



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE VULGATE CYCLE

The Lancelot-Grail Cycle

Volume VIII - the complete seven books

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

This is original Mythopouch wording. It is not the Old French text and not a translation.

© 2026 Mythopouch. All rights reserved. Mythopouch™ is a trademark of Mythopouch.

CONTENTS

THE VULGATE CYCLE - THE LANCELOT-GRAIL CYCLE

THE HISTORY OF THE HOLY GRAIL

The Book No Bigger Than a Man's Palm
The Vessel and the Dungeon
The Leper Emperor
The First Bishop and the Red-Cross Shield
The Naming of the Grail
The Rock and the Silver Ship
Solomon's Ship
The Crossing on the Bishop's Garment
The Martyrs of Camelot and the Empty Seat
Corbenic and the Dolorous Stroke

THE STORY OF MERLIN

The Council in Hell
The Infant Advocate
The Tower That Would Not Stand
The Night at Tintagel
The Sword in the Stone
The Bastard King
The Mirror of Tintagel
The Valley of Bedegraine
The Wars of the Young King
The Carole and the Tower of Air

THE BOOK OF ARTHUR

The Book That Begins in the Middle
Dead Youth
The Parting at Vandebières
The Queen Carried Off
Daguenet
The Son Against the Father
The Cat of the Lake
The Valley Without Return
The Self-Baptised Queen and the Ugly Appearance
The Judgement of Merlin, and the Breaking of the Book

LANCELOT OF THE LAKE, PART I - THE WHITE KNIGHT AND THE UNCROWNED KING

Fire Behind, Water Before

The Queen's Hands at the Sword-Belt

Dolorous Guard

The Uncrowned King

The Well of Blackness

The Black Knight's Bargain

"Who Made You a Knight?"

The Shield Made Whole

The Other Guinevere

The Empty Shield

LANCELOT OF THE LAKE, PART II - THE KNIGHT OF THE CART AND THE LION BEGOTTEN

The Forest of Madness

The Knight of the Cart

The Sword Bridge

The Tower on the Sea

The Tomb That Waits for Two

The Sorrowful Queen's Son

The Lion Begotten

The Painted Prison

The Siege Perilous

The Wicked Knight

THE QUEST OF THE HOLY GRAIL

The Siege Perilous

The Feast Where No One Spoke

The White Shield and the Castle of Maidens

The Desert and the Sea

Harder Than Stone

An Old Tree Without Fruit

The Fire Between Brothers

Solomon's Ship

The Door That Burned

The Marvel of Marvels

THE DEATH OF KING ARTHUR

The Tally of the Dead

The Red Sleeve

The Apple and the Barge

The Trap and the Stake

The War of Brothers

The All-Day Duel

The Usurper

The Wheel Turns

Salisbury Plain

The Last Hermitage

THE VULGATE CYCLE - THE LANCELOT-GRAIL CYCLE

A complete re-telling in seven books, drawn from H. Oskar Sommer's edition of the Old French Vulgate (The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances, 1908-1916). Book I tells the History of the Holy Grail; Book II the Story of Merlin; Book III the fragmentary Book of Arthur, which survives in a single manuscript broken at both ends; Books IV and V tell of Lancelot of the Lake; Book VI the Quest of the Holy Grail; and Book VII the Death of King Arthur.

THE HISTORY OF THE HOLY GRAIL

Before Arthur was born, before Merlin wrought his marvels, before the Round Table had a name, the Grail came westward out of Jerusalem in the hands of exiles. This is the first branch of the Vulgate Cycle - the Lancelot-Grail - an Old French prose romance of the early thirteenth century, here retold from the text as printed in H. Oskar Sommer's edition of the Vulgate Version. It presents itself not as invention but as chronicle: a sacred history copied, its author swears, from a book written by no earthly hand. In the Old French it is called the L'Estoire del Saint Graal.

THE BOOK NO BIGGER THAN A MAN'S PALM

In the year seven hundred and seventeen after the Passion of Our Lord, there lived a hermit in a hut in one of the wildest parts of White Britain, a man who called himself, and believed himself, the least and the greatest sinner in the world. On the eve of Good Friday, as he kept his vigil, Christ came to him and placed in his hands a little book no bigger than a man's palm, written in His own hand - for the Lord had written nothing with His own hand since the Resurrection, save this.

The book had four beginnings. "This is the book of thy lineage," said the first. "Here begins the book of the Holy Grail," said the second. Then: "Here is the beginning of the terrors." And last: "Here begin the marvels."

When the hermit read, thunder rolled over the waste, and wonders walked abroad in the night. An angel caught him up to the third heaven, and what he saw there no tongue may tell. On Easter Sunday the book vanished from his keeping, and a voice declared that he must suffer to win it back. So he suffered - through dreams and search and long affliction - until the book was restored to him, and by Ascension Day he had copied it all, word for word, into the keeping of mortal men.

Thus the tale begins with a scribe, as a relic begins with a shrine. What follows is what the little book contained: the history of the holy vessel men call the Grail, and of the generations who bore it out of the East into Britain, through fire and shipwreck, blindness and blood, until the line should ripen into the knight in whom all the adventures would end.

THE VESSEL AND THE DUNGEON

Joseph of Arimathea was a knight of Pontius Pilate, a man of standing in Jerusalem, and a secret believer in the Prophet whom his masters condemned. He lived in the city with his wife Elyab and their young son Josephes, and when the darkness came at noon and the veil of the Temple was torn, it was Joseph who went boldly to Pilate and begged the body of the crucified Lord.

But before that, he had done something quieter and stranger. From the house of the Last Supper he had taken the dish - the escuele, the deep plate from which Christ had eaten with His twelve -

and he carried it with him to the tomb. And when he took the body down and laid it in his own new sepulchre, he gathered in that dish the blood that still ran from the wounds, and kept it.

The elders of the city learned what he had done, and their rage was great. They seized him and immured him in a filthy dungeon beneath the house of Caiaphas, and there they meant him to rot. For a time they grudged him even bread and water; and after the third day, when the world had changed forever and they would not believe it, the bread and water stopped altogether.

Forty years, or near enough, Joseph lay in that cell.

He did not hunger. He did not age. For on a night soon after his imprisonment, a light came into the dungeon as though a hundred candles had been lit within the stone, and out of the light came Christ Himself, bearing in His hands the vessel Joseph had hidden. He gave it into the prisoner's keeping, and taught him its mysteries, and promised that it would sustain him. And so it did. The years passed over Joseph like weather over a mountain, and the dish that had held the blood of God held his life also.

THE LEPER EMPEROR

In those days Vespasian, son of the Emperor Titus, was a leper, and no physician in Rome could cleanse him. Word came to him of a woman in Jerusalem named Veronica, who kept a cloth on which the very likeness of Christ was imprinted, pressed from His face on the road to Calvary. Vespasian sent for her, and when the cloth was raised before his eyes and he looked upon that face, the leprosy fell from him like a husk.

Whole and burning with a new faith, he vowed vengeance on those who had done the murder. He came to Jerusalem, and Caiaphas, hoping to purchase his own life, revealed the prison where Joseph had been immured a generation before. They broke open the cell, and the men who entered staggered back - for the dungeon blazed with light, and the prisoner sat within it neither starved nor aged, and when they told him how long he had lain there, he would not believe it. He reckoned three days had passed.

Vespasian dealt out judgement. Those who had abetted the Crucifixion were burned. Caiaphas he judged unworthy of an honest death: he set him adrift in a boat without rudder or oar, to learn on the waste of the sea what he had refused to learn on land. Then Vespasian was baptised, and passed out of this story into his own.

Christ now commanded Joseph to depart out of Judea, taking nothing with him but the vessel. Philip, bishop of Jerusalem, baptised the household - Elyab, Josephes, and the rest - and Joseph gathered seventy-five companions of the new faith. At Bethany the Lord ordered them to make an ark of wood for the vessel, which none might touch save Joseph and his son. The company went out manna-fed into the East, and after long wandering they came to a city called Sarras - from which, the book says, the Saracens take their name.

THE FIRST BISHOP AND THE RED-CROSS SHIELD

The king of Sarras was an old man named Evalach, called the Unknown, and his kingdom was failing. Tholomer, king of Babylon, pressed him hard with the armies of Egypt - the same Tholomer

who had once raised him up. For Evalach had not been born a king. He was a poor man's son of Meaux in France, taken long ago in a tribute exacted by Augustus Caesar; he had killed the son of his master Felix and fled east, and Tholomer had given him a kingdom. Now that debt had come due in war.

Joseph promised him victory if he would destroy his idols and believe. Evalach answered with the question that honest doubt has asked ever since: how can one who could not save Himself save another? But in the night he dreamed of three trunks of a tree that were one tree, and of a child who passed through a sealed door of marble without breaking it, and Joseph read the dream for him: the Three that are One, and the Son born of a sealed maiden. Evalach's heart turned.

Then came the night that Sarras had not seen the like of, nor has any city since. As the company kept vigil, a procession entered the lodging in silence: angels bearing the dish, and a wondrous head, and a sword; and last of all, Christ Himself. He opened the ark and drew forth episcopal vestments that had waited there since the world was young, and before them all He consecrated Josephes, Joseph's son, as the first Christian bishop. An angel stood guardian over the holy oil of that consecration, and kept it for the kings of Britain yet unborn, down to the days of Uther Pendragon. And Josephes celebrated the first mass of the Grail, in which the bread upon the altar became a little child, and was divided in three, and yet was consumed whole.

For the war, Josephes gave the old king a sign. Upon Evalach's white shield he fixed a cross of red silk, to be kept covered until the utmost extremity. The war with Tholomer lasted three days. Evalach was reinforced by his estranged kinsman and seneschal Seraphe, a man of great prowess; yet the Egyptian host was numberless, and on the third day the king was taken and Seraphe struck down. In that extremity Evalach tore the covering from his shield - and saw upon the red cross Christ crucified, living and bleeding, as though the hour on Calvary had been folded into that field. And a White Knight rode out of nowhere through the press, unhorsed Tholomer, lifted the wounded Seraphe to safety, routed the armies of Egypt, and was gone before any man could thank him.

Then came wonders of a gentler kind. Queen Sarracinte revealed that she had long been a Christian in secret: a hermit had healed her mother of the bloody flux years before and baptised them both, and when the hermit died, a mysterious man in black had come to continue his ministry. Seraphe was baptised and took the name Nascien; Evalach was baptised Mordrain, which the book glosses as slow-to-believe - a king who needed three trunks and a marble door and a crucified God on his shield before he would yield.

THE NAMING OF THE GRAIL

Until that day the vessel had no name among men. It was Nascien who named it. When they showed him the holy thing and he looked upon it, he said that nothing in all his life had wholly pleased him until now - everything before had displeased him in some part, but this pleased him utterly. And from gré, pleasure, he called it Graal. So the word entered the world: the name of the dish of the Last Supper that had held the blood of Christ.

Yet the Grail admitted only the worthy, and Nascien had to learn it in his own body. When the ark stood open he could not master his longing, and he lifted the cover to peer into the vessel - and

was struck blind where he stood.

At Orcauz, later, Josephes cast a devil out of an idol before the people; and when certain unbaptised scorners of the company were slain, the judgement fell on the bishop himself for meddling where God had not sent him. An angel of the Lord came upon him and drove a lance through his thigh, and the iron head broke off in the wound. There it stayed, burning, until the appointed hour, when the angel returned and drew the head out - and the blood that dripped from that iron healed Josephes' thigh and opened Nascien's blind eyes in the same moment. Then the prophecy was spoken: the lance would bleed again when the adventures began, and one other man, a king of Josephes' own kin, would be struck through both thighs, and would not be healed until the Good Knight achieved the Grail.

Hold that lance in mind. It runs through the whole of this history like a thread of fire.

THE ROCK AND THE SILVER SHIP

King Mordrain dreamed a dream he could not hold. He saw a lake flow out of the belly of Nascien's young son Celidoine, and the lake fed nine streams - eight of them equal in greatness, but the ninth as great as all the rest together, foul at its source and afterwards running clear. And One came in the likeness of the Crucified, and bathed His whole body in the ninth stream alone. The eight are the kings who would descend from Celidoine; the ninth is Galahad, in whom Christ would bathe Himself wholly. As Mordrain strained to understand, a voice cried out of the air: "Here is the beginning of dread." And the Holy Ghost caught the king up out of his bed and out of the world.

In his absence, ruin moved quickly. Kalafier, a hater of the new faith, accused Nascien of the king's murder and threw him into prison with his son Celidoine. But a hand reached down out of a cloud and drew Nascien free; and when Kalafier in his fury had the boy Celidoine hurled from the battlements, nine hands came out of heaven and bore the child up and carried him safely away. Fire from heaven consumed Kalafier where he stood.

Mordrain, meanwhile, woke upon a bare rock in the western sea - a pirates' lair in ancient days, until Pompey the Great swept it clean. There he abode, alone with the wind and the gulls, while heaven tested him. A ship of silver came over the water, and in it a man who called himself Tout-en-Tout - All-in-All - who comforted the king and fed him and strengthened his faith. Then a black ship came, and in it a woman of great beauty, fair of speech, who reasoned with him sweetly against his belief. It was Lucifer, wearing a woman's face. When the king would not yield, the tempter showed him what seemed to be the corpse of Nascien, newly dead, and pressed him to despair. And when they set bread before him, a phoenix swept down out of the sun and snatched the morsel from his very lips, for it was not fit that he should eat at that table. Mordrain's faith held. He had been slow to believe; he was not slow to endure.

SOLOMON'S SHIP

Nascien, freed by the hand from the cloud, wandered the sea's edge until he came to the Turning Isle, and there he found a ship at anchor with no living soul aboard - a ship out of time, built by King Solomon long before Christ was born, and freighted with mysteries. Upon its deck stood a great bed; at the bed's head lay a sword girt with a strange belt of hemp - the sword of David,

which Solomon had refitted, the Sword with the Strange Hangings. And at the foot of the bed grew three spindles, one white, one green, one red, sprung from the branch that Eve carried out of Paradise.

Nascien stepped aboard with imperfect faith, and the ship knew it. The deck split beneath him, and he barely swam ashore alive. So he learned what Mordrain had learned on the rock: these holy things were not his. The ship, the bed, the sword, the spindles - all had been made for the last knight of his own line, the Good Knight still centuries unborn.

A letter upon the ship named that line and its destiny. Of one descendant it said he would be "like a dog until his end," for his sins - this was Lancelot. Of the last it said: "foul at the source, afterwards clear; in him Christ shall bathe Himself wholly; he shall end all the adventures." And the ship would not rest, the letter said, until it had carried that last knight and the Grail back to Sarra, three hundred years thence.

The boy Celidoine, meanwhile, had been set down by the nine hands in the land of King Label of Persia, and there the boy expounded King Label's dreams, laying bare the secret sins written in them - a forbidden desire, and the murder of his own sister, a hidden Christian - until Label, broken open, converted, was baptised, and died. The pagan barons cast Celidoine adrift in a boat with a captured lion, and the lion spared him; he came at last to his father, and father and son departed together in Solomon's ship. On that voyage a giant assailed them, and Nascien, forgetting the warning, drew David's sword - and it broke in his hand, as had been foretold. It was Mordrain, restored to them, who joined the pieces, and the blade was whole again: for the sword would suffer no hand but the appointed one. And when Nascien lingered aboard after being ordered to leave the ship, a fiery sword ran him through the shoulder, punishment for laying hand on the forbidden blade.

Far away, Nascien's wife Flegentine and Queen Sarra's messengers scoured the seas for them - through shipwreck and starvation, through the ruined isle of Hippocrates, where a great physician had once been undone by a loveless wife. The priest Hermoine walked upon the sea as on dry land to come to Nascien and heal his wounded shoulder. Celidoine they sent ahead into Britain, to the castle called Galafort. And Label's daughter, sole survivor of her people's destruction, was baptised by Petrone, Joseph's kinsman, and took the name Sarra; Celidoine took her to wife, and with her received the kingdom of North Wales.

THE CROSSING ON THE BISHOP'S GARMENT

Now Christ commanded the aged Joseph to beget a second son upon Elyab, and this was Galaaz - Galahad - ancestor, not namesake, of the knight to come. And the word came that the company must cross over into Britain, the promised land of this history.

There were no ships. And before the crossing, the company was purged: four hundred and sixty of them confessed their lechery and were barred from the passage, for the sea would carry only the clean.

Then Josephes did the thing by which this crossing is remembered. He took off his shirt - the hem of his bishop's alb - and spread it upon the water, and bade the pure step aboard. And they

stepped, and the cloth held them; it stretched upon the sea to hold them all, and the elect of the Lord sailed to Britain on their bishop's garment.

Symeu, one of the barred, and his son Moys, could not abide it. Unchaste and unrepentant, they tried to board, and the cloth that bore up saints sank beneath them like a stone, and they went down. Nascien, coming after with a vessel, ferried the remnant over the next day.

In pagan Britain the Grail showed its first kindness on that shore: a poor woman set her twelve loaves before the vessel, and they fed more than five hundred.

At Castle Galafort, young Celidoine debated the Saracen wise men and prevailed. Duke Ganor dreamed his dream - of the fleur-de-lys that was Eve, of the closed rose that was Mary, of the man who came forth from the unopened rose, who was Christ - and was baptised with a thousand of his people. The hundred and fifty who refused baptism were drowned, every one; and over their bodies rose the Tower of Marvels, with a prophecy written into it: that twelve years of adventures would come to Britain under a King Arthur, to be ended at last by the last descendant of Nascien. It was here that Elyab bore her second son, and they named him Galahad after Galafort. Here too the philosopher Lucan, mocking the Virgin Birth in his learning, was struck by the Virgin herself, and died tearing out his own tongue. The king of Northumberland attacked the new Christians and was slain at the Humber.

But Britain was not won by wonders alone. In North Wales, King Crudel seized Joseph and Josephes and a hundred and fifty of the faithful, and flung them into prison with a jeer that echoes down the whole book: "Let them be for forty days, and see if their vessel will feed them." It was the taunt of Caiaphas' dungeon over again - and it had the same answer. Christ came and comforted the prisoners, and appeared to Mordrain at Sarras in the likeness of one crucified, and commanded the rescue. Mordrain took ship with the queens, fell upon Crudel, overthrew and killed him, and broke the prison open. The vessel had fed them, as it always fed its own.

Mordrain, though, pressed once too often on the holy things. At mass he came too near the Grail, and in an instant his sight was taken from him and the strength of his body. He prayed only for this: to live until the coming of the Good Knight, the ninth of Nascien's line. And a voice granted it - at Galahad's coming he would see again and be made whole. Only four men heard that promise: Mordrain, Joseph, Josephes, and Nascien. So the old blind king withdrew to a hermitage to wait out the centuries, the one man in all this book who does not die.

THE MARTYRS OF CAMELOT AND THE EMPTY SEAT

Camelot was then the greatest of the pagan cities, and its king, Agrestes, the subtlest of its enemies. He feigned conversion and was baptised; then, when he thought the Christians snared, he demanded apostasy of twelve kinsmen of Josephes. They refused. Agrestes had them bound to the great cross of his temple, and with his own mace he beat out their brains, one after another. Then madness took him, as it takes those who murder the saints: he strangled his own household, gnawed his hands like a beast, and leaped into a blazing oven. The blood of the twelve stained the cross black, and it was called the Black Cross from that day. The temple was razed, and over it rose a church of St Stephen, the first martyr greeting the newest.

