

70 Sir Perceval on the Grail Quest

Now the tale leaves Sir Lancelot and turns to Sir Perceval of Wales.

Now the story goes that when Sir Lancelot had ridden after Sir Galahad, as the adventures recounted above tell, Sir Perceval turned back to the recluse, hoping to receive information about the knight that Sir Lancelot followed. He kneeled at her window; the recluse opened it and asked Sir Perceval what he wanted. V VI.3; C XIV.1

"Madame," he said, "I am a knight of King Arthur's court and my name is Sir Perceval of Wales."

When the recluse heard his name she felt great joy, for she loved him more than any other knight—as she ought, since she was his aunt. Then she commanded the gates of her enclosure to be opened to him and he had a wonderful welcome, as warm as she could provide to him according to what lay within her power. In the morning Sir Perceval went to the recluse and asked her if she knew the knight with the white shield.

"Sir," she said, "why do you wish to know?"

"Truly madame," said Sir Perceval, "my heart will never be at ease until I know to what fellowship that knight belongs and how I may fight with him; I cannot leave him be so easily, for I have been somewhat shamed by our first encounter."

"Ah, Sir Perceval," she said, "you wish to fight with him? I see that you have a great desire to be slain, just as your father was slain through his recklessness."

"Madame, it seems from your words that you know me well."

"Yes," she said, "I well ought to know you, for I am your aunt. Although I am in this humble place, at one time I was known as the Queen of the Wastelands, and I was reputed to be the richest queen in the world. But my riches never pleased me half as much as my poverty does now."

Then Sir Perceval wept with emotion when he knew this was his aunt. "Ah, fair nephew," she said, "when did you last hear news of your mother?"

"Truly," he said, "I have heard none, although I often dream of her in my sleep. I do not know whether she is dead or alive."

"Indeed, fair nephew, your mother is dead. After you departed from her she became so sorrowful that as soon as she made her next confession, she died."

"Now God have mercy on her soul!" said Sir Perceval. "I have great sorrow to hear this; but all of us must die one day. Now, fair aunt, who is that knight? I believe it must be the same knight who bore the red armor on Whitsunday."

"Indeed," she said, "that is he, for he ought by rights to always wear red armor. That same knight has no peer; all that he does is worked as if by a miracle, and he shall never be overcome by any earthly man's hand."

C XIV.2

"Also, Merlin made the Round Table as a symbol of the roundness of the world; men should understand it thus. For all the world, Christian and heathen, come to the Round Table. When they are chosen to be of the fellowship of the Round Table they think themselves more blessed and honored than if they had received half the world. You have seen that many have forsaken fathers and mothers, and all their kin, and their wives and children, so that they may join your fellowship."

"You yourself are an example of this, for since you departed from your mother, you have never returned to see her since you found yourself in fellowship with the knights of the Round Table. When Merlin created the Round Table, he said, 'The truth of the Holy Grail will be made known by the fellowship of the Round Table.' Men asked him how they might know which were the ones who might achieve the Holy Grail. Then he said, 'There are three white bulls who shall achieve it. Two of them shall be virgins and the third shall be chaste. One of those three will exceed the deeds of his father in the way that the lion exceeds the leopard in strength and hardiness.' Those who heard Merlin say this said, 'Since there shall be such a knight, you should create with your magic a seat in which no man can sit except for him who will surpass all other knights.' Then Merlin answered that he would do this, and then he made the Seat Perilous in which Galahad sat at the feast this past Whitsunday."

"Now, madame," said Sir Perceval, "I have heard enough from you that I will gladly never have ado with Sir Galahad except through acts of goodness. For the love of God, fair aunt, can you tell me where I might find him? I would very much love to be in fellowship with him."

"Fair nephew," she said, "you must ride to a castle, which is called the Castle Goothe, where his first cousin lives. There you may stay this night. As he instructs you, follow after Sir Galahad as fast as you can. If his cousin can tell you no tidings of him, ride straight to the Castle Corbenic where the maimed king is lying, and there you shall certainly hear news of him."

C XIV.3

Then Sir Perceval departed from his aunt, and each made great sorrow at their parting. He rode until evening, when he heard a clock strike the hour, and then he became aware of a house enclosed by walls and surrounded by deep ditches. He knocked at the gate. He was admitted; he dismounted and then was led into a chamber, where he was soon unarmed.

He enjoyed warm hospitality all that night. In the morning he heard mass, and in the chapel he found a priest waiting at the altar, and to his right he saw a pew enclosed with iron. Behind the altar was a fair, rich bed, covered in silk and gold. Then Sir Perceval real-

ized that a man or woman was lying in that bed, but he could not tell which for the person's face was covered. Then he stopped looking about him and paid attention to the service.

