



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE DEATH OF KING ARTHUR

La Mort le Roi Artu

Volume of eight - Book VII - 10 chapters

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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THE DEATH OF KING ARTHUR

The fifth and final branch of the Vulgate Cycle, the *Mort Artu* (c. 1230-1237) closes the great trilogy begun in the *Lancelot proper* and *La Queste del Saint Graal*. Here the adventures end and the consequences begin: the Grail is taken up to heaven, and what remains is the slow, foreseen, unstoppable ruin of the Round Table. The retelling follows the Old French text as established in H. O. Sommer's edition of the Vulgate, holding to its versions of events even where later retellings - Malory's above all - have taught the world to remember them differently. In the Old French it is called the *La Mort le Roi Artu*.

THE TALLY OF THE DEAD

When the Quest of the Holy Grail was ended, Bohort - whom later ages call Bors - came back to Camelot alone of the three companions, and the court gathered in silence to hear him. Galahad, the son of Lancelot, had achieved the Grail and yielded up his soul in the same hour; Perceval had died a year later; and the Grail itself had been lifted out of the world, never again to be seen in the land of Logres. So Bohort told it, and King Arthur listened with a countenance that aged as he listened.

Then the king caused the rolls of the Round Table to be read, and the tally was made: thirty-two knights of that fellowship had died in the Quest, and of those thirty-two, eighteen had been slain by the hand of one man - Gauvain, the king's own nephew, the eldest son of King Lot of Orkney. When Gauvain heard the number named, he said little; but those who loved him saw him go apart and sit long with his head bowed, as a man who has heard a curse pronounced over him. The seeds of the end were in that tally, though no one yet could read them.

Lancelot du Lac had come back from the Quest a chastened man. The Grail had refused him for his sin, and he had sworn to sin no more. For a while he kept his vow, and held himself coldly from Queen Guenievre; but the queen, who was not accustomed to be refused anything by Lancelot, turned her anger on him so sharply that his resolve broke, and the old love took up its old place between them - tenderer than before, and less careful. Now there was scarcely a knight or lady at court who did not know that the best knight in the world lay with the king's wife. Only the king was supposed not to know; and the king, who loved them both above all people living, made it his business not to know.

But Agravain, second of the sons of Lot, hated Lancelot and hated the queen's pride, and came before Arthur and spoke the thing aloud: my lord, your honour is mocked nightly, and all the court sees it save you. Arthur heard him with a heavy heart. He did not believe it - he would not believe it - but a king whose shame is spoken in open hall is a king cornered, and at last he suffered the truth to be tested, as one who hopes the test will fail.

THE RED SLEEVE

At that season Arthur proclaimed a great tournament at Winchester, for he saw the adventures of the realm dwindling now that the Grail was achieved, and feared his knights would grow soft. He left Queen Guenievre at Camelot - half a test, though he named it no such thing - and Lancelot begged off, pleading an old wound, and sent his brother Hector and his cousins Bohort and Lionel on ahead. That night, however, he armed himself in strange harness and rode out of Camelot

secretly and alone. Arthur, watching from a window with young Girflet beside him, saw him go and was glad at heart: Lancelot meant to joust in disguise, as he had done so often - not to linger with the queen.

On the road Lancelot lodged at the castle of a vavasour at Escalot, whose two sons were newly come to knighthood. One son he took with him as companion; from the other he borrowed a plain red shield, vermillion without device, leaving his own famous shield hanging in the chamber. And the vavasour's daughter - a girl young and fair, whose name the story does not give us - saw the strange knight and loved him in the instant of seeing him, wholly and hopelessly, as lightning strikes.

She came to him before he rode out and begged him, as humbly as a lady may, to wear her token at Winchester: a sleeve of red. Now Lancelot had never in his life worn any lady's favour - not even the queen's - but here he could not find it in him to refuse, and besides, he thought, the token would complete his disguise, for no one would believe Lancelot du Lac would carry a woman's sleeve into the lists. So he bound the red sleeve upon his helmet, and rode to Winchester with the girl's heart tied to it, though he did not know that yet.

The tournament was the finest held in Logres in many a year, and the knight of the red shield was the best of the day. He unhorsed every man who came against him - even Hector, his own brother, went down before him, not knowing who had struck him. And in the thick of the press Bohort met the strange knight and couched his lance and struck with all his strength, and brought him down, sorely wounded in the side, near to death. Only then, seeing him hurt and helpless, did the truth come home; and Lancelot, wounded, slipped away from the field without the prize he had plainly won, and was carried to the house of his young companion's aunt, where he lay near six weeks in healing. Gauvain and Gaheriet sought him through the country after and could not find him.