At the Hill of the Giant, Josephes established the Grail Table, in memory of the table of the Last Supper. And between his own place and that of his kinsman Bron he left a space - for it was the likeness of Christ's own seat at that supper, and it must stand empty until He came, or sent His chosen. Moys - the same who had sunk beneath the shirt at the crossing, saved from the sea but not from envy - burned to sit in that seat. He begged leave of Josephes. The bishop warned him plainly, and then, for Moys pressed him, permitted it. The moment Moys sat, seven flaming hands came down out of heaven and seized him and carried him off, burning like a dry bush. His cries would be heard long afterward out of a house of flame, and when Josephes prayed for him, half the fire went out - but only half. The seat waited, as the Siege Perilous would one day wait at Arthur's Table, for the one man born to fill it.

Bron, Joseph's brother-in-law, brought his twelve sons before the bishop, and each chose his path: eleven took wives, but the youngest, Alain li Gros, chose virginity and the service of the Grail, and Josephes named him his successor. In a lean time, when the vessel fed only the sinless and the sinners went hungry, Alain took the net from the Grail table and fished, and drew up one great fish; divided in three, it fed them all. So men called Alain the Rich Fisher, and the name passed to every keeper of the Grail after him.

Joseph, grown very old, still journeyed. Alone in the Forest of Broceliande he came to a castle where a lion slew his Saracen guide; the lord's men jailed him, and he was wounded in the thigh, and the sword that dealt the wound broke and left a shard in his flesh. Joseph healed the sick lord of that castle and raised the lion-slain man from the dead, and baptised them both, and prophesied that the broken blade would never be made whole until the achiever of the adventures came. A white hart with four lions - Christ and His Evangelists - guided the company across a great water.

But sin walked with the saints all the way. In the land of King Escos, from whom Scotland takes its name, the Grail refused food to Chanaan and to Symeu - drawn living from the sea, as Moys had been, but not from his sins - as it always refused the unclean. Chanaan in his rage murdered his own twelve brothers; Symeu stabbed Pierre, Josephes' kinsman, with a poisoned knife. Devils snatched Symeu away into fire; Chanaan died repentant and was entombed, and flames burned upon his grave. Neither would be released until Lancelot came.

Pierre did not die of the poisoned wound. Set adrift, he came to the isle of pagan King Orcanz, where the king's daughter nursed him in secret. When King Lucas of Ireland accused Orcanz of poisoning his son, Pierre took the field as Orcanz's champion, defeated Lucas, and reconciled the two kings; both converted, Orcanz taking the baptismal name Lamer, and Pierre married the princess, baptised Camille. From that marriage descend King Lot of Orkney and Gawain - so that Gawain, too, is of Joseph's seed.

And Galahad of Galafort, Joseph's younger son, was taken as king by the heirless men of Hocelice; the land was renamed Gales after him, and from him descend Urien and Yvain. Over Symeu's fiery grave he founded an abbey, and no man could lift the slab of his tomb until Lancelot lifted it.

Then the deaths began, as they must, even in a sacred history. Joseph of Arimathea died soon after Galahad's coronation and was buried at an Abbey of the Cross. Josephes, the first bishop, made

one last gift before he followed his father. Visiting the blind Mordrain, he took down the king's old shield, and his nose began to bleed, and with his own blood he painted a red cross upon it - a shield no man might bear without ruin until Galahad. It hung thereafter above Nascien's tomb. The next day, Josephes died.

CORBENIC AND THE DOLOROUS STROKE

The Grail passed to Alain the Rich Fisher, and Alain carried it into the Terre Foraine, the Foreign Land, whose king Kalafes was a leper. Alain healed him, and the king was baptised Alphasan, and in his gratitude he built a castle to house the holy vessel. Letters in Chaldean appeared upon it, naming it: Corbenic, which signifies holy vessel.

Alain's unmarried brother Josué wed Alphasan's daughter, and at the wedding feast the Grail fed every guest the food his heart most desired. But that night Alphasan presumed to sleep in the chamber near the vessel, and he woke in darkness to a celestial mass - lights, voices, the air trembling - and a knight all in flame drove a lance through both his thighs, crying that no man might sleep in that Palace Adventurous save the best of knights. Alphasan lingered ten days and died; Alain the Rich Fisher died the same day.

Josué became the first crowned Grail King of Corbenic, and from him ran the line of the Fisher Kings: Aminadap, Catheloy, Manaal, and Lambor. It was in Lambor's day that the blow fell from which Britain has never quite recovered in all the long story that follows.

Lambor was at war with his Saracen neighbour, King Varlan, and pursued him to the seashore. There, at anchor, Varlan found a ship no man was sailing - Solomon's ship, still keeping its centuries-long appointment - and on the bed within it, the sword of David with the strange hangings. Varlan took the sword and turned with it upon Lambor, and with it he struck the Grail King dead.

That was the Dolorous Stroke: the first blow that sword ever struck in Britain, struck with a holy weapon in an unholy hand. The land itself was wounded by it. No ploughman worked, no wheat grew, no tree bore fruit, no fish swam in the waters - the kingdom became the Waste Land, and waste it would remain through all the years until the Good Knight should come asking the question that heals. Varlan, resheathing the sword, fell dead.

Lambor's son Pellehan, wounded through both thighs, was the Maimed King, beyond all healing until Galahad; his son Pelles succeeded him at Corbenic, and on Pelles' daughter Lancelot of the Lake would one day beget Galahad - knotting the chosen bloodlines into one: Nascien's line on the father's side, Bron's on the mother's.

The book closes as it lived, in marvels and in deaths. Nascien, Flegentine, and Queen Sarracinte died upon one day, and blind Mordrain buried Nascien and hung the blood-painted shield above his grave, and went back to his abbey to wait. Celidoine died and was buried at Camelot; his line ran on through Marpus, Nascien, Alain li Gros, Ysaies, Jonans, to a King Lancelot - the elder of that name. This Lancelot was beheaded by a treacherous duke as he drank at a spring on Good Friday after his confession; the severed head could not be lifted from the boiling water, and the duke was crushed beneath his own falling gatework. The tomb of King Lancelot bled healing drops, and two

lions guarded it - "and this marvel lasted," the book says, "until Lancelot of the Lake came and killed them both," and found there his grandfather's head, and his own true name.

So the Estoire delivers its burden forward. The Grail sleeps at Corbenic in the wounded land; the Maimed King waits; the empty seat waits; blind Mordrain waits in his hermitage for the ninth of the line. All the promises now require a world for Galahad to be born into - a Britain of warring kings, of a Pendragon and a sword in a stone, of an enchanter to build the Table and foretell the knight. For that, the tale must turn to Merlin.

THE STORY OF MERLIN

Second branch of the Vulgate Cycle, the Lancelot-Grail, here retold from the Old French prose romance as edited by H. Oskar Sommer. Where the Estoire del Saint Graal carried the Grail across the sea to Britain, the Estoire de Merlin tells how the age of Arthur was made: the begetting of the prophet who was half a devil, the rise and fall of kings before him, the sword in the stone, the wars that forged the realm of Logres, and the love that locked the enchanter away from the world he had built. In the Old French it is called the L'Estoire de Merlin.

THE COUNCIL IN HELL

When Christ harrowed Hell and carried off the souls of the just, the devils gathered in council, and their rage was the rage of a lord who finds his stronghold broken and his captives carried off. They could not undo what had been done; but they could answer it. If God had sent His Son among men to draw them upward, the devils would send a son of their own - a man begotten of their nature, knowing all things that have ever been, cunning beyond any sage, who would walk among mankind and lead it astray. A counter-Christ. So they chose one of their number, skilled in entering the dreams and beds of mortals, and charged him with the getting of this child.

He found his ground in a rich and pious household, a family that feared God and kept the Church's seasons. Piece by piece the demon pulled it down: the wealth scattered, the father brought to despair, the sons taken off one after another, until of all that house only the youngest daughter remained - a maiden devout and steadfast, guarded in her soul by her confessor, the holy hermit Blaise. Night after night she armed herself with prayer and the sign of the cross, and the demon could not come near her.

But one evening she lay down angry and unshriven, her heart hot with some quarrel of the day, and in her bitterness she forgot her prayers. Her guard was lowered for a single night, and a single night was enough. The incubus took her in her sleep, and she woke knowing that something had been done to her that she could not name, and wept, and ran to Blaise.

The hermit heard her confession and saw farther than she could. The child she carried was the devils' work - but the devils had overreached themselves. For when the boy was born, hairy and strange and huge-eyed, Blaise baptised him at once, and the waters of baptism undid Hell's design at its root. The child kept his father's gifts: the knowledge of every past thing, of all that is said and thought in the world. But God, who will not be outplotted, gave him gifts His enemy never intended: free will, and the knowledge of things to come. They named him Merlin, after his mother's father.

THE INFANT ADVOCATE

The law of that land was not gentle to a woman who bore a child and could show no husband. Merlin's mother was seized and condemned to the fire, and her judge sat in his robes, well pleased with his own righteousness, to sentence her.

Then the child spoke. He was perhaps two and a half years old, still small enough to be held, and the court laughed to see him lifted up - until his voice came out clear and cold as well-water, and the laughing stopped.

He defended his mother as no advocate could have done, laying out the truth of her life and of the thing that had been done to her. Then he turned upon the judge himself. "You sit in judgement on a woman's begetting," he said, "yet you do not know your own. Shall I tell the court who your father was? Not the man your mother was married to, but the priest who came to her in her garden." And he named the man, and the place, and the hour, while the judge's face drained of colour. He went further: he prophesied that the priest would die by drowning, and in due course the priest, crossing a plank bridge, fell into the stream beneath it and was drowned, as Merlin had said.

The court freed the mother. The child owned plainly what he was - the son of a demon, gotten as the devils had planned - but he declared that he would serve God, not them; for baptism had made him his own. And when the storm of those days had quieted, Merlin came to Blaise with a charge that would outlive them both. "Take up your pen," he said, "and write. Write all that I tell you - my begetting, my birth, and all that I shall do and suffer, and all that will come after in the realm of Logres. For these things must not be lost." So Blaise withdrew to his hermitage in Northumberland and began the book that he called the estoire, the history; and whenever Merlin came back to him through the years, the hermit's pen took down what the prophet dictated. What you read here is, by its own account, that book.

THE TOWER THAT WOULD NOT STAND

In those days Britain had a king named Constant, and after him his son Moyne, called the Monk, because the churchmen had made a clerk of him and he had no more business on a throne than a cowl has on a charger. Vortigern, the dead king's seneschal, saw how it lay: he had the monk-king murdered and took the crown, and to hold it he bought peace with Hengist and his Saxons, heathen out of Germany who came first as sellswords and stayed as wolves stay. The men of Britain hated Vortigern for it, and loyal hands smuggled the two young princes of the true line - Pendragon and Uther, Moyne's brothers - overseas beyond his reach.

Hated men dream of safety. Vortigern set his masons to build a refuge-tower, the strongest in Britain, and every night what they raised by day fell down. Again they built, and again it fell, until the king's wise men and diviners, pressed for an answer, gave him the answer such men keep for last: the foundations must be mortared with the blood of a child who had no father.

Messengers rode out hunting such a child, and in one town they heard boys quarrelling at their games, and one boy jeering at another: "Hold your tongue - you who never had a father!" The fatherless boy was Merlin, then about seven years old. He came to Vortigern's tower not as a victim but as a judge. He mocked the diviners who knew neither what lay beneath the tower nor

what hung above it. "Dig," he said. They dug, and found a deep pool; they drained the pool, and out of it rose two dragons, one red and one white, which closed upon each other and fought so savagely that the earth shook and the half-built walls swayed. All that day they fought, while the king and his people watched in dread, and at last the white dragon drove the red to the pool's edge and killed it - and then, grievously wounded, the white dragon died itself.

Merlin read the meaning as another man reads a psalter. The red dragon was Vortigern; the white was the party of the true princes, Pendragon and Uther, who were even then upon the sea with their ships. The white dragon would slay the red - and would die of the slaying, for the Saxons would outlast Pendragon too. It fell out as he said. The brothers landed, the barons rose to them, and Vortigern perished in his burning castle. Pendragon was crowned, and Merlin stood at his right hand; with the prophet's cunning the king trapped Hengist and put him to death. But Hengist's people came back to avenge him, and in that war Pendragon fell, as the white dragon had died by the pool.

So Uther reigned, and took his brother's name for his own: Uther Pendragon. For Pendragon's memorial Merlin did a wonder that still stands on Salisbury Plain - he brought the great stones by his art out of Ireland and set them in their everlasting circle. And for Uther he made a greater wonder still. Two holy tables, he told the king, had gone before: the table of the Last Supper, and the table Joseph of Arimathea made for the Grail. Merlin founded the third, the Round Table, at Carduel, seating fifty chosen knights as equals about its rim. One seat he forbade any man to take - the Siege Perilous, which must stand empty until the knight should come who would achieve the Grail. Once, in Uther's day, a knight presumed to sit in it; the earth opened and swallowed him, and he was never seen again. After that the empty seat kept its own counsel, and men gave it a wide berth.

THE NIGHT AT TINTAGEL

At a Christmas crown-wearing, when the king kept high feast and all his barons with their ladies sat in the hall, Uther looked across the firelight at Ygraine, wife of the Duke of Tintagel, and desire went into him like a blade. He honoured her openly - too openly. Ygraine, who was loyal and shrewd, saw what was in his face and told her husband, and the Duke, furious at the insult, took her out of the feast without leave and rode for Cornwall. Uther demanded their return; they defied him; the king invaded.

The Duke split his strength. Ygraine he shut in Tintagel, the castle on the sea-cliffs that no army could take; himself he garrisoned at Terrabil, against Uther's host. And Uther, camped in the field, began to sicken with longing as men sicken of a wound. His knight Ulfius, riding out on the king's affairs, met a beggar by the road - a ragged, knowing beggar who told Ulfius his errand before he spoke it, and the king's sickness before it was confessed. It was Merlin, who knew all that had passed as his father knew all past things. His price, named before witnesses: Uther should have his desire of Ygraine, but the child conceived that night must be surrendered to Merlin to be disposed of as Merlin willed. The king swore it.

That evening Merlin wrought his deepest mischief. He changed Uther's face and form into the very likeness of the Duke of Tintagel, and himself and Ulfius into the shapes of the Duke's two knights,

Bretel and Jordanus. In these borrowed faces they came to Tintagel at nightfall, and the porters, seeing their lord home with his familiar men, opened the gates. Uther lay with Ygraine, and she received him believing she received her husband.

That same night, miles away, the real Duke made a sally from Terrabil and was killed in the fighting - so that the man in Ygraine's bed wore the face of a corpse, and she lay with a stranger in the hour she became a widow. In that night Arthur was conceived: the greatest of kings, begotten between a deception and a death. The old book softens nothing of this: the whole golden age was founded on a lie told in the dark.

In time the truth came out, and the dead Duke's honour was answered as it could be: Uther married Ygraine. Her daughters by her first husband Hoel and by the Duke - five maidens in all - were married into the highest houses of the realm: one to King Lot of Orkanie, one to King Nentres of Garlot, others to Uriens and to King Briadas; and the youngest, Morgan, was sent to a nunnery to be schooled, where among the psalters she found other books, and learned the arts of necromancy. When Ygraine's son was born, Merlin came for his price. The newborn was given out by a privy postern gate into the hands of the waiting enchanter, who carried him to Antron - whom later ages call Sir Ector - a loyal lord of small fame, to be raised as Antron's own son, foster-brother to his boy Kay. The child was baptised, and they named him Arthur. No one in the realm knew whose son he was. That, too, was Merlin's design.

THE SWORD IN THE STONE

Ygraine did not live to see her son a king. About two years before Uther's own end she died, and with her died the one living soul besides Merlin who could have sworn to the boy's begetting. Uther declined after her, in body and in fortune; the Saxons pressed in again upon the realm, and the old king, too weak to sit a horse, had himself carried to battle on a litter, and lying in it he won his last victory. On his deathbed Merlin came to him and promised that his son would be king after him and would accomplish the Round Table and all that was ordained for it. Uther died with that promise in his ears - but to the barons of Britain he died childless, and they fell at once to quarrelling over the crown, and sent for Merlin to give them a way.

Merlin's way was God's. Let the lords assemble at Logres at Christmas, he said, and pray for a sign. They gathered, and on Christmas morning, coming out of mass, they found in the churchyard a thing that had not been there at dawn: a great block of stone, and upon the stone a steel anvil, and through the anvil and into the stone a sword driven to the hilt. Letters written upon it promised the kingdom of Britain to the man who could draw it out.

Every great man there tried - dukes, kings, earls, each one certain the sign was for him - and the sword did not stir for any of them. So they set guards upon it and agreed to hold a tournament at the New Year, and to pray on.

To that tournament came Antron with his sons: Kay, newly knighted, and Arthur, his squire, a boy of fifteen who rode well and carried himself as though the world were a gift someone had just handed him. In the press of the morning Kay found he had left his sword at their lodging and sent Arthur back for it. Arthur found the lodging locked and empty, every soul gone to the lists; and being a boy who solved the problem in front of him, he rode to the churchyard - where the guards,

too, had gone to watch the jousting - took the sword from the stone as easily as a man draws from a scabbard, and carried it to his brother.

Kay knew the sword at once, and for a moment grasped at glory; but Antron made the truth come out of him, and then made Arthur put the blade back and draw it again before witnesses. And then Antron knelt to his foster-son, and told him what he had never told him: "I am not your father."

The barons could not swallow it. A beardless boy, of no name and no house, was to be their king because of a conjurer's trick in a churchyard? They forced delay after delay: let it be tried again at Candlemas - and Arthur alone drew the sword; again at Easter - and Arthur alone drew it; again at Pentecost. But by then the commons of the realm had seen enough. God's will, they cried, was written plain as the letters on the blade, and they would have no king but the one God had given them. At Pentecost Arthur was crowned.

For the sword itself bore its name in its letters: ESCALIBOR, which in the old tongue means that it cuts iron and steel and wood. In this telling - the true telling of the Vulgate book - the sword in the stone and the great sword of Arthur's wars are one and the same. No lady's hand rose from any lake to give him another.

THE BASTARD KING

Six kings came to the young king's coronation feast, and Arthur, generous as he would always be, received them with high honour. They took his gifts and despised him for them. He was low-born, they said among themselves, a bastard of nobody's getting; shall kings kneel to a stable-boy? Lot of Orcanie was the loudest of them, and behind him stood Uriens of Gorre, Nentres of Garlot, Angusel of Scotland, Carados Briefbras, and Yder - and their rebellion grew, in time, to eleven crowned kings.

Merlin came before them with the plain truth: this boy was Uther Pendragon's son, begotten on Ygraine, given out at birth to fostering by Uther's own sworn bargain. They laughed in his face. A witch's word against what their eyes could see - a squire with no pedigree. But the commons of Logres did not laugh; they had seen the sword, and they closed their ranks around their king. In the fighting that followed Arthur bore Escalibor in his first war, and the six kings were routed from the field.

Afterward, Merlin sat with Arthur and told him his whole story, beginning to end - the night at Tintagel and the Duke's death, the postern gate, the fostering at Antron's house, and the five half-sisters married into the great houses of the realm, whose sons would be the flowers of his court: Gawain, Lot's heir; Yvain, Uriens's son. With Ygraine dead and Uther in his grave, Merlin's word was the only proof the boy-king had; Ulfius and Antron stood witness to the bargain and the fostering. Arthur heard it all, and grieved for the father he never knew, and went on.