When it came time for the consecration of the bread and wine, he saw that person lying in the bed sit up and uncover his face. He seemed to be a very old man with a crown of gold upon his head; his shoulders were bare, as was the rest of his upper body, down to his navel. Then Sir Perceval saw that the man's body had many great wounds, on his shoulders, arms and face. The man raised his hands toward the host and cried, "Fair sweet Lord Jesus Christ, do not forget me!" He did not lie down again, but remained in prayer; he seemed to be three hundred years old.

When the mass was over the priest took the communion host and bore it to the sick king. When he had received it, he took off his crown and commanded that it be set on the altar.

Then Sir Perceval asked one of the monks who he was. "Sir," said the good man, "you have heard much about Joseph of Arimathea—how he was sent by Jesus Christ into this land to teach and preach the holy Christian faith, and how because of that he suffered much persecution at the hands of the enemies of Christ. In the city of Sarras he converted a king who was named Evelake. This king came with Joseph into this land, and ever he wished to be where the Holy Grail was; one time he came so close to it that Our Lord was displeased with him, but still he followed it more and more, until God struck him almost totally blind. Then the good king cried out for mercy, and said, 'Fair lord, do not let me die until a good knight of my blood, nine generations descended from me, comes; I wish to see openly he who shall achieve the Holy Grail so that I might embrace him.'

"When the king had thus said his prayers, he heard a voice that said, 'Your prayers have been heard, and you shall not die until he has embraced you. When that knight comes you will be able to see clearly again and your wounds shall be healed; until then, they shall never close.' Thus this is what befell King Evelake, and this king has lived a holy life for four hundred years. And men now say that the knight who shall heal him is in this court. Sir," said the good man, "I pray you, tell me what knight you are, and if you are a knight of King Arthur's court and the Round Table."

C XIV.4

"Yes, indeed I am, and my name is Sir Perceval of Wales." When the good man heard his name, he was very happy that he had come there.

Then Sir Perceval departed and rode until the hour of noon. Then, in a valley, he encountered twenty men-at-arms who were bearing a knight who had been slain. When they saw Sir Perceval they asked him from whence he had come. When he said "From the court of King Arthur," they all cried at once—

"Slay him!"

Then Sir Perceval smote the first knight to the earth and killed his horse as it lay on top of him. Then seven of the knights attacked him at once, raining blows upon his shield, while the others killed his horse underneath him. He fell to the earth and would have surely been killed or taken prisoner had not the good knight Sir Galahad, wearing red armor, come into those parts by chance.

When he saw all those knights attacking one knight, he cried, "Spare that knight's life!" Then he turned toward the twenty men-at-arms and rode at them as fast as his horse could go, with his spear poised. He smote the first knight to the earth, horse and man. When his spear was broken, he drew his sword and smote on the right hand and on the left such that it was a marvel to see. At every stroke he defeated one of the knights so that he could fight no more, and one by one they each fled into the forest, and Sir Galahad followed them.

When Sir Perceval saw him chase after them, he was very unhappy that he had no horse, for he well knew that it was Sir Galahad who had helped him. He cried aloud, "Fair knight, wait and allow me to thank you, for you have done much for me!" But ever Sir Galahad rode quickly away, and soon he was out of his sight. As fast as he could, Sir Perceval ran after him on foot, calling out.

Then he met with a young yeoman who was riding on a hackney; in his right hand he held the lead for a great steed who was blacker than any he had ever seen.

"Ah, fair friend," said Sir Perceval, "if ever I could do anything for you, or be your knight in any place you need me to be, I would as long as you would lend me that black steed so that I might overtake a knight who is riding ahead of me."

"Sir," said the yeoman, "that I cannot do, for the horse belongs to a man who would slay me if I did that."

"Alas," said Sir Perceval, "I have never had such great sorrow as I have now for losing yonder knight."

"Sir," said the yeoman, "I am very sorry for you, for a good horse would seem to be fitting for such a man as you, but I dare not give you this horse—you could have him only if you took him from me by force."

"That I will not do," said Sir Perceval.

So they departed, and Sir Perceval sat down under a tree and made sorrow out of measure. As he sat there, a knight came riding by on the horse the yeoman had led, and he was fully armed.

C XIV.5

Immediately after came the yeoman, riding as fast as he could, and he asked Sir Perceval if he had seen any knight riding on his black steed.

"Yes, sir, indeed! Why do you ask?"

"Ah, sir! That steed has been taken from me by force, and because of that my lord will slay me, no matter what I do or where I go."

