



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

LANCELOT OF THE LAKE

Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac

Volume of eight - Book V, Part 2 - 10 chapters

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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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 Patrides 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.

Claudias 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.

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