Merlin knew that swords alone would not make this king. He sent Arthur across the sea to Ban of Benoic and Bors of Gaunes, brother kings whose lands the warlord Claudas gnawed at year by year; and the two kings came with three hundred knights, and there was a great tournament where Kay and Lucan and young Girflet carried off the prizes, and for a day the war was forgotten in the brightness of lances. But before they would kneel, Ban and Bors - kings themselves, and

careful what king they served - demanded proof of the boy's blood.

Then Merlin did the thing that stilled every tongue in the hall. He had the sacrament brought, and the enchanter who never in his life laid a hand on any man laid his hand upon the body of Christ and swore that Arthur was Uther's son, conceived and born as he had told it. Men might mock a witch's prophecies; no man believed even a devil's son would damn his soul for a lie. Ban and Bors rose and did homage, and the three of them made their plan: first to crush the rebel kings, then to ride to the aid of Leodagan of Carmelide, beset by the Saxon King Rion - and in time, Arthur should wed Leodagan's daughter Guenevere, the fairest lady in the world.

THE MIRROR OF TINTAGEL

Now comes the dark stroke in the pattern, and the book does not flinch from it.

King Lot was called away early from the court to a council, and his wife - Arthur's own half-sister, though neither of them knew it - remained behind. Arthur desired her, and as his father had once gone in another man's likeness to Ygraine's bed, so the son went in darkness to the bed of Lot's wife. Half-asleep, she believed him her husband returned. It was Tintagel again, with the generations shifted one step on: the same deception, the same night-born child. That night Mordred was conceived, and the narrator of the estoire pauses to spell out the lineage, as a man spells out a debt that will come due: Arthur's son, by Arthur's sister, King Lot's wife.

Merlin, who had never yet been wrong, prophesied openly that a knight already conceived but not yet born - a child whose birthday would be the first of May - would destroy King Arthur and lay waste the realm of Logres.

What Arthur did then was the first great sin of his reign. He had the nobly born infants of the May Day gathered up, and they were put to sea in a ship - whether he meant their deaths outright, as later retellings charge him, or meant to cast their fate upon God and the water, the versions of the book tell it differently, and men blamed Merlin's counsel as much as the king's deed, though they kept their blame behind their teeth. The ship foundered. All the children of the May perished - save one. Mordred's mother had sent her son out secretly, and he alone was cast ashore alive, and a good man took him and fostered him. So the destroyer was preserved by the very water that was meant to take him, and grew up far from the court he would one day burn.

THE VALLEY OF BEDEGRAINE

The rebel kings regrouped and swelled to eleven, and came against Arthur with an army that should have buried him. Merlin's answer was the war's great sleight of hand: by his art he ferried the whole host of Ban and Bors - ten thousand mounted men - secretly across the sea, and hid them in a deep valley of the forest of Bedegraine, where no scout's eye would find them.

The battle joined without them, and the eleven kings pressed Arthur hard, and the young king fought in the thickest of the press with Escalibor doing its named work. Then, at the moment Merlin had chosen, the hidden host broke out of the valley like a river through a breached dam. Ban and Bors fell upon the rebels' flank, and the army of the eleven kings came apart - shattered, ridden down, the survivors limping home with their crowns askew. And there the bitterest jest of

the war awaited them: while they had marched to pull down a bastard boy, the Saxons had crossed into their own undefended lands, and the rebel kings came home from rebellion to defend their smoking fields from the heathen.

In these days the maiden Lysanor came to do homage to the king, and Arthur lay with her, and of that gentler night was born his son Loholt - a good knight in the years to come, whose fate belongs to another part of the great book.

While their fathers fought the Saxons for their own lands, the sons of the rebel kings made a different choice. Young men know glory when they see it, and glory had gone over to Arthur. Gawain, Lot's eldest, came with his brothers Agravain, Guerrehet, and Gaheriet; with them came Galegantin, Nentres's son, and Sagremor, and Dodinel, and the two Yvains - the young generation of the Round Table arriving all at once, like a spring flight of birds. Merlin took them in hand, and the road to Arthur's court became one of his great games of disguise. He met them as a lamenting old man and tested their courtesy; to Arthur himself he came as a ragged bird-catcher and mocked the young king's stinginess to his face, while the court marvelled at the beggar's insolence; he sent ahead a forged letter that set the court guessing; he drove a riderless horse with a bloody saddle galloping past his own friends, so that the young knights spurred after it in grief and fury, believing their prophet murdered. Still squires, untested and half-armed, the youths beat the Saxons in fight after sharp fight. Through those same Saxon lines the infant Mordred passed in a squire's charge, one more refugee child among the war's debris; and Gawain, who did not yet know the half of his own house's secrets, fought through an assault to rescue his mother with his own hands.

THE WARS OF THE YOUNG KING

On Merlin's counsel, Arthur and Ban and Bors rode without banners, incognito as errant knights, to the relief of Leodagan, whom the pagan Saxon King Rion had besieged in Carmelide. The battles there were the making of Arthur's name. Leodagan himself was taken in one melee and rescued at the lance's point; Cleodalis, the steward whose wife Leodagan had wronged long ago, fought loyally for the king who had shamed him, and the book honours him for it. At the victory feast Arthur and Guenevere, Leodagan's daughter, saw one another across the hall, and what passed between their eyes was the beginning of the whole after-history of the realm.

In the climactic battle Guenevere herself armed Arthur for the field, fastening his harness with her own hands - a queen's service performed before ever she was a queen. Arthur felled the giant Jonap; and Merlin, standing apart as he always stood, raised a supernatural wind that tore through the heathen ranks, burned their banners where they stood, and hung a single flame burning in the empty air above the field. Rion fled, leaving behind his sword: Marmiadoise, which had been Hercules' own blade in the ancient world. Arthur took it up and wielded it thereafter - and not long after, at the great dubbing in Logres where Gawain and all the young company were made knights, Arthur gave Escalibor into Gawain's hands, where the sword of the stone would do famous work.

There were gentler interludes too, for the book is woven of many threads: the knight Guinebal found love and enchantment in a forest; Bors of Gaunes killed his old enemy Ameus and settled that long account. Then came Trebe. Claudas of the Land Laid Waste besieged the castle where

Ban's and Bors's queens were shut in, and the allies came to raise the siege. Ban fought Claudas hand to hand; young Gawain, burning in his new knighthood, struck Claudas from his horse; the two queens watched the whole battle from the walls, their hearts going up and down with the tide of it. When the fight hung even, Merlin himself led the charge beneath the dragon standard, and the enemy broke. Claudas escaped - as he always escaped, to trouble the book again - but Trebe held.

And because the estoire will have its jest as well as its battles, it tells how Merlin went to Rome, where the emperor - whom the romance, caring nothing for chronology, calls Julius Caesar - lay haunted by a dream no sage could read. Merlin came into his forest as a stag, and then as a wild man of the woods, and laughed when they caught him; for only he could read the dream, and its reading was a scandal: the empress kept her lovers in her chamber disguised as ladies-in-waiting. More than that, Merlin unveiled Caesar's own trusted seneschal, the grave Grisandoles, as a woman - the exiled princess Avenable, who had lived as a man and governed an empire. The empress was executed; Caesar, nothing daunted, married Avenable, and Merlin departed from Rome as strangely as he had come to it.

The wedding of Arthur and Guenevere was held at Carhaix in Carmelide, and it was beset as no wedding should be. King Lot plotted to seize the bride from the very feast, and was foiled by Merlin, forewarned as always. Closer and stranger was the second plot: Guenevere had a half-sister, begotten by Leodagan on the same night the queen herself was begotten, upon the unwilling wife of his steward Cleodalis - and this False Guenevere, with her treacherous knight Bertelay, schemed to steal her sister's face, her name, and her throne. That plot too was broken, and the false sister and Bertelay were driven into exile; but the book lets the threat stand over the feast like smoke: one day, it promises, she will indeed supplant the queen. Guenevere's dowry was the Round Table itself, kept at her father's court since Uther's death - and Merlin, giving away the bride, spoke the warning he always spoke in full knowledge: that Guenevere would love, and be loved by, the best knight in the world, who was not Arthur. Arthur heard him, and married her anyway, as Merlin knew he would.

After the wedding came the peace-making, and it was Gawain who made it. He went to his own father Lot and persuaded him to submit; then Lot, Gawain, and his brothers rode the perilous embassy to the other rebel kings. All the powers of Britain assembled on the Plain of Salisbury; a truce was sworn; and the combined host, rebels and allies shoulder to shoulder at last, fell upon the last Saxon army in Britain and crushed it for good. The peace of Logres became permanent. Then Lucius, Emperor of Rome, sent his challenge to Arthur, and the king campaigned on the Continent and stripped the Romans of their lands - until word came that Leodagan was dead, and the host turned home to Logres.

THE CAROLE AND THE TOWER OF AIR

Through all these wars and weddings one thread runs underneath, surfacing and sinking again as the book weaves it: the thread of Merlin and Nimiane.

In the forest of Brocéliande there lived a vavasour named Dyonas, and his daughter Nimiane had been from her girlhood under the protection of Diana, goddess of the woods, who had foretold to

her family the stranger who would one day come to the fountain. Merlin, for his part, had already told Blaise the whole story before it began - how he would love this maiden, and teach her, and how it would end. He knew, and he went.

He came to the fountain disguised as a squire of surpassing beauty, and told her he was a wanderer seeking his old master. And to dazzle her he worked the loveliest of all his enchantments: he conjured a carole - an orchard where none had stood, full of knights and ladies dancing hand in hand in the green shade, singing as they turned. The song they sang runs through the whole love story in advance, like a refrain heard from the far side of a hill: truly, love begins in joy and ends in sorrow.

Nimiane was not dazzled past thought. She set her terms with the composure of a queen: she would be his amis, his love, but she would keep her virginity, and he would teach her his arts - all of them. Merlin, who could see the end of this road as clearly as the beginning, accepted. Meeting by meeting, between his journeys - to Rome, to the mustering of Arthur's allies, even to Jerusalem, where he converted King Flualis - he came back to Brocéliande, and lesson by lesson she drew his knowledge out of him: the arts of illusion, the making of phantoms, and the spell for putting a man to sleep, which she tried first upon her own father, gently, and found it good. She was the aptest pupil he ever had. He was, though he never said it plainly, teaching his own jailer her trade.

On his last visits to Blaise in Northumberland, Merlin unburdened himself. Long ago he had spoken a riddle-prophecy, of the wild man who would be bound by the she-leopard in circles neither of iron nor steel nor wood nor gold nor silver. Now he owned what the riddle meant: the she-leopard was Nimiane, the wild man was himself, and the binding would fall on him, and he could not guard against it - or would not; the prophet who had out-plotted kings and devils walked towards his own foreseen end with something like peace. This, he told Blaise, was the last time they would ever speak. Let the hermit write on: the adventures of the Grail would be accomplished in Arthur's day, and the book must be ready for them. Then he rode south to Brocéliande.

There came a day when Merlin lay down to sleep beneath a flowering hawthorn in the forest, and Nimiane walked her circle of enchantment around him as he slept. He woke inside a tower. It had no walls that hands could touch - not iron, not steel, not wood, not stone, but air alone, woven by the very spells he had taught her - and it was, as the book says plainly, the strongest prison in the world, never to be undone while the world endures. She could pass in and out; he could never leave. And here the Vulgate's telling parts company with all the later, harsher versions: Merlin does not rage and is not murdered. His Nimiane is no exasperated sorceress sealing a nuisance under a rock; she is his loving jailer, who keeps him faithfully and comes to him often, and he is the willing captive of his own teaching. He had sung the carole's refrain himself, long ago. Love begins in joy, and ends in this.

Merlin's absence began to trouble the court, and the knights of the Round Table swore the first quest the world had ever known - the pattern of every quest after it. Gawain, Sagremor, and Yvain rode out with twenty-four knights to find their prophet. Sagremor and Yvain failed and came home. Gawain's road was stranger: passing a lady in the forest, he failed in courtesy and did not greet her, and she cursed him into the shape of a dwarf. Dwarfish and questing still, he came at last to a place in the deep woods where there was nothing to see - only a mist like smoke hanging among

the trees - and out of the mist came Merlin's voice.

The voice told him everything: the hawthorn, the circle, the tower that was no tower. Gawain asked how it might be undone, and the voice answered that it could never be undone, by him or by any man. "When you have gone from here," Merlin said, "I shall never speak with you again, nor with any other - save only with my love." Gawain wept, and rode on; the lady, satisfied at last by his amended courtesy, restored his own shape; and the dwarf-knight Evadeam, freed from an enchantment in those same adventures, came back with him to join the Round Table. Gawain stood before Arthur and reported the enchanter's fate, and the court mourned him as men mourn a mountain.

So the age of Merlin closed, and with his withdrawal from the world began the twelve-year peace of Arthur's golden age - the bright interval in which all the great adventures could happen, for only when the omniscient enchanter is locked away can chance and error and questing exist at all. Already the next story was gathering at the edges of this one: Ban and Bors had sons, and Ban's son was an infant named Lancelot; the wars with Claudas smouldered on in Benoic and Gaunes; the Siege Perilous stood empty at the Round Table, waiting; and Nimiane, keeper of the world's wisdom now, would one day take up a fatherless child and carry him down beneath the Lake. Where that child grew, and what he became, the third branch of the great book - the Lancelot Proper - now takes up the tale.

THE BOOK OF ARTHUR

Of all the branches of the Lancelot-Grail Cycle, none is so nearly lost as this. The Livre d'Artus, the Book of Arthur, survives in a single manuscript, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fonds français 337, a book broken at both its ends, which no modern tongue has ever rendered in full. It is a rival continuation of the Merlin: where the Suite du Merlin turns one way at the battle of Clarence, this book turns another, and runs on for a hundred and eighty leaves of wars and enchantments in which Gauvain, not Lancelot, is the flower of chivalry. What follows is re-told from Sommer's edition of the Vulgate text, the seventh volume, honouring the gaps that the centuries have torn in it. In the Old French it is called the Le Livre d'Artus.

THE BOOK THAT BEGINS IN THE MIDDLE

The Book of Arthur opens in the middle of a sentence, as a man wakes in the middle of a dream. Someone is speaking of a damsel, and of the way of her: how she had a speech so sweet and so soft that no heart could hold out against it, and yet how, when she was angered against any soul, her wrath was a thing terrible to meet. Who she was, the torn page will never tell. Those who have brooded over the fragment have guessed at Morgue la Fee, the king's half-sister, who is abroad and busy in the first battles; or at Sebile, the pagan queen and enchantress of Sarmenie, whose story the book will tell in its own time. The book keeps its secret. It is fitting that a romance so full of enchantresses should begin with one woman's face half in shadow, and never name her.

Then, with no more warning than a trumpet gives, we are in the war. The young King Artus is crowned and wedded to Genievre, whom the English call Guinevere, and his realm is not yet a realm but a battlefield. Out of the north and across the narrow seas have come the Saxon kings in coalition: Cristamanz and Mohanadap, Senayns and Senebrun, Senodalus and Pluinant, Sephar

and Creons, Senaas and Fusabre, and with them Mohyanapus, uncle to King Rion and to Aminaduc of Denmark. Their war-cry rings through the first pages of the book: "Trai! Trai!" And against them stand Artus and his new knighthood, Ban of Benoic and Bohort of Gannes his allies out of Gaul, and the queen's own company, the Chevaliers de la Roine, the Queen's Knights, whom this book sets in the field long before any other branch of the Cycle thought of them. The king himself rides Plantamor, his great charger, and bears Escalibor, and where the sword swings the Saxons go down like barley.

The stubbornest of his enemies is no Saxon but a rebel of his own country: Herlais, duke of Rognes, and behind the rebellion stands Uriens, lord of Gorre, aggrieved and dangerous. For Artus had given the city of Clarence to Galeschin, the son of King Lot's house, and made him duke of it; and Uriens, who coveted the place and failed to take it, swore a revenge that would cost the realm dear before it was spent. The fighting ranges through the Gaut Destroit, the Narrow Wood, and about Branlant, whose constable holds the passes; and among the men who press into these wars comes a name that will matter in another book: Creomas of Sorelois, kinsman of Minadoras, who will one day be seneschal to a lord called Galehaut. The Book of Arthur is always sowing seeds whose harvest it will not live to see.

It was before Clarence that the wars buried one of their oldest giants. Hagodabran, the great enemy of the Merlin years, the Saxon champion whose coming had once shaken the young king's host, was wounded in the fighting and could no longer hold the field. In the dead of night he fled the city, he and his three redoubtable nephews, four shadows on spent horses; and Gauuain, the king's nephew, whom later ages call Gawain, rode after him with Eliezer at his side. All the dark hours they hunted, till the woods were black on every side and the trail ran cold, and near midnight the two knights reined in and let him go. So Hagodabran passes out of legend: not slain in any last stand, not sung in any death-song, but dwindling into the dark with his wounds and his nephews, never seen by bard or book again. Other tellings give him other ends. This book simply lets the night have him.

DEAD YOUTH

In these same years the court gave a name, or rather two names, to a knight who would carry both to his grave: Sagremor of Constantinople's kin, whom all the Cycle knows as Sagremor li Desreez, Sagremor the Impetuous. He earned the first honestly. In the press of battle a frenzy would take him, so that he forgot danger, forgot reason, forgot everything but the blows before him, and no company could hold him and no enemy could stand him; and then, as suddenly as the fit came, it went, and he dropped from his saddle like a dead man and lay senseless while the fighting swept past. Men who saw it swore he had the falling sickness; men who fought beside him thanked God for it, for while the fit was on him he was worth twenty.

It was Keu the seneschal, Kay as the Welsh hills call him, who gave him the second name, and gave it in malice. Watching Sagremor carried senseless from the field, Keu laughed and christened him Mort Jeune, Dead Youth, and the jest ran round the court as such jests do, gathering cruelty as it ran. Sagremor heard it. There was a quarrel, hot words before the barons, and then more than words: the feud came to blows, and when it ended the seneschal of Logres lay with his arm broken, and the young hothead stood over him breathing hard.

King Artus, who loved order and loved his seneschal, took Keu's part at first, and the court braced for a lasting breach. But Merlin was still in the land in those days, the prophet moving among the barons like a counsellor among wayward sons, and he and the great men of the realm put themselves between the two. Keu was made to see that mockery in hall is a weapon like any other, and draws blood like any other; amends were made and accepted, and Sagremor kept his two names, the honourable and the mocking one, the way a man keeps both his scars and his medals. Yet the book does not let the seneschal rest as a mere fool, either. It has kept for him, further on, a day of glory such as no other branch remembers. The Book of Arthur loves to surprise us about familiar men.

THE PARTING AT VANDEBIÈRES

There is a scene at Vandebières, when the campaigning had paused, that the book lingers over with unusual tenderness: the farewell of Ban and Bohort. The two brother-kings of Gaul had come over sea with their knights and their treasure when Artus's cause was weakest, and had stood by him through the worst of it; now their own lands called them home, and the young king, who was not often a man of open feeling, took leave of them as of fathers. There were gifts given, rich and royally chosen, the old solemn currency by which kings say what their tongues cannot: horses and arms and gold, and promises renewed, and love declared before the whole host. They would meet again in story, these three, and their sons after them; but the book seems to know that something ended at Vandebières, the first companionship of the wars, and it lets the moment breathe.