"Well," said Sir Perceval, "what would you have me do? You can see very well that I am on foot. If I had a good horse, I would bring the other horse back again."

"Sir," said the yeoman, "take my hackney and do the best you can; I shall follow you on foot to see how you do."

Then Sir Perceval mounted the hackney and rode as fast as he could. At length, he saw the knight and cried, "Knight, turn and face me!"

The knight turned and rode against Sir Perceval with his spear raised. He struck the hackney right through the chest and the horse fell down dead to the earth. Sir Perceval had a great fall himself, and the other knight rode away.

Then Sir Perceval was furious and cried, "Abide, wicked knight! Coward! False-hearted knight! Turn back and fight with me on foot." The knight did not answer, but went on his way.

When Sir Perceval saw that he would not turn back, he cast away his shield, helm and sword and said, "Now I truly am a wretch—cursed and most unhappy of all other knights." He was in this sorrowful state all that day until night. Then he felt faint and lay down and slept until it was midnight.

Then he awoke and saw before him a woman who said to him severely, "Sir Perceval, what are you doing here?"

"I do neither good nor ill."

"If you will promise me," she said, "that you will do what I ask when I summon you, I shall lend you my own horse, which will bear you wherever you wish to go." Sir Perceval was glad of her offer and promised to do what she desired. "Then wait here and I shall go and fetch you a horse." She returned soon after and brought with her a horse so black it seemed a fiendish steed.

When Sir Perceval beheld that horse, he marveled at how large he was and how fine his trappings were. Although he was not feeling strong, he leapt upon him without concern for himself.

As soon as he was mounted, he spurred the horse toward the forest; the moon shone clear. Within an hour he had traveled four days' journey. He came to a rough river that roared along, and the horse would have borne him into it.

When Sir Perceval came near to the edge of the river, he saw that the water was so rough, he didn't think he would be able to pass over it. He made the sign of the cross on his forehead.

C XIV.6

When the fiend sensed that Sir Perceval had made the sign of the cross, he shook Sir Perceval from his back and went into the water roaring and making great complaints; and it seemed to Sir Perceval that the water was burning.

Then Sir Perceval realized that the horse had been a fiend which would have brought him to perdition. He then commended himself to God and prayed that Our Lord keep him from all temptation. He prayed thus all night, until it was the morning of the next day.

He saw then that he was on a wild mountain which was surrounded by the sea, as far as he could see; there was no civilized place where he could rest, but only wild beasts everywhere.

He went down into a valley, and there he saw a serpent who had a young lion by the neck. Then a great lion came out, roaring at the serpent. As soon as Sir Perceval saw this, he hurried thither, but before he could get there the lion had overtaken the serpent and had begun to do battle with him.

Then Sir Perceval thought he should help the lion, for he seemed to be the more noble beast of the two. So he drew his sword and raised his shield, and struck the serpent so that he inflicted a deadly wound on him.

When the lion saw this, he made no move to fight with him, but rather showed him all the friendliness that a beast could show a man.

When Sir Perceval perceived this, he cast down his shield, which was broken, and then took off his helm so that he could better breathe, for he was breathing hard after his fight with the serpent. The whole time he was doing this, the lion was fawning on him like a spaniel. He stroked the lion on the neck and shoulders and thanked God for the fellowship of the beast. About noon the lion took his little whelp and bore him back to where he had come from.

Then Sir Perceval was alone. As the tale tells, he was at that time one of the men in the world who most strongly believed in Our Lord Jesus Christ—and at that time there were few people who had complete belief, for in those days the son cared for the father not more than he did for a stranger.

So Sir Perceval comforted himself with thoughts of Our Lord Jesus Christ and asked him that no temptation should bring him out of God's service, but that he might be able to endure as God's champion. After Sir Perceval had prayed thus, he saw the lion coming toward him; it crouched down at his feet, and all that night he and the lion slept together.

While Sir Perceval slept he dreamed a marvelous dream: that he encountered two ladies, and one was sitting on a lion and the other on a serpent. One of them was young, and the other was old. The younger one said, "Sir Perceval, my lord greets you and sends word that you should arm and prepare yourself, for tomorrow you must fight with the strongest champion in the world. If you are defeated, you may be acquitted if you lose any of your limbs, but you will be shamed for ever, to the ending of the world."

Then he asked her who her lord was, and she said, "the greatest lord in the world." Then she disappeared suddenly, and he did not know where she had gone.

C XIV.7

Then the other lady came forth, who was riding on a serpent, and she said, "Sir Perceval, I am making a complaint to you for what you have done to me, and I have never done anything to offend you."

"Indeed, madame," he said, "I have never done offense to you or any other lady."