It fell out that Gauvain, riding home from that vain search, lodged at Escalot in the very chamber where Lancelot's shield hung upon the wall. The maiden tended him, and when he heard how the knight of the red shield had worn her sleeve and left his shield in her keeping, he understood all, and concluded what the whole court would soon conclude: that Lancelot had taken a new lady. He wooed the girl himself, gently, and was gently refused - her heart was already given past recall - and so rode on to Camelot and told Arthur what he had seen. And Arthur was quietly, deeply relieved: surely Agravain had spoken falsely, for a man entangled with the queen does not wear the sleeve of a maiden of Escalot. It was then that he first told Gauvain of the accusation, and Gauvain answered flatly that he did not believe a word of it - not of his own brother's mouth.

But the news travelled another road as well, and came to Queen Guenievre: Lancelot had worn another woman's sleeve in the lists. The queen's fury at it was a fire that would take the whole next year of the kingdom to burn out.

As for the maiden of Escalot, when Lancelot was healed and came to take his leave, she told him plainly what she felt, and asked him to take her as his wife. Lancelot answered as gently as a man can answer such a question, but he answered finally: he would never marry, and to take her as a lover he could not honourably do - such love would be her shame and his dishonour. Even Bohort urged his cousin to love the girl if he could, for she was worthy of it; but Lancelot could not, and

what a man cannot do in love, no urging makes possible. So he departed. She told him at parting that he had broken her heart, and it was no figure of speech. She took to her bed and did not rise again, and before she died she dictated a letter: that Lancelot would pray for her soul, and give a penny at mass for her, and that all who read it would know she had died for the truest love that ever a maiden bore. Then she asked that her body be laid in state upon a rich bed, in a covered barge, and sent down the Thames to Camelot.

And it was done as she asked.

THE APPLE AND THE BARGE

Not long after, Arthur rode hunting and lost his way as the dark came down, and took lodging in a castle that belonged to his sister, Morgan la Fée - the same castle where Morgan had once held Lancelot prisoner for a year and a half, and had given him then the room he asked for, and paints, and time. Arthur slept that night in that painted room, and by candlelight and by morning light he read the walls. There was Lancelot's whole young knighthood set out in pictures, adventure by adventure - and running through them all, unmistakable to any eye that knew her, the face of Guenevere, and the history of Lancelot's love for her from the days of Galehaut onward. What a man paints on his prison walls, he does not paint in jest.

Arthur rose from that bed a king who knew. Morgan urged him to vengeance, hot and immediate; but Arthur took the knowledge home in silence and locked it in his heart, where it lay like a stone.

In the same season the queen, still burning over the red sleeve, banished Lancelot from court and drove him from her sight with bitter words. Bohort rebuked her boldly - you have sent away the man this kingdom can least spare - but she would not hear. Lancelot withdrew, heartsick, into the forest; and there, sleeping beside a spring, he was mistaken by one of Arthur's huntsmen for a stag and shot through the thigh with a crossbow bolt. So he lay again in a hermit's cell, healing, while the court held its tournament without him.

At one such feast a knight named Avarlan, who hated Gauvain, brought apples and had poisoned one of them, meaning it for Gauvain's death. Now it was the queen's custom, when fruit was served, to give of it first to Gauvain her husband's nephew; but that day, abstracted and unhappy, she took the apple and handed it instead to a knight who sat near, Gaheris li Blans de Carahan. Gaheris ate, and fell dead at the table before the company.

There was no hiding such a death. Mador de la Porte, the dead man's brother, rose in his grief and charged the queen with treason by poison, and demanded trial by battle: let a knight prove her innocent in the lists, or let her burn. The law gave Arthur no escape - he, who was judge, was also husband. Forty days' respite was granted, no more; and then the dreadful reckoning of the matter became plain. No knight came forward. Too many had seen the queen's own hand pass the apple; and to take up arms in a quarrel a man knows to be false is to forfeit honour and soul together. Even Gauvain refused on that ground, and no man could blame him. The queen who had been the glory of the fellowship sat waiting forty days to be burned, and the greatest knights of the world stood about her with their hands hanging.

