



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE QUEST OF THE HOLY GRAIL

La Queste del Saint Graal

Volume of eight - Book VI - 10 chapters

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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THE QUEST OF THE HOLY GRAIL

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

THE SIEGE PERILOUS

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

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

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

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

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

THE FEAST WHERE NO ONE SPOKE

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

That evening, when the knights sat at meat, there came a clap of thunder so great that it seemed the palace must fall, and then a sunbeam pierced the hall and made it sevenfold brighter than before, and every man looked upon his fellows illumined as if by the grace of the Holy Spirit - and no one could speak. Into that silence came the Holy Grail, covered with a cloth of white samite; and no one saw what bore it, nor hand that carried it, nor foot that walked. It passed through the hall, and as it passed every knight was served the food that his heart most desired, and the hall was filled with the fragrance of all the spices of the earth. Then it was gone, and speech returned to them, and they gave thanks to God with many tears.

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

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

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

THE WHITE SHIELD AND THE CASTLE OF MAIDENS

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

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

Galaad knighted his squire Melyant, son of the King of Denmark, and soon after they came to a fork in the road where a cross bore writing: the right-hand road for any knight, the left-hand road reserved for the best knight in the world. Melyant, proud of his new spurs, insisted on the left. There, in a wild place, he found a golden crown set upon a seat, and covetousness moved him to take it - and straightway a knight lanced him through the body. Galaad came and defeated the attackers and bore the wounded boy to a hermitage; and the hermit told Melyant plainly that his pride had taken the left road and his covetousness the crown, and that the spiritual order he had just received outweighed all earthly prowess. The boy lived, and was wiser.

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

THE DESERT AND THE SEA

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

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

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

HARDER THAN STONE

Lancelot's road was the hardest of all, for he carried his sin with him like a second harness. He came to a chapel and found its door shut against him, though he hauled at the ring with all his strength; and he lay down to sleep outside, by a stone cross. In the night, between waking and sleeping, he saw the chapel door open of itself and a light come forth brighter than the sun, and the Holy Vessel borne in the air by unseen hands, and before it a sick knight lying upon a litter, who cried for healing and was made whole. Lancelot strained to rise and enter, and could not stir a limb - because of sin, a voice said - and afterward the healed knight's squire, finding him like a dead man, took his horse and sword and helmet as forfeit. And as he sat there stripped, the voice spoke once more, and it was the coldest sentence ever pronounced upon him: "Lancelot, harder than stone, more bitter than wood, more barren than a fig-tree, get thee hence from this place."

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

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

AN OLD TREE WITHOUT FRUIT

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

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

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

At last they found the hermit Nascien, the chief exegete of the quest, who had been Seraphe in the world long ago, and he read their dreams to them like an open book. The hundred and fifty bulls were the questers, stained with sin; the three white were Galaad and Perceval, spotless, and Bohort, once stained and long since cleansed. The vanishing spring was the Grail itself, of which Lancelot might not drink; his punishment was foretold - four and twenty days he would lie senseless when he came too near. And to Gauvain, Nascien said the hardest word of that hard quest: "You are an old tree that bears neither leaf nor fruit." Gauvain declined the penance offered him, and he and Hector turned back towards Camelot with nothing in their hands but shame.

THE FIRE BETWEEN BROTHERS

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

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

Afterward a lady of surpassing beauty begged his love, and when he refused her, she mounted the battlements of her tower with twelve gentlewomen and swore they would all leap to their deaths unless he yielded. Bohort looked upon them and judged it better that all their souls should perish

than that his one soul should be damned; and they leaped; and he made the sign of the cross - and there was thunder, and devilish crying, and the tower and the lady and the twelve gentlewomen vanished like breath from cold iron. They had all been fiends, and the seductress had been Lucifer himself.

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

SOLOMON'S SHIP

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

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

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

She did not have long to wait. The ship brought them to a castle whose chatelaine lay sick of leprosy, and the custom of the place was monstrous: every virgin who passed was bled into a silver basin, for it was said that only the blood of a royal virgin could cure the lady. The three companions fought the castle's people - ten knights, and then sixty - until night made a truce of it. And when the maiden understood the misery of the sick lady, she consented freely to the custom. "Here is my blood," she said, "which I desire to shed for the love of God"; and she charged them that her body be set adrift in a boat, and that they suffer it to be carried to Sarras, where Galaad

and Perceval would also lie. In the morning she was bled into the silver basin, and as her life ran out she received her Saviour, and so died; and the leper lady, washed in the blood, was made whole. They laid the maiden in the boat with a writing that told her whole story, and the sea took her.

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

THE DOOR THAT BURNED

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

Lancelot sailed on alone and was set ashore below Corbenic, the castle of the rich Fisher King. At the gate two lions barred his way and he beat them back; and at midnight, within the castle, he came to a chamber whose door was locked, and from within it shone a light as though the sun were housed there. A voice forbade him to enter. He looked through the doorway and saw the Holy Vessel set upon a silver table, and angels serving about it with censers, and an aged priest standing at the mass, and at the elevation of the host he saw, or thought he saw, three figures in the air where the priest lifted the body of the Lord. And thinking that the celebrant sank beneath a weight too great for him, Lancelot - out of courtesy, out of the old reflex of aid - stepped across the threshold to help him.

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

THE MARVEL OF MARVELS

Galaad, meanwhile, finished the adventures of the kingdom. To King Mordrain - Evalach of Sarra, stricken blind and wounded centuries before for approaching the Grail too boldly - he came as morning comes: the ancient king's eyes opened at his approach, and he called Galaad the lily for his virginity and the rose for his charity, and died in the young knight's arms, and his wounds were found healed. Galaad touched the Boiling Well and its waters went still, for there was no heat of

lust in him; and at an abbey in Gorre, where Lancelot had once failed, he quenched the fiery tomb of his ancestor Simeon, whose soul had burned there three hundred and fifty-four years, and set it free.

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

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

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

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

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

One year to the day from his crowning, at dawn, the three came before the table for the mass, and Josephe himself, borne down from heaven, celebrated it. He bade Galaad look within the Vessel. And Galaad looked - and trembled in all his limbs, as mortal flesh must tremble when it faces the

spirit unveiled - and saw what no tongue may tell, the marvel of marvels. "Lord," he said, "I thank Thee that Thou hast suffered me to see what my heart desired; now I pray Thee, in this bliss, let me pass from this life." He received the sacrament, and rose, and kissed Perceval and Bohort, and his last words in the world were these: "Salute for me my father, my lord Lancelot." Then he bowed his head before the table and yielded up his soul, and a great company of angels bore it away rejoicing.

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

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

So ends the Queste, with the Round Table already hollowed by its losses and the Grail gone from Logres forever. Bohort's tale is written; but Lancelot is once more in the queen's chamber, Gauvain's unavenged dead cry out from their graves, and the grief Arthur spoke at the oath still waits upon its hour. What remains is the ending itself - the ruin of the fellowship and the death of the king - told in the last branch of the trilogy, the Mort le Roi Artu.

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