"Yes," she said, "and I shall tell you why. I have raised a serpent for a long while who pleased me very much, and yesterday you slew him as he was hunting his prey. Tell me why you slew him, for that lion was not yours."

"Madame, I well know the lion was not mine; but the lion is of a nobler nature than the serpent, and that is why I slew him. It seems to me that I did nothing amiss against you, madame," he said. "What would you have me do?"

"I would like," she said, "that in amends for the slaying of my beast, you become my man."

Then he answered and said, "I cannot grant you that."

"No?" she said. "Truly, you have been my servant since the moment you received baptism and communion in the faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, I assure you that whenever I find you someplace off your guard, I shall take you, as one who has rightfully been my man."

She departed from Sir Perceval, leaving him sleeping; he was very troubled by this vision. On the morning he rose and crossed himself, and found that he felt very weak.

Then Sir Perceval saw a ship on the sea which was sailing toward him. He went to the ship and found it covered within and without with white samite. At the rail stood an old man clothed in a surplice who seemed to be a priest.

"Sir," said Sir Perceval, "you are welcome."

"God keep you," said the good man. "From whence do you come?"

"Sir, I am of King Arthur's court, and a knight of the Round Table. I am engaged in the quest for the Holy Grail, and here I have found myself in great difficulty, unlikely to escape from this wilderness."

"Do not fear," said the good man. "If you are a true knight according to the rules of chivalry, and your heart is pure, you should not be afraid that any of your enemies might slay you."

"Who are you?" asked Sir Perceval.

"Sir, I am from a distant land, and I have come hither to comfort you."

"Sir," said Sir Perceval, "what does the dream that I dreamed last night mean?" And then he told him all that he had dreamed.

"She who rode upon the lions symbolizes the new law of Holy Church—that is to say faith, hope, belief and baptism. There is a good reason that she seemed younger than the other, for she was born after the Passion and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Out of great love she came to warn you of a great battle that you will have to fight."

"With whom," said Sir Perceval, "shall I fight?"

"With the most fearsome champion of the world. For as the lady said, if you acquit yourself well it will be by the losing of a limb, for that would shame you to the ending of the world. She that rode on a serpent represents the Old Law, and the serpent represents a fiend. When she blamed you for slaying her servant, she was not only referring to when you slew her serpent, but also the devil that you rode to the rocky shores of the river; when you made the sign of the cross, you slew him and destroyed his power. When she asked you to make amends and you said no, that was her attempt to make you follow her and forsake the faith into which you were baptized."

Then he commanded Sir Perceval to depart, so he leapt overboard and then the ship went away, he knew not where.

Then Sir Perceval climbed the rocks and found the lion which had begun to keep constant fellowship with him; he stroked it on the back and felt great joy at his company. Sir Perceval sat there with the lion until midday, when he saw a ship come sailing on the sea as fast as if it were being driven by all the winds. When he saw this, he hurried to the shore and found the ship covered in silk blacker than any he had ever seen. There was a gentlewoman standing on the deck, richly clothed—he had never seen her equal.

C XIV.8

When she saw Sir Perceval she asked who had brought him into that wilderness "from which you are never likely to leave; you shall die here of hunger and mischance."

"Damsel," said Sir Perceval, "I serve the best man of the world, and in His service He will not allow me to die, for he who knocks shall enter, he who asks shall have, and he who seeks Him shall find."

Then she said, "Sir Perceval, do you know who I am?"

"Who told you my name?" asked Sir Perceval.

"I know you better than you think; I came just recently out of the Waste Forest where I found the red knight with the white shield."

"Ah, fair damsel!" he said. "I would be very glad to meet with that knight."

"Sir knight," she said, "if you will promise me on the faith you owe to knighthood that you will do what I wish when I summon you sometime in the future, I shall bring you to that knight."

"Yes," he said, "I promise to fulfill your desire."

"Well," she said, "now I shall tell you. I saw him in the Waste Forest chasing two knights into the water which is called Mortaise, and the other knights fled into that water in fear for their lives. The two knights crossed over and the Red Knight came after; his horse drowned and it was only through great effort that he made it to land." This is what she told him, and he was glad to hear this news.

Then she asked him if he had eaten recently.

"Nay, madame; truly, I have not had anything to eat for the last three days, although just recently I spoke here with a good man who fed me with his good words which greatly refreshed me."

"Ah, sir knight! That same man," she said, "is an enchanter and a twister of words. If you believe him, you shall be shamed and die on this rock from hunger; then you will be eaten by wild beasts! You are a young man and a good knight, so I shall help you if you wish."

"Who are you," said Sir Perceval, "to offer me such great kindness?"

