



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE HISTORY OF THE HOLY GRAIL

L'Estoire del Saint Graal

Volume of eight - Book I - 10 chapters

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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CONTENTS

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 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 Sarra 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 Celidaine, 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 Celidaine 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. Celidaine 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; Celidaine 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. Celidaine 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 gateway. 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.

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