



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

LANCELOT OF THE LAKE

Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac

Volume of eight - Book IV, Part 1 - 10 chapters

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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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.

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