After the parting came the war of Estremores. Raolais of Estremores and his brother Maduc le Noir, Maduc the Black of the Black Isle, had offended against the king's peace, and Artus carried the war into their lands. In the fighting their nephew Plarés was slain, and the grief of it hardened both sides, until it was agreed that the quarrel should not consume more knights but be settled by two: single combat, Gauvain against Raolais. They fought long and grimly, for Raolais was no small champion; but the Orkney blood was up, and in the end Gauvain had him down and at mercy. And here the book shows what conquest meant to Artus's generation: not a corpse but a vassal. Raolais yielded, did homage, and took his place at the Round Table, and his brother the Black Knight of the Isle became the king's man likewise. So the realm grew, one defeated enemy at a time, each made a friend by the ceremony of submission and the grace of acceptance. This is the statecraft of the Book of Arthur: homage, gift-giving, marriage, the slow rituals by which a war-torn island was hammered into a kingdom.

THE QUEEN CARRIED OFF

Uriens of Gorre had not forgotten Clarence. The city he had failed to take festered in him, and the rebellion he led against his crowned king had, at its root, that single slight: a duke's coronet given to Galeschin that Uriens believed his own. When open war had spent its first fury, his revenge took a crueller road. In the confusion of the raiding he struck not at Artus but at Genievre, and carried off the queen.

It is the first abduction of Genievre in all the Cycle, long before Meleagant and the sword-bridge, and the book gives it the weight of a sacrilege. The realm that had been hammered together at such cost seemed suddenly frail again: if the queen could be taken out of the king's peace, then

whose wife, whose daughter, was safe in it? Uriens held her in the fastness of his own country, behind the loyalty of men who had never forgiven the young king, and the court hung between grief and fury.

But the rescue belongs to the generation this book exists to praise. Gauvain rode for her, and Artus with him, king and nephew together, and where the king's host rolled over the marches of Gorre the knight rode before it, first at every barrier and first at every wall. "Sir king," men heard Gauvain say in the press of it, "let the realm see what manner of nephews it has." And the realm saw. Between the king's power and the knight's prowess the rebellion's proudest hour was broken open, and Genievre was brought back unharmed, and the court's rejoicing had in it something of relief and something of new resolve. The Queen's Knights, who ride through every campaign of this book, had gone with their lady into that dark hour and came out of it with her. Yet the book does not pretend the wound closed cleanly. Uriens was still at large, still unreconciled, and Merlin, who saw further than any man at that court, knew that the quarrel of Clarence was not ended. It had only changed its shape.

DAGUENET

Among the knights who grew up in these wars, none grew faster than Gauvain, and none loved more the game of the hidden name. When word came to court from Lore of Branlant, the Maiden of the Narrow Wood, besieged in her own lands by Waldin of the Fearsome Vale, a jilted and dangerous suitor who would have by force what he had failed to win by wooing, it was Gauvain who answered, and Gauvain who chose to answer in disguise.

He called himself Daguenet. Under that alias, unknown and unheralded, he rode into the Narrow Wood, found Waldin and his people pressing the siege, and overthrew the man of the Fearsome Vale in open combat. Then, the work done, he did the thing that marks the young Gauvain of this book: he departed unnamed. No boast, no revelation, no claiming of reward or of the maiden's gratitude; he rode back out of the wood as quietly as he had entered it, and Lore of Branlant was left with a deliverance and a mystery.

She unravelled the mystery in time, as maidens in these books always do, and learned that Daguenet was the king's own nephew. And with the knowledge came love, the hopeless kind, for the Gauvain of the Book of Arthur is not a marrying man. Her story was not finished with him: the wider telling of these matters darkens strangely, and in after days the Maiden of the Narrow Wood would be wife to Maduc the Black of the Black Isle, the king's reconciled enemy. But the Dame du Gaut Destroit rides in and out of the later pages of this book still, and the memory of the knight who saved her and would not tell his name rides with her. Of such threads is the tapestry of the Cycle woven: a rescue here, a wound there, a name withheld, and consequences that outlast the man who caused them.

THE SON AGAINST THE FATHER

The quarrel of Clarence came to its last field when Uriens marched on the city again, and this time the book arranged an ordeal such as few romances dare: the war was put to single combat, and the champion of the king's side was Yvain, Uriens's own son.

Yvain, whom the whole Cycle honours as the Knight of the Lion, was young then, and newly of Artus's fellowship, and the choice was no accident of the lists. He stood for the new allegiance his generation had sworn, the Round Table against the old rebellious lordships, and standing so, he must face his own blood. Father and son armed and came together before Clarence, and the chronicle of blows is terrible to read, for neither held back, and each knew the other. The old lord fought with the craft of thirty years of war, and fought for everything he had lost: the city denied him, the homage refused, the long grudge of a proud man. The son fought with a quieter heart and the steadier hand, and those who watched said afterward that his sorrow was his armour, for he had nothing to prove to the man who begot him and everything to prove to the king who had taken him up. But the younger strength and the newer cause prevailed: Yvain defeated his father, struck him down and held him at mercy, and the rebellion ended at the point of a son's sword.

What followed is the book's deepest statement about what Artus's kingship was for. Uriens, conquered by his own child, did homage to King Artus, and the rebel barons, seeing their leader kneel, came in and were reconciled. There was no execution, no attainder, no proscription; there was a ceremony, hands folded in hands, and a great lord made the king's man, and a son raised up a father he had been given the strength to humble. Other branches of the Cycle give this kind of hour to Gauvain and his father King Lot. The Book of Arthur, characteristically, turns the same key in a different lock, and gives the moment to Yvain, and to Uriens a dignity in submission that the other tellings do not. It is a book that believes in second allegiances. So the barons' war closed, and the giants that stalked the marches in those years, for the book pauses for giant-fights as readily as for sieges, were hunted down by a court at last united enough to hunt them.

THE CAT OF THE LAKE

It falls to Merlin, in the midst of the middle wars, to tell a story before a monster-fight, and the story is stranger than the fight. At Ascension tide, he said, a fisherman went out on the lac de Losane, the lake of Lausanne, and vowed to God his first catch of the day. The first cast brought up a fish, and the fisherman looked at it and coveted it for his own table, and kept it. The second cast brought up a finer, and he coveted that too, and kept it, and the vow was twice broken. The third cast brought up no fish at all, but a kitten, blacker than a mulberry, and the man, who had rats in his house, kept the creature for his vermin, thinking no harm.

So the devil enters a house, said Merlin: small, and black, and useful. The kitten grew, and was fed, and grew beyond feeding, and one night it strangled the fisherman, and his wife, and his children, every soul under that roof; and then it went out from the house to the mountain beyond the lake, and there it waxed great and terrible beyond measure, a beast with a devil's heart, the horror men afterwards called Chapalu. Against that horror King Artus himself armed and went, and the book gives the fight its full weight, though it is Merlin's exemplum that outlasts it: a vow twice betrayed, a third gift taken in greed, and a household devoured. The wars of Logres were fought with swords; the wars of the soul, the prophet reminded his king, are fought with promises.

The book is just to Keu, too, in these campaigns, and gives him his one brilliant day. At a ford in the Saxon country, with Gauvain and Yvain beside him, it was the seneschal who invited the combat when the enemy pressed, and Keu who slew two of the pursuers with his own hand while each of his companions overthrew one. One day in a long life of mockery and broken arms; but the Book of

Arthur, which loves the overlooked, set it down, so that no one should say the seneschal never earned his seat. And still the Saxon kings came: Minor and Malaquins and Cristans new-landed, and the old ones unwearying, and the war rolled on through Cambenic and beyond, year after year, as the middle leaves of the book burn with it.

THE VALLEY WITHOUT RETURN

Of all the enchantresses who move through this book, and they are many, none casts so long a shadow as Morgue la Fee, Morgan as the world now names her. She was King Artus's half-sister and Queen Genievre's own lady, high in trust and higher in pride; and she loved Guiomar, the queen's nephew, a knight of the royal house. The queen discovered the love and would not suffer it, and parted them; and from that parting, says the Book of Arthur, dates the hatred of Morgue for Genievre that runs under all the later branches of the Cycle like a seam of black ore under a green field.

What this book alone tells is where Morgue went. She flew to Merlin. She came to him as the discarded and the desperate come to the powerful, with her beauty and her grievance and her quick, insatiable mind; and the enchanter loved her, with the old, unwise, world-wearied love that was to be his own undoing. He, who had read the heavens and the hour of his own end, could not read, or would not read, the woman before him. For love he taught her his whole art, withholding nothing, as men in love withhold nothing, though every gift was a weapon: the words that bind and the words that loose, the shaping of seeming, the governance of places, so that a valley could be made a gaol and a forest a fortress. She was the aptest pupil he ever had. She was also, though he would not see it, his rehearsal for Niniane. And when she had learned all he had, she used it. In a hidden place she founded the Val sanz Retor, the Valley Without Return, a valley bound about with such enchantments that no faithless knight who entered it could ever leave it; and her purpose was double, to regain power over Guiomar, whom she meant to draw into it, and to spite the queen and the whole Round Table by making a prison for their chivalry.

King Artus searched for his sister everywhere, through every country, and found nothing; and Queen Genievre, who suspected what the search might unearth, made Guiomar swear that he knew nothing of where she had gone. So the valley stood, and the book lays down, with the patience of a lawyer and the imagination of a poet, the chain of adventures locked into its spell. Only the knight who should achieve Escalon le Tenebreux, the Dark Ascalon, could break the enchantment of the Val; only he could lift from the river the bodies of two guiltless lovers who lay drowned in it; only he could achieve the Tour Douloureuse, the Dolorous Tower. Adventure answers adventure like link to link, and the reader begins to see the shape of this book's genius: it is a machine for explaining the world of the Lancelot before the Lancelot exists, every marvel a root, every root pointing at a story not yet told.

THE SELF-BAPTISED QUEEN AND THE UGLY APPEARANCE

Far to the east, in the pagan kingdom of Sarmenie, ruled Queen Sebile, an enchantress of great knowledge and, until these years, of no faith. Her land was besieged by Baruc li Noirs, Baruc the Black, called the Fairy Knight, li Chevaliers Faez, a champion of more than mortal power; and when the news of her need reached the Round Table it was Sagremor, Dead Youth himself, who took the

adventure. The book delights in him here: the man mocked at court for falling from his saddle is the man who stands between a queen and a fairy host. Sebile, who knew enchantment as other queens know needlework, saw the kind of man her champion was, and loved him; and because his faith forbade the match while hers was darkness, she did a thing almost without parallel in these romances: she baptised herself, naming aloud the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and was a Christian by her own act and her own words, for love of her knight. Then she taught him what he could not have learned in any school of arms: how to strike down the enchantments of a magic orchard, where the very trees were bound in the Fairy Knight's power; and with that knowledge he prevailed, and the siege was broken, and the queen of Sarmenie wed the Impetuous One, and a kingdom and a soul were won in a single campaign. So magic and grace meet in this book, and grace, for once, is taught by the magician.

Against that gentle conversion the book sets a horror. On a river of Libya there appeared the thing men called la Laide Semblance, the Ugly Appearance, an apparition so hideous that its gaze turned living men to stone; the adventure of it, said the wise, had been established long ago by Judas Maccabeus, and it had waited since for its achiever. Keu the seneschal attempted it and failed, which surprises no reader. The knight who achieved it the rest of the Cycle has forgotten: Greu of Alenie, the king of Alenie's son, a Round Table knight who exists only in this book, a recruit of the Saxon wars whom no other branch remembers at all. Greu went to the quest guided by the Wise Lady of the Forest of No Return, an enchantress as benign as Morgue was bitter, and with her counsel he passed the petrifying horror where Keu had failed. His reward had come to him disguised as a messenger: the Wise Lady's own niece was the damsel who had brought him word of the adventure, and he married her, a bride won out of the quest itself. As for the monster, Merlin dealt with it in the end as he dealt with most loose ends of the magical world: he took the Ugly Appearance and cast it into the gulf of Satellie, far away in the sea of Satalia, and the river of Libya had peace.

There is a pattern here that the Book of Arthur traces again and again: the enchantress who damns and the enchantress who saves, the valley that keeps and the forest that releases, Sebile's baptism at one pole and Morgue's valley at the other, and in the midst of them all the figure of Merlin, teacher of both camps, growing weary and growing doomed.

THE JUDGEMENT OF MERLIN, AND THE BREAKING OF THE BOOK

For Merlin, in this book, does not vanish into silence. Other branches end him with a sigh: a hawthorn in blossom, a tower of air, a voice heard crying from nowhere while the story hurries on. The Book of Arthur alone dares to tell what happened next: his captivity and his death are narrated, and what followed his death.

Niniane, for so this book spells the Lady of the Lake, was his undoing, as the parallel branches also say. He loved her; he taught her; she learned from him the art that mastered him, and the time came when the master of kings and enchanters lay bound in a prison from which no prophecy could free him, because prophecy had foreseen it. The book does not soften the account. Merlin was demon-engendered, the child of a fiend and a woman's woe, made for purposes not God's; and at the end he surrendered to love, flesh to flesh, and by that surrender his body was doomed. So the demon-born body of Merlin died in its prison, and every reader of the Cycle, until this book

was found, believed the story ended there.

It does not. The Book of Arthur brings his soul before judgement, and there the unique thing happens. Divine intervention willed that his soul be saved, despite the sins of the flesh and despite his begetting: for his good deeds were weighed against his sins, and the good weighed heavier. The counsellor of kings, the baptiser's prophet, the builder of the Round Table's order, had spent a dark inheritance on works of light, and mercy, which is not arithmetic, counted the spending. And then the book does its boldest thing. It gives the imprisoned Merlin a prophecy of his own release, a release far beyond any horizon his captors could see: a knight called Perlesvaux, Perceval, shall one day free Merlin, but only after Lancelot is dead. The Lancelot branch itself glances back at this promise, saying that the story will later tell how Perceval delivered Merlin; and so the fragment, broken at both ends, reaches past its own breaking and points at an unseen future, at a deliverance scheduled beyond the death of the greatest knight of all. In the same pages the book tells how and why Merlin, in his might, made the Isle Tronoiant, the Turning Island, so that the cloud-voyage of Nascien's kinsman, sung of in the Grail history, here receives its root. Even dying, the enchanter is made the architect of the whole Cycle's geography.

The last leaves of the book hurry, as if the scribe felt the darkness coming for the candle. They give us the young Nascien of Noargue, son of the Damoiselle de la Blanche Nue, sitting at a hermit's feet while the old man unfolds the Gospel of Nicodemus: the witnesses before Pilate, the figures of Moses, the holy chrism, until the boy renounces knighthood and turns hermit himself; and woven into that instruction is the genealogy the whole Cycle rests upon, the descent of Lancelot from Joseph of Arimathea through Galaad. They give us the Widowed Lady of the Waste Forest, mother of Agloval and of Perceval, and twenty knights riding to succour Agloval, keeping a promise the book made long before, to tell what became of Perceval's brothers, whom the Lancelot barely names. They give us darker things, too: a knight cruelly ill-treated by Agravain, the first stain of that cruel nature; the Chastel de la Mort, the Castle of Death, of which the book says flatly that no man put into it ever came out except wholly dead, and in it Gaheriet slays Kaols sans Douceur, Kaols the Merciless, a fitting tenant for such a house; the Castle of Maidens, ruled in this telling by the Queen of Denmark, who hates the Round Table, where Sagremor vanquishes Greomar its master and Minoras li Preuz fights beside the king; and the same queen's enchanted garden, an otherworld orchard in which knights are detained, as if joy itself had learned to keep prisoners. And among them the book remembers small Senehaut, lady of the knight Blis, stolen and rescued by Sagremor, who bore her rescuer a daughter that resembled him more closely than a picture, a child Queen Genievre herself took into her household to rear.

Then, on the last surviving page, in the middle of a battle, the book breaks. A knight, so spent he can barely lift his arms, fights on because he is afraid to die; fear of death, says the text, made him quicker and lighter than his own strength could. Gauvain is spurring to a maiden's rescue. Nearly every thread has just been tied. And the sentence stops, and there are no more pages. The lost ending, the scholars say, was probably short; the story was nearly done. But it is not done, and never will be, and the Book of Arthur ends as it began, in the middle of a breath.

It remains only to say where the breath was going. This book had already told the noble origin of Galehaut, lord of Sorelois, which the Lancelot never troubles to explain; had shown Brandus des

Illes, lord of Dolorous Garde before Lancelot's day, luring Gauvain and Yvain towards the Dolorous Chartre and its prisons, the very dungeons that Lancelot will one day break open and empty; had planted the Nameless City and the Terre Foraine and the lineage of Galahad. The Queen's Knights are mounted and waiting. The prophecy hangs in the air: Perceval shall free Merlin, after Lancelot is dead. Everything in this fragment leans forward towards a hero who has not yet entered it. So the supplement hands the story back to the greater Cycle: to the Lancelot proper, where the knight whom all this preparation awaits will come at last out of the Lake, and the wars and wonders of Arthur's youth will give place to the glory and the grief of his maturity.

LANCELOT OF THE LAKE, PART I - THE WHITE KNIGHT AND THE UNCROWNED KING

The Book of Lancelot of the Lake is the central and longest branch of the Vulgate Cycle, the vast Old French prose compilation also called the Lancelot-Grail. This first half - retold here from H. Oskar Sommer's edition of the Vulgate (volumes III-IV) - follows Lancelot from his christening under a holier name, through his childhood in the Lake and his nameless arrival at Arthur's court, to the conquest of Dolorous Guard, the great war and greater friendship of Galehaut, and the founding of his love for Queen Guinevere. It closes where the oldest form of the romance closes: with a death by grief and a tomb built for two. In the Old French it is called the Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac.

FIRE BEHIND, WATER BEFORE

In the march of Gaul there ruled two brothers who loved each other as brothers seldom do: King Ban of Benoic and King Bors of Gaunes. They had ridden to Britain in Arthur's first dark spring and helped him break the rebel kings at Bedegraine, and Arthur had promised them aid in turn against their own enemy - King Claudas of the Waste Land, brave as any man alive and treacherous as winter ice. But Arthur's wars were many and his memory slow, and the promised help did not come. Year by year Claudas ate the brothers' lands, until Ban held nothing but the castle of Trébe, and Claudas came and sat down before it.

When Ban saw that the walls would not hold, he took his wife Elaine - of the line of David and Solomon, and soon to be called the Queen of Great Sorrows - and their infant son, a child christened Galahad for that holy ancestor, King Galahad of Wales, who was son of Joseph of Arimathea. With a handful of followers they slipped out of Trébe by night, riding for the sea-road and Britain, where Arthur must at last repay his debt.

They had not gone far before Ban, cresting a hill above a still lake, looked back. On the horizon his last castle burned, and the whole sky was the colour of wound and ember. The old king set his hand to his breast. He cried out that he saw the end of his house and of the earthly joy God had lent him, and there on the hillside, with the fire behind him and the water before, his heart burst within him, and he fell from the saddle dead.

Elaine cast herself down beside her lord. She laid the baby on the grass while she tended the dead - closing his eyes, straightening his limbs, weeping over him the first of the many sorrows that would give her her name - and in that moment the lake stirred. Out of the water rose a lady, beautiful beyond the daughters of men, who took up the child and went down again beneath the surface, and the lake closed over them without a ripple. The mother cried out after her son; but the

Lady of the Lake kept what she took, and she kept it well.