"I am," she said, "a gentlewoman who has lost her inheritance; at one time I was the richest woman in the world."

"Damsel," said Sir Perceval, "who has disinherited you? I am very sorry for your sake."

"Sir," she said, "I dwelled with the greatest man of the world, and he made me seem fair and beautiful, so that there was no one like me. I had some pride in that beauty, more than I ought to have had, and I said something that displeased him. Then he would not allow me to remain in his company, but drove me from my inheritance and disinherited me forever. He had no pity for me or for any members of my court. It has come to pass, sir knight, that I have lost everything; yet, I have managed to take some of his men away from him and made them my men, because no matter what they ask from me, I always give them what they ask and more. Thus, I and my servants war against him night and day, and if I hear of any good knight or good man, I get him on my side if it is at all possible. Because I know that you are a good knight, I beseech you to help me; you are a fellow of the Round Table, wherefore you ought not to fail to help a gentlewoman who has been disinherited if she asks you for help."

Then Sir Perceval promised to help her as much as he was able, and she thanked him. The weather was hot, so she called a lady-in-waiting to her and bade her bring forth a pavilion. She did so, and pitched it on the ground.

C XIV.9

"Sir," she said, "now you may rest during the heat of the day." He thanked her, and she helped him remove his helm and his shield, after which he slept a great while. When he awoke, he asked if she had anything to eat, and she said, "Indeed! You shall have plenty!"

Then a table was laid, and so much food was set thereon that he had great wonder, for there was every kind of food that he could think of. He also drank there the strongest wine that he had ever had, or so it seemed to him, and because of this, he grew a little warmer. Then when he beheld the gentlewoman, he thought she was the fairest creature that he had ever seen.

Then Sir Perceval offered her his love, and asked her to be his lady. She acted as if she was refusing his offer, but she did this so that he would fall all the more ardently in love with her; he never ceased asking her to give him her love.

When she saw that he was quite warm with desire, she said, "Sir Perceval, know that I will not fulfill your desire unless you swear that from henceforth you shall be my true servant, and do nothing but what I command. Will you promise me this, as you are a true knight?"

"Yes," he said, "fair lady, by the faith of my body!"

"Well," she said, "now you may do with me what you wish, as you are the knight in the world for whom I have the most desire." Then she commanded two squires to make a bed in the middle of the pavilion; she disrobed and lay down.

Then Sir Perceval lay down beside her, naked, and by chance and grace he saw his sword lying on the ground, unsheathed, and he saw the pommel, wherein was a red cross and the symbol of the crucifix. He suddenly thought of his knighthood and the promise he had earlier made to the good man, and with that thought he made the sign of the cross.

At this, the pavilion turned upside down and disappeared in a cloud of black smoke. He was very afraid, and cried out, "Fair sweet Lord Jesus Christ, do not let me be shamed! I was almost lost, and would have been, were it not for Your grace!"

C XIV.10

Then he looked into the lady's ship and saw her going aboard. As she did, she said, "Sir Perceval, you have betrayed me!" Then she sailed off with much roaring wind and noise, so that it seemed that all the water burned in her wake.

Then Sir Perceval was very sad. He pulled his sword close to him and said, "Since my flesh wishes to be my master, I shall punish it." Then he cut himself through the thigh so that the blood spurted all about him, and he said, "Good Lord, take this in recompense for what I have done against You, Lord."

Then he clothed and armed himself, all the while saying to himself, "Wretch of all wretches! I was nearly lost, and almost lost that which I can never get again—my virginity. That may never be recovered once it is lost." Then he stopped his bleeding wounds with a piece of his shirt.

As he was thus lamenting his situation, he saw the same ship coming from the east that he had seen the good man in the day before. This noble knight was very ashamed of himself, and fell into a swoon. When he came to he went to the good man meekly and greeted him.

The man asked Sir Perceval, "How have you done since I departed?"

"Sir," he said, "here was a gentlewoman who almost led me into deadly sin." And he told the man the whole story.

"You do not know who that lady was?" asked the good man.

"Sir," he said, "no, I do not, but I may well believe that the devil sent her hither to shame me."

"Ah, good knight!" he said. "You are a fool! That gentlewoman was the master fiend of hell, who has power over all other devils; that was the old lady riding on the serpent that you saw in your vision."

Then he told Sir Perceval how "Our Lord Jesus Christ drove the fiend out of heaven because of his sin, and he had been the brightest angel in heaven. He lost his place in heaven, and that was the foe that you fought with. He would have overcome you if it had not been for the grace of God. Now, Sir Perceval, beware and take this as a lesson."

Then the good man vanished. Sir Perceval took his arms, entered the ship, and departed from that place.

