



CHRETIEN DE TROYES

# PERCEVAL

*The Story of the Grail*

Translated by NIGEL BRYANT

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*Translated by*  
Nigel Bryant

D. S. BREWER

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## CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES

Line-numbers refer to *Le Roman de Perceval ou le Conte du Graal*, ed.  
William Roach, 2nd edition, Geneva, 1959.

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## THE FIRST CONTINUATION

Line-numbers refer to *The Continuations of the Old French Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes*, Volume I, ed. William Roach, Philadelphia, 1949.

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## *Introduction*

The *Perceval* of Chrétien de Troyes and its Continuations have survived in 15 medieval manuscripts, but only one of them, fonds français 12576 of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, contains Chrétien's poem and all four Continuations without any missing folios. It is in excellent condition, and was copied with a remarkable degree of care, with very few obvious errors or accidental omissions. It is that manuscript's text which is followed in this translation, except where occasionally indicated in footnotes.

The manuscript probably dates from early in the second half of the thirteenth century, but the dating of the original composition of the poems is difficult. Chrétien de Troyes almost certainly began *Perceval* in the mid-1180's, and definitely no later than the end of the decade, for Count Philip of Flanders, to whom it is dedicated, died at Acre in 1191 during the Third Crusade. Chrétien himself died with *Perceval* unfinished, as Gerbert de Montreuil testifies\*. The theme of Chrétien's last work was, however, too good to leave, and quite apart from the separate works that it inspired, Chrétien's own poem was taken up by no fewer than four continuators, who carried the story on over a period of some forty years. The First Continuation is completely anonymous; the authorship of the Second is hard to attribute, since at the point where the writer identifies himself† none of the scribes of the extant manuscripts could agree on a spelling or even a version of the name; only the last two are properly attributable: the writer of the Third Continuation identifies himself at the very end as Manesier, and there is another Continuation – which appears in the manuscript as a long interpolation between the Second and the Third – written by a man who announces himself as Gerbert‡ and who is generally accepted as being Gerbert de Montreuil, the author of the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Violette*. It seems extremely likely that Manesier and Gerbert, judging by their extensive borrowings from *Perlesvaus* and *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, wrote their Continuations as late as 1230; and it seems likely also that they wrote them at very much the same time, with no knowledge of each other's work. It may well be that Gerbert wrote his own independent ending to the romance, and that a scribe or redactor later cut it so that the Third Continuation could be added.

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\* Below, pp. 260 - 261.

† Below, p. 200, where the name appears as Gautier de Denet.

‡ Below, p. 261.

It is not hard to see why Chrétien's unfinished story of the Grail proved such a compelling one, for its fundamental theme could hardly have been bolder, clearer or more movingly simple, or more important to its medieval audience. It is about the making of a knight – in the most complete sense. It is not by chance that the story begins with a boy who has been brought up in a remote forest with no knowledge whatever of the world of knighthood, and with only the haziest understanding of matters religious – he does not even know what a church is, let alone a knight's hauberk, shield or lance. Chrétien's plan is so forthright and sweeping that he sets out to depict a knight's development from a point of total innocence and ignorance.

In the early episodes of the romance Chrétien skilfully exploits the comic potential of this ignorance; but there is at the same time something deliberately unsettling in Chrétien's depiction of the innocent leaving his mother collapsed in a heap outside her house, almost assaulting a girl to take her ring, and killing a knight to get his arms. It becomes hard to distinguish between the innocent and the primitive.

The first steps towards improving the innocent boy's ways are taken by a knight named Gorneman de Gorhaut; but it is extremely important that, although the boy takes to knighthood like a fish to water, Gorneman's instruction is primarily martial and secular. So that when the new knight encounters his first great adventure, freeing Blancheflor from her enemies Engygeron and Clamadeus, he shows how immensely talented he is as a warrior; but his next great adventure, his visit to the Fisher King's castle, is a disaster: he is as yet utterly inequipped to plumb the secrets of the radiant grail and the mysterious bleeding lance. Immediately afterwards, in a piece of brilliantly emphatic symbolism, Chrétien shows the new knight Perceval breaking the sword given to him by the Fisher King with the very first blow he strikes.\* The significance of the broken sword motif was not lost on the continuators, who introduced the mending of a broken sword at the Fisher King's castle as the principal test of a knight's worthiness to learn the secrets of the grail and the lance. In the First Continuation Gawain twice fails to repair it, although on the first occasion it initially looks to be perfectly joined, just as Gawain looks on the face of it to be a very worthy knight indeed; and at the end of the Second Continuation Perceval succeeds in repairing it – except for a notch on one edge: he is still not quite worthy to know the truth. 'From this test,' says the Fisher King, 'I know for sure that, of all men now living in all the world, there is none of greater worth than you in combat or in battle; but you have not yet done enough to have God bestow on

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Below, p. 46.

you the praise, esteem and courtesy, the wisdom and the chivalry, to enable us to say that of all knights you were the most endowed with all high qualities.” And the true meaning of the Broken Sword is made plainest of all by Gerbert de Montreuil who, unlike Manesier in his Continuation, was not content to leave the notch in the Broken Sword’s blade. In terms reminiscent of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, the great Cistercian who was a driving force behind the Crusades, Gerbert has a hermit explain to Perceval that ‘a knight’s sword has two cutting edges: do you know why? It should be understood... that one edge is for the defence of Holy Church, while the other should embody true earthly justice. . . . But know this: Holy Church’s edge is broken, while the earthly edge cuts indeed ... and a knight who carries such a sword is deceiving God; and if he does not mend his ways, the gate of Paradise will be closed to him.’<sup>†</sup> Gerbert, indeed, has Perceval break yet another sword while hammering on a gate which is locked to him, the gate of a ring of wall inside which he can hear great rejoicing;<sup>‡</sup> and Perceval is told afterwards by the smith Triboet that ‘you broke it at the gate of Paradise.’<sup>§</sup> By the end of the Second Continuation, then, Perceval has done as much as can be done in the secular, martial sense – the ‘earthly edge’ is mended – but he has still more to achieve before the symbolic sword is whole: before, that is to say, he is a complete knight.

The importance of the spiritual alongside the martial in the development of a knight, symbolised so powerfully by the Broken Sword, is a constantly recurring theme. Chrétien makes the point very clearly with the episode, strikingly thrust into the midst of Gawain’s adventures, where Perceval suddenly reappears after five years of random feats of chivalry. ‘Perceval . . . had lost his memory to such a degree that he no longer remembered God. April and May passed by five times – that’s five whole years – without him entering a church or worshipping God or His cross . . . That’s not to say that he stopped seeking deeds of chivalry: he went in search of strange, hard and terrible adventures, and encountered so many that he tested himself well. In five years he sent sixty worthy knights as prisoners to King Arthur’s court. That was how he spent five years, without a thought for God.’<sup>¶</sup> It is all very well gallivanting around defeating knights, but there is the matter of God. Perceval is so lost, indeed, that he does not even know that it is Good Friday; and when he goes, distraught, to the house of his hermit uncle to beg forgiveness for his waywardness, the hermit makes him aware

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\* Below, p. 212.

† Below, p. 235.

‡ Below, pp. 214 - 215..

§ Below, p. 222

¶ Below, p. 72.

that he is stained with sin: it was the sin of deserting his mother that had led to his silence when he saw the grail; and the hermit stresses the importance of church and mass, so shamefully forgotten by Perceval for five long years – not, indeed, that Perceval has ever really shown any great awareness of them: his ignorance of them has so far been almost as total as his earlier ignorance of a knight's military equipment.

From the point where Perceval next reappears in the romance – in the Second Continuation – he abundantly proves his military capabilities; what is disastrous is that he is so repeatedly unaware of how far he has to go in his spiritual development. He is shocked when, on a second visit to his hermit uncle's cell, his uncle deplores his killing of another knight, and he is made to realise for the first time the importance of confession.\* The imbalance of Perceval's development as a knight – his brilliance as a warrior but his spiritual immaturity – is perhaps best demonstrated by the episode involving the girl who is willing to tell him the way to the Grail Castle 'if you'll keep to the way and not stray from it'.† The way involves crossing a fragile bridge of ivory over the river Marmonde, and the girl gives him a ring and a white mule, saying: 'As long as you have the ring on your finger, my white mule will carry you safely. . . and you need have no fear of crossing the ivory bridge'.‡ Sure enough, the white mule carries him safely and calmly across the wafer-thin ivory bridge, while his charger – a warrior's mount – crosses behind 'with difficulty, most fearfully'.§ But having got across, Perceval does not follow the path to the Grail Castle at all, but promptly allows himself to be distracted into yet more feats of military prowess – albeit proving what an outstanding knight he is – in the shape of a mighty tournament at the Proud Castle;¶ so that when he comes to return the ring and the white mule to the girl, she is literally speechless when he tells her that he has not even tried to find his way to the Grail: 'She mounted swiftly, without taking her leave, and rode off, much to Perceval's amazement. He was now quite bewildered, for he did not know which path to take or in which direction to turn to find the court of the king called the Fisher.'\*\*

Gerbert de Montreuil, whose poem is by far the most inspired and methodical continuation of Chrétien's themes, shows by his handling of the broken sword motif that he was acutely aware of how much remained to be done before Perceval was fully worthy to know the secrets of the grail and the lance. Gerbert cleverly reintroduces Gorneman de Gorhaut, Perceval's first instructor in the art of arms, to

\* Below, p. 169.

† Below, p. 177.

‡ Below, p. 178.

§ Below, p. 179.

¶ Below, pp. 186 - 190.

\*\* Below, p. 193.

contribute to his moral development by emphasising the importance of marriage;\* Gerbert at the same time thus completes Chrétien's theme of the young knight's awakening to love, by having Perceval marry Blancheflor† – and the marriage is chaste indeed.‡ And most important of all, perhaps, is Gerbert's long and central episode describing Perceval's battle with the Dragon Knight, for in it Perceval becomes unmistakably a crusader. Immediately before the battle he receives a white shield with a red cross;§ the Dragon Knight, moreover, who is besieging the lady of the castle of Montesclaire, is not merely wicked but an infidel, a devotee of the Devil, carrying a shield with a demonic dragon's head fixed in it, which engulfs any attacker in flame; and the lady besieged at Montesclaire is none other than the Girl of the Circle of Gold, the significance of which would not have been lost on any of Gerbert's audience acquainted with this episode's source; for in *Perlesvaus*, from which the Dragon Knight story is taken, the Circle of Gold is identified as the Crown of Thorns.¶ Even without the additional element of an infidel threat to a most holy relic, the significance of this episode's details was unlikely to be missed; and with the aid of the power of the red cross shield – which has another holy relic, a piece of the true cross, embedded in it – Perceval not only defeats the infidel but converts him, too.\*\* In a way, nothing crystallises the overall 'meaning' of Perceval better than this episode, for stressing the importance of a knight's spiritual development alongside his mastery of arms leads almost inevitably to making crusading the natural outlet for knightly skills. That is surely what made the grail theme such a crucial and potent one in Arthurian romance in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries; for the great quest for the grail portrayed in the most exciting and appealing way possible the fusion of religious ideals and a warrior ethic, at a time when the Crusades had made such a fusion the very definition of knighthood and the very object of knightly endeavour. At a time when affairs in the Holy Land were not exactly happy for the forces of Christendom, it was an important message for the poets to convey; all the more reason, too, for Gerbert to make the taking up of the red cross shield such an inspiringly awesome challenge: ' . . . no-one could find the Grail or the lance with the head that bled ceaselessly, except the first one to be able to remove the shield from the

\* Below, p. 241..

† Below, pp. 251 - 261.

‡ Below, pp. 259 - 260.

§ Below, p. 264.

¶ See *The High Book of the Grail: Perlesvaus*, translated by N. Bryant (D.S. Brewer, 1978), pp. 131 and 164.

\*\* Below, pp. 280 - 281.



neck of the beautiful girl. But it was at his peril that any man touched it or tried to remove it unless he was the boldest man in the world, both in word and deed, and confessed of all his sins; for otherwise he would be destroyed and killed by a thousand stones, and nothing could protect him. There was an inscription upon it to that effect for the benefit of all who saw the shield and were able to read. The girl stepped into the house at once. She had been scouring many lands, both day and night, but no-one who read the inscription would lay a hand upon the shield: they did not dare to try, for it was a fearsome test indeed.”

It must be stressed, however, that any overall ‘meaning’ there may be in *The Story of the Grail* is nothing like as systematic as the above may suggest. The ‘meaning’ of the romance is not an appeal to get on the next boat to the Holy Land, any more than it is an appeal to get married and make confession and remember the power of the sign of the cross. Quite apart from the fact that there are huge digressions from the grail theme throughout Perceval, with a good deal of intriguing story-telling for its own sake – notably in the First Continuation, which contains two sections that are virtually separate romances – the ‘meaning’ is in a sense cumulative, gradually expanding from episode to episode, all following on from Chrétien’s introduction of Perceval as a totally ‘unmade’, innocent, ignorant boy. Perceval shows the gradual making of a supremely fine knight in every sense – martial, moral and spiritual. And from time to time, as in the ‘crusading’ episode of the battle with the Knight of the Dragon, the romance was able suddenly to jolt its medieval audience into a quite unexpected realisation of the meaning of being a knight. But it is important to stress, too, that the romance can hopefully still work on a less limited level: the depiction of an individual’s development is relevant not only to the twelfth and thirteenth century aristocracy. Some may, for example, find significance – something profoundly, intriguingly suggestive – in two crucial mysteries of Chrétien’s great, emblem-filled story: Perceval’s initial failure at the Grail Castle is because of ‘the grief you caused your mother when you left her’; and the key to success in healing the crippled king is nothing more and nothing less than the asking of questions.

NIGEL BRYANT

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\* Below, p. 264.

**H**E LITTLE REAPS WHO LITTLE sows, and a man who wants to reap some harvest spreads his seed in such a place that God repays a hundredfold; for on worthless ground good seed will thirst and fail.

Chrétien now sows and lays the seed of a romance that he begins, and sows it in so good a place that he cannot fail to have great reward; for he is doing it for the worthiest man in Christendom\*: Count Philip of Flanders†, who is of even greater worth than the mightily esteemed Alexander. I shall prove that the count is worth a good deal more than he, for Alexander had amassed within him all the vices and all the evils of which the count is clean and safe. The count will not tolerate base jokes or spiteful words, and hates to hear ill spoken of any man, whoever he may be. The count loves justice, and loyalty and holy church, and despises all baseness; and he is more generous than any man known: he gives according to the Gospel, without hypocrisy or guile, for it says: 'Do not let your left hand know the good your right hand does'. But the receiver knows, and so does God, who sees all the secrets and knows all the thoughts hidden deep within men's hearts and bowels. And why does the Gospel say 'Hide from your left hand your good deeds'? The left, according to the scriptures, signifies the vainglory that comes from false hypocrisy. And what does the right signify? Charity; which does not boast of its good works but does them covertly, so that they are secret save to the one whose names are God and Charity. For God is Charity; and the man who lives in charity according to the scriptures, Saint Paul says, and I say to him, he lives in God, and God in him. So know this, in all truthfulness: those gifts that good Count Philip gives are gifts of charity, for he is prompted only by his fair and generous heart, which bids him do good. Is this man not of greater worth than Alexander, who did not care about charity or other good deeds? He is indeed, and never doubt it.

So Chrétien's toils will not be vain in striving, by the count's command, to put into rhyme the finest tale ever told in a royal court: it is the story of the Grail, of which the count gave him the book.‡ Hear how he acquires himself.

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\* Literally "in the Empire of Rome"

† Philip, count of Flanders, 1143-91

‡ This tantalising allusion to a written source has been the subject of much conjecture. Nothing is known for certain about what "the book" may or may not have been.

IT WAS IN THE TIME WHEN TREES burst into leaf, and fields and woods and meadows are green, and the birds in their own Latin sing so sweetly in the morning, and every soul is afire with joy, that the son of the widowed woman of the wild and lonely forest rose, and with all eagerness he saddled up his hunting-horse and took three javelins, and set out from his mother's house.

He thought he would go and see the harrowers who sowed her barley with their twelve oxen and six harrows. And so he passed into the forest; and how his heart then leapt within him at the sweetness of the season and the singing of the joyful birds: everything delighted him! The weather was so sweet and mild that he took the bridle from his hunting-horse and let him go free to graze amongst the fresh green grass.

He was very skilled at throwing his javelins, and all around he went throwing them, backwards and forwards, high and low, hour after hour – until he heard, coming through the woods, five armed knights: all fully armed from head to foot. And their arms made a terrible din as they came, as oak- and elm-branch crashed against them; their lances clashed upon their shields, the mail-rings of their hauberks ground; wood and iron, shield and mail, all alike resounded. The boy could hear but could not see them as they came towards him at a walk. He was filled with awe, and said:

‘By my soul, my lady my mother's words were true when she told me that devils are the foulest things in the world! She taught me that to counter them a man should make the sign of the cross – but never mind that! I'm not going to cross myself – no, I'm going to strike the very strongest with one of my javelins; for then, I think, none of the others will dare come near me!’

So said the boy to himself before he saw the knights; but when he saw them openly, no longer hidden by the trees, and saw their hauberks shimmering, their helmets, burnished, dazzling, saw the white and the red shining brightly in the sun, and the gold and blue and silver, he thought it handsome and glorious indeed, and cried:

‘Oh, thank you, God! These are angels I see here! And truly, I've sinned terribly and done great wrong, saying they were devils. My mother told me no fable when she said that angels were the fairest things there are, except God, whose beauty surpasses all other. But there, I think, I see God Himself! For I can see one so fair that, God defend me, the others are not one tenth as beautiful. My mother said herself that we should worship God above all things, and pray to Him and honour Him, and I shall worship that one there and all the angels after Him.’

Then he threw himself to the ground and said such creed and prayers as he knew – taught him by his mother. And the foremost of the knights saw

this and said:

‘Stay back! A boy who’s seen us has fallen to the ground in fear. If we all advanced towards him at once he’d be frightened to death, I think, and couldn’t answer any of my questions.’

They drew rein, while the foremost knight rode swiftly on towards the boy and greeted him and reassured him, saying:

‘Don’t be afraid, boy.’

‘I’m not, by the Saviour in whom I believe,’ the boy replied. ‘You’re God, aren’t you?’

‘No, in faith!’

‘Who are you, then?’

‘I’m a knight.’

‘I’ve never met a knight before,’ the boy said, ‘or ever seen or heard of them; but you’re more beautiful than God. Oh, I wish I were the same – made like you, and shining so!’

Then he drew close up beside the knight, who asked him: ‘Have you seen five knights and three young ladies pass this way today?’

But the boy had other news to seek and questions of his own to ask: he reached for the knight’s lance and, taking hold, said: ‘My good, dear sir, who call yourself knight; what’s this thing you’re holding?’

‘I see I’m to have fine guidance here!’ the knight said. ‘I’d thought to learn some news from you, my friend, but you want some from me! And I’ll tell you: this is my lance.’

‘Do you throw it,’ asked the boy, ‘as I do my javelins?’

‘Why, no! What a simpleton you are! You strike with it directly.’

‘Then one of these three javelins is a better weapon; I can kill as many birds or beasts as I like with these, at the same range as a crossbow!’

‘That’s not really my concern, boy; answer my question about the knights. Tell me, do you know where they are, and did you see the young ladies?’

The boy grabbed the bottom of the knight’s shield and said, quite openly: ‘What’s this? What’s it for?’

‘Is this some kind of trick, boy? You keep changing the subject! I’d thought, God help me, you’d give me news rather than learn from me, but you want *me* to tell *you* what’s what! And so I shall, come what may, for I’ve taken a liking to you: this thing I’m carrying is called a shield.’

‘A shield?’

‘And truly,’ said the knight, ‘I shouldn’t scorn it, for it’s such a faithful friend that if anything’s thrown or shot at me it sets itself against the blows: that’s how it serves me.’

Just then the knights who had stayed behind rode briskly up to their

lord, and promptly said:

‘What’s this Welshman saying, sir?’

‘He doesn’t quite know his manners,’ the lord replied. ‘So help me God, he won’t give me a straight reply to anything I ask him! Instead he asks the name and use of everything he sees.’

‘Oh, I promise you, sir, the Welsh are all by nature more stupid than the beasts in pasture; and this one’s pretty beastly! Only a fool would dally with him, unless he meant to waste his time in idle sport.’

‘Perhaps,’ the first knight said, ‘but in faith, before I carry on I’ll tell him whatever he wants to know. I shan’t leave otherwise.’ Then he asked him yet again: ‘If you don’t mind, boy, tell me of the five knights and the girls; have you met or seen them today?’

The boy grabbed him by his mail-coat and started tugging it. ‘Now tell me, sir,’ he said, ‘what’s this thing you’re wearing here?’

‘Don’t you know, boy?’ said the knight.

‘No, I don’t.’

‘This is my hauberk, boy, and it’s as heavy as iron – because it’s made of iron, as you can see.’

‘I don’t know anything about that,’ he said, ‘but God save me, it’s very handsome. What do you do with it? What’s it for?’

‘That’s easily answered, boy. If you tried to throw a javelin or shoot an arrow at me, you couldn’t do me any harm.’

‘Oh, sir knight, may God keep all the hinds and stags from hauberks, or I’d never kill one: I’d have to give up hunting them.’

The knight said to him yet again: ‘God bless you boy, can you tell me news of the knights and the girls?’

But he, in his simplicity, asked him: ‘Were you born like that?’

‘No, boy, that’s impossible! No man could be born so!’

‘Who was it, then, made you that way?’

‘Boy, that I shall tell you indeed.’

‘Go on, then.’

‘Gladly. Not five full years ago I was given all these arms by King Arthur, who dubbed me knight. But now you tell me: what became of them – the knights who passed this way with the three girls? Were they riding fast or slowly?’

And the boy replied: ‘Sir, look now: the highest wood that you can see, bounding the mountain all around; there are the passes of Valbone.’

‘What of that, dear brother?’ said the knight.

‘That’s where my mother’s harrowers are, who sow and plough her lands. And if those people passed that way and they saw them, they’ll tell you so.’

They said they would follow him if he would guide them there,

to the folk who harrowed the barley. And so the boy mounted his hunting-horse and rode to where the harrowers were working in the ploughed lands where the barley was sown. But when they caught sight of their lord they all trembled with fear. And do you know why? Because of the knights they saw coming with him, fully armed; for they knew very well that if the knights had told him of their life and ways, then he would want to be a knight; and his mother then would lose her mind, for they had been trying to keep him from ever seeing knights or learning anything of their business. The boy said to the men who drove the oxen:

‘Have you seen five knights and three girls ride by this way?’

‘They’ve just gone through the pass this very day,’ the ox-drivers said.

And so the boy said to the knight who had talked to him so long: ‘Sir, the knights and girls did go this way; but tell me more now of the king who makes men knights: where does he usually live?’

‘I’ll tell you, boy,’ he said. ‘The king is staying at Cardoeil. He was there not five days ago, for I was there and saw him; and if you don’t find him today, there’ll be someone who’ll give you news of him for sure, wherever he may have gone.’

With that the knight rode off at a gallop, anxious to catch up with the others. Nor did the boy delay in riding home, where his mother was waiting, her heart black with grief because he had been away so long. But the moment she saw him she was filled with joy; she could not hide her happiness, she loved her son so much, and ran to meet him, crying:

‘Dear son! Dear son!’ a hundred times and more. ‘Dear son, my heart has been distraught indeed: you’ve been away so long, I’ve been so beset by grief that I nearly died. Where have you been so long today?’

‘Where, lady? I’ll tell you, and without a word of a lie; I’ve seen something that made my heart rejoice. Mother, didn’t you always say that angels and God, our Lord, were so beautiful that Nature never made such a handsome creature, and in the world there was nothing so fair?’

‘I still say so, dear son. I said so, truly, and still do.’