And in those very days, down the Thames towards Camelot, came the barge.

It was seen from the walls in the morning: a covered boat moving without sail or oarsmen, rich as a chapel, and in it a bed of state, and on the bed a dead maiden, pale and beautiful, with a letter in her hand. They brought the king and queen down to see. The letter was opened and read in a silence that no one broke: here lay the daughter of the vavasour of Escalot, who had loved Lancelot du Lac from the hour she saw him, whom he had refused in all honour and all gentleness, and who had died of it. She asked his prayers, and a mass-penny, and the pity of all true lovers.

So the court learned the truth of the red sleeve. They buried the maiden with the honours of a king's daughter and set an epitaph over her grave. And Guenievre, reading that letter, understood two things at once: that Lancelot had never been false to her - and that she had banished the one man alive who could save her from the fire.

She humbled herself then as the proud rarely humble themselves: she sent to Bohort and begged him to take up her quarrel. Bohort was merciful in her extremity - though merciful with a design. He would fight for her, he said, if no better knight came forward. And those who knew Bohort understood what was meant, for it was an open secret among Lancelot's kin that the wounded man in the hermit's cell was healed, and near, and would not let his lady burn.

On the fortieth day, when the queen was led out and the pyre stood ready and Mador waited armed in the lists, a strange knight rode in, in disguise, and offered battle for her. They fought, and the strange knight unhorsed Mador, and beat him down on foot, and when Mador was at his mercy he spared his life - the quarrel extinguished, the queen cleared before God and men. Then the champion withdrew as he had come; but everyone knew, and the queen knew best of all. The lovers were reconciled soon after, tenderer than they had ever been, and less cautious - as if the nearness of the fire had taught them nothing except that they could not live apart. It was the last happiness either of them would have.

THE TRAP AND THE STAKE

Agravain had waited, and now he struck openly. Before the king and the full court he named Lancelot traitor and the queen adulteress, and demanded that the king act. But the house of Lot was divided against itself: Gauvain refused all part in the business, and Gaheriet and Guerrehet with him. Gauvain warned Arthur to his face - if you do this, you will destroy your kingdom and the Round Table together, for Lancelot will not be taken like a thief, and when the swords come out there is no putting them back. Arthur heard him, and believed him, and was cornered all the same; for the thing was public now, and a king who is publicly shamed and does nothing is no king. So he authorised the trap, and Agravain and Mordret - the Mordred of later tradition, youngest of the brothers and Arthur's own son by his half-sister, though reared as Lot's - undertook to spring it.

Arthur took the whole court hunting overnight, and Lancelot was pointedly left uninvited. When the hunters were gone, the queen sent for him, and he came to her chamber as he had come a hundred times, wearing no armour, carrying only his sword.

In the dark before dawn the conspirators surrounded the chamber, and their cry went up at the door like hounds giving tongue: Traitor! Traitor! Come out, Lancelot, for you are taken!

Within, Lancelot had barely time to bar the door. He stood unarmoured in his shirt, and outside were men in full harness, and the queen wept and wrung her hands. But the best knight in the world was never less dangerous than when he was trapped. The door gave way at the first rush, and the first man through it Lancelot killed with a single stroke; and before the others could press in over the body he had dragged the dead man inside, barred the door again, and begun to strip the armour from the corpse. When he came out, he came out armed, in a dead man's harness, and he killed several more in the corridor and cut his way through the ring of them and escaped into the night. Agravain, who had led the cry, survived the chamber and fled; Mordret, prudent where his brother was bitter, had never dared to close. Behind them the queen was left alone in the wrecked room, and there was no disguising anything, ever again.

Arthur came home from the hunt to a catastrophe already accomplished, and in his grief and shame he did the thing for which his reign would be answerable before God and Rome: he condemned Guenievre to the stake at once, summarily, without trial. Gauvain would have no part in the burning; he washed his hands of all of it, and said why. The escort of forty knights was given to Agravain to command. And Gaheriet - the gentlest of the brothers, Lancelot's own favourite among all the Orkney kin - was ordered to ride with the escort, and went, in grief, obedient as a knight must be to his king.

The word went out through the forest faster than any messenger: the queen burns at noon. Lancelot's kin gathered as flame gathers - Bohort and Lionel, Hector des Mares, Bleoberis de Ganis, and all the house of Benoic - and they fell upon the escort on the road, where the pyre was already built and the queen stood bound, in a shift, watching the smoke of her own death rise.