71 The Further Adventures of Sir Lancelot on the Grail Quest

We leave this story, and turn now to Sir Lancelot.

When the hermit had kept Sir Lancelot three days, he then gave him a horse, a helm, and a sword; Sir Lancelot departed and rode until the hour of noon. Then he saw a little house, and as he drew near, a little chapel. There beside it was an old man who was richly clothed all in white. Then Sir Lancelot said, "Sir, God save you!" V VI.4; C XV.1

"Sir, God keep you," said the good man, "and make you a good knight."

Then Sir Lancelot dismounted and entered the chapel where he saw an old man, dead, wearing a white shirt made of very fine cloth.

"Sir," said the good man, "this man ought not to be in such clothing as you see him in, for he broke the oath of his order; for more than a hundred years he has been a member of a religious order."

Then the good man and Sir Lancelot went into the chapel, and the good man put a stole around his neck, took up a book, and began to perform a ritual. At that they saw a fiend so hideous in form that no man in the world, no matter how hard-hearted, could have helped but be afraid.

The fiend said, "You have troubled me greatly! Tell me what you want of me."

"I would like," said the good man, "that you tell me how my brother died, and whether he is saved or damned."

The fiend said in a horrible voice, "He is not lost; he is saved."

"How can that be?" said the good man. "It seems to me that he did not leave this life well, for he broke the rules of his order by wearing a shirt when he ought to wear none, and whoever trespasses against the rules of our order does not leave this life well."

"Not so," said the fiend. "This man who lies here came from a noble line. There was a lord, called the Earl of the Vale, who warred against this man's nephew, who was called Aguars. This Aguars saw that the earl was stronger than he was, so he went to his uncle for advice, the same man who lies dead here. He left his hermitage to help his nephew against the mighty earl. It happened that the man who lies here dead did so much through wisdom and strength that the earl was captured, along with three of his lords.

"Then there was peace between the earl and Aguars, and sureties were made so that the earl would never war against him again. Then the dead man lying here returned to his her-

C XV.2

mitage. The earl ordered two of his nephews to take revenge on this man; so they came here and found him one day performing the mass. They waited until the mass was done, and then they set upon with drawn swords, intending to slay him. But no sword could wound him; it was as if he were a bar of steel. The High Lord whom he served saved him.

"Then they made a great fire and took off all his clothes, including the hairshirt he wore. Then this hermit said to them, 'Do you think you shall burn me? It does not lie in your power to destroy me; you could not even hurt a thread of my clothing, if I had any on my body.' 'No?' one of them said. 'We shall try anyway.' So they fully undressed him and put this shirt on him and then cast him into the fire. He lay in that fire all day and night and did not die. In the morning I came and found him, dead, but neither the shirt nor his body was burned. The men took him out of the fire, in great fear, and laid him here as you can see.

"Now you can allow me to go on my way, for I have told you the truth." And the fiend departed with great noise and wind. The good man and Sir Lancelot were glad to know the story of the dead hermit. Sir Lancelot stayed with the good man that night.

"Sir," said the good man, "are you not Sir Lancelot du Lake?"

"Yes, sir," he said.

"Sir, what do you seek in this country?"

"I go, sir, to seek the adventures of the Holy Grail."

"Well," he said, "you may well seek it, but even if it were right here, you would have no power to see it—no more than a blind man might see a bright sword. That is because of your sin; if it were not for that, you would be more able to see it than any man now alive." Then Sir Lancelot began to weep. The good man said, "Have you confessed your sins since you began the quest for the Holy Grail?"

"Yes, sir," said Sir Lancelot.

In the morning, after the good man had performed the mass, they buried the dead man.

"Now," said Sir Lancelot, "father, what shall I do?"

"Now," said the good man, "I command you to take the hairshirt that was this holy man's and wear it next to your skin, and that shall help you greatly."

"Sir, then I will do it," said Sir Lancelot.

"Also, sir, I order that you eat no meat as long as you are on the quest for the Holy Grail, and neither shall you drink any wine; also, you must hear mass daily, if you are able."

So Sir Lancelot put the hairshirt on and departed at evensong, riding off into the forest. He met there a gentlewoman riding on a white palfrey. She asked him, "Sir knight, where are you riding?"

"Indeed, damsel," said Sir Lancelot, "I do not know where I am going, except that it is as fortune leads me."

"Ah, Sir Lancelot," she said, "I know what adventure you seek, and you were nearer to it earlier than you are now. Yet, you shall see it more openly than you did before, and you will understand this very soon."

Then Sir Lancelot asked her where he might find lodging for the night.