‘Say so no more, mother! Haven’t I seen the fairest things alive, that pass through the lonely forest? They’re more beautiful, I think, than God and all his angels.’

His mother took him in her arms and said: ‘I commend you to God, dear son, for I’m deeply afraid for you. I do believe you’ve seen the angels who cause people such grief, killing whoever they come across.’

‘No, truly, mother, no, I didn’t! They told me they were called knights.’

His mother fainted at the word, hearing her son say ‘knights’; and

when she came to, she cried, now filled with anguish: ‘Oh, alas! What blows fate deals me! My good, dear son, I’d planned to guard you so well from knights that you’d never hear of them or ever see one. You should indeed have been a knight, if God had pleased to guard your father and others close to you. There was no knight of such high worth or as feared and dreaded as your father was, dear son, in all the islands of the sea. You may be proud indeed and fear no shame of your descent, either on his side or on mine: for I too was born of a line of knights, and the finest in the land. In all the ocean’s isles there was no finer lineage than mine in my time; but now the greatest of my line have fallen: it’s often the case that misfortunes befall the worthy men who strive to live in honour and prowess. Iniquity, and shame, and sloth, they never fall, for they can go no lower; but the good, it seems, must always fall. Your father, though you don’t know this, was crippled by a wound in the leg. Then his great land and his great treasures, held by him as a worthy man, all went to perdition, and he fell into utter poverty. And after the death of King Uterpandragon, the father of good King Arthur, noble men were wrongly reduced to poverty and robbed of their inheritance and ruined; the lands were laid waste and the poor people left destitute; they took to flight, all those who could. Your father had this manor-house out here in the wild forest; he couldn’t flee, but with all haste he had himself borne here in a litter, not knowing where else to go. You were just a little boy, barely weaned, little more than two years old. But you had two very dear brothers, and when they grew older, at your father’s advice and counsel they went to two royal courts to receive arms and horses. The elder went to the king of Escavalon, and served him a long while, until he was dubbed a knight. The other son, born after him, served King Ban of Gomorret. On one and the same day both boys were dubbed and knighted; and on one and the same day they both set out to come back home, intending to delight me and their father; but he never saw them again, for they fell in combat. Yes, both of them were killed in battle, and it grieves and pains me desperately. A grim fate befell the elder, for when his body was found, crows and rooks had pecked out his eyes. Your father died of grief for his sons, and I’ve suffered a bitter life since his death. You were all my consolation then, and all that I possessed, for nothing else remained to me. God had left me nothing more to give me joy and happiness.’

The boy heard very little of what his mother said to him.

‘Give me something to eat,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’d love to go to the king who makes men knights; and go I shall, whatever grief it brings.’

His mother kept him there and held him back as long as she could; and she clad and dressed him in a big canvas shirt, and breeches made in the Welsh fashion, where shoes and leggings, I believe, are made together in one

piece; and he had a hooded tunic of deer-hide, stitched tight all around; that was how his mother clothed him. She held him back for three days, no more; after that all her ploys were vain. Then wondrous grief beset her; weeping, she kissed and embraced him, and said:

'It grieves me deeply, dear son, seeing you depart. You'll go to the king's court and tell him to give you arms. And there'll be no refusal: he'll give you them, I know he will. But when it comes to using them, what'll happen then? How will you fare at something you've never done and never seen anyone else do? Badly, I fear, in truth. You'll be hopeless at it! And no wonder: you can't know what you've not been taught – the wonder's when a man fails to learn the things he often hears and sees. Dear son, I want to give you some advice which you'd do well to heed; if you remember it, it'll be much to your benefit. You'll soon be a knight, my son, I do believe, if it be God's will. If you encounter, near or far, a lady in need of help, or any girl in distress, be ready to aid them if they ask you to, for all honour lies in such deeds. When a man fails to honour ladies, his own honour is surely dead. Serve ladies and girls and you'll be honoured everywhere. But if you should desire the love of any, take care that you don't annoy her by doing anything to displease her. And a maid who kisses gives much; so if she consents to kiss you, I forbid you to take more: for love of me, leave with the kiss. But if she has a ring on her finger or a purse at her waist, and for love or through your pleas she should give it to you, then I'm happy that you should take her ring; yes, I give you leave to take the ring and purse. Dear son, I've something more to say to you: on the road, or in lodging, share no-one's company for long without asking him his name; for know this, in short: the name he has reveals the man. Speak with worthy men, dear son, and seek their company; for a worthy man never gives false counsel. Above all I beg you to go to minster and to church, to pray to Our Lord to give you honour in this world and grant that you so lead your life that you may come to a good end.'

'Mother,' he said, 'what's a church?'

'My son, it's where one pays service to God, who made heaven and earth and set the men and women here.'

'And what's a minster?'

'Just this, my son: a beautiful and holy house where sacred relics and treasures are kept, and where we sacrifice the body of Jesus Christ, the holy prophet who was treated so wickedly by the Jews. He was betrayed and unjustly condemned, and suffered the pain of death for all men and women; for their souls went to Hell when they left their bodies, but He set them free. He was bound to a stake and scourged, and then crucified, and made to wear a crown of thorns. To hear masses and matins, and to worship this lord, I would have you go to church.'



And that was that. He took his leave, his mother wept, and on went the saddle. He was dressed in the style and manner of the Welsh, with shoes of coarse hide on his feet. Wherever he went he always bore three javelins: he wanted to take them with him now, but his mother took two of them because he would have looked too Welsh – she would have taken all three of them if she could. He carried a switch in his right hand to goad his horse along. Weeping, the mother who adored him kissed him as he left, and prayed to God to keep him safe.

‘Dear son!’ she cried. ‘God guide you! May he give you more joy than is left to me, wherever you may go.’

When the boy had gone a pebble’s throw he looked back and saw his mother fallen at the bridge’s foot; she lay there in a faint, as though she had fallen dead. But the boy lashed his hunting-horse hard on the rump with his switch and departed; and his mount was sure of foot and bore him swiftly through the forest, great and dark. He rode on from early morning till the day drew to a close. He slept in the forest that night, until the bright new day appeared.

**I**n the morning when the birds began to sing the boy rose and mounted, and rode on until he caught sight of a pavilion pitched in a beautiful meadow beside a stream from a spring. The pavilion was a wonder, it was so fair: one side was vermilion, the other embroidered with a thread of gold, and on the top was a golden eagle. Upon this eagle the sun fell, bright and blazing, and the whole meadow shimmered with the pavilion’s light. All around the pavilion, the fairest in the world, were leafy bowers, and lodges made in the Welsh manner, of interwoven branches. The boy rode towards the pavilion, and as he approached he said:

‘God, I see your house! It’d be shameful of me not to go and worship you. My mother was right when she said a church was the fairest thing there is, and she told me that whenever I came across one I should go and worship the Creator in whom I believe. In faith, I’ll go and pray to Him to send me food today – I could really do with some.’

Then he came up to the pavilion and found it open; and inside he saw a bed covered with a rich silken cloth; and in the bed, all alone, lay a young girl, sleeping. Her companions were out in the wood: her maids had gone to pick fresh flowers with which to strew the pavilion, as was their custom. As the boy entered the pavilion his horse neighed so loudly that the maiden heard it and woke with a start. And the boy, simple soul that he was,

said:

‘I give you greeting, girl, as my mother taught me to do. She told me to greet girls whenever I met them.’

The girl trembled with fear, thinking the boy was mad – and she charged herself with madness for letting him find her alone.

‘On your way, boy!’ she cried. ‘Be off before my sweetheart sees you!’

‘No, by my life! I’m going to kiss you!’ said the boy. ‘I don’t care who it upsets – my mother told me to!’

‘I’ll never kiss you, truly I won’t – not if I can help it!’ cried the girl. ‘Be off in case my love should find you! If he does, you’re dead!’

But the boy had strong arms and embraced her – but gauchely, for that was the only way he knew. Then he laid her down full-length beneath him, and she struggled with all her might to get away; but she fought in vain, for whether she liked it or not the boy kissed her seven times in a row – so the story says – until he saw a ring on her finger crowned with a brilliant emerald.

‘My mother also told me,’ he said, ‘to take the ring from your finger, but to do no more with you. So now for the ring! I want it!’

‘You’ll never have my ring,’ the maiden cried, ‘unless you tear it from my hand by force!’

The boy grabbed her hand, forced her fist open, snatched the ring from her finger and set it on his own; then he said:

‘I wish you well, girl! I’m off now, and with good reward! It’s much better kissing you than any of the chambermaids at my mother’s house: your lips don’t taste sour.’

The girl began to weep and said: ‘Boy, don’t take my ring or I’ll be sorely punished for it, and it’ll cost you your life sooner or later, I promise you.’

He took in not a word of this, but he knew he hadn’t breakfasted: he was dying of hunger, horribly. He found a cask full of wine and beside it a silver goblet; and then he saw a fresh, white cloth on a bundle of rushes. He picked it up, and underneath he found three fine venison pies, new baked – not at all unappetizing! To quell the hunger that beset him he broke open one of the pies and ate with a vengeance, and started pouring wine into the silver cup: it wasn’t bad; he drank great and frequent draughts, and said:

‘I can’t eat all these pies myself, girl. Come and eat, they’re very good! We can have one each and there’ll still be a whole one left!’

But for all his calls and invitations, the girl just wept and couldn’t say a word. She wrung her hands and wept piteously, while the boy ate and drank till he had had his fill. Then he covered up what he had left and took his leave at once, commending her to God – little though his good wishes

pleased her.

‘God save you, friend!’ he cried. ‘And don’t be upset that I took your ring; before I die I’ll repay you for it. I’m off now, by your leave.’

The girl wept and said she would never commend him to God, for because of him she would suffer shame and distress such as no unfortunate girl had ever known, and that she would never have help or aid from him as long as he lived, and that he should know he had betrayed her. And so she was left there, weeping.

It was not long before her love returned from the wood; and when he saw the hoof-prints left by the boy, who had now set off on his way, he was most aggrieved. He found his love weeping, and said:

‘Girl, from the signs I see, I think a knight has been here.’

‘No, sir, no, I promise you; but a Welsh boy was here, a tiresome, base and foolish youth, who drank as much of your wine as he pleased, and ate some of your pies.’

‘Is that why you’re weeping, my fair one? If he’d eaten and drunk the lot it would have been as I’d have wished.’

‘That’s not all, sir,’ she said. ‘There’s also my ring; he seized it from me and carried it off. I’d rather have died than have had him take that.’

Her love was downcast then, and anguished in his heart. ‘In faith,’ he said, ‘this is an outrage! Since he’s taken it, let him keep it; but I think he did more. If he did, don’t hide it.’

‘Sir,’ she said, ‘he kissed me.’

‘Kissed you?’

‘Yes, truly, but against my will.’

‘No!’ he cried, in an agony of jealousy. ‘It was as you wished, and pleased you well! He found no great resistance! Do you think I don’t know you? I do indeed, I know you well! I’m not so blind or boss-eyed that I can’t see your falseness! You’ve taken a wicked course, and a course that’ll bring you pain; your horse shall have no oats to eat, nor shall he be cared for, until I’ve taken my revenge. And if he loses a shoe he’ll not be reshod; if he dies you’ll follow me on foot. And the clothes you wear will not be changed; you’ll follow me on foot and naked until I have his head; I’ll settle for no less.’

With that he sat down and began to eat.

**M**eanwhile the boy rode on, until he saw a charcoal-burner coming, driving an ass before him.

‘Worthy ass-driver,’ said the simple youth, ‘tell me the quickest way to Cardoecil. They say King Arthur, whom I so want to see, makes men

knights there.'

'Boy,' he said, 'if you go this way you'll find a castle overlooking the sea. And you'll find King Arthur at the castle, both joyful and grieving.'

'Oh, please tell me now, what causes the king this joy and grief?'

'I will,' he said, 'and it won't take long. King Arthur with all his army fought against Rion, the King of the Isles, and Rion was defeated, which brought King Arthur joy. But he's distressed that his companions have left him for their castles where they decided it would be best to stay, and he has no news of them at all; that's what's caused him grief.'

The boy cared little for the charcoal-burner's news, but set off along the road that he had shown him, until he caught sight of a castle overlooking the sea, most finely situated, and strong and handsome. And then he saw, riding out through the gate, an armed knight carrying a cup of gold in his hand; he held his lance and reins and shield by his left hand, and the cup of gold in his right; his arms looked fine upon him, and they were all red. The boy gazed at these handsome, brand new arms, and was overwhelmed and said:

'In faith, I'll ask the king to grant me those; how I'd love it if he gave them to me! A curse on the man who'd seek any others!'

With that he hurried on towards the castle, so eager to reach the court; but as he drew near, the knight stopped him and asked: 'Where are you going, boy? Tell me.'

'To the king's court,' he said, 'to ask him for those arms.'

'And well you might, boy,' the knight replied. 'Off you trot, then, quickly, and then come back. And you'll tell this to that worthless king: that if he doesn't wish to hold his land as my vassal, he should yield it to me or send a champion to defend it against me, for I say it's mine. To prove my point, I've just taken this cup from before his eyes, with the very wine he was drinking!'

The knight should have sought another messenger, for the boy hadn't heard a word. He rode straight on to the court, where the king and his knights were seated at dinner. The hall being on ground level, the boy rode in on horseback; and it was paved with flagstones, and was as long as it was wide. King Arthur was sitting at the head of the table, lost in thought; all the knights were laughing and joking with each other – all except the king, who was deep in thought and silent. The boy came forward, not knowing whom to greet, for he didn't know the king at all. Then Yvonet came towards him, holding a knife in his hand.

'Vassal,' the boy said, 'you with the knife in your hand, show me which of these men is the king.'

Yvonet, who was always courteous, replied: 'There he is, friend.'

And the boy went up to him at once and gave him such greeting as he knew. But the king was still lost in thought and did not say a word. The boy addressed him a second time; the king thought on and said nothing.

‘By my life,’ said the boy, ‘this king never made anyone a knight! How could he make someone a knight when you can’t get a word out of him?’

And so he prepared to go back and turned his hunting-horse about; but he pulled his mount so near the king, like the rude soul that he was, that, without a lie, he sent the king’s hat flying from his head to the table.

The king turned his bowed head to the boy and awoke from his thoughts and said: ‘Dear brother, welcome. Please don’t take it ill that I didn’t return your greeting. I couldn’t reply for grief and anger, for my greatest enemy, the one who hates and torments me most, has now contested my land; he’s mad enough to claim that he’ll have it all, unconditionally, whether I like it or not. His name is the Red Knight of the forest of Quinqueroi. And the queen had come to sit here before me, to see and to comfort the knights who are wounded. I wouldn’t have cared about the Red Knight’s words, but he took my cup from in front of me, and snatched it up so recklessly that he poured the whole cupful of wine over the queen. It was a base, ugly, shameful deed; the queen has run back to her chamber, burning with rage, suicidal with anger; God help me, I don’t think she’ll escape from it alive.’

The boy didn’t care a jot about the king’s story, or about his grief or his shame – and just as little about the king’s wife.

‘Make me a knight, lord king,’ he said, ‘for I want to go.’

The eyes of the simple, untaught youth were bright and laughing. None who saw him thought him wise, but all who saw him thought him handsome and fair.

‘Friend,’ said the king, ‘dismount and give your horse to a boy, who’ll care for him and do your bidding. In a moment you shall be a knight, to my honour and your profit.’

But the boy replied: ‘The ones I met in the glade never dismounted. Why do you want *me* to? By my life, I won’t get down! Just hurry up, then I can go.’

‘Ah!’ said the king, ‘my good, dear friend, I’ll do so most willingly, to your profit and my honour.’

‘Good lord king,’ said the boy, ‘by the faith I owe the Creator, I shan’t be a knight for long without being a *red* knight. Grant me the arms of the one I met outside the gate – the one who took your golden cup.’

Kay the seneschal, who was one of the wounded, was angered by these words and said: ‘How right you are, friend! Go at once and take his arms, for they’re yours! How wise of you to come and ask!’

The king heard this and was enraged, and said to Kay:

'It's very wrong of you to mock the boy, and ill becoming a worthy man. Though the boy be simple, he may yet be a noble man; his upbringing may be to blame, at the hands of a bad master, but he may yet prove a worthy vassal. It is base to mock others – as it is to promise without giving. A worthy man shouldn't promise anything to anyone that he cannot or will not give, lest he incur the ill-will of a man who was his friend before the promise, but who, since it was made, expects it to be fulfilled. I tell you, it's better by far to refuse from the beginning than to raise expectations. The truth is, a man who makes a promise and fails to keep it is deceiving and fooling himself, for he is turning his friend's heart from him.'

And while the king said this to Kay, the boy, as he turned to leave, saw a beautiful, most comely girl and greeted her; and she returned his greeting, and then she laughed, and as she laughed she said:

'If you live long, boy, I feel in my heart that in all the world there will not be, nor will there ever have been known, a finer knight than you: so I think and feel and believe.'

This girl had not laughed for more than six years; but she said these words so loud and clear that everyone could hear her. And the words enraged Kay; he leapt forward and slapped her so hard across her tender cheek that he laid her full-length on the floor. And turning back after hitting the girl he found the court fool standing by a chimney, and in his raging temper he kicked him into the blazing fire, because the fool had always said:

'That girl will never laugh until she sees the one who is destined to be the greatest of all knights.'

The fool cried out, the girl wept, and the boy delayed no longer: without a word from anyone he set off after the Red Knight. And Yvonet, who knew all the secret, shortest cuts and was a keen bringer of news to court, ran off, all alone, without companion, through a garden beside the hall and down through a postern gate, and came straight to the path where the knight stood, waiting for adventure and a trial of chivalry, the golden cup on a grey stone block beside him. The boy was racing towards him to take his arms, and when he had ridden within earshot he cried:

'Lay down your arms! King Arthur commands you to carry them no more!'

And the knight asked him: 'Well, boy, does anyone dare come and defend the king's right? If so, out with it!'

'What? By the devil, sir knight, are you mocking me, that you haven't laid aside my arms? Get on with it and take them off, I command you!'

'I asked you, boy,' he said, 'if anyone was coming from the king to

fight me?’

‘Sir knight, take off those arms or I’ll take them off you! I’m not letting you have them any more! I’m warning you, I’ll hit you if you make me say it again.’

The knight was angered then: he swung his lance with both hands and gave the boy such a blow across the shoulders with the shaft that he rocked forward over the neck of his horse. The pain of the blow enraged the boy; he aimed straight for the knight’s eye and let fly his javelin so fast that the knight neither saw nor heard it; it struck clean through the eye and into the brain, and out through the nape of his neck the blood and brain came spilling. The knight’s heart burst with the pain, and he toppled over and crashed to the ground, dead. The boy dismounted and laid the knight’s lance to one side and took his shield from his neck; but he didn’t know how to tackle the helmet on the knight’s head: he couldn’t think how to remove it. And he wanted to ungird the knight’s sword but didn’t know how, nor how to draw it from its scabbard; he just grabbed the sword and heaved and pulled. Yvonet began to laugh when he saw the boy’s bewilderment.

‘What’s going on, friend?’ he said. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I don’t know. From what your king said I thought he’d granted these arms to me, but I’ll have to chop the knight to bits before I get them: they’re stuck so tight to the body that inside and out are one piece, it seems – they’re stuck together solid.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Yvonet. ‘I can separate them if you wish.’

‘Go on, then,’ said the boy, ‘and give them to me, quickly.’

So Yvonet set to work, and stripped the knight right down to his toes; he left neither hauberk nor shoe, nor the helm on his head nor any other armour. But the boy wouldn’t lay aside his own clothes; for all Yvonet’s pleas he wouldn’t take the sumptuous tunic of quilted silk that the knight had worn beneath his hauberk. Nor could Yvonet talk the boy out of the old ankle-boots he wore; the boy said:

‘The devil! You must be joking! Change the fine clothes my mother made me the other day for this knight’s stuff? My nice thick canvas shirt for his, all soft and thin? You’d have me give up my tunic that never leaks, for this one, that wouldn’t keep out a drop? Hang anyone who’d change good clothes for bad!’

Teaching a fool’s not easy. All pleas were vain: he would take nothing but the arms. Yvonet laced them on for him, and tied the spurs to his ankle-boots, and clad him in the hauberk – a finer one was never seen; and over the mail hood he set the helmet, which fitted him perfectly; and he taught him to gird on the sword so that it hung loose and free; then he set the boy’s foot in the stirrup and mounted him on the knight’s charger.

He had never seen stirrups before, and knew nothing of spurs – he had only used sticks and switches. And finally Yvonet brought him the shield and the lance and presented them to him. And before Yvonet turned back, the boy said to him:

‘Have my hunting-horse, friend; take him back with you – he’s very good, but you can have him: I don’t need him now. And take the king his cup with my greetings. And say this to the girl that Kay struck on the cheek: that if I can, before I die, I intend to deal with Kay so that she may consider herself avenged.’

And Yvonet replied that he would return the cup to the king and deliver his message faithfully. And with that they parted and went their ways.

Yvonet came into the hall where the barons were, and carried the cup to the king, saying: ‘Rejoice, sire! That knight of yours who was here just now returns your cup to you.’

‘Which knight do you mean?’

‘The one who has just left here,’ said Yvonet.

‘You mean the Welsh boy,’ said the king, ‘who asked me for the red arms of the knight who’s done me every possible shame?’

‘Yes indeed, sire.’

‘And how did he get my cup? Did the knight love and esteem him so much that he returned it of his own free will?’

‘No indeed. The boy made him pay dearly for it: he killed him.’

‘How was that, dear friend?’

‘I don’t know, sire; except that I saw the knight give him a painful blow with his lance, and the boy struck him back with a javelin right through the eye so that blood and brain spilled out behind, and laid him dead on the ground.’

Then the king said to the seneschal: ‘Ah, Kay! you’ve done me ill service! With your offensive tongue, which has uttered so many insults, you’ve robbed me of the boy who’s been of such worth to me today.’

‘And by my life, sire,’ said Yvonet to the king, ‘he gave me a message for the queen’s maid whom Kay struck out of spite and hatred: he says he’ll take revenge on him if he gets the chance.’

The fool, who was sitting beside the fire, heard this and leapt to his feet, and came bounding up to the king, hopping and jumping for joy, and said: ‘God save me, lord king, adventures are now about to befall us, and many of them will be hard and cruel. And I promise you, Kay can be quite certain that his feet and his hands and his base and foolish tongue will bring shame upon his life, for before a fortnight’s passed the knight will have avenged the kick he gave me, and the slap he gave the girl will be well repaid



and dearly bought, for his right arm will be broken between the elbow and the armpit. He'll carry it in a sling for half a year, indeed he will; he can escape it no more than death.'

These words upset Kay so much that he nearly burst with rage and fury; he would have killed the fool in front of everyone, but he refrained from attacking him, knowing it would incur the king's displeasure.

And the king cried: 'Ah, Kay! you've earned my rage today! If someone had guided the boy in the art of arms, so that he could have handled a shield and lance, he'd have made a good knight for sure; but he knows so little about arms or anything else that he couldn't even draw a sword if he needed. Now he's sitting, armed, upon his horse, and he's sure to meet some hardy knight who won't hesitate to wound him to win his horse; he'll soon kill or maim him, for he won't know how to defend himself. He's so naive and untaught, he won't last long.'

Thus the king lamented and grieved for the boy, and his face was crestfallen. But lamenting would do no good, and he said no more.

**M**eanwhile the boy went riding through the forest without a stop, until he came to a flat land beside a river. The river was wider than a crossbow's range, but all the water that ebbed and flowed stayed within its banks.

