of *The Quest of the Holy Grail* by Pauline Matarasso is available in Penguin Classics.

For an outstandingly lucid and readable discussion of the inspiration, development and significance of the Grail legend, and for a comprehensive bibliography, see Richard Barber's *The Holy Grail – Imagination and Belief* (Allen Lane/Harvard University Press, 2004).

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