The melee was short and terrible. Lancelot sought Agravain through the press and killed him - the accuser died by the hand of the man he had accused, which was fitting, and bought nothing. Bohort killed Guerrehet. And Gaheriet, who had loved Lancelot and been loved by him, stood in the midst of it with his sword undrawn, refusing to strike at the friends of his heart - until his brothers fell around him, and grief and the instinct of survival overcame him, and he drew at last and killed two of Lancelot's men. Then Hector, riding past at the gallop, struck off his helmet with a backhand blow, not staying to see who it was; and Lancelot, fighting half-blind through the crush, swung at a bareheaded knight who came against him and cut him down.

It was Gaheriet. Only when the field was cleared, and the queen unbound and weeping in his arms, and the bodies turned over to be counted, did Lancelot learn whose blood was on his sword. The story says he had never known grief like it, and never would again. With that one unwitting stroke - the gentlest knight of his house, the dearest of the Orkney brothers, dead by the hand that loved him - the thing became irreparable. Between Lancelot and Gauvain there was now a body, and between Lancelot and Arthur a war, and no courtesy or penance in this world could call either back. Of all the escort only Mordret escaped to carry the news.

Lancelot took the queen away with him to Joyous Guard - the castle he had won single-handed in the first year of his knighthood, when it was called Dolorous Guard, and had held ever since as the fortress of his heart. It would be his refuge now; and in time it would be his tomb.

THE WAR OF BROTHERS

When Gauvain heard that Gaheriet and Guerrehet were dead, his grief passed over into something harder, and he swore an oath that governed the rest of his life: there would be no peace between him and Lancelot while Lancelot lived. And Arthur, who still loved Lancelot and in the secret of his heart half-doubted the adultery, besieged Joyous Guard all the same - for Gauvain's sake now, and for the dead boys', more than for the cuckoldry.

There were those who tried to stop it. A damsel came as messenger and rehearsed all that Lancelot had done for them: how many times he had rescued Arthur, how many times he had saved Gauvain's own life. She reminded Gauvain of the vision shown him long before - the dragon overcome by the leopard, Arthur brought down by Lancelot - and of all it foretold: the loss of the war, of the kingdom, of honour itself. Gauvain heard her out and refused every term. His wisdom told him she spoke truth; his grief told him he did not care; and grief was driving.

Then came the day when the two armies were drawn up and the melee joined, and King Arthur himself, in the fury of the charge, levelled his lance and rode full at Lancelot. And Lancelot saw his king coming - the man who had made him, whom he had served and loved all his life - and he did the thing that no calculation of war could justify and no courtesy could omit. He held his lance upright. He took the king's charge full on his shield and went down under his horse, unhorsed by his own refusal, rather than raise a weapon against Arthur.

Hector saw it and was beside himself. He couched his lance and unhorsed Arthur in turn, tore the helmet from the king's head as he lay dazed, and shouted to Lancelot: here, end it - kill him and the war is over! But Lancelot rebuked him hotly, lifted the stunned king from the ground with his own hands, set him back in his saddle, and led his horse out through the edges of the battle to safety, guarding the man who had come that morning to destroy him. Arthur, when his wits returned, praised his enemy's courtesy aloud, and wept for it; and still he could not make the peace. Some things a king wants with all his heart and cannot have, because his kingdom and his kin have become a wheel that no longer answers his hand.

The scandal of it travelled far - a king of Britain burning his queen untried - and after some two months the Pope's bulls arrived, borne by the Bishop of Rochester: let Arthur take back Guenievre his wife, and make his accord with Lancelot, upon pain of interdict laid on the whole realm. Arthur, who had never ceased to love her, accepted. Lancelot himself delivered the queen back to her husband and offered battle to any man who dared impugn her. No man did. It was all correct, and all hollow. Then Lancelot departed the realm forever, with a hundred knights of his blood, and crossed the sea into Gaul; and there he installed Bohort as king of Benoit and Lionel as king of Gaunes, and made ready for the war he knew would follow him.

It followed. Gauvain's vengeance was not appeased, and Arthur crossed the sea after Lancelot and laid siege to his city - and to do it, he left the governance of Logres in the hands of Mordret: the kingdom, the treasury, and the queen, all given into the keeping of his own son. The story pauses on that decision the way a man pauses at the top of a stair in the dark. It was the sealing of Arthur's doom.