"You shall not find any lodging this day or night, but tomorrow you shall find good lodging and reassurance for that which has caused you doubt."

Then he commended her to God and rode until he came to a cross; he took that as his lodging place for the night.

He put his horse out to pasture and took off his helm and laid down his shield. He said his prayers before the cross, asking that he never fall into deadly sin again, and then laid himself down to sleep.

As he slept, a vision came to him. A man appeared, surrounded by stars, wearing a golden crown on his head. That man led in fellowship seven kings and two knights. All of these worshipped the cross, kneeling before it, holding their hands up to heaven, and saying, "Sweet Father of Heaven, come and visit upon us all that each of us has deserved."

Then Sir Lancelot looked up to heaven, and it seemed to him that the clouds opened and an old man came down, surrounded by a company of angels; he lit among them and gave to each his blessing, calling them his servants and his good and true knights.

When the old man had done this, he came to one of the knights and said, "I have lost everything that I have trusted to in you, for you have acted against me as a warrior, and fought wrong wars, vaingloriously, for worldly pleasures rather than to please me. Therefore, you shall be confounded unless you yield to me my treasure."

This was the vision Sir Lancelot had while he slept before the cross. In the morning he mounted his horse and rode until midday. By chance, he encountered the same knight who took his horse, helm, and sword while he slept, at the time when the Holy Grail had appeared before the cross.

When Sir Lancelot saw this knight, he did not greet him courteously, but rather cried out, "Knight! Defend yourself! You have done me great unkindness!" Then they both raised their spears, and Sir Lancelot came at him so fiercely that he smote the other knight down, horse and man, to the earth; the other knight almost broke his neck. Then Sir Lancelot took back the knight's horse, which had been his, and dismounted the horse he was riding. He tied the other horse to a tree, so that the knight might find it when he arose, and mounted his own horse.

Then Sir Lancelot rode until it was night. By chance he met with a hermit, and each of them greeted the other. He stayed with the good man all that night, and gave his horse such food as he could find.

The good man said to Sir Lancelot, "From whence do you come?"

"Sir," he said, "I am of Arthur's court, and my name is Sir Lancelot du Lake; I am on the quest for the Holy Grail. Therefore, sir, I ask you to explain to me a vision I had last night." Then he told him of the vision he had had.

"Lo, Sir Lancelot," said the good man, "by this vision you should understand that the high lineage from which you come was represented. Forty years after the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Joseph of Arimathea preached of the victory of King Evelake, who defeated his enemies in battle. Of the seven kings and two knights, the first was called Nappus, a holy man. The second was called Nacien, in honor of his grandfather; the spirit of Our

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Lord Jesus Christ dwelled in him. The third was called Helias le Gros, and the fourth Lis-ayus. The fifth was called Jonas; he departed from his country and went into Wales where he married the daughter of Manuel, by which he became king of the land of Gaul. He came to dwell in this country, and his son was King Lancelot, your grandfather, who married the daughter of the king of Ireland; he was as worthy a man as you are. His son was King Ban, your father, who was the last of the seven kings. Thus, you see Sir Lancelot, that you were not one of the seven kings, but rather, one of the two knights. The ninth and last knight was represented as a lion, for he shall surpass all earthly knights, and that is Sir Galahad, whom you conceived on King Pelles' daughter. You ought to thank God more than any man who is living, for among earthly sinners, you have no peer as far as knighthood goes, nor shall you ever. But you have thanked God very little for all the virtues he has given you."

"Sir," said Sir Lancelot, "you say that good knight is my son?"

"You ought to know," said the good man, "for you slept with the daughter of King Pelles, and on her you begat Sir Galahad; it was he who sat in the Seat Perilous at the feast of Pen-tecost. You should acknowledge it openly that he is your son. In no place should you have ado with him, for no knight can defeat him in trials of arms."

"Well," said Sir Lancelot, "it seems that that knight should pray for me to God the Father so that I do not fall into sin again."

"Trust," said the good man, "that you shall fare much better for his prayers. For the son shall not bear the wickedness of the father, but every man shall bear his own burden. Therefore, ask God for help, and he will help you in all your times of need."

Then he and Sir Lancelot went to supper, and then lay down to rest. The hairshirt pricked Sir Lancelot's skin and gave him much grief, but he suffered it meekly and accepted the pain.

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In the morning, he heard mass, armed himself, and then took his leave. He mounted his horse and rode into a forest where there were no paths. As he looked around him, he saw a fair plain, and beside that, a fair castle; before the castle were many pavilions of silk, all of different colors. It seemed to him that there were five hundred knights riding on horseback, and they were divided into two parties: those who were of the castle were all on black horses with black trappings, and those who were not of the castle were all on white horses with white trappings. A great tournament began, and the knights hurtled at one another with such force that Sir Lancelot marveled greatly. As he watched, it seemed to him that the knights of the castle were faring the worst.