He rode right across a meadow towards the great and roaring river; but he didn't venture into the water: he saw that it was dark and rushing, and a good deal deeper than the Loire. So he rode along the bank; and on the far side of the river rose a jagged crop of rock, the water beating at its foot. And on one side of the rock, where it sloped down to the sea, there stood a rich and imposing castle. As the river opened into a bay the boy turned to his left, and there he saw the castle's towers being born: for in his eyes they were being born there, issuing from the rock. In the middle of the castle loomed a great, strong tower, and a mighty barbican faced the bay and made its stand against the sea that pounded at its foot. At the four corners of the castle wall, which was made of great, square, solid stones, were four turrets, strong and handsome. The castle was finely situated, and well arranged inside. Before the round gatehouse was a bridge built of stone and sand and lime, stretching across the water; the bridge was strong and high, with battlements all the way along. In the middle of it was another tower, and before it a drawbridge, designed and built to serve its special purpose: by day it was a bridge, by night a gate. The boy turned his horse towards it.

Dressed in a rich and deep-hued gown, a nobleman was strolling on the bridge. Up rode the boy. The noble, for appearance's sake, was holding a cane in his hand; and two boys had followed him, wearing no tunics or surcoats. The Welsh boy was very mindful of what his mother had told him, for he gave the nobleman his greeting, and said: 'Sir, my mother taught me that.'

'God bless you, dear brother,' the nobleman replied, seeing from his words that he was a fool and a simpleton. 'And where are you from?'

'Where am I from? From the court of King Arthur!'

'What have you been up to there?'

'The king made me a knight; God send him good fortune!'

'A knight! God save me, I thought he'd forgotten about such matters for the moment; I thought he had other things on his mind than making men knights. But tell me, brother, who gave you those arms?'

'The king,' he said, 'granted them to me.'

'Did he indeed? How was that?'

And the boy told him, just as you have heard in the story. To repeat it would be a bore and pointless: no story benefits from that. The nobleman questioned him further, asking him about his horsemanship.

'I run him up and down nicely, just like I did with the hunting-horse I took from my mother's house.'

'Tell me more, dear friend. How do you manage with your arms?'

'I know all about getting them on and off: the same way the lad did for me after I'd watched him strip the knight I killed. They're so light to wear, they're no trouble at all.'

'By my life, that's good,' the noble said, 'I'm glad of that. Now tell me, if you don't mind, what's brought you here?'

'Sir, my mother told me to approach worthy men wherever I found them, and to trust in what they said, for there was much to gain by heeding them.'

'God bless her,' the nobleman replied, 'for she gave you good advice. Have you anything else to tell me?'

'Yes.'

'What's that?'

'Just one thing: give me lodging tonight.'

'Most gladly,' said the nobleman, 'provided you grant me a favour from which you'll greatly benefit.'

'What's that?'

'Trust in your mother's advice, and also in mine.'

'In faith,' said the boy, 'I promise you that.'

'Dismount then.'

And the boy stepped down. One of the two boys who were there took his horse, while the other disarmed him; that left him in his ridiculous outfit – in the ankle-boots and the ill-made, ill-cut coat of deerhide that his mother had given him. Then they fitted the nobleman with the sharp steel spurs that the boy had brought, and he mounted the boy's horse, hung the shield from his neck by its strap and took up the lance, and said: 'Now learn the art of arms, my friend: take note of how a lance should be held, and a horse spurred and reined.'

Then he unfurled the pennon and showed the boy how a shield should be carried. He made it hang a little forward until it touched the horse's neck, and he set the lance in its rest and spurred the horse on. It was worth a hundred marks, that horse: none ever charged with more will, more speed or more power. The nobleman was highly skilled with shield and horse and lance, for he had learned the art from his boyhood, and everything he did filled the boy with delight.

When he had finished his splendid mock-combat before the boy, who had watched with rapt attention, the nobleman came back to him with his lance raised and asked him: 'Well, friend, could you handle the lance and shield like that, and spur and guide the horse?'

And straight away the boy replied that he did not wish to live a day longer, or ever enjoy wealth, if he did not know how to do those things.

'My good, dear friend,' said the nobleman, 'what a man can't do he can learn to do, if he's willing to work and apply himself. All skills require heart and toil and practice: with those three things they can be learned. And you shouldn't be ashamed or blamed if you can't do what you've never done and have never seen others do.'

Then the nobleman told him to mount, and the boy began to carry the lance and shield as perfectly as if he had spent his life in tournaments and wars, and ridden through every land in search of battle and adventure; for it came to him quite naturally, and with nature instructing him and his whole heart committed, he was bound to have no difficulty – not where nature and heart strove together. He gave such a fine account of himself that the nobleman was greatly pleased, saying to himself that if the boy had spent his whole life working and engaged in arms this would still have seemed a fine display.

When the boy had done his turn he came back to the nobleman with his lance raised, just as he had seen him do, and said: 'Did I do well, sir? Do you think my effort will be worthwhile, if I keep on trying? My eyes have never seen anything I've desired so much. I'd dearly love to know as much about it all as you.'

'My friend,' said the nobleman, 'if you've set your heart on it, you

will; you need have no fear of that.'

Three times the nobleman mounted and three times taught him everything he could, until he had taught him a good deal; and three times he bade the boy do likewise. The final time he said to him:

'If you met a knight and he struck you, what would you do?'

'I'd hit him back.'

'And if your lance broke?'

'Then there'd be nothing else for it: I'd lay into him with my fists.'

'No you wouldn't, friend.'

'What should I do, then?'

'Join combat with the sword.'

Then the nobleman plunged the lance bolt upright in the ground before him, eager to train the boy in the art of arms so that he could defend himself with the sword if he were attacked, and go on the offensive if the chance arose. Gripping the sword he said to the boy: 'Friend, this is how to defend yourself if anyone attacks you.'

'God save me,' said the boy, 'I know more about that than anyone; I learned all about it at my mother's house, practising with cushions and shields, till often I was quite worn out.'

'Then let's go to my house at once,' said the nobleman. 'I can give you no better advice. Tonight we'll enjoy the finest lodging – no-one shall stand in our way!'

They both set off then side by side, and the boy said to his host: 'Sir, my mother taught me that I should never share a man's company for long without knowing his name. That's what she said, so I'd like to know yours.'

'Dear friend,' the nobleman replied, 'my name is Gorneman de Gorhaut.'

So they walked on to the castle, hand in hand. As they began to climb the steps a young lad came up eagerly, carrying a short mantle; he ran and dressed the boy in it, in case he caught some harmful cold after getting so hot. The nobleman's house was rich and great and handsome, and he had fine retainers, and dinner was already spread, good and appealing and well prepared. And so the knights washed and sat down to dine. The nobleman seated the boy next to him, and had him eat with him from the same platter. I shall say no more about the meal – neither how many dishes they had nor what they were; suffice it to say that they ate and drank their fill. And when they had risen from the table the nobleman, courteous soul that he was, begged the boy who had sat beside him to stay for a month. He would gladly keep him a full year if he wished, and in that time would teach him things, if he cared to learn, which would be of great use in time of need. But the boy replied:

'Sir, I don't know if I'm near the house where my mother lives, but

I pray that God may lead me to her so that I may see her again, for I saw her faint and fall at the foot of the bridge outside our gate, and I don't know if she's alive or dead. She fainted with grief because I left her, I know it. So I can't stay, not until I know how she is.'

The nobleman could see it was no use pleading with him. They said no more, and retired to their rest without another word, for the beds were already made.

The nobleman rose early next morning and went to the boy's bed where he found him still lying, and had a shirt and breeches of fine linen brought to him as a gift, and hose dyed with brazil wood, and a tunic of violet silk woven and made in India; he sent him all these things to wear, and said to him: 'If you'll take my advice, friend, you'll wear these clothes here.'

'Good sir, how can you say that? Aren't the clothes my mother made me twice as good? You'd have me wear *these*?'

'By my life and the eyes in my head, my boy, these are far better.'

'Far worse, you mean!'

'You promised, friend, when I brought you here, that you'd do everything I told you.'

'And so I will,' said the boy. 'I won't break my promise to you in any way.'

So he delayed no longer in donning the clothes, and abandoned the ones his mother had made. Then the nobleman knelt down and fastened the boy's right spur; for it was the custom that whoever made a man a knight should put on his spur. There were a good number of other boys there, and all who could lend a hand to arm him. And the nobleman took the sword and girded it on the boy and kissed him, and said that with the sword he had given him the highest order that God had created and ordained: the order of chivalry, which should always be clean of all wickedness. Then he said:

'Good brother, listen to me now: if you ever have to fight a knight, I want to say this: I beg you, if you gain the upper hand, and he can no longer resist and has to beg for mercy, make sure that you grant it and do not kill him. Another thing: don't be too keen on talking. Anyone who talks too much is bound often to say things that make him look a fool. For in the words of the wise: "He sins who speaks too much". So I warn you, friend, not to have too loose a tongue. I ask this, too: if you find a man or a woman, or an orphan or a lady, in any kind of distress, you'll do well to lend them your aid if it's in your power. And one more lesson I have for you – and don't scorn it, for it's not a lesson to be scorned: go willingly to church to pray to the One who made all things, that He may have mercy on your soul, and in this life here on Earth He may guard you as His Christian.'

The boy said to the nobleman: 'May you be blessed by all the popes,

good sir, for my mother said the same!

‘Never say, dear brother,’ said the nobleman, ‘that your mother taught you such and such: say it was I. I don’t blame you for having said so hitherto, but henceforth, please, refrain, for if you keep on saying it people will think you’re mad.’

‘What shall I say, then, sir?’

‘You can say that the vassal who fastened your spur taught and instructed you so.’

And the boy gave him his word that for as long as he lived he would not mention anyone but him, for he trusted his advice.

Then the nobleman raised his hand and blessed him with the sign of the cross, saying: ‘Since you’ve no desire to stay and are determined to go, go with God and may He guide you.’

**T**he new knight took his leave of his host, impatient now to return to his mother and to find her alive and well. He made his way into the lonely forests, for he was more at home there than in the open country, knowing the ways of the woods; and he rode on until he caught sight of a castle. It was strong and finely situated, but outside the walls there was nothing but sea and river and wasteland. He hurried on towards it until he came up to the gate; but before he could reach it he had to cross a bridge so weak that he thought it would hardly take his weight. The boy rode on to the little bridge, and crossed it without any harm or misfortune befalling him. But when he reached the gate he found it locked fast. He wasn’t one to hammer gently, and his cries were none too soft. He pounded away until a thin, pale girl came rushing to the windows of the hall and cried:

‘Who’s calling?’

He looked up and caught sight of the girl and said: ‘Dear friend, I’m a knight who prays you to let me in and give me lodging tonight.’

‘Sir,’ she said, ‘you shall have lodging, though you’ll give me little thanks for it. But we’ll lodge you as well as we can.’

The girl drew back from the window then; and the boy, waiting at the gate, felt they were making him stand around too long and began to shout again. Thereupon four retainers came and unlocked the gate: each had a fine sword girded on and was clutching an axe.

‘Come this way,’ they said to him.

If these retainers had been in a happy state they would have been handsome men indeed; but they had suffered so much from lack of food and

sleep that they were a piteous sight. And just as the boy had found the land outside all bare and deserted, so he found precious little within. Everywhere he went he found the streets waste and the houses in ruins, with not a man or woman anywhere. There were two churches in the town which had both been abbeys: one of nuns, lost and fearful, the other of monks, confused, bewildered. These churches were adorned neither with ornament nor tapestry; their walls, he saw, were decayed and crumbling, their towers open to the sky; and the doors of houses hung open at night as they did by day. No millstone ground, no oven baked in any part of the town, and there was not a drop of wine nor a morsel of bread – not a pennyworth of anything. The castle he had found was waste: there was no bread, no pastry, no wine, no cider, no ale.

The four retainers led him to a palace roofed with slate, and there they helped him dismount and disarm. Then a boy came down a staircase from the hall carrying a grey mantle, and draped it on the knight's shoulders. Another took his horse to the stable, where there was no hay or corn and only the smallest amount of oats, for there was none in the house. The others bade him go before them up the steps to the hall, which was handsome indeed, and two noblemen and a girl came up to meet him. The noblemen were grey with age but not altogether white; they would have been in their prime of blood and strength if it had not been for their troubles and woe. The girl who came with them was more gracious, comely and elegant than a hawk or bird of paradise. Her mantle and tunic were of a rich black cloth starred with gold, and there was no sign of wear on the ermine lining. The neck of her gown had a border of black and white sable, of a perfect length and breadth. And if I have ever described the beauty God placed in the body or the face of a woman, I must do so once more, and not one word shall be a lie. Her head was bare, and her hair was so fair and shining that anyone who saw it would have thought it was all pure gold, if such a thing were possible. Her forehead was high and white and smooth, as if it had been carved by a man's hand from stone or wood or ivory. Her eyebrows were fine and perfectly spaced, and her eyes were bright and laughing, clear and well set; her nose was straight and smooth; and in her face the red and white made a finer blend than red and silver in heraldry. God had made in her a prodigy for stealing men's hearts; He had never made her like before and has never done so since. When the knight saw her he greeted her, and she greeted him, as did the two knights with her. She took him by the hand most courteously and said:

‘Good sir, your lodging tonight will certainly not be such as befits a worthy man. If I told you now the full extent of our plight, you might well think I was saying it in a base attempt to make you go. But come now, please, and take lodging, such as it is, and may God give you better tomorrow!’

And she led him by the hand to a chamber with a painted ceiling,

long and wide and beautiful. They sat down together on a quilt of samite spread across a bed. Knights entered in groups of four and five and six and sat down quietly, and gazed at the one who was sitting beside their lady not saying a word. He was refraining from talking because he remembered the advice that the nobleman had given him, and all the knights began whispering to each other about his silence.

‘God,’ they all said, ‘I wonder if this knight is dumb? It would be a great shame, for never was such a handsome knight born of woman. He looks so well beside my lady, and my lady beside him, if only they weren’t both struck dumb! He is so handsome, and she so beautiful, that never were a knight and a lady so well matched. They look as though God made them for each other, and meant to put them together.’

All those present discussed this for a long while. And the girl waited for him to talk to her about something or other, until she clearly realised that he was not going to say a word unless she spoke to him first. So she said, most courteously:

‘Where have you come from today, sir?’

‘Young lady,’ he replied, ‘I stayed last night at the castle of a nobleman where I had good, fine lodging. It had five strong and splendid towers, one big and four small; I could describe it all to you, but I don’t know the name of the castle – though I do know that the worthy man’s name was Gorneman de Gorhaut.’

‘Oh, dear friend!’ cried the girl, ‘your words are fine indeed! You’ve spoken most courteously! May God the King reward you well for calling him a worthy man, for you never said a truer word. He is indeed a worthy man, by Saint Richier – I can testify to that. I’m his niece, you know, but I haven’t seen him for a very long time. But certainly, since you left your home you won’t have met a worthier man, I’m sure of that. He’ll have given you delightful lodging, being the worthy and courteous soul he is – and powerful, too, and well served and rich. But here there are only five small loaves which an uncle of mine, who is a prior, a most holy and religious man, sent me for supper tonight, and a small cask of sour wine. There’s no other food here, except a roebuck that one of my retainers killed this morning with an arrow.’

She gave orders then for the tables to be set; her bidding was done and everyone sat down to supper. They did not sit there eating long, but the food was taken eagerly. When they had finished they parted: those who had kept watch the night before stayed there to sleep, and those who were on guard that night made ready. Fifty retainers and knights kept watch that night, while the others did everything they could to make their guest comfortable. The one who took charge of making his bed laid out white sheets and a costly coverlet, and a fine pillow for his head. That night the



boy had all the comfort and pleasure one can imagine in a bed, except for the enjoyment of a girl, if that had been his wish, or a lady, if that had been allowed. But he knew nothing about love or anything else, and fell asleep quite soon, untroubled by any worries.

But his hostess, shut up in her chamber, could get no rest. While he slept at ease she was burdened with thought, for she had no defence in a battle that threatened her. She tossed and turned, back and forth. Then finally she threw a mantle of silk over her shirt, deciding in her bold courage to take the risk; and it was no easy decision: she would go to her guest and tell him of her worries. So she rose from her bed and left her chamber, in such fear that she trembled in every limb and broke into a sweat. Weeping, she came to the bed where he lay sleeping, and began to grieve and sigh most deeply, and bent down and knelt and wept so much that her tears spilt all over his face; but she could not bring herself to do any more. She wept so long that he woke up, startled and amazed to find his face all wet, and saw her kneeling beside his bed, embracing him tightly around the neck. He was courteous enough to take her in his arms and draw her to him, saying:

‘What do you want, dear girl? Why have you come here?’

‘Oh, gentle knight, have pity on me! In the name of God and His son, please don’t think ill of me for coming here. Although I’m almost naked I had no thought of folly or sin or wickedness. There is no-one living in the world as filled with grief and misery as I. Nothing I have brings me any comfort, and I haven’t had a day free of misfortune, so wretched am I! But I shall see no night after tonight, nor any day after tomorrow, for I’m going to kill myself with my own hand. Of three hundred and ten knights who used to man this castle only fifty now remain; for two hundred and sixty have been led away and killed or imprisoned by an evil knight named Engygeron, the seneschal of Clamadeus of the Isles. I grieve as much for the captured as for the killed – I know they’ll die: they’ll never escape. So many worthy men have died for me that it’s only right I should despair. Engygeron has besieged us here for a whole winter and summer, never moving; and his strength increases constantly, while ours has diminished and our provisions have been exhausted: we’ve not enough left to feed even one man properly. We’re now in such a plight that tomorrow, unless God intervenes, this castle will be surrendered, for it’s no longer defensible, and I shall be surrendered with it as a miserable prisoner. But truly, I’ll kill myself before he leads me off alive. He’ll have me dead; then I shan’t care if he carries me off. Clamadeus, who dreams of having me, never will in any way, except bereft of life and soul. In a jewel-case of mine I keep a knife of the finest steel which I shall bury in my heart. That’s what I had to tell you; I’ll go now and leave you in peace.’

The knight could soon earn great praise if he had the courage, for

whatever she may have given him to understand, the only reason she had come and wept on his cheeks was to put him in the spirit to take up the battle to defend her land, if he dared do so for her. And he said to her:

‘Dear friend, put on a brave face tonight. Take comfort now and stop your weeping; come up here beside me and wipe the tears from your eyes. If it be God’s will, He’ll send you better fortune tomorrow than you say. Come and lie beside me on this bed – it’s wide enough for both of us. You shan’t leave me tonight.’

And she said: ‘I will, then, if you wish.’

And he kissed her and held her fast in his arms, and drew her gently and softly under the coverlet. She let him kiss her, and I don’t think it displeased her. They lay like this all night, side by side, lip to lip, until the morning when day was near. She found great comfort that night, as they slept lip to lip, arm in arm, until day broke. At dawn the girl returned to her chamber; and without the help of a maid or waiting-woman she dressed and made herself ready, waking no-one.

As soon as they saw the day break those who had been keeping watch that night woke the sleepers, rousing them from their beds; they rose without delay. At the same time the girl returned to her knight, and said to him most courteously:

‘Sir, may God give you a good day today; I don’t think you’ll be staying here long: what would you gain by doing so? You’ll leave, I know; but I don’t object to that – I’d be discourteous if I did, for we’ve done you no honour or service here. I pray God that He may have better lodging in store for you, with more bread and wine and other good things than there are here.’

‘Dear lady,’ he replied, ‘I shan’t be looking for other lodging today. I’ll be bringing peace to all your land instead, if I possibly can. If I find your enemy outside it’ll grieve me if he stays there longer to harass you in any way. But if I kill and vanquish him, I ask, as my reward, that your love may be mine. I’ll take no other payment.’

And she answered him, most graciously: ‘Sir, you’ve asked of me a small, poor thing; but if it were denied you, you’d take it as pride, so I won’t refuse it. But don’t say that the condition of having my love is that you go and die for me, for that would be a grievous shame. Be sure of this: your body and your age are not such that you could endure and contain in battle so hard and strong and great a knight as the one who waits outside.’

‘You’ll see if that’s so today,’ he said, ‘for I’m going to fight with him. Nothing you can say will stop me.’

She fashioned her speech cleverly, pretending to plead against his plan when it was just what she wanted. One often belies one’s wishes on

seeing a man eager to do one's will, so as to fire his keenness even more. And that was what she did so skilfully – inspiring him to do what she staunchly deplored.

He called for his arms; they were brought to him, and he was armed and mounted on a horse that was ready for him in the middle of the square. Everyone present looked dismayed and said:

'Sir, may God lend you aid today, and heap misfortune upon Engygeron the seneschal who has destroyed all this land.'

Such was the prayer of every man and woman. They led him in a convoy to the gate, and when they saw him outside the castle they all cried with one voice: 'Good sir, may that true cross on which God allowed His son to suffer guard you today from mortal danger and misfortune and capture, and lead you back safely to where you may rest at ease in happiness and pleasure.'

In such words everyone prayed for him.

Then the men of the besieging army saw him coming; they pointed him out to Engygeron, who was sitting in front of his tent, shoes and breeches ready laced, expecting that the castle would be surrendered to him before nightfall, or that someone would come from the castle to fight with him in single combat. And his men were in high spirits, thinking they had conquered the castle and the whole country. Engygeron, mounted on a strong and sturdy charger, came calmly up to the knight at a walk and said:

'Boy, who sent you here? Tell me your business: have you come in search of peace or battle?'

'What are you doing in this land?' replied the boy. 'You'll tell me first why you've been killing their knights and ravaging the whole country.'

And Engygeron answered, like the haughty and arrogant man he was: 'I want that castle cleared forthwith and the keep surrendered. It's been held against me too long. And my lord will have the girl.'

'Damn that decree and the one who uttered it!' cried the boy. 'You'll renounce every claim you've made upon it!'

'What nonsense is this you're talking? By Saint Peter,' cried Engygeron, 'it's often the way that one who's not to blame pays the penalty.'

The boy was incensed at that and set his lance in its rest; and they charged at each other as fast as their horses could carry them. With their anger and rage and the strength in their arms they made their lances shiver and fly into pieces. But Engygeron was the only one to fall, wounded by a thrust clean through his shield, and he was in terrible pain in his arm and side. The boy dismounted, not knowing how to attack him on horseback; down he jumped, sword in hand, and strode up to Engygeron. I don't know what else to tell you: I shan't describe what befell each man and give you details of every

blow; but the battle lasted a long while, and the blows they dealt were terrible, until Engygeron fell. The boy attacked him fiercely until he cried for mercy, but he said he would have no mercy whatever; but then he remembered the nobleman, who had taught him never to kill a knight deliberately once he had vanquished him and had mastery. And Engygeron cried:

‘Good, gentle friend, don’t be so cruel as to refuse me mercy! I grant and accord you victory; you’re a true and splendid knight indeed, but no-one would have believed from seeing you and knowing us both that you’d have killed me in battle by your own arms alone. But if I testify, in the presence of my men outside my tent, that you’ve vanquished me in combat, my word will be taken and your honour will be much enhanced, more than any other knight’s. And if you’ve a lord who’s done you some kindness or service and has had no reward from you, then send me to him, and I’ll go and tell him on your behalf how you vanquished me in battle, and yield myself as his prisoner to do with me as he will.’

‘A curse on whoever would sue for more!’ said the boy. ‘I’ll tell you where to go, then: to that castle; and you’ll tell the fair girl who’s my love that never, as long as you live, will you ever trouble her again, and you’ll put yourself entirely, wholly, at her mercy.’

And Engygeron replied: ‘Then kill me, for she would have me killed! She desires nothing so much as to bring me shame and torment, for I was involved in her father’s death; and I’ve incurred her greatest anger by killing and capturing all her knights this year. Anyone who sent me to her would be committing me to a terrible imprisonment; it’s the worst he could possibly do! If you have any other friend or sweetheart who’s not so keen to do me harm, send me to him or her, for this one would certainly take my life if ever she got her hands on me!’

And so he told him to go to a castle belonging to a worthy man, and he gave him the noble’s name. There is not a mason in all the world who could have described the castle better than he. He told him with high praise of the river and the bridge, and the turrets and the tower and the mighty walls around it, until Engygeron realised all too well that the boy wanted to send him as a prisoner to the place where he was hated most.