Elaine buried her king on the hill where he died, and there she raised the Royal Minster, an abbey of nuns, and took the veil herself, calling herself never again Elaine but the Queen of Great Sorrows. Her sister Evaine, King Bors's widow, came to share her house of prayer; and before Evaine died God comforted her with a vision: her two young sons, and her sister's stolen son, growing up together in a fair country no sorrow could enter. So it would be.

For King Bors died soon after his brother, and his infant sons fell into the hands of the man who had unmade their house. The elder, Lionel, bore on his body a birthmark shaped like a lion; the younger was Bohort - whom later ages call Bors. Claudas gave the boys to his knight Pharien to rear, and they grew up princes in the hall of their father's murderer, with their tutors Lambegues and Leonce watching over them. It could not last. At a feast, Claudas's son Dorin, cruel as his father and prouder, taunted the boys past bearing; and young as they were, Lionel and Bohort struck him down and gave him his death-wound. They would have died for it beneath Claudas's sword - but the Lake was watching. The damsel Seraide, agent of the Lady, came secretly into that court, and by her enchantments she changed the two princes into greyhounds, and in that shape they ran out of the hall of their enemy through legs and benches and shouting men, and no one marked them. So the Lake gathered in the last of its orphans: three princes unhoused by one man.

For the Lake was not water. It was the semblance of water, a mirage spread by Merlin's own teaching over parks and orchards and a rich manor where the Lady ruled. In that hidden country the child Galahad grew up believing the Lady was his mother. He knew neither his name nor his blood; and when he asked who his father had been, she answered only that he was of a lineage that would not shame him. Beside him Lionel and Bohort finished their knightly education, and the Lady, who had stolen him for love, watched him grow into the fairest youth in the world - and began to arm herself, as far as she was able, against the day he must leave.

THE QUEEN'S HANDS AT THE SWORD-BELT

He was eighteen when he pressed her to make him a knight. The Lady did not refuse; but first she taught him. At length she instructed him in the history of chivalry - how it was ordained to defend Holy Church, to succour the weak, to keep faith with the helpless and with ladies, and how the knight's body was consecrated like a priest's to a service. The boy drank it in. Then she outfitted him as no knight had ever been outfitted: a snow-white horse, white armour, a white shield, and a sword at his side bright as ice, all white and silver, so that when he rode he seemed less a man than a visitation. He had no name to give, and so the world would know him by a colour: the White Knight.

On the eve of St. John's Day the Lady brought him to Camelot, with Lionel and Bohort, Seraide, and a retinue splendid enough to make the court stare. She asked King Arthur to knight her foster-son; the nameless varlet came to court on the Friday, and on the Sunday he was made knight. And on that day Lancelot of the Lake - though no one yet called him so - saw Queen Guinevere, daughter of King Leodegan of Carmelide, whose dowry was the Round Table itself. From that look comes everything in this history, the book says plainly: every deed of prowess he ever did was fuelled, from that hour, by love of the Queen.

Two things befell at the knighting that the court never forgot. The first was a wonder. Into the feast came a knight wounded past belief, with two broken lance-shafts standing in his body and a sword-blade through his head, who had been told that only the hands of the new-made knight could draw them out. The white youth came, trembling a little, and drew out the shafts and the blade one by one, cleanly, and the man lived. It was his first feat, and those who saw it crossed themselves: the election was plain.

The second was an oversight that was no oversight. Arthur dubbed him, and gave him the accolade, and in the press of ceremony forgot to gird on his sword. It was Guinevere who took the sword and belted it about him with her own hands. Now it is the law of chivalry that he from whom a man holds his sword is the one who makes him knight. Years later Lancelot told her the meaning of that hour, though he knew it already then: "Lady, you made me a knight. He from whom a man holds his sword makes him a knight; I hold mine from you - the King never gave it me." Before he was Arthur's knight, he was the Queen's; and the Queen's he remained.

He asked his first boon that same feast. A messenger of the Lady of Nohaut, Arthur's liege-woman, came begging a champion against the King of Northumberland, who warred on her. Kay the seneschal wanted the adventure and said so - the beginning of the long rivalry of Lancelot and Kay - but the new knight claimed it as his first request since his knighting, and when Arthur hesitated to hazard so green a boy, the boy shamed him with courteous, stubborn words until the King yielded. The White Knight rode north, overthrew the champion of Northumberland, reconciled the king and the lady - and sent back to Queen Guinevere two damsels as tokens of his service. It was the first gift; there would be nothing of his that was not hers after.

DOLOROUS GUARD

On the river Humber stood a castle whose name was a promise: Dolorous Guard. Its lord was Brandin of the Isles, called the Copper Knight, and about its walls lay an enchantment old and patient. The custom of the castle was this: any knight who would win through to the keep must first defeat ten knights at the outer wall, and then ten more at the second gate, each in single combat; and then he must slay the lord, or else abide forty days within, to lift the curse forever. In the cemetery without the walls stood row on row of gravestones carved with the names of those who had tried and failed - but the stones lied. The men were not dead. They rotted in Brandin's Dolorous Prison, and among them lay Lohot, King Arthur's own son, sickening in the dark.

The White Knight took the adventure. He came to the first wall and fought the ten of the outer ward, and when night fell he had defeated six. A veiled damsel found him then - one of the Lake's agents, though he did not know it - and lodged him, and brought out three white shields for the morrow. "Take the first," she said, "and when your strength fails, look at the shield: the red band upon it will make you twice as strong. When that is not enough, take the second shield, with two bands, and you will be three times the man. And the third shield bears three bands, and with it you will have the strength of four." So the Lake armed her son, as she would arm him all his life, against the measure of the world's malice.

The next day he finished the ten of the first wall, and went on to the second gate, and the ten there went down before him as the strength in him redoubled and redoubled again. From the wall

above, Brandin the Copper Knight leaned out to watch his castle's custom break - leaned too far, and toppled over the far side of his own parapet, and fell crashing upon one of his own knights and crushed him, and in the confusion Brandin fled. Dolorous Guard was taken. The conqueror stood in the castle that no man had taken, and the people came out to stare at the white figure who had ended their long thralldom.

In the cemetery there was one grave covered by a slab of metal so great that no knight had ever stirred it. It bore an inscription: only one knight could lift it, and beneath it his name would be revealed. Lancelot set his hands to the slab and raised it as easily as a man lifts a lid - and read what was written beneath, and knew himself at last. He was the son of King Ban of Benoic. Only the damsel of the shields saw what he read; to all the rest of the world he remained what he had been, the White Knight, the Conqueror of Dolorous Guard. Fame went to the deeds; the name he kept. But from that day he walked in the knowledge of his blood - Ban's son, heir of Benoic, of the lineage of David.

The news ran to Arthur's court, and the King sent Gawain - his nephew, already the measurer of every marvel - with Yvain and eight knights to learn the truth of it. They came to Dolorous Guard and were lured into an armed lodging and carried off, all ten, to join the forgotten men in the Dolorous Prison. Then Arthur himself rode to the Humber with Guinevere and the flower of the court. For four days the castle gate stayed shut against the King; and when the Queen herself asked entry, a gatekeeper's blunder barred her as though she were any traveller. She turned away angry, and somewhere within the walls the unrecognised conqueror saw her go, and his heart went with her.

He would not let Arthur's people rot. Guided by another damsel of the Lake, Lancelot fell upon Brandin's scattered men; and when Brandin launched a night-raid of a hundred and fifty knights against Arthur's camp, the White Knight alone threw it into panic and rout, and took Brandin prisoner in the middle of his own host. Brandin he traded for every man in the Dolorous Prison. Gawain and Yvain and the rest came up blinking into the daylight, and never once saw their rescuer's face - the helm stayed laced, the shield was strange - and when they looked for him to thank him, he was gone. He slipped away rather than claim the castle. For he had a world to win, and he did not yet mean to win it under his own name.

THE UNCROWNED KING

Out of the western sea came then the greatest challenge Arthur's reign had yet faced. Galehaut, Lord of the Distant Isles, king of Sorelois, was the son of a beautiful giantess, taller than any man at Arthur's court and yet made in proportion, and so gracious in his strength that men loved him at sight. He had conquered thirty kingdoms, and he had sworn an oath: he would never set a crown upon his head until he had added to them the crown of Logres - until Arthur himself knelt as his vassal. Men called him the Uncrowned King, and the Haut Prince, and they said that the only man alive who had seen him, Arthur's own knight Galegantin, described him strangely for a conqueror: "A young bachelor, most gentle, kind-hearted, and generous." His summons came to Camelot like a writ: submit, or be invaded. Arthur refused, and both realms armed.

At the first great meeting of the armies - a battle ordered like a tournament, for so these kings made war - a white knight fought for Arthur whom no one could name. He entered the field already wounded, and Malaguin, the King of a Hundred Knights, Galehaut's cousin, gave him a graver one; and still both kings marked him. Never, each told his men, had such deeds been seen. When the truce was called and a second meeting fixed, the White Knight had himself carried away in a litter rather than be unhelmed, and the Lady of Nohaut nursed him back to strength. Gawain went questing after his identity, came to the cemetery of Dolorous Guard, and set his hands to the metal slab - and could not stir it. Whatever name lay beneath was not for him.

Between the battles came the strangest of Lancelot's adventures. A squire brought him word that Queen Guinevere was held prisoner in Dolorous Guard, and he rode like one mad back to the Humber - into a trap. The tale was a lie, contrived by the townsfolk, who were angry that their conqueror had broken their castle's custom and then ridden away without finishing the work: the forty days that alone would lift the enchantment forever. They had him, and they made their demand. And Lancelot, who could have cut his way out, yielded, and went down to finish what he had begun.

THE WELL OF BLACKNESS

Beneath the cemetery chapel of Dolorous Guard lay the roots of the enchantment, and Lancelot went down to them alone. He came first to a door guarded by two knights made all of copper, who moved and struck like living men; their blows fell on him like hammers on an anvil, and one opened his shoulder before he broke them. Beyond lay the Well of Blackness, a pit of dark so deep it seemed the floor of the world, and on its far side waited a black knight with flames pouring from his mouth, swinging an axe. There was no bridge. Lancelot took his run and leapt the well, closing inside the axe's arc before it could fall, and grappled the burning knight barehanded, and throttled the breath and the fire out of him together, and cast the body into the blackness. In the last chamber stood pillars of copper, and among them a copper woman who held the keys. One key opened the chest in the pillar; the other opened the Perilous Chest itself. He turned the second key, and the enchantment of Dolorous Guard broke like ice in thaw. The castle that had been a curse on the Humber was given a new name: Joyous Guard. And though he would not claim it yet, Lancelot was its lord.

Of the wanderings that followed, the book tells much and this telling must tell little: how he suffered the absurd captivity of Daguenet the Fool, and how he slew two giants; and how the Lady of Malohaut took him prisoner, for he had killed her seneschal's son, and held him in her dungeon. The damsel who had followed his fortunes believed him slain and took the veil in grief. But the day of the great battle with Galehaut drew near, and the Lady of Malohaut, who was no fool, released her prisoner on his parole - his sworn word to return to her prison when the battle was done.

At that battle he was the best knight on the field, and Gawain was wounded near to death. Yet Galehaut's host was far the stronger, and the end was not in doubt - and here the Uncrowned King did a thing no conqueror does. He disdained an honourless victory over an outnumbered king, and granted Arthur a truce of a full year, bidding him raise a greater army and come again. Lancelot, true to his word, went back to the Lady of Malohaut's prison. There a curious thing befell. The Lady came to look upon her sleeping prisoner and saw his body bruised black from the fighting; she

leaned close, and nearly kissed him where he slept, and fell in love with what she had sworn to punish. She threatened him with death to learn his name, and the name of the lady he served, and he would have died before he spoke either. In the end she freed him instead, and promised him new armour for the next year's battle - black armour, for a knight who must not be known.

THE BLACK KNIGHT'S BARGAIN

When the year turned, a black knight on a black horse rode to the field between the two armies, and no device declared him. Gawain, half guessing, sent him three lances; and when those were spent, there came to him a second gift - ten lances and three of Gawain's own horses - sent at the request of the Queen herself, for Gawain and the Lady of Malohaut, who had begun to suspect whose heart beat under that black mail, had contrived it between them. The message asked that the Black Knight do his arms that day in the honour of Queen Guinevere.

What he did then, the heralds wrote down and men retold for a generation. He unhorsed the First Conquered King - the first and proudest of the thirty kings Galehaut had made his vassals - and turned the whole day for Arthur. Galehaut watched from his own side of the field, and his heart went out of him to the unknown man. That evening he sought the Black Knight and pledged him, by all he held sacred, anything in his power to grant. And Lancelot named his price: "Tomorrow, at the very moment of your victory, surrender yourself to King Arthur." Galehaut, who had spent his life and thirty kingdoms towards one crown, gave his promise. He asked no why. He had found the one man in the world whose friendship he wanted more than Logres.

The next day a knight wearing Galehaut's own armour fought on Galehaut's side, and did such work against Arthur's people that the court was appalled; only Gawain, watching the way he rode, knew him. The battle broke as it had to break. Arthur's army went down towards ruin, the Uncrowned King rode at the summit of his life's ambition - and then Lancelot claimed the boon. And Galehaut, at the very instant of his triumph, with Logres falling into his hand, left his host and knelt to King Arthur and yielded himself his prisoner, and begged his forgiveness.

Arthur, astonished, raised him up and received him as a friend. So the war of the thirty-one kingdoms ended not in conquest but in a bargain of love; and it was this deed, the book says, that afterward won Lancelot his seat at the Round Table - though he had traded it, and everything he had, for a friend's vow and a queen's regard.

"WHO MADE YOU A KNIGHT?"

Guinevere would not be put off. The knight who had saved the kingdom twice, who had made the Uncrowned King kneel, was still a mask without a man behind it, and she demanded to meet him. Galehaut arranged it - a private audience, from which he himself withdrew with the attending ladies; among them went the Lady of Malohaut, who recognised her former prisoner the instant her eyes fell on him, and kept her counsel.

Then the Queen began her questioning, and it was less a conversation than a gentle, merciless peeling. The young knight before her could hardly speak; he who had faced the ten and the ten at Dolorous Guard stammered like a boy. Was he the Black Knight of the second battle? He was. Was he the knight who had worn Galehaut's armour on the last day, and fought against his own

king? He was. Was he the conqueror of Dolorous Guard, the White Knight, the deliverer of Gawain? One by one the disguises came away under her questions, and beneath each there was only another of his deeds, and beneath all of them only him. Then she asked the question that had no armour against it: "Who made you a knight?" And he answered, "Lady, you did." And he told her what he had carried since the sword-belt touched his side: that he from whom a man holds his sword makes him a knight, that he held his sword from her hand and never from the King's - and that everything he had done, every blow struck and every wound taken, had been done not for Arthur, but for her. And when she asked his name, he gave her that too, as he would have given her anything she asked: he was Lancelot, son of King Ban of Benoic, of the line of David.

He nearly fainted as he said it. And Galehaut, who watched from his distance with the ladies, needed no more: his suspicion was confirmed, and where another man might have seen scandal, the son of the giantess saw only his friend's heart, and resolved to win it what it wanted.

He went to the Queen, this king of thirty kingdoms, as an ambassador for a tongue-tied boy. He asked her to return Lancelot's love; and she - who had ruled that heart since St. John's Day and knew it - agreed, and agreed to seal it with a kiss. Galehaut staged the moment like a captain planning a battle. He brought the two together and, with the watching ladies near at hand, he set his own great body between them and every other eye, and behind that living wall of friendship Lancelot and Guinevere kissed for the first time. The illuminators of a later century would paint it exactly so: the Haut Prince standing screen, holding his cloak, so to speak, over adultery itself. The Lady of Malohaut forced her way into the secret and made herself the second go-between; and Guinevere, who arranged hearts as other queens arranged marriages, paired her with Galehaut - a doubled couple orbiting and serving the central one. Her words to Galehaut that day have outlived every chronicle of his conquests: "Galehaut, I give you this knight forevermore - except for what I have previously had of him."

THE SHIELD MADE WHOLE

Lancelot rode away with Galehaut to Sorelois, to learn his friend's kingdom and be learned by it. The Lady of the Lake, watching from afar, sent Lionel to squire for him; and to Guinevere she sent a gift that was also a sentence: a magic shield, painted with a knight and a lady leaning towards one another for a kiss, but split down the middle so that the two figures could never touch. When the love between the knight and the Queen should be fulfilled, the split would close, and not before. Guinevere kept the shield, and understood it, and waited.

Gawain, healed, resumed his old quest for the unknown knight, and the Queen let fall a hint: seek him with Galehaut. On the road he fell in with young Hector - Ector de Maris, Lancelot's half-brother, though the kinship was not yet known - and with Lionel. At Sorelois he came within a lance's length of fighting Lancelot himself, each unknown to the other, before Lionel threw himself between them. Then Guinevere's letter came, commanding her knight to do whatever Gawain asked; at that word, and only at that word, Lancelot spoke his name: Lancelot of the Lake.

But war does not wait on friendships. The Saxons and the Irish came into Scotland like the tide, and Arthur marched north against them and laid siege to Saxon Rock, a fortress standing from Vortigern's time. Within its walls dwelt a Saxon enchantress of terrible beauty, and Arthur grew

so besotted with her that he slipped secretly into her chamber, and was taken, and the King of Logres sat in a Saxon cell while his army wasted outside. Lancelot and Gawain, Galehaut and Hector, coming secretly to his aid, were lured into a trap and flung into the same prison.

In that dark season two things happened together, and the romance binds them so closely that a reader cannot pull them apart. While Arthur his king sat captive, Lancelot and Guinevere consummated their love - and far away in her keeping, the painted split in the magic shield closed, and knight and lady touched at last. And in the Saxon prison, Lancelot's mind broke. He went mad, striking at friend and foe alike, so that his captors, more afraid of him than of any army, turned him loose; he wandered raving, and only Guinevere's presence could quiet him, and he stayed sane only while he wore her shield upon his arm. Love had made him the best knight in the world; now love had taken his wits, and only love could give them back. It was the Lady of the Lake who came at last and cured him, her fairy providence standing, as it always stood, between her foster-son and the abyss.

Sane and armed, he returned to a field where the Britons were losing. He turned the battle as a man turns a plough; he broke the Saxon host, freed King Arthur, took the enchantress in her own fortress, and forced the surrender. And Gawain stood up before the army and named the rescuer at last, openly: Lancelot of the Lake. Arthur begged him then to take a seat at the Round Table - and Lancelot refused. He refused until Guinevere asked him; then he stayed, for her, as he had done everything for her. Galehaut took a seat as well, and Hector with him. Yet even in the rejoicing there was a shadow: Galehaut's new-built castles in Sorelois had fallen in ruin of themselves, and holy men read in it the anger of God that he had made war upon Arthur, and prophesied that his friendship with Lancelot would one day cost him his life. The prophecy was kept, and remembered, and it loads all that follows.

THE OTHER GUINEVERE

King Leodegan of Carmelide had begotten two daughters on the same day, and given both the same name. One was the Queen. The other, born of his seneschal's wife, was her exact double - the same face, the same birthday, even the same ring - and she had lived her life in her sister's shadow, hating the resemblance and the difference. Now, conspiring with the knight Bertholai and twenty barons of Carmelide, the False Guinevere wrote to King Arthur claiming to be his true wife, and demanding the Round Table back as her dowry if he refused her. Judgement was set for the day after Christmas.