THE ALL-DAY DUEL

The war in Gaul went badly, and Arthur rebuked Gauvain for it, and Gauvain, stung past endurance, sent Lancelot a formal challenge: he accused him of the treacherous slaying of Gaieri, and offered to prove it on his body in single combat. So it was cried and witnessed, and on the appointed morning the two greatest friends the Round Table had ever known rode out between the armies to destroy each other.

They fought all day. In the morning Lancelot had the better of it - Gauvain went down, and rose, and went down again, and each time Lancelot stood off and let him rise, as a man does with a friend he is trying not to kill. But it had been given to Gauvain, from the hour of his baptism at noon, that his strength doubled daily as the sun climbed towards midday; and as noon came on, the miracle took hold, and his arm grew heavy as a giant's, and Lancelot's position changed from winning to enduring. He gave ground and covered himself and suffered the storm, hour upon hour, fighting the purest defensive battle of his life, while the sun crossed the meridian and declined, and Gauvain's strength declined with it. And when the unnatural power had waned, Lancelot struck once, truly, and Gauvain fell with his helm split and a terrible wound in his head, and the field went still.

On his knees, bleeding, Gauvain would not yield. He would not withdraw the accusation. He begged Lancelot to kill him where he knelt, since the quarrel was sustained and the law of arms gave the victory. And Lancelot looked down at the man who had been his dearest friend on earth, and refused the kill, and left the field.

It was the mercy of a brother, and it accomplished nothing. The head wound never healed. It would kill Gauvain, by inches, over the months to come - and when it did, it would take the last living bond between Arthur and reason down with it into the grave.

THE USURPER

While Arthur warred in Gaul, Mordret ruled in Logres, and ruling, he took the kingdom. He produced letters - forgeries, every one - reporting that Arthur lay dead or dying of his wounds across the sea, that Gauvain was dead already, and that the dying king had named Mordret his heir and willed Queen Guenevra to him as wife. He had spent the regency bribing the barons well, and the barons, accustomed to follow strength, followed it; and Mordret was crowned King of Logres, son seated in his father's throne by his father's own misplaced trust.

But the queen was not so easily transferred. Summoned to the marriage, Guenevra - certain in her heart that Arthur lived - feigned consent, and asked a little time to prepare; and with that time she gathered loyal men and provisions and shut herself up in the Tower of London, and defied him. Mordret besieged her there, and the Archbishop of Canterbury rebuked him to his face for the sin he contemplated, and was driven out for his pains, and went into a hermitage to pray for a kingdom that had ceased to listen. From the Tower the queen sent a page in secret across the sea, to find Arthur and tell him what his son had done.

It was in those same months that the Emperor Lucius of Rome took advantage of Arthur's absence and poured his armies into Gaul, overrunning Burgundy. So the last war of Arthur's reign became two wars at once. Kay the seneschal - Arthur's foster-brother, companion since the first drawing of the sword - was killed in the fighting. Gauvain, his head wound forever reopening, slew the

emperor's own nephew before he was borne down by numbers; and Arthur fought through the press to Lucius himself and killed him with his own hand. It was the last of his victories, and it purchased nothing he could keep.

Then the queen's page arrived, and the king learned that his realm, his treasure, and his wife were in Mordret's hands. Before the whole army Arthur spoke the secret he had carried all his reign: Mordret was his son, his own begotten son, and he vowed aloud to kill him. The host re-embarked for Logres.

And Guenievre, when she heard that Arthur had landed and Mordret had abandoned the siege of the Tower to meet him, made the last free choice of her life. She did not wait to learn which man would win. Either victory was a judgement on her - the husband she had betrayed, or the son who had tried to force her - and she feared them both. She slipped away to the abbey of Amesbury and took the veil while the war was still undecided, and the queen of the glory years became a nun, and in time abbess, and never in this world saw Lancelot again.

THE WHEEL TURNS

Mordret's army met the landing at Dover, and the battle on the beach was bitter. In it Gauvain was struck once more upon the old, unhealed wound in his head - the wound Lancelot had given him, the wound he had refused to die of and could not live with - and this time it was mortal.