‘Good brother,’ he said, ‘you’re sending me to no haven there! God help me, you mean to put me in the worst plight and the worst hands; for I killed one of his brothers in this war. Kill me yourself, my good dear friend, rather than make me go to him: if you force me there it’ll be death for me.’

And the boy replied: ‘Then you’ll go as a prisoner to King Arthur; give the king my greetings, and tell him from me to show you the girl whom Kay the seneschal struck because she laughed when she saw me. You’ll yield yourself her prisoner and tell her, if you please, that I pray God to let me live

long enough to avenge her.'

And Engygeron replied that he would do that service as well and as finely as he could. The victorious knight turned back towards the castle, while Engygeron set off to his imprisonment, giving orders that his standard should be taken down. The besieging army departed, till not a fair or a dark-haired head remained.

The people of the castle poured forth to meet the knight on his return. But they were most upset that he had not taken the head of the defeated knight or brought him back to them. They joyfully helped him dismount and disarmed him at a mounting-stone, but they all said:

'Since you've not brought Engygeron back, why didn't you cut off his head?'

And he replied: 'In faith, my lords, I think that would have been most ill-advised! He's killed your kinsmen, and I couldn't have protected him: you'd have killed him in spite of me. And it wouldn't have been very good of me to refuse him mercy when I had the better of him. And do you know what that mercy was? He is to present himself as a prisoner to King Arthur, if he keeps his promise to me.'

Just then the girl appeared and greeted him with the greatest joy, and led him to her chamber to rest and take his ease. She did not resist his embraces and kisses; instead of eating and drinking they sported and kissed and embraced and exchanged sweet words.

Meanwhile Clamadeus, in his delusion, was expecting to have the castle without contest that day, until he met a boy along his way, lamenting terribly, who told him the news about Engygeron the seneschal.

'In God's name, sir, things are going badly!' said the boy, who was grieving so much that he was tearing at his hair with both hands.

And Clamadeus replied: 'What's wrong?'

'Truly, sir, your seneschal has been defeated in combat, and is to yield himself prisoner to King Arthur: he's on his way now.'

'Who did this, boy? Speak up! How could it happen? Where could the knight have come from, who could beat such a worthy and valiant man into submission?'

'Oh, dear sir,' the boy replied, 'I don't know who the knight was. But I know this much, for I saw it myself: he came out of Beaurepaire, and was armed with red arms.'

'Tell me, boy, what shall I do now?' he cried, nearly out of his mind.

'Now, sir? Go back the way you came. You'll gain nothing by carrying on.'

Just as he said this there appeared a rather white-haired knight who

had always been Clamadeus' mentor, who said: 'Those are base words, boy! You should give wiser and better advice than that. He'd be mad to listen to you: if he takes my advice he'll carry on. Sir,' he continued, 'do you want to know how to get the knight and the castle? I'll tell you the way most certainly, and it'll be done with ease! Within the walls of Beaurepaire there's nothing to drink or eat and the knights are weak, while we are strong and healthy, neither hungry nor thirsty, and could endure a great battle if they dared to come out and engage us. We'll send twenty knights to fight outside the gate. The knight, sporting with his fair love Blanchefflor, will want to prove his chivalry; but he won't have a chance! He'll be captured or killed, for the others, who'll be so weak, will give him little help. The twenty will do nothing except draw them into the trap and keep them occupied while we creep up through this valley and close in on them from behind.'

'Truly,' said Clamadeus, 'I approve of that! We have four hundred armed knights here, and a thousand footmen fully equipped, all chosen fighting men; our enemies are all as good as dead!'

So Clamadeus sent twenty of his knights before the castle gate, carrying all kinds of pennons and banners unfurled in the wind. And when the men of the castle saw them they rashly flung open the gates according to the boy's wishes, and with everybody watching he rode out to do combat with the knights. Bold and strong and confident, he met them all together; and no-one who felt his onslaught thought him an apprentice in the art of arms! He showed great skill that day: he gutted many with his lance, here pierced their chests and there their breasts, here broke an arm and there a collar, this one he killed and that one wounded, this one unhorsed and that one seized, and gave the captives and the horses to those who had need of them.

But suddenly they caught sight of the great battalion who had come up through the valley: four hundred armed knights and a thousand foot-soldiers. The men of the castle drew up close to the open gate, while the besiegers beheld the loss they had suffered of their wounded and dead companions, and came charging towards the gate in impetuous disarray. The defenders were all ranged in serried ranks at their gate and received them boldly; but they were few in numbers and weak, while their attackers were boosted by the foot-soldiers who followed them, until they could withstand them no longer and fell back into the castle. Above the gate were archers shooting into the great crowd and press who were burning and raging to burst into the castle, until finally, violently, one band broke their way in. But the men above sent a portcullis crashing on to those below, killing and crushing all it caught as it fell. Clamadeus could not have seen a more grievous sight: the falling gate had killed huge numbers of his men and locked him out; there was nothing for it but to go and rest: to continue such a furious assault

would be a waste of effort now.

But his mentor who counselled him said: 'Sir, it's not to be wondered at if misfortune befalls a worthy man. Good and ill befall everyone according to God's will and pleasure. The long and the short of it is: you've lost. But every saint has his feast day! The tempest has fallen on you, your men are wounded and the men of the castle have won; but they'll lose yet, be sure of that! Tear out both my eyes if they hold out for three more days. The castle and the keep will be yours; they'll put themselves entirely at your mercy. If you can stay here just today and tomorrow – that's all – the castle will fall into your hands. Even the girl who's refused you for so long will beg you in God's name to take her!'

Then those who had brought tents and pavilions began to pitch them, while the others made lodges and shelters as best they could. Meanwhile the men of the castle disarmed the knights they had captured; but they did not lock them in dungeons or irons, provided they promised as loyal knights to stay in captivity honourably and to do their captors no harm. Such was their imprisonment.

Now, that very day a mighty wind had driven a vessel across the sea with a great cargo of wheat and other supplies on board. By God's will it arrived safe and sound before the castle. As soon as they caught sight of it the men of the castle sent down to enquire who they were and what they wanted. Down they came from the castle to the ship and asked them what people they were, where they had come from and where they were going.

And they replied: 'We're merchants carrying provisions to sell: bread and wine and salted bacon, and we've plenty of cattle and pigs to slaughter if need be.'

The men of the castle cried: 'God be praised for giving the wind the power that brought you drifting here! You're very welcome! Start unloading! You can sell the lot, as dear as you dare! Come quickly now and take your payment: there'll be plenty to receive and count! We'll give you bars of gold and silver for your wheat. And for the wine and meat you'll have enough riches to fill a cart – more, if need be!'

The buyers and sellers did a fine job as they set about unloading the ship and sending all the goods ahead to fortify the people in the castle. When they saw them coming carrying the provisions you can imagine how they rejoiced! And with all possible speed they gave orders for dinner to be prepared.

Clamadeus, loitering outside, could now stay as long as he liked; for in the castle they had cattle and pigs and salted meat in abundance, and enough wheat to last till the next harvest.

The castle cooks were not idle, and boys lit the kitchen fires to cook

the dinner. Now the young knight could sport with his love at his ease; she embraced him, and he kissed her, and they delighted in each other's company. The hall was far from silent now: it rang with rejoicing and a mighty din. The dinner made everyone rejoice: they had longed for it so much; and the cooks laboured with all their might until finally they said they could sit down to dine – and how they needed that dinner!

When they had eaten they rose from the tables; but Clamadeus and his men were filled with anguish, for the news had now reached them of the castle's provisions. They all said they should leave, for there was no way now of starving out the castle: they had besieged it for nothing. Clamadeus was furious, and without anyone's advice or counsel he sent a message to the castle, telling the red knight that until noon the next day he could come and meet him alone in the plain to do battle with him if he dared. When the girl heard this she was filled with grief and anger; but her young love returned word that, come what may, Clamadeus would have battle since that was what he wanted. At that the girl's distress grew deeper still, but I think no amount of tears from her would ever have made him stay. All the women and all the men implored him not to go and fight one whom no knight had ever withstood in battle before; but the boy said:

'It's best you say no more, my lords, for no man in the world could hold me back from this.'

Thus he stopped their tongues, for they dared say nothing more; instead they went to their beds and rested until the sun rose next morning. They were still most distressed for their lord, but no matter how much they implored him they could not change his mind. And his love, too, had begged him that night not to go to battle but to stay there in peace, for they had nothing to fear any longer from Clamadeus and his men. But all this entreaty was worthless – which was strange and remarkable indeed, for her coaxing words to him were as sweet as could be, and with each word she kissed him so softly and gently that she slid love's key into the lock of his heart. Yet still she found no way of dissuading him from going to battle; instead he called for his arms, and those he commanded brought them to him with all speed. But there was the greatest sorrow as the boy was armed; all the men and women were heavy-hearted. He commended them all to the king of kings and mounted his swarthy horse which had been brought to him; and then in a moment he was gone. As he departed he left them grieving bitterly.

When Clamadeus saw his enemy coming he had such wild thoughts in his head that he imagined he would empty the knight's saddle in no time. The plain was beautiful and smooth, and no-one was there save the two of them, for Clamadeus had dismissed his men and sent them all away. Each had his lance fixed in its rest before the saddle-bow, and they charged at each



other without a challenge or wasting words. Both had the sharpest heads on their ash-wood lances, strong and fine to handle; and they charged full tilt, and the knights were strong, filled with mortal hatred; and they struck each other so hard that the wood of their shields split and their lances smashed and they brought each other down; but they both leapt up and came straight at each other, fighting with swords for a long while, and it was an even battle. I could tell you a good deal about it if I wished, but I'll not spend my efforts on that; one word is worth as much as twenty. In the end Clamadeus, against his will, had to cry for mercy. But he swore most earnestly, as his seneschal had done, that on no condition would he submit to imprisonment in Beurepaire, any more than his seneschal would; nor, for all the Roman Empire, would he go to the nobleman who owned the fine castle. But he willingly promised to yield himself prisoner to King Arthur, and to give his message to the girl whom Kay had struck so basely: that he longed to avenge her, whoever it might grieve or trouble, if God gave him strength. Then the boy made him swear that before dawn the next day all those held captive in his dungeons would be set free, safe and sound; and that, as long as he lived, if ever there were an army besieging the castle he would drive them off if he could; and that the girl would never again be troubled either by him or by his men. And so Clamadeus returned to his land, and when he arrived he commanded that all his captives be released from prison, and said they could go their ways now, completely free. As soon as he had given the word his bidding was done: out came the prisoners, freed from the dungeons, and they set off immediately with all their belongings, for nothing was kept from them.

Clamadeus set out on a different path, travelling all alone. It was the custom at this time, as we find written in the book,\* that any knight had to yield himself prisoner dressed just as he was when he left the combat, just as he was when he was vanquished, without removing or donning anything. Thus attired, Clamadeus set off after Engygeron, who was heading for Disnadaron where the king was to hold court.

Meanwhile there was great jubilation in the castle, where those who had spent so long in foul captivity had now returned. The hall and the knights' lodgings rang with rejoicing, and in the chapels and churches all the bells pealed with joy. Every monk and nun sent thanks to God, while through the streets and squares all the men and women danced their rounds. How the castle celebrated, now that no-one was besieging them or waging war!

And meanwhile Engygeron rode on; and Clamadeus followed him, and three nights in a row he lodged at the house where Engygeron had lodged. He followed him, lodging by lodging, to Disnadaron in Wales, where

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i.e. the source-book referred to in the Prologue.

King Arthur was holding a packed court in his halls. They saw Clamadeus coming, armed as custom required, and he was recognised by Engygeron, who had already given the boy's message to the court on his arrival the night before, and had been retained for the king's household and council. He now saw his lord covered in crimson blood, but did not fail to recognise him; he said at once:

'My lords, my lords, behold a wonder! Believe me, the boy with the red arms has sent this knight here! He's vanquished him, I'm sure of it, for he's covered in blood. I know that blood well, and the man himself, for he's my lord and I'm his vassal. Clamadeus of the Isles is his name, and I thought there was no finer knight in the Empire of Rome, but misfortune befalls even worthy men.'

So said Engygeron; and then Clamadeus arrived, and they ran to meet each other in the middle of the court. It was Pentecost, and the queen was sitting beside King Arthur at the head of the table, and there were a good many counts and kings, dukes and queens and countesses; all the masses had been sung, and the ladies and knights had returned from church. Kay came walking through the hall, without a coat or mantle, holding a stick in his right hand and wearing a hat of rich cloth upon his fair-haired head. There was not a more handsome knight in all the world, and his hair was plaited in a braid; but his beauty and his prowess were spoiled by his wicked mocking. His tunic was of a rich cloth coloured with a fine, deep dye, and it was girdled with a finely worked belt of which the buckle and all the links were gold: I can say that with confidence, for so the source-book testifies. Everyone stepped out of his path as he strode through the middle of the hall, avoiding him for fear of his wicked jests and his evil tongue. Any wise man fears open spitefulness, whether it be in seriousness or jest. All those present greatly feared his base mockery, and no-one said a word to him.

In view of them all, Kay stepped up to where the king was sitting and said: 'If you wish, sir, you can eat at once.'

'Kay,' said the king, 'leave me in peace. Never, by the eyes in my head, will I eat on so great a feast-day when I hold so full a court, until some news arrives here.'

It was while they were talking thus that Clamadeus entered the court to yield himself a prisoner, armed as custom demanded; and he said: 'God save and bless the finest king alive, the most generous and most noble: such is the testimony of all who have heard of his great deeds. Now hear me, good sire,' he said, 'for I have a message to give. Much as it grieves me, I acknowledge that I'm sent here by a knight who has defeated me. I have to yield myself prisoner to you on his behalf, whether I like it or not. If anyone asked me if I knew the knight's name, I would have to say no. But I can tell

you that he carries red arms, and he said that you gave them to him.'

'God guide you, friend,' said the king. 'Tell me truly: is he in good health and spirits?'

'You may be sure he is, my good dear sire,' said Clamadeus. 'He's the most valiant knight I've ever known. And he told me to speak to the girl who laughed at him, which made Kay behave so shamefully as to strike her: he says he'll avenge her, if God grants him the power.'

The court fool, when he heard these words, jumped for joy and cried: 'God bless me, my lord king, that blow will indeed be avenged, without a word of a lie; for Kay will dislocate his shoulder and break his arm – there's nothing he can do to stop it!'

Kay heard this and thought it the most insulting foolishness; you may be sure that it was not cowardice that stopped him beating the fool about the head, but the presence of the king and the risk of shame.

The king shook his head and said to Kay: 'It grieves me deeply that he isn't here with me. It was you and your foolish tongue that made him go, and it saddens me.'

Then Gifflet rose at the king's command, along with Sir Yvain, who improved all those who shared his company; and the king told them to take Clamadeus and lead him to the chambers where the queen's maids were playing. Clamadeus bowed to them, and the knights commanded by the king led him to the chambers and pointed out the girl to him, and he told her the news that she so wished to hear, for she still grieved for the shame that rested on her cheek. She had quite recovered from the blow, but she had not forgotten or forgiven the shame: and a man does ill to forget a shame or injury done to him – the pain passes but the shame remains in a staunch and vigorous man; only in a man of little worth does it cool and die away. Clamadeus had now given his message; and the king retained him in his court and household for life.

Meanwhile the one who had fought him for the land and for the beautiful girl Blancheflor, his love, was now taking his pleasure and ease beside her. The land would now have been his, entirely and undisputed, had his heart not been elsewhere; but he was thinking more of someone else, for his heart was fixed on his mother whom he had seen faint and fall, and he longed more than anything else to go and see her. He did not dare to ask leave of his love, for she refused and forbade it and commanded all her people to beg him to stay. But all their pleas were vain, except that he made them a promise: if he found his mother alive he would bring her back with him, and from that day forward would be lord of the land; they had his word to that. And if she were dead, he would return likewise.

And so he set out, promising to return, leaving his beautiful love

filled with anguish and sorrow, as was everyone else. There was such a procession as he rode from the town that it was like Ascension Day or a Sunday, for all the monks were there, dressed in their copes of rich silk, and all the nuns in their veils; and they all said:

‘Sir, you’ve saved us from exile and restored us to our homes: it’s no wonder that we grieve when you mean to leave us so soon. Our sorrow is bound to be great, and it couldn’t be more so.’

And he said to them: ‘There’s no need to cry any more. With God’s guidance I’ll return, and what’s the use of weeping? Don’t you think it’s right that I should go and see my mother, whom I left on her own in the wood called the Waste Forest? I’ll come back, whether it’s her wish or not – I shan’t fail to, not for all the world. If she’s alive, I’ll have her take the veil as a nun in your church; and if she’s dead, I’ll have a service for her soul each year, that God may place her with the pious souls in Abraham’s bosom. Worthy monks, and you, good ladies, this should be no cause for grief, for I’ll endow you richly for her soul’s sake, if God leads me back.’

At that the monks and nuns and everyone turned back. And he set out, his lance in its rest, fully armed, just as he had come.

All day long he rode on, meeting no earthly being, neither Christian man nor Christian woman, who could guide him on his way. He prayed constantly to God the sovereign father to grant that he might find his mother full of life and health, if it were His will. He was still praying when he caught sight of a river flowing down a hill. He saw that the water was swift and deep and did not dare to ride in; and he said:

‘Oh! Almighty Lord, if only I could cross this river I think I’d find my mother on the other side, if she’s still alive.’

He rode along the bank until he came near a rock, and the river washed all round it so that he could go no further. But suddenly he noticed a boat with two men on board, sailing downstream. He drew rein and waited, thinking that they would sail on down to him. But they stopped and stayed dead still in midstream, most securely anchored. The one in the bow was fishing with a line, baiting his hook with a little fish slightly bigger than a minnow. The boy, not knowing what to do or where to find a crossing, hailed them and asked:

‘Tell me, my lords, is there a bridge across this river?’

And the one who was fishing replied: ‘No indeed, brother, by my faith; nor is there any boat, I think, bigger than the one we’re in, which wouldn’t carry five men. You can’t cross on horseback for twenty leagues

upstream or down, for there's no ferry or bridge or ford.'

'Then tell me, in God's name,' he said, 'where I could find lodging.'

And the man replied: 'You've need of that and more besides, I'd say. I'll give you lodging tonight. Ride up through the cleft in that rock, and when you come to the top you'll see a house in a valley ahead of you: that's where I live, with river and woods close by.'

So he made his way up the rock; but when he reached the top he looked all around him and saw nothing but earth and sky, and said: 'What was the point of coming here? Just a wild goose chase! God bring shame on the fool who sent me here! What a fine guide he was, saying I'd find a house when I reached the top! Oh, fisherman, that was a most unworthy deed, if you said it to do me harm.'

But suddenly, in a valley nearby, the top of a tower caught his eye. From here to Beirut you would not have found one more handsome or more finely placed. It was square and built of grey rock, flanked by two smaller towers. The hall stood before the tower, and lodges before the hall. The boy rode down towards it, saying that the one who had sent him there had guided him well, and he praised the fisherman, no longer calling him treacherous or dishonest or untruthful, now that he had found a place to lodge. He headed towards the gate; and before the gate he found a drawbridge, and it was lowered. He rode in over the bridge, and four boys came to meet him; two of them disarmed him, while the third led away his horse and gave it hay and oats; the fourth dressed him in a fresh and brand new mantle of scarlet cloth. Then they led him to the lodges; and I tell you, a man could have searched as far as Limoges without finding any so handsome.

The boy stayed in the lodges until two servants were sent to summon him to the lord. He returned with them to the hall, which was square, being as long as it was wide. In the middle of the hall he saw, sitting in a bed, a most handsome nobleman with greying hair; on his head he wore a hat of sable, berry-black, covered in a deep rich cloth on top, and his whole gown was the same. He was leaning on his elbow, and before him was a huge fire of seasoned logs, blazing brightly, surrounded by four columns. Four hundred men could easily have sat around that fire and each would have had an excellent place. The columns were very strong, supporting a tall, wide chimney of heavy bronze. The two servants led the boy forward, one at each elbow, and brought him before their lord.

When the lord saw him coming he greeted him at once, and said: 'My friend, forgive me if I don't get up to meet you, for I'm unable.'

'In God's name, sir,' said the boy, 'don't mention it; God give me joy and health, it doesn't bother me at all.'

But for the sake of his guest the worthy man struggled up as much as he could, and said: 'Come here, friend. Don't be afraid of me: sit down here beside me, you're quite safe. I command you.' So the boy sat down at his side, and the nobleman asked him: 'Where have you come from today, my friend?'

'Sir,' he said, 'I rode this morning from Beaurepaire – that was its name.'

'So help me God,' said the nobleman, 'you've travelled a very long way today. You must have left before the watch blew the dawn signal.'

'No indeed,' said the boy. 'The first hour' had already been sounded, I promise you.'

While they were talking thus, a boy came in at the door; he was carrying a sword hung round his neck, and presented it to the nobleman. He drew it half out of its scabbard; and from letters written on the blade he saw where it was made, and read that it was of such fine steel that there was only one way it could ever be broken, known only to the one who had forged and tempered it.

The boy who had brought it to him said: 'Sir, the beautiful fair-haired girl, your niece, has sent you this gift; you never saw a finer sword as long and as broad as this. You may give it to whoever you wish, but, wherever it's bestowed, my lady dearly hopes that it will be put to good use. The one who forged the sword has only ever made three, and he's about to die, so this is the last he'll ever make.'

And straight away the lord presented the sword to his guest with a belt which itself was worth a fortune. The sword's pommel was made of the finest gold of Arabia or Greece, and the scabbard was of golden thread from Venice. With all its rich decoration, the lord presented it to the boy and said: 'Good brother, this sword was intended and destined for you, and I very much want you to have it; come, gird it on and draw it.'

The boy thanked him, and girded it on so that it was not restricting, and then drew it, naked, from the scabbard; and after gazing at it for a while, he slid it back into the sheath. And truly, it sat splendidly at his side, and even better in his hand, and it seemed indeed that in time of need he would wield it like a man of valour. Behind him he saw a group of boys standing by the brightly burning fire; he noticed the one who was looking after his arms, and entrusted the sword to him. Then he sat down again on the bed beside the lord, who treated him with the greatest honour. And no house lit by candles could ever provide a brighter light than there was in that hall.

While they were talking of one thing and another, a boy came from a chamber clutching a white lance by the middle of the shaft, and he passed

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\* Six o'clock.

between the fire and the two who were sitting on the bed. Everyone in the hall saw the white lance with its white head; and a drop of blood issued from the tip of the lance's head, and right down to the boy's hand this red drop ran. The lord's guest gazed at this marvel that had appeared there that night, but restrained himself from asking how it came to be, because he remembered the advice of the nobleman who had made him a knight, who had instructed him to beware of talking too much; he feared it would be considered offensive if he asked, so he did not. Just then two other boys appeared, and in their hands they held candlesticks of the finest gold, inlaid with black enamel. The boys who carried the candlesticks were handsome indeed, and in each candlestick burned ten candles at the very least. A girl who came in with the boys, fair and comely and beautifully adorned, was holding a grail\* between her hands. When she entered holding the grail, so brilliant a light appeared that the candles lost their brightness like the stars or the moon when the sun rises. After her came another girl, holding a silver trencher. The grail, which went ahead, was made of fine, pure gold; and in it were set precious stones of many kinds, the richest and most precious in the earth or the sea: those in the grail surpassed all other jewels, without a doubt. [They passed before the bed]† as the lance had done, and disappeared into another chamber. The boy saw them pass, but did not dare to ask who was served from the grail, for he had taken the words of the wise nobleman to heart. I fear he may suffer for doing so, for I've heard it said that in time of need a man can talk too little as well as too much. I don't know whether it will bring him good or ill, but he asked nothing.