Bertholai did not leave the outcome to judges. He took Arthur in the forest and gave him a love-potion, and the King drank, and fell madly in love with the impostor, and did all that they bade him. He declared his true wife a counterfeit before his own court; and the barons of Carmelide condemned Guinevere to burning - for she had worn the crown, they said, and for a crowned traitor only fire would do. Gawain and the knights of the Round Table chose banishment from the realm rather than assent to the sentence.

Then Lancelot rode in with Galehaut at his back and an army behind them, and offered his body in judicial combat to prove who the Queen was. Bertholai rigged the terms: the Queen's champion must fight not one knight of Carmelide but three. Lancelot was ordered to withdraw his defiance or

stand to the three alone; and he answered by renouncing his allegiance to Arthur and his seat at the Round Table - he would not withdraw, and he would not serve a king who would burn Guinevere. He fought the three, and killed two, and wounded the third, and God showed the right as plainly as lances can show it.

Yet Arthur, still drowned in the potion, would not take her back. So Galehaut opened his own kingdom: Lancelot and Guinevere withdrew to Sorelois, and there, cast out of Logres by a lie, they lived for the first time openly as lovers. The imposture that had been meant to destroy her paradoxically granted them their idyll - the one season in all the long romance when their love had the sunlight.

It could not stand against heaven. The Pope threatened Arthur with an interdict upon the whole kingdom unless he received his true queen again; Arthur refused, and the interdict fell, and the churches of Logres fell silent. Ten months into that silence, judgement came from within: the False Guinevere and Bertholai were struck down by a paralysing sickness, divine punishment plain to all, and before they died they confessed everything to Amustans, the King's chaplain - whether death came of the sickness or of the King's justice, the book leaves between two readings.

Then Arthur sued for reconciliation, and Guinevere - who remembered the stake and the sentence - made him sue in earnest before she yielded, and returned. The King begged Lancelot to take back his seat at the Round Table, and in full court, before every eye, Guinevere gave Lancelot a full and public kiss and declared him her own knight, her personal champion - and Arthur approved it with his whole heart. In those same days Lionel was made knight. Never had the love stood so high and so honoured, and a reader who knows the end of the cycle reads these pages the way one watches a man feast on the edge of a cliff.

THE EMPTY SHIELD

During the celebrations outside London, when the court sat unarmed at its games, a knight of giant stature burst in among them and snatched up Gawain and rode off with him before a sword could be drawn. It was Carados, lord of the Dolorous Tower, whose mother was a witch; she accused Gawain of the death of her brother, poisoned his wounds under pretence of tending them, and left him to rot in a vermin-swarming dungeon.

Lancelot rode out with Yvain and Arthur's nephew Galeshin to find him. The quest had gates. At a church on the way, invisible hands beat all who entered with staffs; only Lancelot passed through unstruck. Then they came to the Val Sans Retour, the Valley of No Return, which Morgan le Fay had enchanted so that no knight who had ever been false in love could leave it - and into that net, over the years, the flower of Britain's chivalry had walked and stayed. Galeshin and Yvain were caught like the rest. Lancelot killed four dragons that held the valley's passages, won across a plank-bridge defended against him, and entered the enchantment's heart; and because he was the one knight perfectly true in love - true to Guinevere without a single wavering - the valley had no power to hold him, and the enchantment broke, and every prisoner went free. (Morgan's grudge was old and personal: Guinevere had once banished from court Morgan's lover, who was the Queen's own cousin.)

Morgan had her revenge another way. She drugged Lancelot in his sleep and had him carried to her castle, and named her ransom: the ring Guinevere had given him. He refused her to her face. She let him go on parole to finish Gawain's rescue - he drew two dead bodies from a river, as prophecy required before the Dolorous Tower could fall, slew Carados, and freed Gawain - and then, being Lancelot, he went back and surrendered himself to Morgan's prison as he had sworn. While he slept she slipped the ring from his finger and set her own near-perfect copy in its place, and sent the stolen ring to court with a lying letter: Lancelot was dying, and returned the token, repenting that he had sinned against God and his king by loving the Queen. Guinevere answered smoothly before the court that she had loved him only as the saviour of herself and the realm, and Arthur believed her; but the words cost her, and the ring was gone. Morgan then wooed her prisoner herself, offering all she was; he told her he would rather die. In the end she released him.

But the lie had gone further than she knew, and it killed better than it was aimed. While Galehaut, Gawain, Yvain and Lionel rode the roads searching for him, Lancelot came back alone to Sorelois and found Galehaut gone from home. Despair took him; he fled armourless into the forest, out of his mind a second time, leaving his shield behind him. A vavasour found the shield and carried it to Galehaut, who was wounded and abed from the searching. And Galehaut looked at the abandoned shield of his friend and read it as men read such signs: Lancelot was dead. He would hear no comfort. He refused food, fell into a wasting sickness, and within ten days he was dead - the gentle conqueror of thirty kingdoms, the Uncrowned King, dead of grief for a friend who was alive, the prophecy fulfilled to the letter. His kingdom passed to his nephew Galehodin; and word came in the same dark season that the Lady of Malohaut had died too, and so the doubled couple was unmade on both sides at once.

Long afterward, wandering, Lancelot came upon Galehaut's grave and would have killed himself upon it, but Seraide found him and stayed his hand, and turned his grief to a better work. He had his friend's body brought to Joyous Guard - the castle he had conquered nameless, in the days before any of this had names - and there he built a tomb for two, and set Galehaut within it, and kept the place beside him empty for himself. In time that place was filled, and the stone received its final words: Here lies the body of Galehaut, Lord of the Distant Isles, and with him rests Lancelot of the Lake, who, save only his son Galahad, was the best knight ever to enter the kingdom of Logres.

So ends the first life of Lancelot of the Lake: the nameless years, the winning of a name, the founding of the love and the friendship that between them will unmake a kingdom. What follows belongs to the second half of the book - the abduction of Guinevere by Meleagant and the knight of the cart, the Sword Bridge into Gorre, the war of the Saxon queen Camille, Morgan's long imprisonment and the painted walls, and the road to Corbenic, where Lancelot will beget upon the Grail-king's daughter the son whose name he once bore and lost: Galahad.

LANCELOT OF THE LAKE, PART II - THE KNIGHT OF THE CART AND THE LION BEGOTTEN

This is the second half of Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac, the central branch of the thirteenth-century Vulgate Cycle - the great French prose compilation scholars call the Lancelot-Grail, here followed in H. Oskar Sommer's edition. The first half told of Lancelot's fostering by the Lady of the Lake, his love for

Queen Guinevere, and his friendship with Galehaut, lord of the Distant Isles. This half carries him through the shame and glory of the Knight of the Cart, the begetting of Galahad at Corbenic, two descents into madness, and the long Claudas war. It closes upon a hermit's prophecy of the knight who is yet to come.

THE FOREST OF MADNESS

The tale resumes in sorrow. Morgan le Fay, Arthur's sister and Lancelot's tireless enemy, had taken him prisoner and demanded Queen Guinevere's ring as his ransom. When he refused - though she offered him death in its stead - she waited until he slept, drew the ring from his finger, set a counterfeit in its place, and sent word to the court that Lancelot lay dying, returning the queen's ring with a confession of his sinful love. Guinevere, forced to answer before all the barons, declared she had loved him only for his services; and Arthur believed her. But the words, spoken to save them both, fell upon Lancelot's heart like a sentence of death.

Seeing that neither threats nor love could move him, Morgan at last released him, and he rode back towards Sorelois believing the queen's love lost forever. He found Galehaut gone - ridden out into the world in search of him - and, heartsick and alone, he did not wait. Unarmed, without shield or companion, he fled into the deep forest, and there his reason left him. For nearly a year he wandered the wildwood of Logres, filthy and ragged, eating roots and raw herbs, sleeping beneath the bare thorn, known to no one and knowing no one - the best knight in the world reduced to a beast of the woods.

And while he wandered, unknowing, the thing befell that would one day all but kill him with grief. Galehaut, who loved him above all earthly things, recovered his shield from those who boasted of his death, and, concluding that his friend was slain, refused all food and drink. Within ten days the lord of the Distant Isles was dead of sorrow, never knowing that Lancelot lived. His nephew Galehodin inherited his lands. Of all this the madman in the forest knew nothing; the tidings lay waiting for him on a road he had not yet ridden.

It was the Lady of the Lake, his foster-mother, who found him at last on Candlemas Eve in the forest of Tintagel. By her care and her enchantments she drew him back to himself, and by Easter he was whole again in mind, though the scars of grief remained. She armed him and sent him towards Camelot - and so, all unknowing, he rode straight into the strangest adventure of his life.

THE KNIGHT OF THE CART

On Ascension Day a knight rode into Arthur's court with a boast and a challenge. He was Meleagant, son of King Baudemagus of Gorre, and he proclaimed that he held many people of Logres in his father's land - men and women who might go free only if some knight of Arthur's would escort Queen Guinevere safely through the forest and defend her against him. Kay the seneschal, ever hungry for glory, tricked the king into granting him the boon of the escort; and so the queen rode out under Kay's protection, and the court watched her go with heavy hearts. Before nightfall Meleagant had overthrown the seneschal and carried the queen away into Gorre - a kingdom ringed about by a great river, to be entered only by two crossings: the Underwater Bridge, sunk beneath the flood, and the Sword Bridge; and it was the custom of that land that none who entered might ever leave.

Lancelot, newly cured and riding hard upon the news of this outrage, twice had his horse slain beneath him in the pursuit. On the road he met a dwarf driving a cart - in those days a pillory-cart, the shameful wagon in which criminals and the dishonoured were paraded through the towns, a thing no knight might touch without losing his honour forever. The dwarf offered to carry him to the queen. Lancelot hesitated. For one moment - no longer than a man draws breath - the law of knighthood warred with the law of love. Then he climbed into the cart.

Through the towns they drove him, and the people ran out to pelt the knight in the cart with mud and filth, crying shame upon him, while Gawain followed after on horseback in wonder and in grief. That moment of hesitation, so small upon the road, would follow Lancelot longer than any wound: the queen had heard of it, and she would not forget.

A damsel of the wayside - who was, though none yet knew it, Meleagant's own sister, and no friend to her brother's villainy - guided the rescuers onward, sending Gawain towards the Underwater Bridge and Lancelot towards the Sword Bridge. On that road the adventures of the Grail began to gather about him like a mist. He passed the tests of a temptress damsel who would have turned him aside. He found in a meadow an ivory comb with strands of golden hair wound in its teeth - the queen's comb, dropped in her captivity - and he took one hair and laid it against his heart, and treasured it above all the gold of Logres. He came to a great slab of marble that no knight had ever lifted, and alone he raised it, and read beneath the name of the elder Galahad, first Christian king of Hoselice, son of Joseph of Arimathea - his own forefather, of the holy lineage from which he sprang.

Last of all he came to a tomb burning within a ring of fire that no man might quench: the tomb of Symeu, whose spirit had waited long for this hour. From the flames a voice spoke to him, and what it said he carried ever after in silence. "Your baptismal name," said the spirit, "is Galahad - the name your mother gave you, though the world knows you by another. And a son shall be born to you who shall be called by that name, and he shall sit in the Perilous Seat at the Round Table, and he shall achieve the Holy Grail, and all the adventures of the Kingdom of Adventure shall be ended by his hand." The voice told him, too, that his mother yet lived - Queen Helen, once wife of King Ban of Benoic, now a nun at the Royal Minster in Gaul. But the fire Lancelot could not quench; that was reserved for the Good Knight who was to come, and for the first time in his life the best knight in the world was told plainly: not you, but your son.

THE SWORD BRIDGE

The Sword Bridge lay across the black water of Gorre: a single blade of bright steel, sharp as a razor, stretched from bank to bank, and on the farther side two lions crouched and roared. Lancelot looked at it and commended himself to God. He stripped off his armour and his shoes, took the edge of the blade in his bare hands, and crossed upon hands and feet and knees, and the steel cut him to the bone at every grip, so that his blood ran down the blade and dripped into the water beneath. He did not stop. When he set foot on the far bank and turned to face the lions, they were gone - phantoms only, conjured to frighten the faint of heart. Of all the wounds he ever bore, he was proudest of those.

Within Gorre he found a kingdom divided against itself. King Baudemagus, an honourable man who had never approved the abduction, had taken the queen under his own protection and kept her from his son's hands; but Meleagant burned with jealous hatred of Lancelot, whose fame and whose nearness to the queen he could not endure, and he demanded single combat. They fought, and at first Lancelot fought weakly - until the queen came to a window of the tower to watch, and one glance of her face passed through him like fire through dry grass. Then his blows fell so fast and heavy that Meleagant reeled, and the watching court cried out the stranger's name: it was Lancelot du Lac. At the queen's request, for her honour's sake, he spared his enemy, and Baudemagus set the terms: a rematch in one year's time, before King Arthur, at Camelot.

But when Lancelot came before the queen, she received him coldly, as though he were a stranger. "What did you seek here, sir knight?" she asked. He answered that he had come for her. "You might have done better," she said, and turned away - and he understood that the cart was remembered against him, that the one breath of hesitation had outweighed in her judgement all the wounds of the Sword Bridge. Then false tidings ran through Gorre in both directions: to Lancelot, that the queen was dead, and to the queen, that he was slain. Lancelot, hearing she was dead, fastened his belt about his own neck and would have hanged himself from his saddle-bow as he rode, had not his companions seized him and held him until the truth overtook the lie. At last she relented, they were reconciled, and she granted him what he had never dared to ask: that he come to her that night.

There was a window of iron bars between her chamber and the dark, and Kay lay wounded in the next room, groaning in his sleep. Lancelot took the bars in his hands and pulled, and bent them apart, and the iron gashed his fingers to the bone; but he felt no pain for the sweetness of that night, and they lay together until dawn while the seneschal slept on the other side of the wall. In the morning his wound had bled upon the sheets, and Meleagant, finding the blood and the sleeping Kay, cried out before the court that the queen had dishonoured the king with a wounded man. Then Lancelot stood forth and swore upon the relics that the charge was false, offering battle in her defence; they fought, and King Baudemagus himself came between them and halted the combat, for he would have no treachery done under his roof. So the queen's honour was held safe - for that time.

Yet Gorre kept its custom. Seeking after Gawain, who had entered by the Underwater Bridge and vanished, Lancelot was lured away from his companions by a dwarf in Meleagant's pay, and taken. The others freed Gawain and brought the queen home to Logres in joy; and a forged letter went before them claiming that Lancelot was safe at Camelot. It was not so. The Knight of the Cart was a prisoner of Meleagant still.

THE TOWER ON THE SEA

Meleagant dared not kill him openly, so he gave him into the keeping of his seneschal of Gorre, and there the seneschal's wife - for in all Lancelot's captivities it was women who pitied him - paroled her prisoner on his sworn oath that he would return, so that he might ride to the tournament of Pomeglai. In borrowed armour, all red from helm to spur, the unknown knight came to the field and outshone every man there. But the queen had heard of the red knight, and she sent a messenger to test him: "Do your worst." And Lancelot, obedient in love even at the price of his

honour, let himself be overthrown and shamed before the whole field, suffering the mockery of all - and by this the queen knew him, for no other knight in the world would have so obeyed her. Then her second message came: "Now do your best." And the red knight rose up and swept the field before him like a scythe, unhorsing all who came against him, and the heralds cried his praises, and Guinevere's heart was eased. The tournament done, he kept his oath and rode back of his own will into his prison.

Then Meleagant, fearing the year's end and the rematch at Arthur's court, devised a crueler captivity. On a bare island in a remote inlet of the sea he had a tower built without doors, and Lancelot was walled up within it - one small window high above the rocks, stale bread lowered to him, and water gone stagnant in its jar. At Camelot the year ran out, and Meleagant came boldly to Arthur's court demanding his combat; and when no Lancelot appeared, Gawain stood forth and pledged to fight in his place, for he would not let the queen's champion be named a coward or a dead man while any knight of the Round Table could lift a lance.

It was Meleagant's sister who found the doorless tower. Rowing along the coast she heard a voice lamenting from the little window, and knew it, and spoke up to him. She passed a pickaxe up to him through the window, and through long nights he broke and dug at the new stone until he had made a breach; and she nursed him back from starvation to strength, secretly, for she hated her brother's dishonour. On the appointed day, at Camelot, Meleagant stood armed in the lists against Gawain, already crying victory - and at the last hour Lancelot rode in. He borrowed Gawain's horse and harness, and the two enemies met for the final time.

There was no mercy in that fight. Lancelot struck Meleagant's hand from his wrist, and opened his belly with the next blow, and when the man, mortally wounded, would have cried for quarter, Lancelot smashed his helmet so that the plea could not leave his mouth - for this was the traitor who had shamed the queen and walled a sworn knight into the sea. Then he struck off his head, and the adventure of Gorre was ended, and the people of Logres held there went free.

THE TOMB THAT WAITS FOR TWO

Meleagant had a cousin, Argodras le Rous, who raised a cry against Lancelot: he had killed his kinsman by treachery, he said, and the matter was set for trial at the court of Baudemagus. Riding to answer it, Lancelot came upon a sight that stopped his heart: four knights of Sorelois upon the road, guarding a rich casket on a litter - and within it the body of Galehaut, whom they were bearing to his burial.

Until that hour he had not known. The tidings had passed him by in the year of his madness, and now grief he had never suspected fell upon him in its full weight. He drew his sword to kill himself upon his friend's body, and would have done it, had not Saraide, the damsel of the Lady of the Lake, found him in that hour and stayed his hand. She it was who counselled that the body be borne to Joyeuse Garde - the strong castle Lancelot had won in his youth, when it was called Dolorous Guard - so that the truest friend he ever had might lie in the keeping of the one who loved him best. Three of the guarding knights, who would not yield the litter, Lancelot slew; the fourth he spared to help bear it. And Galehaut was entombed at Joyeuse Garde with royal honour, in a tomb made wide enough for two; for Lancelot had sworn that when his own day came he

would lie beside his friend, in death as in life. So the castle of his first conquest became the house of his last rest, long before his rest was due.

On the road he came upon Meleagant's sister, who for the kindness she had shown him had been condemned by her own people to be burned; he rescued her from the fire. A black knight, Griffon du Maupas, lent him arms on the pledge that he would yield himself and his armour when claimed - a pledge that would return to trouble him. And at Windesant he met Argodras in judgement-combat and killed him, and the herald Patrises bore word to old Baudemagus that his son was dead, and the king grieved, but did not deny that Lancelot had fought by law.

THE SORROWFUL QUEEN'S SON

Now the strand of the story passes for a while to Gawain, and to the deepening shadow of the Grail. Lancelot, riding unrecognised, was wounded in a chance joust against his own cousin Bohort - whom later ages call Bors - who in those days, not knowing the queen, had carried her off from an ambush and brought her back in honour, all in ignorance. Then Griffon du Maupas came to claim the pledged armour, and it was seen afterward on another knight's back, a dead man's head tied to the saddle-bow; and the queen, hearing of it, believed Lancelot slain, and the court mourned. Arthur sent Gawain out with nine knights to seek him, alive or dead.

On that quest the company met Eliezer, son of King Pelles of the Grail castle, carrying a sword broken in two - the sword that had snapped in the wounding of Joseph of Arimathea, which only the best knight of the coming age might join together again. One after another they tried, and one after another they failed; the halves would not meet. At a perilous cemetery stood a tomb wrapped in fire, and when Gawain and Hector approached it, invisible swords beat them twice to the ground, senseless. The adventure, they were told, was reserved for another: for the son of the Sorrowful Queen - that is, of Queen Helen, who had sorrowed long for her lost child. For Lancelot, not for them.