Then Sir Lancelot thought to help the weaker party to increase his chivalry. So he thrust in among the party of the castle and smote down a knight, horse and man, to the earth. He rushed here and there and did many marvelous deeds of arms. Then he drew his sword and struck many knights to the earth; all of those who saw him marveled that ever any one knight could do such feats of arms.

Always the white knights stayed close by Sir Lancelot, trying to tire him out, and in the end Sir Lancelot was so weary from all his great deeds that he could not lift up his arms to give one more stroke, and he felt as if he could never again bear arms.

Then the knights took him away into the forest and had him dismount and rest. Because he had left the field, the knights of the castle were overcome. Then they said to Sir Lancelot, "Blessed be God that you are now of our fellowship, for we shall hold you in our prison." Then they left him there without saying much else.

Sir Lancelot then was very sorrowful, "for never before now was I ever at a tournament or joust when I did not perform the best of everyone. Now I am shamed, and am sure that I am more sinful than I was before." He rode off sorrowing in despair for half a day until he came to a deep valley. When he saw that he could not ride up the side of the mountain, he dismounted under an apple tree. He left his helm and his shield there and put his horse out to pasture; then he laid himself down to sleep. In his sleep, it seemed to him that an old man came before him and said, "Ah, Lancelot! You are of evil, wicked faith and weak belief! Why has your will turned so quickly to deadly sin?" With that, the man vanished and Sir Lancelot did not know where he had gone.

Then he mounted his horse and armed himself. As he rode along the highway he saw a chapel where a recluse lived; she had a window in her cell through which she could see the altar. She called out to Sir Lancelot, recognizing him as a knight-errant. He came to the window and she asked him who he was, where he came from, and what he was seeking.

He told her everything that had happened to him, in full detail, and the truth of what had happened to him at the tournament. After that, he told her of the vision he had had that night in his sleep.

"Ah, Lancelot," she said, "as long as you were a knight of worldly knighthood, you were the most marvelous man of the world, and the greatest adventurer. Now," said the lady, "since you have joined the knights who go on heavenly adventures, you should not marvel if you do not win at a tournament; that tournament yesterday was a symbol of Our Lord, even though there was no enchantment, and those who were at the tournament were earthly knights. The tournament was held to see who should have the most knights—Elizar, son of King Pelles, or Argustus, the son of King Harlon. Elizar and his knights were clothed all in white, and Argustus and his man were all in black.

"What all this means, I shall tell you. On the day of Pentecost, when King Arthur held court, it happened that earthly kings and earthly knights held a tournament together at the commencement of the quest for the Holy Grail. The earthly knights were all clothed in black, with their clothing symbolizing the sins which they have not confessed. Those who were clothed in white symbolize virginity and those who have chosen chastity; that is how the quest began for them. You beheld the sinners and the good men, and when you saw the sinners overcome, you were inclined to help that party because of your arrogance and worldly pride, two things that must be left behind on the quest. In this quest you will have many equals and indeed, betters. You are weakened by poor faith and trust little in sound belief, which was signified when they took you and led you into the forest.

"Then the Holy Grail appeared to the white knights, but you were so lacking in faith that you could not be there to see it, despite all the teaching that the good man had earlier given you. Immediately you turned to the side of the sinners, and that is what caused

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your misadventure. You should know the difference between good behavior and that which comes from a vain desire for glory! Vainglory is not worth a pear. Because of your great pride, you were very sorrowful that you had not overcome all the white knights; because of that, God was angry with you, for on this quest, God does not love such deeds. The vision came to you to tell you that you had acted according to imperfect faith and poor belief, which shall cause you to fall into the deep pit of hell if you do not learn to behave better.

"Now I have warned you of your vainglory and your pride, and you have many times erred against your Maker. Beware of the everlasting pain that you may bring on yourself. Of all earthly knights, I have the greatest pity for you, for I know well that you do not have a peer among earthly, sinful men."

Then she asked Sir Lancelot to dine. After dinner he mounted his horse and commended her to God, and then rode off into a deep valley. There he saw a river called the Mortaise. He needed to cross the river, and it seemed very dangerous to do so. Then, in the name of God, he bolstered his courage and crossed over. When he reached the other side he saw an armed knight, and he and his horse were as black as a blackberry. Without any word he smote Sir Lancelot's horse, killing it, and then passed on, so that Sir Lancelot did not know where he had gone. Sir Lancelot took up his helm and his shield and thanked God for his adventure.