The lord commanded the boys to bring them water and to lay the cloths. Those whose job it usually was did as they were bidden, and the lord and the boy washed their hands in warm water. Two boys brought in a wide table of ivory – according to my source-book it was all one solid piece – and they held it for a moment in front of their lord and his guest until two other boys came with two trestles. The wood of which the trestles were made had two fine qualities: it would never rot or burn, for it was ebony, which is proof against both, so the trestles would last forever. The table was set upon these trestles and the cloth was laid. And what should I say about the cloth? No legate or cardinal or pope ever dined at one so white. The first dish was a roast haunch of venison, seasoned with hot pepper. There was no shortage of clear, delicious wine to drink, from golden cups. Before them a page carved

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\* The use of the indefinite article on the first appearance of this very special artefact is not as strange as it may seem. Chrétien's audience would have known exactly what 'a grail' was: almost certainly derived from the Latin *gradalis*, it was a broad, shallow dish or platter.

† A line accidentally omitted in MS 12576.

pieces from the peppered venison, drawing the haunch to him with the silver trencher, and he presented the pieces to them on a slice of perfectly baked bread. And meanwhile the grail passed before them again, but the boy did not ask who was served from it: he refrained because of the nobleman's well-meant warning not to talk too much – he had taken it to heart and had it ever in mind. But he held his tongue more than he should have done, for as each dish was served he saw the grail pass before him, right before his eyes, and he did not know who was served from it and he longed to know. But he said to himself that before he left he would certainly ask one of the boys of the court, but would wait till the morning when he took his leave of the lord and the rest of the household. And so he put it off till a later time, and concentrated on eating and drinking.

They were not mean with the wines and dishes, and they were delicious and most agreeable. The food was fine and good: the worthy man and the boy were served that night with all the dishes befitting a king or a count or an emperor. And after they had dined they stayed up together and talked, while the boys prepared the beds and provided fruit to eat – and there was fruit of the dearest kind: dates, figs and nutmegs, and cloves and pomegranates, and to finish there were electuaries and digestives, including ginger from Alexandria, and pliris archonticum and stomachicum.\* Then there were many different drinks to sample: sweet, aromatic wine, made with neither honey nor pepper, and old mulberry wine and clear syrup. The boy, who had never tasted the like, was filled with wonder.

Then the nobleman said: 'Good friend, it's time to take to our beds for the night. I'll go now, if you don't mind, and sleep there in my chambers, and whenever you wish you can go to sleep in here. I have no strength in my body: I shall have to be carried.'

At that four servants, strong and hearty, came from the chamber, and taking hold of the four corners of the blanket that was spread across the bed on which the nobleman was sitting, they carried him where they were told. Other boys stayed with his guest and served him and fulfilled his every need: when he wished they took off his shoes and clothes and bedded him in sheets of fine white linen.

He slept until the morning when day had broken and the household had risen; but he could see no-one as he looked about him, and he had to get up alone whether he liked it or not. Seeing that he had no choice he did the best he could, and put on his shoes without waiting for help; then he went to don his arms again, finding that they had been brought and left at the head

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\* As Professor Roach notes in his edition, the names of the various digestives and electuaries evidently caused the scribes some difficulty, for they vary greatly from manuscript to manuscript.



of a table. When he had fully armed he headed for the doors of the chambers which he had seen open the night before; but the move was fruitless, for he found them shut tight. He called and pounded and barged a good deal. Nobody opened up for him or said a word. After calling for quite a while he turned back to the door of the hall. He found it open, and went down the steps to find his horse saddled, and saw his lance and shield leaning against a wall. He mounted and went looking everywhere, but did not find a living soul and could not see a squire or boy. So he came straight to the gate and found the drawbridge lowered: it had been left like that so that, at whatever time he came to leave, nothing should stop him passing straight across. Seeing that the bridge was down he thought the boys must all have gone into the woods to check their traps and snares. He had no wish to stay any longer, and decided to go after them to see if any of them would tell him why the lance bled – if perhaps there were something wrong – and where the grail was carried. And so he rode out through the gate; but before he had got across the bridge, he felt his horse's hooves rise high into the air. The horse made a great leap; and if he had not jumped so well both horse and rider would have been in a sorry plight. The boy looked back to see what had happened, and saw that the bridge had been raised. He called out, but no-one replied.

'Hey!' he cried. 'Whoever raised the bridge, talk to me! Where are you? I can't see you. Come out and let me look at you: there's something I want to ask.'

But he was wasting his time calling out like this, for nobody would answer him.

**H**e headed towards the forest, and came upon a path where he found fresh tracks where horses had passed.

'I think,' he said, 'that the ones I'm looking for went this way.'

So he went galloping through the wood as far as the tracks led him, until he chanced to see a girl beneath an oak tree weeping and crying and lamenting, filled with sorrow and misery.

'Alas!' she cried. 'How unfortunate I am! I was born in an evil hour! Cursed be the hour I was conceived and the hour when I was born! Nothing has caused me such anguish before. Would to God my love were not dead in my arms: it would have been better by far if he had lived and I had died. Why did Death, who has brought me such grief, take his soul rather than mine? What's my life worth when I see the one I most loved lying dead? Truly, with him gone I care nothing for my life or my body. Come, Death, and take my

soul! Let it be the chambermaid and companion of his, if he'll accept it.'

Such was the girl's lament for a knight she was holding, whose head had been severed. As soon as he saw her the boy rode straight up to her, and as he drew near he greeted her, and she greeted him, her head bowed, never ceasing to lament. And the boy asked her:

'Young lady, who killed this knight who's lying in your lap?'

'Good sir,' she replied, 'a knight killed him, this very morning. But there's something that quite amazes me: God save me, you could ride, so they say, forty leagues the way you've come, and you wouldn't find any good or honest or wholesome lodging, yet your horse is well fed and his coat smooth. If he'd been washed and groomed and given a manger of oats and hay he wouldn't have had a fuller belly or a sleeker coat. And it seems to me that you yourself had a comfortable and restful night.'

'Truly, dear girl,' he said, 'I had all the comfort possible last night, and if it shows it's with good reason. But if you shouted loudly from where we are now, it would be heard quite clearly where I lodged last night! You don't know this country very well, and haven't explored it at all, for without a doubt I had the finest lodging I've ever had.'

'Oh, sir! Then you lodged at the house of the rich Fisher King!'

'By the Saviour, girl, I don't know if he's a fisherman or a king, but he's very wise and courteous. I don't know what more to tell you, except that I came across two men in a boat very late yesterday, sailing gently along. One of them was rowing, the other was fishing with a hook, and he told me the way to his house last night, and gave me lodging.'

And the girl said: 'Good sir, he *is* a king, I can assure you. But he was wounded in a battle and completely crippled, so that he's helpless now, for he was struck by a javelin through both his thighs; and he still suffers from it so much that he can't mount a horse. But when he wants to engage in some pleasure and sport he has himself placed in a boat and goes fishing with a hook; that's why he's called the Fisher King. And he finds his enjoyment that way because he couldn't manage any other sport: he can't hunt in the woods or along the riverbanks and marshes. But he has men to hunt the wildfowl, and huntsmen and archers who go shooting with their bows in the forests. That's why he likes to live in this house just here; for in all the world he could never find a retreat so suited to his needs, and he's had a house built befitting a rich king.'

'By my faith, young lady, it's true what you say, and I wondered at it when I came before him last night. I stood a little way from him, and he told me to come and sit beside him, and not to take it for haughtiness if he didn't get up to greet me, for he didn't have the strength or power; so I went and sat at his side.'

‘Truly, he did you a great honour when he seated you at his side. And tell me now: as you sat beside him, did you see the lance whose point bleeds, though it has neither flesh nor veins?’

‘Did I see it? Yes, in faith!’

‘And did you ask why it bled?’

‘God help me, I didn’t say a word.’

‘Then I tell you, you’ve done great wrong. And did you see the grail?’

‘I saw it clearly.’

‘Who was holding it?’

‘A girl.’

‘Where did she come from?’

‘From a chamber.’

‘And where did she go?’

‘Into another chamber.’

‘Did anyone go ahead of the grail?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who?’

‘Two boys, that’s all.’

‘What were they holding in their hands?’

‘Candlesticks full of candles.’

‘And who came after the grail?’

‘Another girl.’

‘What was she holding?’

‘A little silver trencher.’

‘Did you ask them where they were going?’

‘Not a word crossed my lips.’

‘God help me, so much the worse. What’s your name, friend?’

And the boy, who did not know his name, guessed and said that his name was Perceval the Welshman, not knowing if it were true or not. But it was true, though he did not know it. And when the girl heard this she stood up before him and said, bitterly:

‘Your name is changed, dear friend.’

‘To what?’

‘Perceval the wretched! Oh, luckless Perceval! How tragic that you failed to ask all this! You would have healed the good king who is crippled, and he would have regained the use of his limbs and the rule of his land – and you would have profited greatly! But know this now: many ills will beset both you and others. And know this, too: this has befallen you because of the sin against your mother, for she has died of grief on your account. I know you better than you know me; you don’t know who I am, but I was brought up

with you at your mother's house for a very long time: I'm your cousin and you are mine. And I grieve no less for your misfortune in not learning what was done with the grail or where it's taken, than for your mother who has died, or for this knight whom I loved and adored because he called me his dear love and loved me like a noble, loyal knight.'

'Oh, cousin!' cried Perceval. 'If what you've told me is true, tell me how you know.'

'I know it to be true,' said the girl, 'for I saw her laid in the earth.'

'May God in His goodness have mercy on her soul,' said Perceval. 'It's a cruel tale you've told me. And now that she's been buried, what would be the use of going on? I was only going there because I wanted to see her; I'll have to take a different course. If you wanted to come with me I'd be very glad, for the one who lies here dead will be of no service to you now, I promise you. The dead with the dead, the living with the living; let's go together. It seems foolish to me to stay here on your own watching over this body: let's follow the one who killed him. And I promise and swear this: either he'll make me yield or I him, if I can track him down.'

But she, unable to subdue the grief in her heart, replied: 'Dear friend, I won't go with you at any price or leave him till I've buried him. If you'll take my advice you'll follow this paved road, for the cruel and wicked knight who killed my sweetheart went that way. But, so help me God, I don't say that because I'd have you go after him – though I wish him as much ill as if it were me he'd killed. But where did you get that sword that hangs at your left side, which has never spilled a man's blood and has never had occasion to be drawn? I know very well where it was made and I know very well who forged it. Beware! Don't ever put your trust in it. It'll let you down, I promise you, when you find yourself in a great battle, for it'll fly into pieces.'

'Dear cousin, it was sent to my good host last night by one of his nieces, and he gave it to me, and I consider it a fine present. But you worry me if what you've said is true. Tell me: if it came to be broken, do you know if it could be repaired?'

'It could, but there'd be great hardship for whoever found his way to the lake below Cothoatre. There you could have the sword beaten and tempered anew and made whole again, if adventure\* led you there. You must go to a smith named Triboet, and to him alone, for he made it and will remake it; it will never be repaired by any other man. Make sure no-one else tries his

\* In the medieval French romances the word 'aventure' meant a great deal more than its slack modern equivalent. It could mean 'chance' or 'fortune' or even 'phenomenon', and was frequently - and importantly - a sign of God's intervention in the world, and of His grace. A knight would not even encounter an 'aventure', let alone succeed in whatever test it might present, if he were unworthy of doing so, or unable to recognise it as a sign of God's presence and guidance.

hand, for he would not succeed.'

'Truly,' said Perceval, 'it would grieve me deeply if it broke.'

He set off then, and she stayed behind, not wanting to leave the body of the one whose death weighed so heavily on her heart.

**A**nd Perceval rode along the path, following the horse's tracks all the way, until he came upon a palfrey, thin and weary, plodding along before him. The palfrey was so skinny and wretched that he thought he must have fallen into bad hands. He looked well worked and ill fed – like a borrowed horse: overtaxed all day and badly cared for at night. He was so thin that he shivered as though frozen stiff; his neck was all mangy and his ears drooped. He would soon be fodder for mastiffs and mongrels, for his hide was all that covered his bones. There was a woman's saddle on his back and a bridle on his head befitting such a mount. There was a girl in the saddle, and one more wretched was never seen. She would have been fair and comely enough if she had been well cared for, but she was in such a sorry state that there was not a hand's breadth of her gown untorn: her breasts showed through the rips. It was held together here and there with knots and coarse stitches; and her flesh looked as if it had been slashed with a lancet, it was so beaten and burned by heat and gale and frost. She was bare-headed, without a veil or wimple; so her face was clearly seen, with many an ugly stain left in the paths of her endless tears, which flowed down to her breast and over her robe and right down to her knees. Well might she have had a heavy heart, being in such distress.

As soon as Perceval saw her he rode towards her swiftly. She clasped her clothes around her to cover up her skin, but she was bound to open other gaps: whenever she covered one spot she closed one hole and opened a hundred. Thus Perceval found her, pale and wan and wretched, and as he drew near he heard her complaining bitterly of her suffering and misery.

'God,' she cried, 'let me live no longer! I've lived in misery too long and suffered too much misfortune, and through no fault of my own. God, you know I've done nothing to deserve it, so send me, please, someone who'll free me from this torment; or deliver me from the one who makes me suffer this shame, for I can find no mercy in him: I can't escape alive from him, yet he won't kill me! I don't know why he wants my company when he keeps me like this, unless he relishes my shame and misery. Even if he knew for sure that I'd deserved it, he should have had mercy now that I've paid so dearly – if I pleased him in any way. But it's clear I don't please him at all, when he makes me drag out such a cruel life in his wake, and doesn't care.'

Then Perceval, who had now reached her, said: 'God save you, fair

lady.'

And when the girl heard him she bowed, and answered softly: 'May you, sir, who have greeted me, have all that your heart desires – but I shouldn't be wishing you that.'

And Perceval, blushing with shame, replied: 'In God's name, lady, why not? Truly, I don't think I've ever seen you before or done you any wrong.'

'Yes, you have!' she cried. 'For I mustn't be greeted by anyone; that's the torment I have to bear, wretched as I am. I sweat with anguish whenever anyone addresses me or looks at me.'

'Truly, I wasn't aware of my misdeed,' said Perceval. 'I certainly didn't come here to do you shame or wrong; my path just led me here. And once I'd seen you in such a plight, so poor and naked, I could never rest content until I'd learned the truth: what adventure has brought you such sorrow and hardship?'

'Oh, sir!' she cried. 'Have pity on me! Ride on! Fly from here and leave me in peace! It's sin that makes you stop here; so show your goodness and fly!'

'I want to know this,' he said. 'What fear or threat should make me fly, when nobody's pursuing me?'

'Sir,' she replied, 'don't be annoyed, but fly as fast as you can, in case the Proud Knight of the Heath should find us together. All he ever wants is battle and combat, and if he found you here, truly, he'd kill you on the spot. It angers him so much when anyone stops to talk to me that, if he arrives while they're still at it, it'll cost them their heads! He killed one just a short while ago! But first he tells each one why he keeps me in such baseness and misery.'

And just as they were talking thus, the Proud Knight came out of the wood and rode like a thunderbolt across the sand and dust; and he cried at the top of his voice: 'Woe betide you, there beside the girl! I promise you, your end has come for holding her back for a single pace. But I won't kill you until I've told you for what misdeed I'm making her live in such great shame; so listen now, and you'll hear the tale. Just recently I'd gone into the wood and left this girl in my pavilion. I loved no-one but her. But then a Welsh boy chanced to come there. I don't know who he was or where he went, only that he went so far as to kiss her – by force, so she told me! And if she lied, then what was to stop him doing more? And even if it was against her will, wouldn't he then have done all he wanted? Yes! No-one would believe that he kissed her and did no more, for the one always leads to the other! If a man kisses a woman and does no more when they're alone together, then I think it's his decision; for a woman who yields her lips gives the rest most easily

to anyone who makes the effort! And though she may defend herself, we all know, without any doubt, that a woman wants to win in all things but one: that struggle in which she grabs the man by the throat and scratches and bites and wrestles, but wants to be beaten. She struggles, but she longs for it! Too cowardly to grant it, she wants it to be taken by force, but then shows neither willingness nor thanks! That's why I think he lay with her. And he took from her a ring of mine that she wore on her finger, and carried it off, much to my annoyance; and before that he drank and ate his fill of strong wine and good pies that were being kept for me. So now my love has a charming reward as you see! Anyone who commits folly must pay for it, so that he takes care not to reoffend. Truly, I'd good reason to be annoyed when I returned and learned what had happened; and I swore, with justice, that her palfrey would have no oats to eat and would not be groomed or shod again, and that she would have no coat or mantle but the ones she was dressed in, until I got the better of the boy who'd violated her, and taken his life and his head.'

When Perceval had heard him out he answered him in these very words: 'Know this, my friend, without a doubt: she's done her penance, for it was I who kissed her against her will, and it grieved her deeply. And I took her ring from her finger, but that was all – I did nothing more; though I ate, I admit, one of the pies and half of the other, and drank as much wine as I wanted. But I did nothing stupid.'

'By my life!' cried the Proud Knight. 'What an incredible confession! You've deserved death, that's for sure, now that you've admitted it!'

'My death's not as near as you think,' said Perceval.

Without another word they sent their horses charging at each other, and clashed so furiously that their lances flew into splinters. They emptied both saddles as they brought each other down, but they leaped to their feet at once and unsheathed their swords and dealt each other mighty blows. Perceval struck him first with the sword he had been given, because he wanted to test it, and dealt him so great a blow on the top of his steel helmet that he broke the Fisher King's good sword in two. The Proud Knight was not cowed; he repaid him well upon his decorated helmet, knocking off flowers\* and gems. Perceval was bitterly sad at heart that his sword had failed him; but he gathered up the pieces and put them back in the sheath, and straight away drew the sword that had belonged to the Red Knight. Then they came at each other on equal terms and began a bitter battle: you never saw a greater one. The combat was hard and mighty. I've no desire to describe it further, for it seems to me a waste of effort; but they battled on until the Proud Knight of the Heath admitted defeat and cried for mercy. And Perceval, ever mindful of the nobleman's plea that he should never kill a knight once he had asked

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Probably enamel decorations.

for mercy, said:

‘By my faith, knight, I’ll not have mercy on you until you have mercy on your love; for she hasn’t deserved the punishment you’ve made her suffer, I can swear to that.’

And the knight, who loved her more than his own eyes, replied: ‘Good sir, I’ll make amends to her as you wish: I’ll do whatever you command. My heart is dark and heavy for the suffering I’ve made her bear.’

‘Then go,’ said Perceval, ‘to the nearest house you have in these parts, and let her bathe at leisure until she’s healed and well. Then get ready and take her, well dressed and presented, to King Arthur, and greet him on my behalf, and yield yourself to his mercy exactly as you are when you leave here. If he asks who sent you, tell him it was the one he made a red knight by the advice and counsel of Sir Kay the seneschal. And you must tell the court of the penance and suffering you’ve made your girl endure; tell it aloud to all those present, so that all the men and women hear it, and the queen and her maids, too – there are many lovely ones in her company. I hold one in special esteem, whom Kay, because she’d laughed at me, dealt such a blow that he knocked her out. Seek her out, I command you, and give her this message from me: that I will never, on any account, enter any court King Arthur may hold until I’ve avenged her to bring her joy and happiness.’

And the knight replied that he would go there most willingly and say everything he had commanded, and without delay, except that he would first let his sweetheart rest and clothe her as she needed. He would gladly have taken Perceval to rest as well, and to heal and dress his wounds and injuries, but Perceval said:

‘Go now, and good luck to you; just take care of her – I’m going to look for other lodging.’

The talking ended there, and neither party dallied longer: they both set out without more ado. And that evening the knight had his love bathed and richly clothed, and he cared for her so lovingly that she was restored to her former beauty.

Then they both set out and went straight to Carlion, where King Arthur was holding court, and a most intimate affair it was, with only three thousand knights of high repute! In the sight of them all he went to yield himself a prisoner to King Arthur, bringing his sweetheart with him; and when he came before him he said:

‘Good lord king, I am your prisoner and will do whatever you wish, which is only right and proper, for I was commanded to do so by the boy who asked you for red arms, and was given them.’

As soon as the king heard this he understood exactly. ‘Disarm, good



sir,' he said. 'May the one who has presented you to me have joy and good fortune. You're most welcome. For his sake you'll be cherished and honoured in my house.'

'My lord, there's something else I wish to tell you before I disarm, such that I'd like the queen and her maids to come and hear it, for it won't be told until the one has come who was struck on the cheek for no other crime than uttering a single laugh.'

Then the knight paused, and the king sent for the queen as he had requested; she came, and all her maids with her, hand in hand. When the queen was seated beside her lord King Arthur, the Proud Knight of the Heath said to her:

'My lady, a knight whom I hold in high esteem, who vanquished me with his skill in combat, sends you greetings. I don't know what else to tell you of him, but he sends you my beloved – this girl you see here.'

'Many thanks to him, friend,' said the queen.

Then he told her of all the baseness and shame he had inflicted upon her for so long, and the suffering she had endured, and the reason for it all: he told her everything, concealing nothing. When he had finished they showed him the girl whom Kay the seneschal had struck, and he said to her:

'The one who sent me here asked me to greet you on his behalf, young lady, and not to take off my shoes until I had told you that, before God, whatever happens he'll never enter any court King Arthur holds until he's avenged you for the slap, the blow, that you received on his account.'

And when the court fool heard this he leaped to his feet and cried: 'Kay! Kay! God bless me, you'll pay for it, you really will, and soon!'

When the fool had finished, the king in turn said: 'Oh, Kay! How courteous you were to mock the boy! You've robbed me of him with your mocking; I don't think I'll ever see him again.'

Then the king seated his captive knight before him, and pardoned him from imprisonment and bade that he be disarmed.

And Sir Gawain, who was seated at the king's right hand, asked: 'In God's name, sire, who is the man who could defeat such a fine knight as this in single combat? In all the isles of the sea I've never seen or heard of any knight who could equal the Proud Knight in arms and chivalry.'

'Good nephew,' said the king, 'I don't know who he is, though I saw him once; but I didn't then have time to ask him anything: he told me to make him a knight at once, and I saw how fair and handsome he was, and said: "Gladly, brother, but dismount while they bring you golden arms". But he replied that he'd never take those and wouldn't dismount until he had *red* arms. And more amazingly still, he said the only arms he would accept were those of the knight who'd stolen my golden cup! And Kay, insulting as he

was, and is, and always will be, never seeking to say a good word, said to him: "Friend, the king grants you the arms – they're all yours – go and take them!" And the boy, not understanding the joke, thought he meant it, and went after the knight and killed him with a javelin. I don't know how the fight and confusion began except that, for some reason, the Red Knight of the Forest of Quineroi hit him with his lance most haughtily, so the boy flung a javelin clean through his eye and killed him, and took his arms. Since then his service to me has been so good and pleasing that, by my lord Saint David whom they worship and pray to in Wales, I shan't lie in a chamber or hall for two nights in a row until I know if he's alive, on land or sea! I'm setting out to search for him at once!

And once the king had made the vow, everyone knew that there was nothing for it but to go.

**T**hen you would have seen sheets and blankets and pillows packed, coffers filled, packhorses loaded and carts and wagons piled high, for they were not sparing with the number of tents and pavilions they took. If he had taken all day, a bright, well-lettered clerk could not have listed all the harness and equipment that was instantly prepared, for the king rode from Carlion as if he were going on campaign, with all his barons following. Not even a girl remained behind: the queen took them all as a display of power and authority. That night they lodged in a meadow beside a forest.