And Gawain came to Corbenic itself, the castle of the Grail, and failed there in the sight of heaven. A damsel lay enchanted in a tub of scalding water; he could not lift her out. At the high feast, when the Holy Grail was borne in procession through the hall and every man's plate filled miraculously with the food he most desired, Gawain's plate stood empty - for instead of asking the question that would have healed the land, he sat staring at the beauty of the maiden who bore the vessel. That night he lay in the Adventurous Bed and endured its terrors: a flaming lance that fell from the rafters; a vision of a serpent and a leopard locked in combat, which was the dynastic fate of his own house; twelve maidens passing through the chamber wailing; a dove; and at midnight an armed knight with whom he must fight; until at last the Grail itself was borne in and healed his wounds. Yet for all he had endured, he was put out of Corbenic in the morning in a cart of shame, as criminals ride. A hermit told him plainly why: he had preferred the maiden to the Grail. And the hermit gave him a darker warning besides - to keep himself from the war that was coming, the war between King Arthur and the best knight in the world, in which Gawain would die and the kingdom would be ruined. But that day was still far off.

While the searchers wandered, Lancelot himself lay sleeping one noon beneath an apple tree, and misfortune found him there. His cousin Lionel, ranging alone, had pursued the giant knight Tericam

of the Impenetrable Forest - brother of Carados of the Dolorous Tower, and sworn to avenge his brother upon Lancelot - and was taken and beaten with thorns. Hector unhorsed the giant at his trophy tree, where sixty shields of vanquished knights hung, twenty-four of them of the Round Table, but Tericam grappled him and carried him off; and his dungeon filled with Sagremor, Kay, Agloval, and more. Meanwhile the sleeping Lancelot was lifted from the grass by three sorceress-queens - Morgan le Fay, the Queen of Soresan, and Sebile the enchantress - who bore him to their castle and set the old choice before him: take one of them as his paramour, or die in their prison. He chose prison, and death if need be. It was the daughter of Duke Rochedon who freed him - a maiden facing a forced marriage to the Queen of Soresan's brother, who released him on his oath that he would stop the wedding. He kept the oath, and rode on to aid good King Baudemagus in his tournament against the King of Northgales, for he bore no grudge against that honourable house.

THE LION BEGOTTEN

So at last, by roads he did not choose, Lancelot came to Corbenic, the castle of King Pelles of Listenois - the King of the Land Beyond, keeper of the Holy Grail, in whose house the vessel of the Last Supper had dwelt since Joseph of Arimathea brought it west.

There he found a marvel that had waited long for him. In a chamber of the castle a maiden sat imprisoned in a tub of boiling water, and had sat so for five years, enchanted by Morgan le Fay and the Queen of Northgales; and the enchantment could be broken only by the best knight in the world. She was Elaine, Pelles' daughter - called Amite by some, though her true name was Helizabel - the fairest woman of her time. Lancelot took her by the hand and lifted her from the scalding water unharmed, as Gawain had not been able; and all the castle gave thanks. And in the cemetery of Corbenic he read an inscription upon a sealed tomb: he who lifted the stone should beget a lion upon the daughter of the King of the Land Beyond. He lifted it, and a dragon burst forth from beneath, breathing fire, and he slew it. The inscription did not lie.

That evening, at the high feast, Elaine herself bore the Holy Grail in the procession, veiled and shining, and Lancelot watched her go by and thought her the loveliest creature he had seen save one. He did not grasp what passed before his eyes; his heart was elsewhere, and therein lay his ruin and his glory. For King Pelles knew by prophecy that his grandson, begotten by the best knight in the world, would achieve the Grail and heal the wasted land; and Brisen, Elaine's governess, a mistress of enchantments, laid the snare. Word was brought to Lancelot that the queen had come secretly to Case Castle nearby and waited for him there. Enchanted, deceived, he rode through the night to what he believed was Guinevere's bed, and lay with Elaine believing her the queen - and that night Galahad was conceived, the Good Knight, the flower of all chivalry, begotten in darkness and by guile.

In the morning the enchantment lifted, and Lancelot saw the stranger beside him, and seized his sword in his rage and would have slain her where she knelt weeping. But she cried to him that she carried his child - the child of whom the tomb had spoken - and for the sake of the prophesied son he stayed his hand, and departed in bitterness. Riding on, he learned from his hostess that she was the mother of Hector des Mares, begotten by King Ban before his marriage; and so he found a half-brother. He repaid his debt to Rochedon's daughter, and freed the knights imprisoned in

Gwenbaus' Forest Perilous. But the thing that had been done at Case Castle could not be undone, and its harvest was already growing.

For a season after Corbenic the adventures came in stranger, lighter shapes, though each was a test. In a hall deep in the wild country he found a company of ladies dancing an endless carole around an ivory throne that bore a golden crown - a dance that had never ceased and never been joined by any knight. Lancelot stepped into the circle and was crowned, and at once the enchanted statue fell and shattered, the spell lifted, and the dancers, freed of their long captivity, blessed his name.

At Gwenbaus' castle stood the enchanted chessboard: a board of gold whose pieces moved of themselves, and which had never been beaten, for it was fated to fall only to the most graceful and best-beloved knight alive. Even Queen Guinevere had played it and lost. Lancelot sat down before it at Logres, with the queen watching, and won; and she gave him a magic gold ring, and the court marvelled. About this time came the gentle episode of Amable, a virgin who loved Lancelot with a chaste and hopeless love, and who knelt not to him but to Guinevere, begging only to be allowed to love him without sin and without claim; and the queen, moved by the purity of it, accepted the bond. Once, at a tournament, Lancelot caught sight of the queen across the field and was so overcome that his strength left him, and King Baudemagus himself had to lead him aside and seat him under a tree until he recovered - so nakedly did his love proclaim itself to all eyes but the king's.

Then the road grew grim again. Lancelot rode out with Bohort, Gaheriet, and Baudemagus to free their companions: Yvain was delivered from a dungeon; Bohort overthrew the giant Malduit; and when they separated, a damsel guided Lancelot to Tericam of the Impenetrable Forest, in whose prison Lionel and Hector and a dozen knights of the Round Table yet languished. They fought long, and Lancelot drove the giant back into his own moat, tore the helm from his head in the water, and split his skull; and the gates of the Impenetrable Forest were opened, and the prisoners came out blinking into the daylight, and the wrong of Carados was answered to the end.

THE PAINTED PRISON

But Morgan le Fay had not finished with him. In the Lost Forest a damsel of hers waylaid him with courtesy and gave him wine, and the wine was drugged; and he woke in a cell of her castle - her third prison for him - and there he remained two winters and a summer, and the world believed him lost.

Lancelot, who could not fight walls, took up a different weapon. Upon the plaster of his cell he began to paint the story of his life: his fostering beneath the lake, his coming to court, his deeds of arms - and, above all and without disguise, his love for Queen Guinevere, scene by scene, with written captions beneath the paintings naming what each figure did and felt. It was confession and defiance at once: let the walls keep what his lips had sworn to hide. And so they did. Long afterward, in the last days of the kingdom, King Arthur would sleep in that very chamber and read the whole story of his wife and his best knight upon the walls - but that belongs to the tale of the death of Arthur, and is not yet.

One morning in summer he looked from his window and saw a rose in bloom below, just beyond his reach; and at the sight of it his heart broke open, and all the strength of his love and his despair came into his hands. He seized the iron bars of the window and wrenched them bodily out of the stone, and let himself down and went free. When Morgan came to the empty cell and saw the painted walls and the torn stone, she crossed herself and said that no man but a fiend could have such strength - and her hatred learned a new fear.

His wanderings after that led him into the Perilous Forest, to the tomb of his own grandfather, King Lancelot for whom he was named. Two lions guarded it; he killed them. Within lay the headless body of the king, and a hermit told the tale: the king's own cousin, the Duke of the White Fortress, had struck off his head as he bent to drink at a spring, and the severed head had flown into the water, which boiled on the instant and burned the murderer's hands from his wrists, while a black cloud and a falling stone crushed him - yet the spring had boiled ever since, and the land laboured under a curse that would endure until the true knight of the Grail should come. Lancelot reached into the boiling fountain and drew out his grandfather's head, and laid it with the body, and buried him beside Queen Marche his grandmother. But the curse he could not end, and the hermit told him why, without softening it: because of his sin with the queen, this adventure, like Symeu's fire and the Broken Sword, was not for him. He saw in those woods a white hart conducted through the trees by four lions, which a hermit afterward glossed for him: Christ and the four evangelists, walking the wilds of Logres. And he met Sir Sarras, from whom he learned tidings that struck him like a blow: a son was born to the best knight in the world and the daughter of King Pelles - a child named Galahad, after Lancelot's own lost baptismal name. He avenged Sarras upon Beylas, the Knight of the Spring, and sent word ahead of him: he would be at court for Pentecost.

He travelled a while in those days with young Mordred, Gawain's brother, and was present at the turning of that dark destiny: before the tournament of Peningues, Mordred learned the truth of his birth - that he was Arthur's son by Arthur's own half-sister - and learned, too, what was foretold of him, that he was born to destroy the kingdom and his father. Lancelot heard the boy receive his fate, and could do nothing; some prophecies are armed against all swords.

THE SIEGE PERILOUS

He returned to Camelot at Pentecost, on the day appointed, and that very day the Round Table gave a terrible sign. Brumant l'Orgueilleus, nephew of King Claudas, scorning Lancelot's warning, sat down in the Siege Perilous - the seat at the Round Table reserved by Merlin's enchantment for the knight who would achieve the Grail - and before the eyes of all the court he was blasted to ashes where he sat. The empty seat kept its silence and its waiting.

Then came the war long owed, the last great war of Lancelot's story and the settling of his inheritance. Claudas of the Waste Land, who in the old days had dispossessed Lancelot's father King Ban and his uncle King Bors of their kingdoms in Gaul, had now laid hands on Elyzabel, the queen's cousin, and held her prisoner. Her demand for justice, borne to his court by Tarquin - once Claudas' own spy, turned her sworn squire - was insolently refused. Thereupon Arthur declared war, not for Lancelot's sake alone but for his own honour and his wife's kin; yet every man in the host knew whose quarrel it truly was, for the lands they went to win back were the lands Lancelot

should have inherited in his cradle.

The host crossed into Gaul, the vanguard under Gawain and good King Baudemagus. It was a hard campaign. Claudas' son Claudin fell upon them by night in ambush, and Lionel and King Yon were taken and held long before they were exchanged. Before the walls of Gaunes the siege dragged on, and there a strange thing befell: Queen Helen, Lancelot's mother, who dwelt in that country, looked down from the walls upon the assailants and recognised her own nephews among them - Bohort and Lionel, the sons of her dead husband's brother, fighting beneath Arthur's banners to win back their fathers' realm. So the war knotted the sundered family together again upon the very ground of its dispossession.

Claudas drew allies to him: Frollo, Rome's governor of Gaul, a proud knight of the old pagan greatness, came to his aid, and King Arthur met him in single combat on Roland's Island and struck off his head - one of the greatest deeds of arms of Arthur's whole reign. After that the war broke Claudas. He fled into exile, and Claudin surrendered Gaunes to Bohort and Lionel, whose heritage it was. Arthur granted the recovered kingdoms of Gaul to Lancelot, to hold and to share with his kin. And Lancelot went at last to the Royal Minster, and knelt to the aged nun who was Queen Helen his mother, and they were reconciled after a lifetime's parting. She died a week later, content, having seen her son.

THE WICKED KNIGHT

At the victory celebrations King Pelles came to court, and brought Elaine with him - and the past rose up. Guinevere had forgiven the first deception, proven to be Brisen's trickery, but jealousy burned in her; she invited Lancelot to her own chamber that night. Brisen struck again: the same enchantment, the same false summons, and Lancelot went bewitched to Elaine's bed. Guinevere, waiting, came to seek him, and found them, and burst into the chamber with such fury that she banished him from the court and from her sight forever.

Lancelot did not answer her. Half-naked as he was, he leaped from the window into the night, and ran into the woods, and his mind went out like a candle. Thus began his second madness, longer and deeper than the first: for two years he wandered Logres filthy, ragged, unrecognizable, living as the beasts live. Elaine, shamed and wronged, turned upon the queen with a bitter truth: that Guinevere was false to her own husband, and that Lancelot would do better to take a lawful wife than to live in mortal sin for a woman who destroyed him. The queen's anger collapsed into repentance almost at once, but it was too late; and Bohort and Hector reproached her openly before the court for driving the flower of chivalry out of his mind. Hector, young Perceval - who here enters the great story for the first time - and Agloval rode out searching; and once, believing himself mortally wounded, Hector told Perceval what the Grail truly was: the vessel of the Last Supper, brought by Joseph of Arimathea into Logres, the holiest thing in the world.

The madman wandered west, and God guided his feet to Corbenic. No one knew him; the court, laughing, made a fool of the ragged wild man at the knighting of Castor, Pelles' nephew. But Elaine found him asleep in the garden, and knew him by the scars of his wounds, and wept over him, and had him carried into the castle and laid before the chamber of the Grail. And there the Holy Vessel was brought out and shown to him through a veil - the very thing his sin barred him

from achieving - and at the sight of it his madness left him, as darkness leaves at dawn. The Grail that condemned him was also the Grail that healed him; such is the mystery at the heart of this book.

King Pelles, for the sake of his daughter and the child, set Lancelot and Elaine upon an island castle called the Isle of Joy, and there Lancelot lived incognito for years - two, some say four - under the name le Chevalier Malfait, the Wicked Knight, defending the island against all comers and defeating them all, while at Corbenic, and later in a convent near Camelot under Pelles' sister, the boy Galahad grew towards his destiny. In that time Bohort came to Corbenic and Elaine showed him the infant, and Bohort wept for joy and prayed that the son might prove as good a knight as his father - a prayer God had already answered with a greater. At last Hector and Perceval tracked the Wicked Knight to his island, and knew him, and brought him home; and the queen received him again, and the lovers were reconciled amid the joy of the whole court, though something in the kingdom had shifted and would not shift back.

So the branch closes at the height of Arthur's glory: the wars won, the fellowship complete, Merlin long sealed away and surviving only in his prophecies, and in a convent near Camelot a youth of about eighteen years who does not yet know what seat awaits him. To that youth, Galahad, a hermit came and foretold his knighting at Whitsuntide, exhorting him to keep his purity; and the next day the same hermit stood before King Arthur and declared that at Whitsuntide the knight would come to court who would end the adventures of the Holy Grail and sit in the Siege Perilous, and he bade the king summon all his barons to witness. With that summons the Book of Lancelot of the Lake ends - and the Queste del Saint Graal, the Quest of the Holy Grail, begins, in which the son will accomplish all that the father, for all his greatness, was barred from achieving.

THE QUEST OF THE HOLY GRAIL

The fourth branch of the Vulgate Cycle - the original trilogy of Lancelot, Quest, and Death of Arthur - and the mystical heart of the whole edifice. Here the world of tournaments gives way to a world of signs: every adventure is a senefiance, a parable in armour, and hermits wait at every crossroads to explain what the knight has failed to understand. This re-telling follows the Old French text as printed in Sommer's edition of the Vulgate, honouring its Vulgate-specific details where later tradition diverges. In the Old French it is called the La Queste del Saint Graal.

THE SIEGE PERILOUS

On the eve of Pentecost, as the court kept the vigil at Camelot, a damsel rode into the hall upon a horse white with sweat and found Lancelot. "Sir knight," she said, "in the name of King Pelles I bid you follow me." And Lancelot, who had never yet refused a summons, armed himself and rode after her through the darkening forest to a nunnery hidden among the trees, where Bohort and Lyonel had already been brought. There three nuns led out a youth, tall and comely, with a face grave beyond his years, and asked that the best knight in the world make him a knight. Lancelot looked on him and marvelled, though he did not know him; for this was Galaad, his own son by the daughter of King Pelles, conceived in enchantment and reared in holiness. All night the youth kept his vigil before the altar, and at dawn Lancelot girded the sword about him and gave him the accolade, and never asked whose son he was.

When they returned to Camelot, the hall was full of murmuring. Fresh letters had appeared that morning upon the empty seat at the Round Table, the seat no man had ever dared to fill: Four hundred and fifty-four years are accomplished since the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and on the day of Pentecost this seat shall find its occupant. Lancelot reckoned the term and knew it fell that very day, and he had the letters covered with a cloth of silk, for he feared what the seat would do to any man who presumed upon it.

Then a squire came running with stranger news. Below the castle, in the river, floated a great stone of red marble, and fixed upright in the stone was a sword, and on the blade were letters of gold: None shall draw me save the best knight in the world. King Arthur wished Lancelot to try, but Lancelot refused. "Sir," he said, "it is not for me; and woe to him who grasps it in pride, for this sword will yet touch some here grievously." So Gauvain tried, at the king's command, and could not move it; and Perceval le Gallois tried, and could not; and the court returned to the hall in wonder and unease.

At the feast, while the first course was being served, all the doors and windows of the hall shut of themselves - yet the hall grew no darker, for a light not of any torch filled it. And through those closed doors came a venerable old man robed in white, leading by the hand a knight in scarlet armour, without shield or sword, and the old man spoke: "Peace be with you. Fair lords, I bring you the Knight Desired, of the lineage of King David and of Joseph of Arimathea, through whom the marvels of this land and of all foreign lands shall be brought to their end." He led the youth - for it was Galaad - to the Siege Perilous, and lifted away the silken cloth, and there all could read the new writing: This is the seat of Galaad. And the youth sat down in it, and no harm came to him, and the hall held its breath like a man who has seen the beginning of an ending.

Afterward the king led Galaad to the river, and the queen and the court went with them, and Galaad laid his hand upon the sword in the floating stone and drew it out as easily as from its own scabbard. "Now I lack nothing," he said, "save a shield." And as he stood there a damsel cried aloud before all the court, to Lancelot: "Yesterday you were the best knight in the world; today there is one better." And she told them that before the day was out, the Holy Grail would appear in that hall.

THE FEAST WHERE NO ONE SPOKE

King Arthur, who understood more than he said, ordered a tournament in the meadows that day, a memorial - for he saw that the fellowship would never again be gathered whole. Galaad, shieldless still, rode into the lists and cast down every knight of the Round Table who came against him, save Lancelot and Perceval. The queen, watching from her gallery, knew by his bearing whose son he was, and said openly that he was Lancelot's; and when it was told to Galaad, he neither confirmed it nor denied it.

That evening, when the knights sat at meat, there came a clap of thunder so great that it seemed the palace must fall, and then a sunbeam pierced the hall and made it sevenfold brighter than before, and every man looked upon his fellows illumined as if by the grace of the Holy Spirit - and no one could speak. Into that silence came the Holy Grail, covered with a cloth of white samite; and no one saw what bore it, nor hand that carried it, nor foot that walked. It passed through the hall,

and as it passed every knight was served the food that his heart most desired, and the hall was filled with the fragrance of all the spices of the earth. Then it was gone, and speech returned to them, and they gave thanks to God with many tears.

It was Gauvain who rose first. "We have been fed," he said, "yet we saw the vessel veiled. I vow before God that tomorrow I shall ride out and quest a year and a day, and longer if need be, until I see the Grail more clearly than it has been shown to me tonight." And when he had sworn it, they all swore it, one after another, until the whole fellowship stood bound.