They carried him into Dover Castle, and there, dying, he saw it all with the terrible clarity of a man who has nothing left to protect: it was not Lancelot who had ruined the kingdom. It was his own vengeance. Had he made peace when peace was offered - had he not pressed Arthur past every warning, his own warnings included - the king would never have crossed to Gaul, Mordret would never have been regent, and the Round Table would stand. He sent for pen and ink, and wrote a letter to Lancelot: a confession of fault entire and unqualified, a plea for forgiveness, a begging that Lancelot come with all speed to rescue King Arthur, and a last request - that when it was done, Lancelot would come and pray beside his tomb. He urged Arthur to the same counsel: do not fight Mordret yet; wait for Lancelot; he will come, and together you cannot lose.

Arthur refused. And Gauvain died, and they buried him in the castle at Dover above the sea he had defended; and the king's grief was boundless, and his wisdom died with his nephew, and what remained in him was wrath.

In the nights that followed, Arthur was visited twice in dreams. First came Gauvain's ghost, shining, received into bliss for his generosity to the poor while he lived; and the ghost said what the living man had said: do not give battle until Lancelot comes, for if you fight before that, you will die, and your kingdom with you. Then Arthur dreamed again, and this dream was of another order. He saw himself enthroned at the very top of the great Wheel of Fortune, crowned and sceptred, higher than any king of the earth had ever sat; and as he looked down at the world laid out beneath him, the Wheel turned, and Fortune cast him down into black water full of serpents, and every bone in his body broke.

The Archbishop interpreted the dream and begged the king: the Wheel has turned; wait, as Gauvain told you, alive and dead. But Arthur's heart was lifted up in orgueil terrien, earthly pride,

the pride of a king who had conquered twelve kingdoms and would not now sit still for a usurping son. Knowing what the dreams promised, he chose the battle anyway. No truce was sought and none was given. The last hope went out, not by mischance, but by a king's deliberate will.

SALISBURY PLAIN

They met on Salisbury Plain, which the older songs call Camlann. Mordret's host outnumbered Arthur's two to one - fresh, green soldiers bought with the stolen treasury, against the weary veterans of Gaul and Rome. The battle began in the morning and it did not so much rage as consume. Yvain, the son of King Urien, last and greatest of Arthur's champions, fought at the forefront until Mordret's own hand struck him down. The Round Table died around its king the way a fire dies around its centre - by evening, of all that fellowship, there remained alive upon the field exactly three men: the King, and Girflet, and Lucan the Butler.

But Mordret was not yet among the dead. Father and son found each other at the end of the day, as everything in the story had always been travelling towards that meeting. Arthur couched his lance and ran his son through the body, the point passing clean through him; and Mordret, dying on the lance, gathered the last of his strength and dealt his father a sword-blow through the helmet into the head, a mortal wound, and so they accomplished each other. The sin of Arthur's youth, long hidden, had at last come back to him wearing a crown, and they went down together.

Girflet and Lucan lifted the king from among the dead and carried him, bleeding, to a little chapel nearby, a dark poor place the field-folk called the Black Chapel. There Arthur lay in his agony, half out of his mind with grief and pain; and Lucan, who had been wounded himself and said nothing of it, came to lift his king, and Arthur in his delirium seized him and embraced him with such desperate strength that Lucan's heart and bowels burst within him, and the last faithful servant of the Round Table died at his king's feet, killed by his king's love. So Arthur was left with one companion in the world.

Then the king remembered the sword. Excalibur had come to him from the Lady of the Lake, and he would not leave it lying on a field for any hand to find. Take it, he told Girflet, and go down to the water and cast it in, and come back and tell me what you see.

Girflet went, and looked at the sword in his hands - the finest blade ever forged, the hilt blazing with stones - and his heart failed him. Such a sword should not be lost to the world. He threw his own sword into the lake instead, and came back and said it was done. What did you see? asked the king. Nothing, lord, but the water closing. Then you have not thrown it, said Arthur, for I know what should be seen. Go again.

Girflet went again, and again his heart failed, and he cast the scabbard into the water - for even the sheath of that sword was worth a kingdom's ransom - and came back with the same report, and the king sent him out the third time with grief in his voice. And the third time Girflet obeyed. He swung Excalibur once around his head and flung it far out over the lake, and before the blade could touch the water a hand rose up out of the lake and caught it by the hilt, and brandished it three times in the air, and drew it down under the water, and the lake closed over it like a door.

Girflet came back and told what he had seen, and Arthur knew that his hour had come. Leave me now, he said, and save yourself; but Girflet could not go far, and from a hill nearby he looked back, and saw what he saw.