By morning it had snowed heavily, and the country round about was freezing cold. Perceval had risen early as usual, eager to seek adventure and deeds of chivalry, and he came straight towards the frozen, snowy meadow where the king's army was encamped. But before he reached their pavilions, a flock of wild geese, dazzled by the snow, came flying overhead. He saw and heard them as they fled, honking wildly, from a falcon that swooped after them like a flash, until it found one of them alone, cut off from the flock, and swept down and struck the bird so hard that it sent it plummeting to the ground; but it was very early in the morning, and the falcon flew off, not wanting to attack or assail it. Perceval spurred on to where he had seen the goose fall. It was wounded in the neck, and it bled three drops of blood which spilled on to the whiteness of the snow; it looked like a natural colouring. The goose was not hurt badly enough to keep it grounded until Perceval arrived, and it had already flown away. When Perceval saw the crushed snow where the goose had lain, and the blood spilled around it, he leaned on his lance to gaze at the vision; for the blood and snow together resembled for him

the fresh hues of his beloved's face, and he became quite lost in the thought that in her face the red was blended with the white like those three drops of blood in the whiteness of the snow. He was so enraptured as he gazed that he thought he could see the fresh colour of his fair love's face. As Perceval mused upon the drops, all the early morning passed him by.

At length some squires emerged from the tents and, seeing him in his contemplation, thought he was asleep. Before the king, still slumbering in his pavilion, was awake, the squires met Saigremor outside the royal tent, who because of his impetuosity was called the Rash.

'Come on!' he cried. 'Don't hide it from me: why have you come here in such a hurry?'

'Sir,' they said, 'we've seen a knight outside the camp, asleep upon his charger.'

'Is he armed?'

'Yes, in faith.'

'I'll go and speak to him, and bring him back to the court.' And Saigremor ran straight to the king's tent and woke him. 'Sire,' he said, 'out on the heath there's a knight sleeping.'

And the king commanded him to go, and told him to bring the knight back without fail. Saigremor immediately gave orders for his arms to be brought and called for his horse. It was done as soon as he commanded, and he had himself armed well and swiftly. He left the camp, fully armed, and rode on until he reached the knight.

'Sir,' he said, 'you must come to the king.'

The knight did not move, and seemed not to have heard him. He addressed him again, but he made no reply, and Saigremor was angry and said: 'By Saint Peter the Apostle, you'll come whether you like it or not! I'm sorry I ever deigned to ask – I wasted my breath.'

Then he unfurled the pennon that was rolled around his lance, and the horse beneath him leaped forward; he took up his stand on one side and called to the knight to get ready, for he would strike him if he did not defend himself. Perceval looked up at him and saw him coming full tilt. He snapped out of his dreaming and spurred forward to meet him. Saigremor smashed his lance as they met, but Perceval's neither broke nor bent: he struck him with such force that he brought him crashing down in the middle of the field. His horse did not linger but fled away, head high, towards the camp.

Those who were getting up saw the horse from their tents and were most upset. But Kay, who could never resist a cruel word, made a joke of it, saying to the king: 'Oh look, sire, Saigremor's back! He's got the knight by the reins and is bringing him back against his will!'

'Kay,' said the king, 'it's bad of you to mock worthy men. Go

yourself, and let's see you do better.'

'Truly', said Kay, 'I'm only too glad that you'd have me go, and I'll bring him back by force, without fail, whether he likes it or not, and make him give his name.'

He had himself armed with great attention, and then mounted and set off towards the knight, who was so intent upon gazing at the three drops that he was oblivious to everything else. Kay shouted to him from far away: 'Vassal! Vassal! Come to the king! You'll come right now, by my faith, or pay very dearly!'

Perceval, hearing this threat, turned his horse's head about; and thrusting in his spurs of steel he came galloping at Kay – who was not riding slowly himself. Both were anxious to do well, and they clashed full-bloodedly. Kay struck with all his force, so hard that his lance smashed and crumbled like pastry. Nor did Perceval hold himself back: he hit Kay smack upon the boss, and brought him crashing down upon a rock so that he dislocated his shoulder and broke his right arm between the elbow and the armpit like a dry twig – just as the fool had said and foretold: the fool's prediction had come true. Kay fainted with the pain, while his horse fled towards the camp at a gallop.

The Britons saw the horse return without the seneschal, and boys and knights and ladies rode out to find him; he was still unconscious, and they felt sure that he was dead. Then all the men and women began to mourn for him most deeply. Meanwhile Perceval was leaning on his lance again over the three drops.

The king was most upset about his wounded seneschal; he was filled with sorrow and anger, until he was told not to worry, for Kay would recover perfectly if he just had a doctor who knew how to reset a shoulder and mend a break. And the king, who was fond of Kay and held him dear at heart, sent a most learned doctor and two girls who were pupils of his, who put his shoulder back in place and bandaged his arm and joined the broken bone. Then they carried him to the king's tent and did all they could to comfort him, telling him that he would soon be healed and had no need to worry.

And Sir Gawain said to the king: 'God help me, sire, it isn't right – as you've always said and rightly judged – that a knight should disturb another from his thoughts as these two have done, whatever those thoughts may be. I don't know if they were in the wrong, but they've certainly come to no good! The knight was thinking, perhaps, of some loss he's suffered, or maybe his love has been stolen from him, and it's upsetting him and weighing on his mind. But if you approve, I'll go and see how he looks, and if I find that he's left his musing I'll ask him to come back here to you.'

Kay was enraged at hearing this and said: 'Oh yes, Sir Gawain,

you'll lead the knight back by the reins whether he likes it or not, of course you will – provided victory's handed to you on a plate! You've conquered many a knight like that! When the knight's worn out and has fought long enough, then the worthy man asks permission to try his hand – and of course he goes and conquers him! Oh Gawain, you're no fool! There's plenty to learn from you – may I be hanged a hundred times if there isn't! And you're good at spinning fair and courteous phrases, aren't you? Are you going to assail him with hard and haughty words? A curse on whoever thinks so: I don't. You could do this job in a silk jacket! You won't need to draw a sword or break a lance. You can boast of this: that if you can just get your tongue round "Sir, God save you and give you joy and health", he'll do your will! Oh, far be it from me to give you lessons: you'll cosset and coax him like a cat, while everyone's saying "Now Sir Gawain's engaged in a mighty combat!"

'Oh, Sir Kay,' said Gawain, 'there's no need to speak so harshly. Do you mean to vent your rage and spleen on me? By my faith, dear friend, I'll bring back the knight if I possibly can. And I shan't have my arm injured for it or my shoulder dislocated – that's not my idea of a reward.'

'Go now, nephew,' said the king. 'You've spoken most courteously. Bring him back if you can – but take all your arms with you: you're not to go unarmed.'

Gawain, renowned and esteemed for all knightly virtues, had himself armed immediately and mounted a strong, keen horse, and came straight up to the knight who was leaning on his lance, still not tired of the musing that so delighted him. But the sun had dried up two of the drops of blood that had lain upon the snow, and was fast drying up the third; so the knight was not as absorbed in thought as he had been.

Sir Gawain cantered gently up to him, suggesting no wicked intent, and said: 'Sir, I would have greeted you if I'd known your heart as well as my own. But I can tell you that I'm a messenger of the king, who summons and requests you to come and speak to him.'

'There have already been two,' said Perceval, 'who tried to take my life and lead me off as a captive. I was musing so deeply upon a delightful thought that whoever tried to draw me from it was asking for trouble; for just in this spot there were three drops of fresh blood gleaming in the whiteness, and as I gazed at them I thought I saw the fresh colour of my fair love's face, and I didn't want to leave.'

'Truly,' said Sir Gawain, 'there was nothing base about that thought: it was most courteous and sweet; and the one who turned your heart from it was cruel and harsh. But I'd like to know what you mean to do now: I'll gladly take you to the king, if you don't object.'

'Tell me first, my good, dear friend,' said Perceval, 'if Kay the

seneschal is there.'

'Indeed he is. And I tell you, he was the one who jousted with you here just now – and the joust cost him dearly, for you've broken his right arm, though you may not know it, and dislocated his shoulder.'

'Then I think I've avenged the girl he struck.'

When Sir Gawain heard this he was startled, and started, and said: 'God save me, sir, it's you the king's been looking for! What is your name, sir?'

'Perceval, sir; and yours?'

'Truly sir, I was baptised with the name of Gawain.'

'Gawain?'

'Yes, good sir.'

Perceval was overjoyed and said: 'I've heard tell of you, sir, in many places, and longed to make your acquaintance: I hope it may please you as well.'

'Truly,' said Sir Gawain, 'it pleases me no less than you, but more, I think!'

And Perceval replied: 'Then in faith, I'll gladly go where you wish, for it's only right; and I consider myself honoured to be your companion.'

With that they went and embraced each other, and began to unlace their helmets and the necks of their hauberks, opening their mail hoods; then they made their way back, rejoicing. Some boys, up on a hillock, saw them returning joyfully, and came running down to the king.

'Sire! Sire!' they cried. 'In faith, Sir Gawain is bringing back the knight, and they seem very pleased to see each other!'

All who heard the news rushed from their pavilions and went out to meet them. And Kay said to his lord the king: 'Now Sir Gawain, your nephew, has won esteem and honour. My word, it's been a hard and perilous battle! He's coming back as hearty as he left: he hasn't had a blow from anyone, and no-one's felt a blow from him. He hasn't uttered a word of challenge! How right that he should be esteemed and praised! And that people should say he's done what we all failed to do – in spite of all our might and effort.'

So, rightly or wrongly, Kay spoke his mind, as he always did.

Sir Gawain did not want to take his companion to court in his armour, so he had him disarmed in his tent, where one of his chamberlains took a robe from a coffer and presented it to Perceval. When he was finely and handsomely dressed, in a tunic and mantle which suited him splendidly, he and Gawain came hand in hand to the king, who was sitting outside his pavilion.

'Sire,' said Sir Gawain to the king, 'I bring you the one whom, I think, you've been longing to meet for a full fortnight past. He's the one you've been speaking of so much, the one you've been out searching for; I present him to you – here he is!'

‘Many thanks indeed, dear nephew!’ said the king. And overcome with joy, he leaped to his feet to greet him, saying: ‘Welcome, good sir! Now tell me, please, by what name I should call you.’

‘In faith, I shan’t hide it from you,’ said Perceval. ‘Good lord king, my name is Perceval the Welshman.’

‘Oh, Perceval, my good dear friend, now that you’ve come to my court you’d never leave if it were left to me. I’ve been most upset about you, for when I first saw you I didn’t know what a great future God had in store for you. Yet it was clearly predicted, so that all my court knew of it, by the girl and the fool whom Kay the seneschal struck; and you’ve verified their prediction in every way. No-one now can be in doubt that we’ve heard the truth about your chivalry.’

As he said this the queen arrived, having heard the news about the knight who had come. As soon as Perceval saw her and was told that it was she, and saw the girl behind her who had laughed when he had looked at her, he went straight up to meet them and said: ‘May God give joy and honour to the fairest and finest of all ladies living, as all who see and have seen her testify.’

And the queen replied: ‘It’s a great joy that you’ve been found, for you are a proven knight of high and handsome prowess.’

Then Perceval greeted the girl who had laughed at him, and embraced her, saying: ‘Dear girl, if ever you need me, I shan’t fail to come to your aid.’

And she thanked him.

**T**he king, the queen and the barons gave the most joyful welcome to Perceval the Welshman, and led him back to Carlion, returning there that day. They celebrated all that night and all the day that followed, until, on the third day, they saw a girl coming on a tawny mule, clutching a whip in her right hand. Her hair hung in two tresses, black and twisted; and if the words of my source are true, there was no creature so utterly ugly even in Hell. You have never seen iron as black as her neck and hands, but that was little compared to the rest of her ugliness: her eyes were just two holes, as tiny as a rat’s; her nose was like a cat’s or monkey’s, her lips like an ass’s or a cow’s; her teeth were so discoloured that they looked like egg-yolk; and she had a billy-goat’s beard. With a hump in the middle of her chest and a back like a crook, her loins and shoulders were a dancer’s dream: she had a curving back and haunches bent like willow-wands – just right for dancing! Never was

such a girl seen at a king's court.

She rode swiftly up towards the knights, and greeted the king and his barons all together – except for Perceval. Sitting upon the tawny mule she said:

‘Ah, Perceval! Fortune has fair locks in front but is bald behind. A curse on anyone who greets you or wishes you well, for you didn't take Fortune by the hand when you met her. You entered the house of the Fisher King and saw the lance that bleeds, but it was so much trouble to you to open your mouth and speak that you couldn't ask why that drop of blood sprang from the tip of the white head; nor did you ask what worthy man was served from the grail that you saw. How wretched is the man who sees the perfect opportunity and still waits for a better one! And you, you are the wretched one, who saw that it was the time and place to speak and yet stayed silent; you had ample opportunity! It was an evil hour when you held your tongue, for if you had asked, the rich king who is so distressed would now have been quite healed of his wound and would have held his land in peace, which now he will never do. And do you know what will happen because that king will not now rule his land or be healed? Ladies will lose their husbands, lands will be laid waste, girls will be left in distress and orphaned, and many knights will die; all these evils will happen because of you.’

Then the girl said to the king: ‘Don't be displeased, O king, if I leave now, for I must take my lodging tonight far from here. I don't know if you've heard of the Proud Castle, but that's where I have to go tonight. In the castle there are five hundred and sixty six knights of worth; and I tell you, each of them has his love with him, a noble, fair and courtly lady. I'm telling you this because no-one who goes there can fail to find a joust or battle. Anyone eager for chivalrous deeds is sure to find them if he seeks them there. But if anyone wants to gain the whole world's esteem, I think I know the exact place where he could most surely win it, if he dared. On the peak of Montesclaire there is a girl besieged; whoever could raise the siege and free the girl would win the greatest honour and all possible praise; and the one to whom God granted such good fortune could safely gird on the Sword of the Strange Belt.’

With that the girl fell silent, having said all she wished, and set off without another word. And Sir Gawain leapt up and said he would go to Montesclaire and do all in his power to rescue the girl. And Gifflet the son of Do said that he would go, with God's aid, to the Proud Castle.

‘And I,’ said Kahendin, ‘am going to climb Mont Dolerous: I shan't rest till I've done so.’

But Perceval spoke quite differently: he said that as long as he lived he would not lodge in the same place for two nights together, nor hear word of any perilous passage but he would go and attempt it, nor would he hear of



a knight greater than any other but he would go and do combat with him, until he knew who was served from the grail and had found the bleeding lance and learned the certain truth about why it bled; he would never give up, whatever happened.

As many as fifty of them rose, declaring and vowing to each other that they would go and seek out any wonder or adventure that they heard of, in however terrible a land.

And while they were preparing and arming in the hall, Guigambresil came through the door carrying a gold shield, on which there was a blue band that covered an exact third of it, well measured. Guigambresil recognised the king and greeted him as he should; but he did not greet Gawain: he accused him of a treacherous act, saying:

‘Gawain, you killed my lord, and did so without challenging him, for which you should be shamed, reproached and censured; I charge you with treachery. And know this, all you noble knights: every word I’ve said is true.’

Hearing this Sir Gawain leapt to his feet, burning with shame; but the proud Engrevain, his brother, jumped up and drew him back, saying: ‘In God’s name, good sir, don’t disgrace your lineage. I will defend you against the charge and shame that this knight has placed upon you, I swear it.’

But Gawain said: ‘Brother, no man but myself will defend me from it. I *must* defend myself, for he accuses no-one but me. If I’d done the knight some wrong and knew it, I’d gladly sue for peace and make such amends as should satisfy all his friends and mine. But his charge is an outrage, and I offer my gage and will defend myself here or wherever he likes.’

Guigambresil replied that he would prove his foul and wicked treachery in forty days before the king of Escavalon, who in his opinion was fairer even than Absalom.

‘I’ll follow you at once, I promise you,’ said Gawain, ‘and there we’ll see who’s in the right.’

With that Guigambresil set off, and Sir Gawain made ready to follow him without delay. Whoever had a good horse, a good lance, a good helmet or a good sword offered it to him; but he would not carry anything belonging to another man. He took seven squires with him, and seven horses and two shields. Before he had even left the court there was bitter grieving for him, as many beat their breasts and tore their hair and clawed their faces in despair; there was no lady, however level-headed, who did not grieve for him desperately. Many men and women lamented bitterly as Sir Gawain departed. You will hear me tell at great length of the adventures he encountered.

First he saw a band of knights riding across a heath, and he asked a squire who was following them on his own, with a shield hung at his neck and leading a Spanish horse by the bridle:

‘Squire, tell me, who are those knights who passed this way?’

And he replied: ‘It’s Meliant de Lis, sir, a worthy and courageous knight.’

‘Are you in his service?’

‘No, sir. Droés d’Avés is my lord’s name, and he’s no less worthy a knight.’

‘In faith,’ said Sir Gawain, ‘I know Droés d’Avés well. Where’s he going? Tell me all.’

‘He’s going to a tournament, sir, that Meliant de Lis has undertaken against Tybaut of Tintagel. I wish you’d go, too, and help the men of the castle against the outsiders.’

‘God!’ said Sir Gawain then, ‘wasn’t Meliant de Lis brought up in Tybaut’s house?’

‘Yes, sir, God save me; for his father loved Tybaut dearly, and had such faith in him that, as he lay on his death-bed, he entrusted his little son to him. And Tybaut raised him and cared for him as lovingly as he could. Later the time came when he begged for the love of one of Tybaut’s daughters, but she said she would never grant him her love as long as he was a squire. So Meliant, passionately eager as he was, had himself knighted and then returned with his request. But the girl said: “By my faith, it can never be, until I’ve seen you fight and joust well enough to earn my love; for things that are given free of charge are never so sweet and pleasant as those that are paid for! Challenge my father to a tournament if you want my love; for I want to know with certainty that my love would be well bestowed if I granted it to you”. So he’s undertaken the tournament to meet her demands; for love has such lordship over those who are in its power that they never dare to refuse whatever it commands. And it would be idle of you, sir, not to join the men of the castle: if you were willing to help them they could certainly do with you!’

‘You’d better ride on, brother,’ said Sir Gawain, ‘and follow your lord, and say no more of this.’

And so the squire departed and Sir Gawain rode on: he headed straight for Tintagel, for there was no other way to go.

Tybaut had gathered together all his family and cousins and summoned all his neighbours, and they had all arrived now, tall and short, young and white-haired. But when Tybaut spoke privately with his counsellors

he was advised not to engage in the tourney with Meliant, for they greatly feared that Meliant wanted to destroy them utterly; so Tybaut had all the entrances to the castle walled and mortared in. The gates were soundly filled with solid stone and mortar: no need now for a gate-keeper! The only entrance left unblocked was a tiny postern; and its door was certainly not made of glass – it was of copper, built to last forever, barred with a great beam, and there was enough iron on the door to fill a cart.

Sir Gawain, with his baggage-train before him, came up to the gate, for he had to go through the castle or turn back: there was no other path or road for seven full leagues around. When he saw the postern shut he rode into a meadow below the tower, enclosed with a line of stakes, and dismounted beneath an oak tree and hung his shields upon it, and the people of the castle saw him. Most of them were very sad that the tourney had been abandoned; but there was an old vassal in the castle, a wise and highly respected man, strong in land and lineage, whose every word, whatever its outcome might be, was trusted by all the people there. He had seen Sir Gawain and his squires coming, for they were pointed out to him in the distance before they had entered the fenced meadow; and he went to speak to Tybaut, saying:

‘God save me, sir, I do believe I’ve seen two knights, companions of King Arthur, coming. Two worthy knights make a big difference: sometimes just one can win a tourney. For my part I say we should go to the tournament without fear, for you have good knights and good retainers, and good archers who’ll kill their horses. Your enemies are bound to come and seek combat outside the gate: if their pride brings them here, the gain will be ours, the loss and damage theirs!’

Tybaut took the old vassal’s advice, and gave permission for everyone who so wished to arm and ride out, fully armed. The knights were filled with joy, and squires rushed to fetch arms and saddle horses, while the ladies and girls went to sit in the highest places to watch the tournament. Beneath them in the plain they saw Sir Gawain’s baggage-train, and thought at first that there were two knights, for they could see two shields hung upon the oak tree. They said they were lucky indeed to have such a vantage-point, for they would see the two knights don their arms right there before them. So said some, but there were others who said:

‘Good Lord God! This knight has enough equipment and horses for two, but he’s no companion with him. What will he do with two shields? No knight has ever been seen carrying two shields at once!’

It would be a wonder, they thought, if the one on his own were to carry both shields.

While they were talking thus, and the knights were riding out of the castle, Tybaut’s elder daughter, who had caused the tournament to be

held, climbed to the top of the tower. Her younger sister was with her, too, who dressed so quaintly that she was called the Girl with the Little Sleeves, for they fitted tightly to her arms; and all the girls and ladies joined Tybaut's daughters at the tower-top.

And now the tournament assembled before the castle, and there was no knight there so appealing as Meliant de Lis – so said his beloved, who called to the ladies all around her: 'Truly, ladies, I've never seen a knight – I don't see why I should lie to you – so pleasing to my eye as Meliant de Lis. Isn't it a joy to see such a handsome knight? He was just made to sit upon a horse and to carry a lance and a shield: see how well he handles them!'

But her sister, sitting at her side, said there was a more handsome one. The elder daughter was furious, and stood up ready to strike her; but the ladies drew her back, and restrained her from hitting her, which grieved her bitterly.

And the tournament began, where many lances were smashed, many sword-blows dealt and many knights toppled. And I tell you, it was very costly for whoever jousts with Meliant de Lis, for he brought anyone who faced his lance crashing to the solid ground. And if his lance broke he resorted to mighty blows with his sword, and performed better than anyone from either camp.

His sweetheart was so overjoyed that she could not stay silent. 'Look at these wonders, ladies!' she cried. 'You've never seen or heard of their like! There is the finest young warrior your eyes have ever seen: he's more handsome and performing better than anyone at the tourney!'

But the younger daughter said: 'I can see a finer and more handsome one, I think.'

Her sister came at her then, blazing and boiling with rage, and cried: 'You bitch! Do you dare to frown on someone I've praised? You'll wish you hadn't! Take this, and make sure you don't do it again!'

And she gave her such a blow that she left the stamp of all her fingers on her face. The ladies round about rebuked her hotly and pulled her away. Then they began to talk amongst themselves about Sir Gawain.

'God!' said one of the girls. 'That knight beneath the oak tree\*, what's he waiting for? Why doesn't he arm?'

Another, more impertinent, said: 'He must be a pacifist!'

And another: 'He's a tradesman. Don't tell me he means to take part: he's brought all those horses to sell!'

'No,' said the fourth, 'he's a money-changer. And he's no desire to share his riches with the poor young knights today. I'm not lying you know: it's money and silverware in those bags and boxes.'

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\* The original is inconsistent here, referring to an elm – an obvious scribal error.

‘Truly, you’ve got wicked tongues,’ said the younger daughter, ‘and you’re wrong. Do you think a tradesman carries a great lance like his? You’ve hurt me mortally with your devilish words. By the faith I owe the Holy Spirit, he looks far more like a jousting knight than a tradesman or a money-changer. He’s a knight, by all appearances.’

But the ladies all replied together: ‘He may look it, my dear, but he’s not. He assumes the disguise to evade duties and tolls! He thinks he’s clever, but he’s a fool, for he’ll be arrested like a thief and charged with base and foolish larceny, and get a noose put round his neck.’

Sir Gawain heard their mocking words quite clearly, and was most ashamed and upset. But he was mindful, rightly, that he had been charged with treachery and had to go and defend himself. If he failed to go and do battle as he had sworn, he would bring disgrace upon himself and all his line, and it was for fear of wounding or capture that he did not take part in the tournament – keen though he was to do so, seeing the tourney growing ever greater and mightier. And Meliant de Lis was calling for great lances to deal still better blows.