Then Arthur bowed his head and wept before them all. "Gauvain, Gauvain," he said, "you have betrayed me. You have deprived me of the fairest and most loyal company that ever was in any kingdom - the fellowship of the Round Table. For when they have gone on this quest, they will never meet here again, the most of them, and many will die in it." And the king's grief was a prophecy, though none could turn it aside.

In the morning they heard mass, and one hundred and fifty knights swore upon sacred relics, Galaad first among them. The queen threw herself upon her bed in her sorrow, and when Lancelot promised her a swift return, she answered, "Ah, God! My heart does not say so." All the town of Camelot came out weeping, ladies and maidens and old men, and the knights rode out through the weeping streets in silence. At the castle of Vagan they halted, and there, by the cross, they took off their helmets and commended one another to God; and the fellowship broke apart like a ring opened, each knight riding away alone into the forest, alone as the quest required.

THE WHITE SHIELD AND THE CASTLE OF MAIDENS

On the fifth day Galaad came to an abbey of White Friars, and there, behind the high altar, hung a shield white as snow with a cross of red upon it. The monks warned him that it brought harm to every bearer - yet that same day King Baudemagus, who lodged there, took it down in his pride and rode with it into the forest, where a White Knight met him and struck him grievously from his horse. The White Knight took up the shield and gave it to a squire, saying: "Bear this to Sir Galaad, the good knight, and greet him from me." For the shield was no common harness. It had been the shield of King Evalach of Sarras - he who is called King Mordrain - and upon it the dying Josephe, son of Joseph of Arimathea and the first Christian bishop, had traced the cross with his own blood, and it was kept in waiting for the last knight of that lineage. When Galaad set it on his arm, it fitted him as his own skin.

That evening, in the abbey's cemetery, a voice came groaning from a tomb so dreadfully that men dared not approach. Galaad raised the stone, and a fiend leaped out in the likeness of a man and fled shrieking, powerless against the shield; and afterward a holy man expounded the senefiance: the tomb was the hard hearts of the Jews, the souls of the Old Law who awaited deliverance, and the voice was the voice of Christ's soul crying out in the harrowing of hell. So it was with all the adventures of the quest - each one a sealed letter that only the religious could read.

Galaad knighted his squire Melyant, son of the King of Denmark, and soon after they came to a fork in the road where a cross bore writing: the right-hand road for any knight, the left-hand road reserved for the best knight in the world. Melyant, proud of his new spurs, insisted on the left. There, in a wild place, he found a golden crown set upon a seat, and covetousness moved him to

take it - and straightway a knight lanced him through the body. Galaad came and defeated the attackers and bore the wounded boy to a hermitage; and the hermit told Melyant plainly that his pride had taken the left road and his covetousness the crown, and that the spiritual order he had just received outweighed all earthly prowess. The boy lived, and was wiser.

Then Galaad rode to the Severn's bank, where stood a cursed castle held by seven brothers, wicked knights who had slain Duke Lynor and coveted his daughter, and who worked their will on all the country round. From morning until high noon one knight fought seven, Galaad against the brothers, in the castle court, and at last he routed them and they fled. Then the gates opened and the captive maidens of the castle streamed out like souls released from bondage, weeping and crying blessings upon their deliverer. And the exegesis followed, as it always did: the castle was Hell, the seven brothers were the seven deadly sins, and the maidens were the souls of the just, set free by the one who came down into their prison.

THE DESERT AND THE SEA

Perceval le Gallois, riding alone, came to a recluse's cell and found there his own aunt, who had once been Queen of the Waste Land and was now an anchoress vowed to silence and prayer. She told him who the knight of the scarlet armour was, and the prophecy that governed all their roads: three should achieve the quest - two virgins and one chaste man - and one of them should surpass his father as the lion surpasses the leopard. Then she directed him towards Corbenic, and he went out into the waste places to be tried.

Twenty knights fell upon him in the forest, and he would have died there had not a knight in strange armour - Galaad, though Perceval never knew it - scattered them and vanished. Unhorsed and afoot, Perceval prayed through the night; and at midnight a woman offered him a splendid black horse, and he mounted, and the horse flew with him towards a raging river. Only at the water's edge did Perceval make the sign of the cross - and the horse plunged into the flood in a burst of flame, for it was the devil himself, and the woman had been no woman.

Marooned now upon a barren rock in the sea, Perceval watched a lion fight a fire-breathing serpent, and aided the lion, and the beast became his companion, gentle as a hound; and in dream it was shown him that two ladies had ridden those beasts, the New Law upon the lion and the Old upon the serpent. Days later a ship of marvellous richness came to the rock, and out of it stepped a lady of great beauty, who set a pavilion for him and gave him wine, and spoke softly to him until he had nearly gone with her to her bed. But as he moved he glimpsed the red-cross pommel of his sword, and he made the sign of the cross - and the pavilion, the ship, the wine, the lady dissolved into smoke and stench, and a wailing went out over the water; for she was the master devil, come in his fairest garment. Perceval, shamed by how near he had fallen, wounded his own thigh in penitence, and the lion lay down beside him and guarded his sleep.

HARDER THAN STONE

Lancelot's road was the hardest of all, for he carried his sin with him like a second harness. He came to a chapel and found its door shut against him, though he hauled at the ring with all his strength; and he lay down to sleep outside, by a stone cross. In the night, between waking and

sleeping, he saw the chapel door open of itself and a light come forth brighter than the sun, and the Holy Vessel borne in the air by unseen hands, and before it a sick knight lying upon a litter, who cried for healing and was made whole. Lancelot strained to rise and enter, and could not stir a limb - because of sin, a voice said - and afterward the healed knight's squire, finding him like a dead man, took his horse and sword and helmet as forfeit. And as he sat there stripped, the voice spoke once more, and it was the coldest sentence ever pronounced upon him: "Lancelot, harder than stone, more bitter than wood, more barren than a fig-tree, get thee hence from this place."

He went, and found a hermit, and the hermit expounded the three names - the stone that feels nothing, the tree that bears nothing - and wrung from him what no confessor had ever wrung: the whole account of his life with the queen. Lancelot confessed it all, weeping, and vowed chastity, and took upon his body a hair shirt, and ate bread and drank water, and rode on in penance.

But penance is not achievement. Coming upon a tournament where black knights were being beaten by white, his old habit stirred, and he took the side of the black - and for the first time in his life he was worn down, unhorsed, and captured. A recluse told him afterward what he had done: he had taken the party of sinners against the party of heaven, as he had always done, in all his jousting. And another hermit unrolled for him the long scroll of his lineage, showing how he descended from the company of Joseph of Arimathea through Nascien, and how from his own line, grafted onto the lineage of the Grail, had sprung Galaad - so that Lancelot learned that his son was the flower of two genealogies, the Arthurian and the divine, and that he himself stood between them like a bridge the better man must cross. He wandered in penance until the river Maroise penned him against its banks, and there his road turned towards the sea.

AN OLD TREE WITHOUT FRUIT

Gauvain rode long and found no adventure at all. This was itself the adventure, though he could not read it; for the hermits explained later that the adventures of that time were signs and demonstrations of the Holy Grail - not of killing men and knights, but of spiritual things - and they did not show themselves to such as him.

In a ruined chapel, Gauvain and Hector des Mares dreamed. Gauvain saw one hundred and fifty spotted bulls gathered at a rack, fouled with their stains, and among them only three were white - two without spot, and one a little stained. Hector saw Lancelot stripped of his armour and set upon an ass, coming to a spring that vanished at his lips. Waking, they beheld a hand wrapped in red silk pass through the chapel bearing a bridle and a burning taper, and a voice rebuked them for their want of faith.

The next day Gauvain, hungry for a joust as a drunkard for drink, spurred against a knight who cried "Joust!" and lanced him through the body - and the knight was Yvain li Avoltres, his own companion of the Round Table, whom he carried dying to an abbey and buried with such grief as he was capable of.

At last they found the hermit Nascien, the chief exegete of the quest, who had been Seraphe in the world long ago, and he read their dreams to them like an open book. The hundred and fifty bulls were the questers, stained with sin; the three white were Galaad and Perceval, spotless, and Bohort, once stained and long since cleansed. The vanishing spring was the Grail itself, of which

Lancelot might not drink; his punishment was foretold - four and twenty days he would lie senseless when he came too near. And to Gauvain, Nascien said the hardest word of that hard quest: "You are an old tree that bears neither leaf nor fruit." Gauvain declined the penance offered him, and he and Hector turned back towards Camelot with nothing in their hands but shame.

THE FIRE BETWEEN BROTHERS

Bohort - whom later ages call Bors - had been told by a monk that he would be one of the three, because he had kept his flesh nearly clean, one lapse only in all his life; and he took up an austerity of bread and water and did not break it. He championed a young lady disinherited by her elder sister, and defeated for her sake the giant Priadan the Black; and the monks read the senefiance: the younger sister was the New Law, and the elder was the Old.

Then came the trials that measured him. He saw, at one moment and in one place, his brother Lyonel dragged away by armed men, beaten with thorns until the blood ran - and a maiden dragged by her hair towards rape. He could save only one. Bohort reasoned in anguish that his brother was a knight and could endure, but that a maiden's virginity, once taken, could never be recovered; and he saved the maiden first. When he returned, he found what seemed to be Lyonel's corpse, and a priest who blamed him for his brother's death - and all of it was the devil's deceit, for Lyonel lived.

Afterward a lady of surpassing beauty begged his love, and when he refused her, she mounted the battlements of her tower with twelve gentlewomen and swore they would all leap to their deaths unless he yielded. Bohort looked upon them and judged it better that all their souls should perish than that his one soul should be damned; and they leaped; and he made the sign of the cross - and there was thunder, and devilish crying, and the tower and the lady and the twelve gentlewomen vanished like breath from cold iron. They had all been fiends, and the seductress had been Lucifer himself.

But the last trial was real. Lyonel, maddened by the belief that Bohort had abandoned him, attacked his brother in arms; and Bohort would not fight him. An aged hermit threw himself between them, shielding Bohort with his body, and Lyonel struck off his head. Colgrevice of the Round Table, coming upon them, intervened, and Lyonel slew him too. At last, weeping, Bohort raised his sword against his own brother - and a voice from heaven cried "Flee, Bohort," and a fiery brand fell burning between them. Lyonel fell as dead, and the voice commanded Bohort to go to the sea; and there a ship covered with white silk cast off of itself with him aboard, and he found Perceval waiting on its deck.

SOLOMON'S SHIP

Galaad, guided by a damsel through the waste lands, came at last to that same ship, and read the warning written in Chaldee letters upon it: none but the perfectly faithful might enter and live. There the damsel revealed herself to Perceval - she was his own sister, daughter of King Pellehen, and all four went aboard together, and the ship went out of itself over the sea.

Within they found wonders laid out like words in a book: a bed with three posts of natural colour, one white as snow, one red as blood, one green as emerald, and upon the bed a crown of gold,

and a marvellous sword girt about with a poor belt of hempen tow. A letter expounded it all. The posts had grown from a branch that Eve carried out of Paradise, from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: it had grown white while Eve yet kept her virginity, green when she lost it, and red at the slaying of Abel. Solomon, warned in a dream that the last descendant of his line would surpass all knights, had built the ship with his wife's counsel, and laid upon the bed the sword of his father David. Long after, Nascien had broken that sword upon a giant; King Mordrain had re-welded it; and King Parlan had drawn it in presumption, and for that drawing had been lanced through both thighs - and so lay maimed these many years, the Cripple King, waiting for a healing not yet born.

The sword hung by its wretched belt until a worthy maiden should re-hang it. Then Perceval's sister brought forth cords she had woven of gold and silk and her own hair - she had shorn her head on the very Pentecost that Galaad was made knight - and she made a girdle for the sword, and named it the Sword with the Strange Belt, and its scabbard Memory of Blood, and girded it on Galaad with her own hands. "Now," she said, "I care not when I die."

She did not have long to wait. The ship brought them to a castle whose chatelaine lay sick of leprosy, and the custom of the place was monstrous: every virgin who passed was bled into a silver basin, for it was said that only the blood of a royal virgin could cure the lady. The three companions fought the castle's people - ten knights, and then sixty - until night made a truce of it. And when the maiden understood the misery of the sick lady, she consented freely to the custom. "Here is my blood," she said, "which I desire to shed for the love of God"; and she charged them that her body be set adrift in a boat, and that they suffer it to be carried to Sarras, where Galaad and Perceval would also lie. In the morning she was bled into the silver basin, and as her life ran out she received her Saviour, and so died; and the leper lady, washed in the blood, was made whole. They laid the maiden in the boat with a writing that told her whole story, and the sea took her.

That night a storm came down from God upon the castle of the custom - thunder and lightning and a wind like the world's end - and it blasted the castle and slew every one of its defenders, in revenge for the blood of the virtuous maiden, sparing only the cemetery where twelve royal maidens, bled before her, lay in their tombs. And the three companions, going each his own way, parted until the appointed reunion at the Cripple King's court.

THE DOOR THAT BURNED

Lancelot, released from the river, heard a voice in the night bidding him enter a boat that waited at the shore. In it he found the body of Perceval's sister lying in state, and the letter that told her story, and he mourned over her as over his own kin. Then the voice sent Galaad aboard, and father and son voyaged together for six months and more, landing upon wild islands, doing marvels, and serving God - the only long season of peace Lancelot was ever given with his son - until a knight in white armour came and summoned Galaad away to the road that only he could finish.

Lancelot sailed on alone and was set ashore below Corbenic, the castle of the rich Fisher King. At the gate two lions barred his way and he beat them back; and at midnight, within the castle, he came to a chamber whose door was locked, and from within it shone a light as though the sun

were housed there. A voice forbade him to enter. He looked through the doorway and saw the Holy Vessel set upon a silver table, and angels serving about it with censers, and an aged priest standing at the mass, and at the elevation of the host he saw, or thought he saw, three figures in the air where the priest lifted the body of the Lord. And thinking that the celebrant sank beneath a weight too great for him, Lancelot - out of courtesy, out of the old reflex of aid - stepped across the threshold to help him.

A breath of fire blasted him, and unseen hands took him up and cast him out of the chamber, and he fell as one dead. Four and twenty days and nights he lay senseless, as Nascien had foretold - one day for every year, men said, of his sin. When he woke, he lamented that he had been wakened at all, for in that sleep he had tasted bliss; and he named himself to King Pelles, and heard from the king's own mouth that his achievement ended there, at the threshold, forever. So Lancelot turned back towards Camelot to confess his failure; and there the old life waited for him, and the queen's eyes, and in time the hair shirt lay forgotten - for his repentance had been real, but not final, and on that single hinge the whole ruin of the kingdom would one day turn.

THE MARVEL OF MARVELS

Galaad, meanwhile, finished the adventures of the kingdom. To King Mordrain - Evalach of Sarraz, stricken blind and wounded centuries before for approaching the Grail too boldly - he came as morning comes: the ancient king's eyes opened at his approach, and he called Galaad the lily for his virginity and the rose for his charity, and died in the young knight's arms, and his wounds were found healed. Galaad touched the Boiling Well and its waters went still, for there was no heat of lust in him; and at an abbey in Gorre, where Lancelot had once failed, he quenched the fiery tomb of his ancestor Simeon, whose soul had burned there three hundred and fifty-four years, and set it free.

Five full years the quest had run, and the adventures of Logres were ended. Galaad and Perceval met Bohort at a crossroads, and the three rode together to Corbenic, where old King Pelles wept over his grandson. There Elyezer, the king's son, brought out the sword that had been broken when it wounded Joseph of Arimathea in the thigh; Bohort tried to mend it and could not; Perceval tried and could not; Galaad set the two pieces together and they joined seamlessly, and the sword was given to Bohort to keep.

Then a voice emptied the hall of all save the questers, and nine knights entered from foreign lands - three from Gaul, among them Claudin son of Claudas; three from Ireland; three from Denmark - so that with the three companions they were twelve, like the apostles. And angels carried into the hall a bishop who had been dead three hundred years, with letters written upon his brow: Behold Josephe, the first Christian bishop, whom Our Lord anointed in the city of Sarraz. They set him at the silver table, and with him came the Bleeding Lance, whose blood dripped down into the Vessel. At the elevation, a child with a face like flame descended into the bread, and the bread visibly became flesh. And then Christ Himself came forth out of the Vessel - the very bowl from which Jesus Christ had eaten of the lamb on Easter Day - naked and bleeding as from the cross, and gave each of the twelve communion with His own wounded hands.

He told them that the Grail would leave the kingdom of Logres forever, because its claims were no longer served or honoured among so worldly a people; and He charged Galaad to heal the Cripple King with the blood of the lance, and to take Perceval and Bohort to the ship of Solomon; and He warned them that all should die in that service save one. So Galaad anointed the thighs of King Parlan with the lance's blood, and the Maimed King rose up whole, and went to live among the White Friars until his end. The nine foreign knights departed weeping, bearing Galaad's greetings to Lancelot his father.

The three found Solomon's ship waiting, and within it the silver table and the Grail beneath its cover of red samite; and the ship bore them over the sea to the spiritual city, Sarras. There Galaad, kneeling, prayed that God would take him out of this life at the hour of His own choosing, and a voice granted the prayer. At the city's gate he commanded a cripple of ten years' standing to rise, and the man rose; and they found that the little funeral boat had come before them, and they buried Perceval's sister with honours befitting a king's daughter.

Escorant, the pagan king of Sarras, cast the three companions into prison, and there the Grail visited them daily and fed them for a year. When Escorant lay dying he sent for them and begged their pardon, and they forgave him freely, and he died unlamented. Then a heavenly voice named the youngest of the three king of the city, and the unwilling Galaad was crowned, and he made an ark of gold and precious stones to house the silver table.

One year to the day from his crowning, at dawn, the three came before the table for the mass, and Josephe himself, borne down from heaven, celebrated it. He bade Galaad look within the Vessel. And Galaad looked - and trembled in all his limbs, as mortal flesh must tremble when it faces the spirit unveiled - and saw what no tongue may tell, the marvel of marvels. "Lord," he said, "I thank Thee that Thou hast suffered me to see what my heart desired; now I pray Thee, in this bliss, let me pass from this life." He received the sacrament, and rose, and kissed Perceval and Bohort, and his last words in the world were these: "Salute for me my father, my lord Lancelot." Then he bowed his head before the table and yielded up his soul, and a great company of angels bore it away rejoicing.

And in that hour a hand came down from heaven and took the Holy Grail, and the lance with it, and carried them up out of the sight of men; and since that day no man has been bold enough to say that he has seen the Holy Grail.

Galaad was buried beside the maiden in the spiritual city. Perceval put on the habit of a hermit and lived a year and three days more, and then died, and Bohort laid him with the other two. Then Bohort, the last Grail knight in the world, stood alone in a foreign temple with three graves, and turned his face towards the sea. He sailed home to a diminished court, and there he related the Adventures of the Holy Grail as he had witnessed them; and King Arthur's clerks wrote them down, and the rolls were kept at Salisbury, whence - so the book itself declares - Master Walter Map drew his history for the love of his king.

So ends the Queste, with the Round Table already hollowed by its losses and the Grail gone from Logres forever. Bohort's tale is written; but Lancelot is once more in the queen's chamber, Gauvain's unavenged dead cry out from their graves, and the grief Arthur spoke at the oath still waits upon its

hour. What remains is the ending itself - the ruin of the fellowship and the death of the king - told in the last branch of the trilogy, the Mort le Roi Artu.

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 Guenievre, 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 Guenevieve, 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 Guenevieve 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 Benoic 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 Gaheriet, 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 Guenievre 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, Guenievre - 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