A ship came across the water, and in it were ladies, many ladies, all in black; and the foremost of them held out her hand, and it was Morgan la Fée, the king's sister. They brought the ship to the shore, and Arthur rose - from where no man could see how - and went aboard with his horse and his arms, and the women received him with a great keening, and the ship drew away across the water. Where it went, no written word of this story says.

Days afterward, Girflet came back down to the Black Chapel seeking his king's body, and found there a new tomb, rich and freshly made, which the ladies of the ship had caused to be raised; and on it was written: *Ci gist li rois Artus qui par sa valor mist en sa subjection XII roiaumes* - Here lies King Arthur, who by his valour brought twelve kingdoms into subjection. And beside him they had laid Lucan the Butler. Girflet found no promise on the stone of any return - only the fact, and the valour, and the twelve kingdoms. He put on a hermit's habit there beside the tomb, and died eighteen days later, and was buried near his king.

THE LAST HERMITAGE

Lancelot came. Answering Gauvain's letter as fast as sail and horse could carry him, he landed in Logres with an army, and found that he was too late for everything. Arthur was dead and buried. Mordret was dead, but his two sons - Melehan the elder and a younger brother - held the realm between them. And out of Wiltshire came the news that stopped his heart: Queen Guenievre had died at Amesbury, in her abbess's habit, on the very day of the battle of Winchester - dead without his ever having seen her face again. All that he had crossed the sea to save was already in the ground.

There remained only the accounting. At Winchester Lancelot's host met the usurpers' host, and the last war of the Round Table was fought without a Round Table. Melehan killed Lionel, Lancelot's cousin, the king of Gaunes; Bohort avenged his brother on the instant and clove Melehan's head to the shoulders; and Lancelot rode down the younger son in the rout and killed him, and then, alone, lost his way in the forest - a fitting image, though the story offers it plainly: the best knight in the world, riding blind through the trees, with nothing left to find.

What he found, in the end, was a hermitage in the deep wood, where the former Archbishop of Canterbury and Bleoberis de Ganis had put on the habit of monks. And Lancelot du Lac took off his armour for the last time and joined their penance. Bohort went back to Gaul to rule his kingdom; Constantin, son of Cador of Cornwall, was made King of Logres, and the realm had peace of a kind. Hector des Mares, who could not rest, searched the country for his brother and at last found the hermitage, and stayed there, and died there four years later.

When Lancelot's own sickness came upon him, he made one charge upon his brothers: that his body should not lie at Amesbury, nor in any royal place, but in the tomb of Galehaut at Joyous Guard - the friend he had loved above all men, in the castle he had won in the first morning of his knighthood. Five days later the Archbishop dreamed in the night that he saw angels bearing Lancelot up to heaven, and woke, and rose, and found him dead in his bed, smiling, with a

sweetness in the room like the savour of the Grail come back one last time. They set out to carry the body to Joyous Guard, and on the road they met Bohort, who had crossed the sea drawn by a dream of his own; and Bohort looked on his cousin's face and did not weep, for the face was smiling, and he did not return to his kingdom, but turned back with the bier and took the habit beside Bleoberis and the Archbishop, and ended his days in that house.

So the wheel made its full turning, and the fellowship that had been the wonder of the world was gathered into tombs and hermitages: the king beneath his stone at the Black Chapel, the queen in her habit at Amesbury, Gauvain by the sea at Dover, Lancelot beside Galehaut in the castle of his first exploit. There is no word in this telling of Avalon, and none of any king who shall come again - only an inscription over a grave, and twelve kingdoms, and the savour of sanctity in a monk's small cell. The Cycle that began with the coming of the Grail into a broken world ends here, with the world broken anew and the best of it withdrawn into penance and prayer; and of the Round Table there remains nothing but the stories, which have outlasted the stones, and will outlast them still.

SOURCE NOTE

This retelling is original Mythopouch wording. It is not the Old French text and not a translation. It follows the book order of the complete retelling: Book I the History of the Holy Grail, Book II the Story of Merlin, Book III the Book of Arthur, Books IV and V Lancelot of the Lake, Book VI the Quest of the Holy Grail, and Book VII the Death of King Arthur. Checked against H. Oskar Sommer, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, 1908-1916. Ages 15 and up. © 2026 Mythopouch. www.mythopouch.com