All day long until nightfall the tournament raged before the gate; then those who had won booty carried it off to where they thought it would be safest. The ladies saw a squire, very tall and bald-headed, holding the broken stump of a lance and carrying a horse’s head-stall round his neck. One of the ladies called him simple and stupid, and said:

‘God help me, squire, you must be raving mad going into that press to pilfer lance-heads and head-stalls and cruppers and lumps of wood! That’s no way for a squire to behave! To stoop so low shows little self-respect! And right near you, in this meadow below, I can see unguarded and defenceless riches. A man’s a fool if he doesn’t think of his own profit when he has the chance. And that knight there is the most good-natured ever born: if you plucked every hair of his moustache he wouldn’t move! So don’t settle for your cheap, low booty: if you’ve any sense you’ll take all the horses and the other goods there, for no-one’s going to stop you!’

So the squire went straight into the meadow and, striking one of the horses with his stump of lance, he said to Gawain: ‘Vassal, are you feeling all right, sitting here watching all day, doing nothing, neither smashing shields nor breaking lances?’

‘Be off with you!’ cried Sir Gawain. ‘What’s it to do with you? You may yet come to know the reason for my staying, but by my life it won’t be now, for I don’t wish to tell you. Get you gone and go your way. Be about your business.’

The squire left Gawain instantly, not daring to annoy him more.

The tournament now drew to a halt, but there had been many

knights taken prisoner and many horses killed. Meliant's men had won the day, but the men of the castle had taken most booty, and as they parted they swore to each other to reassemble in the field next day and resume the tournament. And so they separated for the night, and all who had come from the castle returned there. Sir Gawain, too, entered behind the main body, and before the gate he met the worthy vassal who had advised his lord about beginning the tournament; and he asked Gawain most kindly and courteously to take lodging there.

'Sir,' he said, 'lodging is ready for you here in the castle. Do stay here, please, for if you carry on you'll not find good lodging before nightfall.'

'Thank you, kind sir, I shall indeed,' said Sir Gawain. 'I've heard worse suggestions than that today!'

The vassal led him to his lodging, talking of one thing and another as they went, asking him what had stopped him taking up arms with them in the tournament that day. And Sir Gawain told him exactly why: he was being accused of treason, and rightly feared being captured or wounded or injured until he could clear himself of the charge, for he felt that he would disgrace himself and all those close to him if he were late and failed to appear on time for the battle he was to fight. The vassal admired him for that, and said he approved of it, and that he had done right to avoid the tourney if that were the reason. And so the vassal led him to his house and they dismounted.

But the people of the castle were deeply resentful, and held a great discussion about how their lord should seize Sir Gawain. And the lord's elder daughter did everything she could to spite her sister, saying:

'Father, I know you've suffered no loss today – in fact I think you've won rather more than you realise, and I'll tell you how. Make no mistake, but give orders for that stranger's arrest – the one who's brought him into the town won't dare to defend him – for he lives by wicked trickery. He has shields and lances carried before him, and horses led by the bridle, and so avoids paying customs because he looks like a knight! So give him what he deserves! He's at the house of Garin, the son of Berte, who's given him lodging; I saw him take him there just now.'

Thus she strove to have Sir Gawain brought to shame. And the lord her father mounted right away, for he wanted to go in person, and headed straight for the house where Sir Gawain was staying. When the younger daughter saw him leave like this, she slipped out of a back door, not wanting to be seen, and hurried straight to where Sir Gawain was lodging, at the house of Garin, the son of Berte. Garin had two very beautiful daughters, and when they saw their young lady coming they were naturally delighted. They both took her by the hand and kissed her on the eyes and lips and joyfully led her into the house.

Meanwhile the noble Garin, who was neither poor nor mean, had remounted, along with his son Herman; they were both going to the court, as was their custom, wishing to speak to their lord. They met him in the middle of the street; and when Garin greeted him and asked him where he was going, he replied that he was heading to Garin's house for entertainment.

'In faith,' said the worthy Garin, 'nothing would please me more! And there you'll be able to see the fairest knight on earth!'

'Truly,' said the lord, 'that's not what I'm going for: I'm going to arrest him – he's a trader! He leads a train of horses to sell and makes out that he's a knight!'

'Away with you! What base words are these?' cried Garin. 'I'm your vassal and you're my lord, but I withdraw my homage to you, and defy you here and now, in my own name and for all my line, before I'll let you act so dishonourably in my house!'

'So help me God,' said the lord, 'I didn't want to do this, but by my life, I've been strongly advised to seize him. But your guest and your house will have only honour from me.'

'Thanks indeed,' said Garin. 'It'll be a great honour to me if you'll come and see my guest.'

And with that they rode together, side by side, to Garin's house. When Sir Gawain saw them he rose like the courteous knight he was, and said: 'Welcome!'

And they both greeted him and sat down beside him. And the worthy man who was lord of that country asked him why, since he had come to the tournament, he had refrained from doing combat. Sir Gawain did not deny that it was wrong and shameful; but he explained at once how a knight had charged him with treachery, and how he was going to defend himself at a royal court.

'Then you had a worthy reason, most certainly,' said the lord. 'And where is this battle to be?'

'Sir,' he said, 'I must appear before the king of Escavalon, and I'm planning to go straight there.'

'I'll provide you with an escort,' said the lord. 'And since you'll have to pass through very poor land I'll give you food to take with you and horses to carry it.'

Sir Gawain replied that he did not need to take it, for if he could find any for sale he would have plenty of food, and good lodgings wherever he went, and everything he needed; so he did not want to take anything of his.

With that the lord rose to leave. But as he left he saw his younger daughter coming the other way, and she rushed up and clasped Sir Gawain by the leg, saying: 'Hear me, good sir, for I've come to appeal to you against

my sister who hit me: defend my cause, I beg you!

Sir Gawain, wondering who she was talking to, said nothing, and patted her on the head. But the girl tugged at him, saying: 'I'm telling you, sir: I appeal to you against my sister, whom I neither love nor cherish, for she's done me great shame today on your account.'

'What has it to do with me, dear girl?' said Sir Gawain. 'How can I defend your cause?'

The lord, who had taken his leave, heard his daughter's plea and said: 'Daughter, who told you to come and make appeals to knights?'

And Gawain said: 'Is she your daughter, then, good sir?'

'Yes,' he replied, 'but take no notice of what she says. She's a child, a foolish, simple thing.'

'Then truly,' said Sir Gawain, 'it would be base of me not to find out what she wants.' And turning straight to her he said: 'Tell me, my sweet and gentle child, how can I make amends for you against your sister?'

'Sir, just for tomorrow, take part in the tournament, for my sake, please.'

'Tell me now: have you ever made a request of a knight before?'

'No indeed, sir.'

'Take no notice,' said the lord, 'of anything she says. Don't listen to her foolishness.'

But Sir Gawain said to him: 'No, sir! God help me, she's a young girl and has spoken finely in her childish way, and I shan't refuse her plea. Since it's her wish, tomorrow I'll be her knight for a while.'

'Oh thank you, my good dear sir!' she cried, so overjoyed that she bowed right down to his feet.

And they left without another word. The lord carried his daughter home on the neck of his palfrey, and asked her how this quarrel had arisen. She told him the truth from start to finish, saying:

'I was very upset because my sister kept saying that Meliant de Lis was the finest and most handsome of them all; but I'd seen that knight down below in the meadow and couldn't help but contradict her, and said that I'd seen one more handsome than Meliant. So my sister called me a silly bitch and gave me a hiding: damn anyone who thought it funny! I'd let both my tresses be cut clean off, much as it might spoil my looks, if it meant that my knight would topple Meliant de Lis in the combat tomorrow. That would put an end to my sister's claims! She's gone on about him so much today that she's annoyed all the ladies. But the weather can quickly turn!'

'Dear daughter,' said the worthy lord, 'I permit you – and command you – to send him out of courtesy some token: a sleeve or a wimple.'



And she, in her modesty, said: 'Gladly, since you say so. But my sleeves are so small that I wouldn't dare to send them to him: no, if I sent him one he might not think much of it at all.'

'Leave it to me, daughter,' said the lord. 'I'll see to it, don't worry.'

So saying, he carried her home, fondly hugging and kissing her, until he arrived at his palace. But when the other daughter saw him coming with her sister in his arms, her heart was filled with anger and she said:

'Sir, where has my sister been, the Girl with the Little Sleeves? She's full of tricks and ruses: she may be young but she's learned them fast! Where did you fetch her from?'

'What does it matter to you?' he replied. 'Just you be quiet. She's worth a great deal more than you, who've pulled her hair and beaten her – which grieves me: you've acted most unworthily.'

Her father's reproach and reprimand left her quite dumbfounded. And he called for a piece of red samite to be brought from one of his chests, and had it cut and made into a long, wide sleeve; then he called his younger daughter to him.

'Daughter,' he said, 'get up tomorrow morning and go to the knight before he sets out. You're to give him this new sleeve as a token of love, and he'll wear it when he goes to the tournament.'

And she told her father that as soon as she saw day break she would be awake and washed and dressed. With that her father left. The girl, filled with joy, begged all her companions not to let her sleep long in the morning, but to wake her as soon as they saw the sun rise if they wanted her to be their friend. They did so most faithfully, for in the early morning, as soon as they saw dawn break, they made her get up and dress. So the girl was up early, and off she went all alone to Sir Gawain's lodging; but she was not so early as to arrive before they had all risen and gone to church to hear mass sung. The girl stayed at the vassal's house until they had prayed for a long while and heard all they should have heard. When they returned from the church the girl jumped up to meet Sir Gawain and said:

'God keep you and grant you honour today! And wear this sleeve I have here as a mark of my love.'

'Willingly, and thank you, friend,' said Sir Gawain.

Then the knights donned their arms without delay and gathered, armed, outside the town. The girls and all the ladies of the castle went up and lined the walls again, and watched the bands of strong, courageous knights assemble.

Meliant de Lis charged ahead of them all against the opposing line, leaving his companions way behind, and when the elder daughter saw her beloved she could not hold her tongue but cried: 'Ladies, here comes the

renowned lord of all knights!

Sir Gawain came at him as fast as his horse could go; and Meliant did not fear him, but shattered his lance utterly as he struck him; and Sir Gawain returned such a terrible blow that he brought him crashing head first to the earth. Then he reached out for Meliant's horse and took it by the bridle and gave it to a boy, telling him to go to the one for whom he was fighting and to tell her that he sent her the first booty he had won that day, for he wanted her to have it. And the boy led the horse, complete with its saddle, to the girl, who from a window of the tower had had a perfect view of Meliant de Lis' fall. And she said:

'Sister, now you can see Meliant de Lis, whose praises you were singing, flat on the ground! To anyone with an eye for truth, what I said yesterday is clear: now, God save me, you can see there's one of greater worth than he!'

She deliberately taunted her sister until she drove her wild. 'Hold your tongue, you bitch!' she cried. 'If I hear another word from you today, I'll give you such a hiding that you'll not have a leg to stand on!'

'Shame on you, sister!' cried the younger. 'Remember God! Just because I've told the truth you've no right to hit me! In faith, I saw him well and truly topple him, and so did you, as clearly as I. I don't think he's got the strength to get up again! I'd say it even if it killed you, for there's not a lady here who didn't see him with his legs in the air and then flat on his back!'

Her sister would have slapped her if she had had the chance, but the ladies in her company would not let her hit her. Just then they saw the squire coming, leading Meliant's horse by the bridle. He found the girl sitting at a window, and presented the horse to her. She thanked him more than sixty times and bade that the horse be taken for her; and the squire went to convey her thanks to Gawain, who seemed to be the lord and master of the tournament, for there was no knight, however brilliant, who could face Sir Gawain's lance and keep his stirrups. Never had he been so keen to win horses, and he made presents of four that day, won by his own hand: he sent the first to the young girl; with the second he thanked Garin's wife, who was delighted with the gift; one of Garin's two daughters received the third, and the other had the fourth.

Then the tournament broke up, and Sir Gawain rode back through the gate, carrying off the prize by the agreement of both camps, though it was not yet noon when he left the combat. When Sir Gawain returned, so great a throng of knights came with him that the town was packed; they all followed him, wanting to ask and enquire who he was and of what country.

He met the young girl right at the door of her house; and she did just this: she took hold of his stirrup straight away, and greeted him with the

words: 'Five hundred thousand thanks, good sir!'

He knew just what she meant, and replied, most nobly: 'I shall be grey and white with age, girl, before I fail to serve you, wherever I may be. And, however far I am from you, if I know that you're in need of help, nothing will stop me coming as soon as I have word.'

'Thank you indeed!' said the girl.

They were talking thus when her father arrived, and he tried with all his might to have Sir Gawain stay there that night and take his lodging; and he begged and entreated him first to tell him his name if he would. Sir Gawain declined to stay, but he told him: 'My name is Gawain, sir. I've never hidden my name wherever it's been asked of me, but neither have I given it without first being asked.'

When the lord heard that it was Sir Gawain his heart was filled with joy, and he said to him: 'Oh, stay, sir! Accept my service tonight, for yesterday I gave you no service at all. And never in my life, I promise you, have I seen a knight whom I longed so much to honour.'

He implored him to stay, but Sir Gawain refused all his pleas. And the little girl, who was neither wicked nor foolish, bent down and kissed his foot and commended him to God. Sir Gawain asked her what she had meant by this, and she replied that she had kissed his foot so that he would remember her wherever his feet should tread.

And he said to her: 'Have no fear, dear friend; with God's help, I shall never forget you when I'm gone.'

And with that he set off, taking his leave of his host and the others, and they all commended him to God.

Sir Gawain slept that night at an abbey, and was given everything he needed. Then early the next morning he took to the road again until, as he rode along, he saw deer grazing at the edge of a forest. He told Yvonet, who was leading one of the horses – the finest – and holding a stout and mighty lance, to stop, and to bring him the lance, and to tighten the saddle-girths of the horse he was leading, and to bring him the horse in place of his palfrey. The squire did not hesitate, but gave him the horse and the lance without delay. Gawain set out after the hinds, and chased them with such trickery and guile that he trapped a white one against a thorn bush, laying his lance across her neck. But the hind leapt like a stag and escaped from him, and he leapt after her and pursued her, and was just about to stop her and catch her when his horse completely lost the shoe from a front hoof. Sir Gawain,

feeling his horse stumble beneath him, was much put out, and set off back to his baggage-train; he could not think what was making him limp, unless he had caught his hoof on a tree-stump. He called to Yvonet to dismount and take care of his horse, who was limping heavily. He did as commanded, and immediately lifted a hoof and found the shoe missing, and said:

'He needs to be shod, sir. We'll just have to lead him gently until we find a smith who can fit a new shoe.'

They journeyed on until they caught sight of people coming out of a castle and along a road. At the front were short-coated people, boys on foot with dogs on leashes, followed by huntsmen carrying bows and arrows, and last of all came knights. At the rear of all the knights were two on chargers, one of whom was a young man, and the most striking and most handsome of them all. He alone greeted Sir Gawain and took him by the hand, saying:

'Sir, let me detain you a while. Go the way I've come and dismount at my house. It's high time you found lodging, if you've no objection. I have a most courteous sister who'll make you very welcome. This gentleman beside me, sir, will take you there.' Then he said: 'Dear friend, I'm sending you with this gentleman to escort him to my sister. Greet her first, and then tell her that I bid her, by the love and faith we rightly share, that if she ever loved a knight she should love this one and hold him dear, and do as much for him as she would for me, her brother, and give him all the pleasure and company he wishes until we return. And when she's received him graciously, make haste and follow us, for I want to return and keep him company as soon as I can.'

With that the knight set off, and Sir Gawain was led to where he was mortally hated by everyone; but he was not recognised, for he had never been seen there before, so he did not know he was in danger.

He noted the castle's fine position, overlooking an arm of the sea, and saw the walls and the tower, so strong that it feared nothing. Then he saw the town, peopled by most handsome folk, and the money-changers' tables piled high with gold and silver and other coins, and the squares and thoroughfares filled with skilled workmen of varied crafts indeed: one made helmets and another made hauberks, one saddles, another blazons, this one bridles and that one spurs, some furbished swords, some fulled cloth while others wove it, and others combed it and others sheared it. Some melted down gold and silver, others worked them into rich and handsome goods: cups, goblets and bowls, enamelled jewellery, rings and belts and buckles. One might well have thought there was a fair in the town every day, brimming as it was with so many riches: wax and pepper and grain and furs and every kind of merchandise. They rode on, gazing at all these things and looking all around, until they came to the tower, where boys came out to take charge of the horses and the other gear.

The knight entered the tower alone with Sir Gawain, and led him by the hand to the girl's chamber, and said to her: 'Dear friend, your brother sends you greetings and commands that this knight be served and honoured; and don't do so grudgingly, but with as much good will as if you were his sister and he were your brother. Be sure you're not mean with whatever he wants, but generous, liberal and kindhearted. See to it now, for I must go: I have to follow your brother to the wood.'

And the girl, filled with joy, said: 'Bless him for sending me such company! To lend me such a fair companion shows how much he loves me: I thank him dearly! Come and sit beside me, good sir. Seeing how fair and noble you are, and because my brother has bidden me, I'll give you sweet entertainment.'

The knight stayed no longer, but set off. Sir Gawain had no complaints at being left alone with the girl, who was most courteous and beautiful, and so well brought up that she knew no-one would send a chaperone, even though she was alone with him. They both talked of love – if they had talked of anything else, what a waste of breath it would have been! Sir Gawain sought and begged for her love, and said he would be her knight all his life; and she did not refuse, but granted it most willingly. But just then a vassal entered who was to cause them great harm: he recognised Sir Gawain, and when he found them kissing and revelling he could not hold his tongue, but cried at the top of his voice:

'Damn you, woman! God destroy and confound you! Letting yourself be kissed and caressed by the man you ought to hate most in all the world! Wretched and foolish woman, how typical this is of you! You should have stolen his heart with your hands, not your lips! If your kisses have reached his heart, then you've drawn it from his breast; but you'd have done better if you'd ripped it out with your hands! There's no good in a woman: a woman's not a woman if she despises evil and loves good – it would be wrong to call her a woman then: she loses that name if she loves only good! But you're a woman, I can see that; for the man sitting beside you killed your father, and you kiss him! When a woman's got her pleasure she cares nothing for the rest!'

With that he dashed out before Sir Gawain could say a word; and the girl fell to the floor where she lay for a long time in a faint. Sir Gawain lifted her up, most grieved and upset at her fear. And when she came to she said: 'Oh, now we're dead! Because of you I'll die today; and so will you, I think, because of me. The people of the town will come here right away, I'm sure of it: there'll soon be more than ten thousand massed outside this tower! But there are plenty of weapons in here: I'll arm you with them quickly. One worthy man could defend this tower against a whole army.'

Then she ran, fearful, to fetch the arms; but when she had equipped him with all the armour, both she and Sir Gawain were less afraid. But as ill chance would have it there was no shield to be had, so he took a chessboard as a shield, saying:

‘My love, there’s no need to find me another!’

And he tipped the chessmen on to the floor; they were made of ivory, ten times bigger than other chess-pieces and of harder bone. Come what may, he now felt sure he could hold the entrance to the tower, for at his belt hung Escalibor, the finest sword there was, which sliced through iron as though through wood.

The vassal meanwhile had run from the tower and found an assembly of the town in session – the mayor and the aldermen and a great mass of other citizens; and they certainly hadn’t been purging themselves: they were stout and fat-bellied. The vassal came up – at more than a trot – crying:

‘To arms, my lords! Let’s go and seize the treacherous Gawain, who killed my lord!’

‘Where is he? Where is he?’ they all cried.

‘In faith,’ he said, ‘I found that proven traitor Gawain in the tower, where he’s taking his ease; he’s fondling and kissing our lady, and she doesn’t object: it pleases her and she’s only too willing! So come now, let’s go and seize him. If you can deliver him to my lord, he’ll be delighted with your service. The traitor has deserved to be brought to shame – but take him alive: my lord would rather have him alive than dead, and rightly so, for a dead man fears nothing. Raise the whole town, and do your duty!’

With that the mayor rose, and all the aldermen after him. Then you would have seen a host of furious townfolk snatching up whatever they could: axes and halberds, a shield without straps, one grabbed a door, another a huge basket. The town crier raised the cry and all the people gathered, and the bells of the commune rang so that no-one should stay behind; even the most base-hearted souls snatched up a pitchfork or a flail or a pick or a club. Not even a pack of Lombards out to kill a slug\* ever made so much commotion. Even the most wretched rogues came rushing, carrying some weapon. Sir Gawain was a dead man unless God came to his aid.

The girl boldly made ready to help him, and cried to the mob: ‘Away! Be off, you rabble, you mad curs, you slavish scum! What devil’s sent you? What are you after? What do you want? God send you constant misery! You’ll never take this knight in here; there’ll rather, please God, be countless of you dead and maimed! He didn’t fly here or creep up secretly; my brother sent him to me as a guest, and begged me to do as much for him as I would for my own brother. Do you think me base for entertaining him with joy and

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\* A passing jibe at the Lombards for their proverbial cowardice.

pleasure as my brother bade? Think what you like, but that's the only reason I gave him such a welcome: there was nothing foolish in my mind. That's why I'm so angry with you for shaming me like this, drawing swords upon me at the door of my chamber with no good reason. Or if you have a reason, you haven't told me what it is! You've shown me the foulest disrespect!

While she spoke her mind the mob had smashed the door down with hatchets, splitting it in two. But Gawain the doorkeeper fought back finely: wielding his sword he dealt with the first man in such a way that the others were all dismayed, and no-one dared go forward. They were all concerned for their own skins, all fearing for their heads. There was no-one bold enough to advance, such was their fear of the doorkeeper: no-one raised a hand against him or went forward a single step. The girl took the chessmen that were lying on the flagged floor and hurled them at the mob in fury. She tore wildly at her clothes, swearing in her rage that, before she died, she would have all the rabble destroyed if she could. The mob drew back, declaring that they would bring the tower down on top of them if they did not surrender. But they put up an even fiercer defence, bombarding them with the ivory chessmen. Most of the mob fled, unable to endure the assault, and started undermining the tower with steel picks, aiming to bring it down, for they did not dare to attack and fight at the door that was held so well against them. And believe me, one worthy man could hold and defend it well, for the doorway was so low and narrow that two men could barely have entered together. And you could not ask for a finer doorman than Gawain for splitting the heads of unarmed men right down to the teeth and scattering their brains.

The lord who had given him lodging knew nothing of all this, but he was now returning speedily from the wood where he had been hunting. And still the mob were working away at the tower with their steel picks. It was then that Guigambresil, who knew nothing of this adventure, came galloping into the castle, and was astounded at hearing the commotion and hammering of the mob. He had no idea that Sir Gawain was there; but when he heard the news he forbade anyone, if he valued his life, to be so bold as to disturb a stone. But they said they would not stop because of him: they would bring the tower down on top of him, too, if he were inside with Gawain. Guigambresil, seeing his warning unheeded, decided to go and find the king and bring him to the riot that the townsmen had started. The king was now on his way back from the wood, and Guigambresil met him and told him:

'Sir, your mayor and your aldermen have done you a great disgrace: they've been attacking your tower and are knocking it down! I'd be grateful indeed if you'd make them pay for it: I've charged Gawain with treason, as you know, and it's Gawain you were lodging at your house; and it's only right and proper, since you've made him your guest, to see that he comes to no

harm or shame.’

And the king replied to Guigambresil: ‘He won’t, once we get there. I’m most upset and angry about this. I’m not surprised that my people hate him mortally, but if I can I’ll protect him from capture or harm, since I’ve given him lodging.’

And so they rode on to the tower, and found the people on every side making a great commotion. The king told the mayor to leave and to lead the crowd away. They all moved off: not a single one remained since that was the mayor’s wish.

Now, there was a vassal present, a native of the town, who, being a man of great wisdom, gave advice to the whole country; and he said to the king: ‘Sir, you need clear and honest counsel. It’s no wonder that the man who committed the treason of killing your father has been besieged here, for he’s rightly held in mortal hatred as you know. But the fact that you’ve given him lodging should safeguard him from being seized or killed. And it must be said, Guigambresil there ought to save and protect him, for he went to King Arthur’s court and charged Gawain with treachery. There can be no doubt that Gawain had come to defend himself against the charge at your court, but I advise that this battle be postponed for a year, and that Gawain should go in search of the lance whose head bleeds constantly – it can never be wiped free of a drop of blood. He must either deliver that lance to you or surrender to such imprisonment as he’s suffering here. Then you’d have a better reason for holding him captive than you have now. I don’t think you could ever impose a task upon him, however hard, that he’d fail to achieve quite brilliantly. You should make those you hate suffer as much as you can; I can suggest no better way of punishing your enemy.’

The king took the vassal’s advice, and went into the tower and up to his sister, and found her brimming with rage. She rose to meet him, and so did Sir Gawain, who never paled or trembled for any fear. Guigambresil came striding forward and greeted the girl – who certainly *had* changed colour – and said these vain words:

‘Sir Gawain, Sir Gawain, because of my charge of treachery you are under my protection and I’ve arranged your safe conduct; but I told you never to be so bold as to enter any castle or city belonging to my lord, but to avoid it if you would. This is not the time or place to complain of what’s been done to you.’

But the wise vassal said: ‘God help me, sir, all this can be sorted out. To whom should one appeal, if the mob have assaulted him? The debate would go on and on until the great Day of Judgement! No, it shall be settled

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\* In fact, what follows was not a term of Guigambresil’s challenge: Chrétien is uncharacteristically inconsistent here.



according to the will of my lord the king: he commands through my lips that, if you and Gawain don't object, you postpone this battle for a year, and let Sir Gawain go; but my lord will first have an oath from him: that within a year – no more – he will deliver to my lord the lance whose head sheds tears of the clearest blood. And it is written that the time will come when the whole kingdom of Logres, which was once the land of the ogres, will be destroyed by that lance. My lord the king wants that oath and assurance.'

'Truly,' said Sir Gawain, 'I would sooner let myself die or languish here for seven years than swear such an oath or give him such a pledge. I'm not so afraid of dying that I wouldn't prefer to suffer death with honour than perjure myself and live in shame.'

'Good sir,' said the vassal, 'it won't be to your dishonour, and I don't think you'll be any the worse for it. Let me explain why: your oath will be to do your best to find the lance, but, if you fail to bring it back, to return to imprisonment in this tower, and thus absolve yourself of the oath.'

'In that case,' said Sir Gawain, 'I'm prepared to make the promise.'

Then a most precious reliquary was brought to him, and he made the vow that he would put all his efforts into searching for the bleeding lance. And so the battle between Gawain and Guigambresil was postponed for a year; he had escaped from great peril in being thus freed.

Before he left the tower he took his leave of the girl; and he told all his squires to return to his land, and to take back all his horses except Gringalet. And so the boys left their lord and departed: I don't wish to say any more about them or the grief they showed. The story leaves Sir Gawain here, and begins to tell of Perceval.

**P**erceval, my source-book tells us, had lost his memory to such a degree that he no longer remembered God. April and May passed by five times – that's five whole years – without him entering a church or worshipping God or His cross: he lived like this for five years. That's not to say that he stopped seeking deeds of chivalry: he went in search of strange, hard and terrible adventures, and encountered so many that he tested himself well. In five years he sent sixty worthy knights as prisoners to King Arthur's court. That was how he spent five years, without a thought for God.

At the end of these five years it so happened that he was riding across a wilderness, fully armed, as always, when he met three knights and as many as ten ladies with them, their heads hidden in their hoods, all on foot, in hair-shirts and bare-footed. The ladies, for the salvation of their souls, were doing

their penance on foot for the sins they had committed, and were astonished to see him coming clad in armour and holding a lance and a shield. And one of the three knights stopped him and said:

‘My good, dear friend, don’t you believe in Jesus Christ, who laid down the New Law and gave it to the Christians? Truly, it’s neither right nor good, but very wrong, to carry arms on the day when Jesus Christ died.’

And he who had no sense of day or hour or time, so troubled was his heart, replied: ‘What day is it, then?’

‘What day, sir? Don’t you know? It’s Good Friday, the day when a man should worship the cross and weep for his sins, for on this day the one who was sold for thirty pieces of silver was nailed to the cross. He who was clean of all sins saw the sins with which the whole world was stained and bound, and became a man to save us from them. He was God and man, truly, for the Virgin bore a son conceived by the Holy Spirit, in whom God assumed flesh and blood, so that the Deity was housed in the flesh of man: that’s certain. And those who won’t believe it will never see Him face to face. That son born of the Virgin Lady, who assumed the form and the soul of man with His holy deity, truly, on this day He was nailed to the cross and freed all His friends from Hell. It was a most holy death, which saved the living and brought the dead from death to life. With their spite the false Jews, who should be put down like dogs, did themselves great harm and us great good when they raised Him to the cross; for they damned themselves and saved us. All who believe in Him should be spending today in penitence. No man who believes in God should be carrying arms today, either in the field or on the road.’

‘Where have you just come from?’ said Perceval.

‘From over there, sir; from a worthy man, a holy hermit who lives in this forest. He’s such a holy man that he lives solely by the glory of God.’

‘In God’s name, my lord, what did you do there? What did you ask? What were you looking for?’

‘What did we ask, sir?’ said one of the ladies. ‘We asked him for guidance from our sins and made confession – the greatest thing any Christian can do who wants to come to God.’

What Perceval had heard made him weep, and he longed to go and talk to the worthy man. ‘I’d very much like to go there,’ he said, ‘if I knew the way.’

‘Sir, anyone who wants to go there should go straight ahead along the way we’ve come, through the thick, dense wood, and watch out for the branches that we knotted together as we came. We left such signs so that no-one going to the holy hermit should lose his way.’

With that they commended each other to God and no more questions

were asked. Perceval set off along his path, sighing from the depths of his heart, for he felt he had wronged God, for which he was deeply repentant. He rode on, weeping, right through the wood.

When he came to the hermitage he dismounted and disarmed and tethered his horse to an elm tree. Then he entered the hermit's cell. In a little chapel he found the hermit and a priest and a clerk – this is the truth – who were beginning the highest and sweetest service that can be held in a holy church. Perceval went down on his knees as soon as he entered the chapel, and the good man, seeing him so humble and weeping, with tears streaming from his eyes to his chin, called him to draw near. And Perceval, who deeply feared that he had sinned against God, clung to the hermit's foot and bowed down before him, and then, with joined hands, he begged him to give him guidance, for he had great need of it. The good man told him to make confession, for he would never have remission if he did not confess and repent.

'Sir,' said Perceval, 'fully five years ago I lost my bearings, and stopped loving God and believing in God; and since then I've done nothing but ill.'

'Oh, good friend,' said the worthy man, 'tell me why you did this, and pray to God to have mercy on His sinner's soul.'

'Sir, I was once at the house of the Fisher King, and I saw the lance with the head that most certainly bleeds, but I asked nothing about the drop of blood I saw hanging from the tip of that white head. And truly, I've done nothing since then to make amends. Nor do I know who was served from the grail that I saw there, and I've since suffered such grief that I would gladly be dead; for I've forgotten God because of it, and not once since then have I asked Him for mercy – and I don't think I've done anything to earn it.'

'Oh, my dear friend,' said the worthy man, 'tell me your name.'

And he said: 'Perceval, sir.'

At that the worthy man gave a sigh, for he recognised the name, and said: 'Brother, a sin of which you know nothing has done you great harm: it's the grief you caused your mother when you left her. She fell to the ground in a faint at the foot of the bridge outside the gate, and she died of that grief. It was because of the sin you committed there that you came to ask nothing about the lance and the grail, and many misfortunes have befallen you because of that. And I tell you this: you wouldn't have survived this long if she hadn't commended you to God. But her prayer had such power that God has watched over you for her sake, and kept you from being killed or captured. It was sin that stopped your tongue when you saw the lance-head that never stanch'd its flow of blood, so that you didn't ask the reason; and folly seized you when you failed to learn who was served from the grail. The

one who's served from it is my brother. My sister, and his, was your mother. And as for the rich Fisher, I believe he's the son of the king who is served from the grail. And don't imagine that he's given pike or lamprey or salmon; he's served with a single host\* which is brought to him in that grail. It comforts and sustains his life – the grail is such a holy thing. And he, who is so spiritual that he needs no more in his life than the host that comes in the grail, has lived there for twelve years without ever leaving the chamber which you saw the grail enter. Now I want to direct you and give you penance for your sin.'

'I want that with all my heart, good uncle,' said Perceval. 'Since my mother was your sister, you ought to call me nephew and I should call you uncle and love you the more.'

'That's true, good nephew, but listen now: if pity has taken hold of your soul, repent in all truthfulness, and each morning, before you go anywhere else, go in the name of penitence to church and you'll benefit greatly: don't fail to do so on any account. If you're in a place where there's a minster, a chapel or a parish church, go there when you hear the bell ring, or sooner if you're awake; it won't be to your disadvantage but very much to your soul's improvement. And if mass is begun there'll be even more profit in being there: stay there until the priest has said and sung it all. If you do this with a will, you may come to redeem yourself and win honour and a place in Paradise. Love God, believe in God, worship God; honour worthy men and women; and stand up before priests – it's a service that costs little, and God truly loves it as a sign of humility. And if a girl or a widow or an orphan requests your help, grant it, and it'll be the better for you; it's a most worthy charity, so you'll do well to give them your aid: make sure you do so, without fail. I'd have you do this for your sins, if you want to recover all the virtues that you used to have. Now tell me if you'll do so.'

'Yes, sir, most willingly.'

'Then stay here with me, please, for two whole days, and in penitence eat such food as I eat.'

Perceval agreed to all of this, and the hermit whispered a prayer in his ear, repeating it to him until he had learnt it. Many of the names of Our Lord appeared in this prayer, including the greatest ones, which the tongue of man should never utter except in fear of death. And when he had taught him the prayer he forbade him ever to utter those names except in times of great peril.

'I shan't, sir,' said Perceval.

And so he stayed there and heard the service, which delighted him.

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\* i.e. communion bread. Given that a 'grail' was a broad, shallow dish or platter (see note above, p.38), the reference to fish is not as strange as it initially appears.

And after the service he worshipped the cross and wept for his sins. That night he ate as the holy hermit pleased; but there were only beets, chervil, lettuce and cress and millet, and bread made of barley and oats, and water from a clear spring. And his horse had straw and a full trough of barley.

Thus Perceval came to recognise that God received death and was crucified on the Friday. And at Easter, most worthily, Perceval received communion.

The story says no more about Perceval for now. You'll have heard a great deal about Sir Gawain before I tell of him again.

Sir Gawain, after his escape from the tower where the mob had attacked him, wandered on until one morning, between nine o'clock and noon, he came riding up towards a hill and saw a tall and massive oak tree, thick with leaves, giving plenty of shade. He could see a shield hung on the oak, and beside it a good, straight lance. He hurried on towards the tree until he noticed a small, dark palfrey beside it; he was astonished by this, for it did not seem right to him: arms and a palfrey did not go together. If it had been a charger he would have supposed that some knight, roaming the country in search of honour and glory, had climbed the hill. But just then he looked beneath the oak and saw a girl sitting there, who would have seemed most beautiful to him if only she had been happy and gay; but she had her fingers thrust into her tresses to tear out her hair, and was going wild with grief. She was grieving for a knight, and was kissing him over and over on the eyes and lips and forehead. Sir Gawain came closer and saw that the knight was wounded, with many cuts to his face and a terrible sword-wound in his head; and down both his sides blood flowed in great streams. The knight had fainted many times from his pain, and now finally lay still, and when Sir Gawain arrived he did not know if he was dead or alive.

'How does he seem to you, dear girl?' he said.

And she replied: 'You can see his wounds are dangerous indeed: he'd die of the very smallest.'

'Dear friend,' said Gawain, 'wake him, please; I want to ask him about the affairs of this land.'

'I won't wake him, sir!' said the girl. 'I'd sooner be flayed alive! I've never loved a man so much, and never will as long as I live. Now that he's sleeping and at rest I'd be a wretched fool to disturb him.'

'Then truly, I'll wake him if I can!' said Sir Gawain, and swinging his lance around he nudged him on the spur with the butt. It did not trouble

the knight to be woken, for Sir Gawain shook his spur so gently that it did not hurt him. Instead the knight thanked him, saying:

‘A thousand thanks, sir, for shaking me and waking me so kindly that I’ve suffered no harm. But for your own sake I beg you, go no further: you’ll be a fool if you do. Take my advice and stop here.’

‘Stop? Why should I?’

‘I’ll tell you, by my faith, since you want to know. No knight who’s ever gone that way, by road or field, has ever come back, for this is the border of Galvoie, and no knight can cross it and return. I’m the only one who’s ever done so, and now I’m in such a state that I don’t think I can last till nightfall. For I met a knight, worthy and bold and strong and fearsome: I’ve never met one so valiant, or tested myself against one so strong. That’s why it’s best if you turn back rather than cross this hill, for the return is hard and terrible.’

‘In faith,’ said Sir Gawain, ‘I didn’t come to go back again. It should be thought foul cowardice in me if I turned back having taken this path. I’m going on until I see why no-one can return.’

‘I can see it must be so,’ said the wounded knight. ‘You’ll go, for you’re eager to enhance your honour. But I’d ask this of you if you’ll let me: if God should grant you the honour which no knight has ever had – and I don’t think any ever will, either you or any other – please return this way and see if I’m alive or dead, or better or worse. And if I’m dead, then in the name of charity and the holy trinity I beg you take care of this girl, and see that she suffers no shame or harm. Please do so, for God never made or thought of making one more noble or kind-hearted.’

Sir Gawain granted his wish, promising that, if he were not prevented by capture or some other misfortune, he would return to him and give the girl such assistance as he could. With that he left them and rode on without stopping, across plains and through forests, until he caught sight of a mighty castle, one side of which was a great sea-port with a fleet of ships to match. This noble castle was worth little less than Pavia. On its other side lay vineyards, and beneath it flowed the great river which girded its walls all around and took its course right down to the sea, protecting the castle and the town on every side. Sir Gawain rode into the city over the bridge, and when he had climbed to the strongest part of the city he found, beneath an elm tree in a courtyard, a sweet girl, whiter than snow, looking at her face and lips in a mirror. She had made a crown around her head with a thin circlet of golden thread. Sir Gawain gave his horse a spur and ambled up towards the girl, but she shouted to him:

‘Easy, sir, easy! Go gently now! You’re riding like a madman! There’s no need to hurry and wear out your horse: it’s foolish to rush for nothing.’

‘God bless you, girl,’ said Sir Gawain. ‘But tell me, dear friend, what

were you thinking of, telling me to go easy, for no good reason?’

‘Oh, I had good reason, knight, truly I did; for I know exactly what you’re thinking.’

‘What’s that?’ he said.

‘You want to take me and carry me off across the neck of your horse.’

‘True enough, girl!’

‘I knew it,’ she said, ‘but curse the thinker of such a thought! You can forget about putting me on your horse! I’m not one of those simpletons that knights sport with and carry off on their horses when they go in search of chivalry. You’ll not take me! And yet, if you dared, you *could* take me with you. If you’d risk fetching my palfrey from that garden, I’d go with you: and misadventure and hardship and grief and shame and mishap would befall you in my company.’

‘Is anything needed but courage, friend?’ said Gawain.

‘I don’t think so, vassal,’ she replied.

‘Oh, dear girl, where shall I leave my horse if I go? He won’t be able to cross that plank to the garden.’

‘No, knight. Give him to me and cross on foot. I’ll keep your horse for you as long as I can hold him. But come back quickly, for I couldn’t keep hold of him if he refused to be calm, or if he were taken from me by force before you came back.’

‘That’s true,’ he said. ‘But I shan’t hold you to blame if he escapes or is snatched from you. And I won’t go back on that.’

So he gave her the horse and set off, but decided to take all his arms with him, for if there were someone in the garden who refused him the palfrey and forbade him to take it, there would be commotion and combat before he brought it back. And then, just as he crossed the plank, he saw a great crowd of people gathered together; they stared at him in dismay and cried:

‘May a hundred demons burn you, girl, for being so wicked! May misfortune strike your body, for you’ve never shown love for a worthy man. You’ve sent so many to lose their heads. What a grievous shame! You mean to fetch the palfrey, knight, but you don’t know the harm that’ll befall you if you touch it. Oh, sir! Why don’t you turn back? Truly, you wouldn’t come closer if you knew the shame and harm and trouble that’ll befall you if you take the palfrey.’

So said all the men and women, desperate to stop Sir Gawain going to the palfrey and to make him turn back. He heard them quite clearly, but nothing was going to change his mind; he went up and greeted them, and they all returned his greeting, but in such a way that they seemed to be in great anguish and distress. Then Sir Gawain stepped up to the palfrey and stretched

out his hand, meaning to take it by the bridle – for it lacked neither saddle nor harness – when a great knight, sitting beneath a lush, green olive tree, said:

‘It’s no use trying to take the palfrey, knight. Don’t lay a finger on it: it would be an act of the vainest pride. I don’t want to forbid you or stop you if you’re so eager to take it, but I advise you to be gone, for if you take that palfrey you’ll find a fearsome challenge elsewhere.’

‘That won’t stop me, sir,’ said Sir Gawain, ‘for the girl beneath the elm tree with the mirror sent me for it, and if I don’t take it back with me, what shall I have gained by coming here? I’d be damned on Earth as a cowardly good-for-nothing.’

‘Then you’ll suffer for it, brother,’ said the knight, ‘for by God the sovereign father to whom I hope to deliver my soul, no knight has ever dared take the palfrey and escaped the grim fate of being beheaded. I fear the same will befall you. I didn’t mean you any harm when I forbade you to take it: you can do so if you wish, for neither I nor anyone here will stop you, but you’ll be making a great mistake if you take it from this garden. I don’t recommend it: it’ll cost you your head.’

Sir Gawain would not linger a moment more. He drove the palfrey, whose head was black on one side and white on the other, straight across the plank. It had no trouble in crossing it, for it had often done so and was well trained and schooled in it now. Sir Gawain took it by its silken rein and came straight to the elm tree where the girl was gazing at herself in her mirror; she had cast her mantle and wimple to the ground so that she could see her face and body freely. Sir Gawain presented the saddled palfrey to her and said: ‘Come now, girl, and I’ll help you mount.’

‘May God never let it be said,’ she replied, ‘in any court you may take me to, that you held me in your arms. If you ever held any part of me, or touched it with your bare hand, I should think myself disgraced. It would be the worst that could befall me if you were ever known to have touched my flesh; I’d rather have my skin and flesh flayed down to the bone – I’ll say that here and now! Leave me the palfrey at once; I can mount well enough by myself – I don’t want your help. And God grant that I may see what I expect today: great shame befalling you before the day is out! Go where you will, you’ll never touch my body or my clothes; but I’ll follow you constantly until you’ve suffered some disaster, shame and misfortune because of me! I know I’ll make you come to grief – you can’t escape it any more than death.’

Sir Gawain heard every word the haughty girl said, but made no reply. He just gave her the palfrey and she returned his horse. Then Sir Gawain bent down, meaning to pick up her mantle from the ground and drape it round her; but the girl, who was never slow or timid in saying shameful words to a knight, watched him and said:



‘Vassal, what business have you with my mantle and wimple? By God, I’m not half as simple as you think. I’ve no desire to have you serve me, for your hands aren’t clean enough to touch anything I wear on my body or my head. You shouldn’t handle anything that touches my body, my mouth, my forehead or my face! May God never honour me again if I ever accept your service in any way.’

So the girl mounted, and donned and fastened her clothes herself, and said: ‘Now, knight, go wherever you like, and I’ll follow you everywhere, until I see you disgraced because of me – and that’ll be today, if it please God!’

Sir Gawain was silent, saying not a word in reply. He mounted, filled with shame, and they set off; and with his head bowed he turned back towards the oak where he had left the girl and the knight who sorely needed a doctor for his wounds. Sir Gawain knew more than any man about healing wounds, and saw a herb in the hedgerow which was very good for taking the pain from a wound, and he went to pick it. Having picked the herb he carried on until he found the girl beneath the oak tree, lamenting, and she said to him as soon as she saw him:

‘Good, dear sir, I think this knight is dead now, for he hears nothing any more.’

Sir Gawain dismounted, and found that the knight had a firm pulse, and his lips and cheek were not very cold.

‘Girl,’ he said, ‘this knight’s alive, you may be sure, for he has a good pulse and strong breathing and no mortal wound. And I’ve brought a herb that’ll greatly help him, I think, and relieve some of the pain from his wounds as soon as it touches him; it’s written that no finer herb can be set upon a wound, and that it has such power that if it were bound to the bark of an infected tree, then, unless it were completely withered, the roots would recover and the tree would return to leaf and flower. Your friend need fear death no longer, girl, once we’ve applied this herb to his wounds and bound it on; but we’ll need a wimple of fine cloth to make a bandage.’

‘I’ll give you the one I’m wearing,’ she said, without hesitation, ‘for it’s the only one I’ve brought.’

And so she took the wimple from her head, and it was very fine and white; and Sir Gawain cut the lengths required and bound the herb he was holding on all the knight’s wounds, the girl helping as best she could. Sir Gawain stayed motionless until the knight gave a sigh and spoke, saying:

‘May God reward the one who has restored my speech, for I was greatly afraid of dying without confession. Demons came here in procession, seeking my soul. I dearly want to make confession before I’m buried. I know a chaplain near here, and if only I had a mount I’d go and confess my sins and

take communion. Once I'd done that I'd no longer fear death. But do me this service, if you will: give me the packhorse of the squire who's trotting this way.'

Hearing this, Sir Gawain turned and saw a squire coming, of most unpleasant appearance. What was he like? I'll tell you: his hair was red and tousled, and stood stiffly on end like the spines of an angry porcupine; and his eyebrows were the same, and covered his face and nose right down to his moustache, which was long and twisted. He had a great slit of a mouth, and a wide beard, forked and curled, and a short neck and a swollen chest. Sir Gawain was keen to go and see if he could have the packhorse; but first he said to the knight:

'God help me, sir, I don't know who this squire is, but whoever he may be, I'd rather give you seven chargers, if I had them here to hand, than his packhorse.'

'I tell you,' said the knight, 'he's intent on one thing only: to do you harm if he can.'

Sir Gawain went up to meet the squire and asked him where he was going. And he, being far from amiable, replied: 'Vassal, what business is it of yours where I'm going or where I'm from? Whatever my path may be, I wish ill fortune on your body!'

At that Sir Gawain gave him his just deserts, striking him with his open palm; and, his arm being armoured and his will to strike keen, he toppled him and emptied his saddle; and when the squire tried to rise he staggered and fell down flat again. He fell seven times or more, I jest not, in less space than the length of a pinewood lance.

When he did get up again he said: 'You hit me, vassal!'

'Indeed I did,' said Gawain, 'but I've not done you much harm. I'm sorry I hit you, before God, but you spoke most offensively.'

'Well, you'll pay for it, and I'll tell you how! You'll lose the hand and the arm that dealt me that blow, for it'll never be forgiven you!'

While this was happening, the wounded knight's heart, which had been so weak, returned to him, and he said to Sir Gawain: 'Leave that squire, good sir, for you'll never have an honourable word from him. Yes, you'd do best to leave him now; but bring me his packhorse, and take this girl here beside me, fasten the girths of her palfrey and help her to mount, for I don't want to stay here any longer. I'll mount the packhorse if I can, and look for somewhere to make confession: I shan't stop until I've confessed and taken communion and received the last sacrament.'

Sir Gawain took the packhorse at once and gave it to the knight; his sight had now returned and cleared, and he saw Sir Gawain and recognised him for the first time. And Sir Gawain took the girl and, like the kind and courteous knight he was, set her upon the dark palfrey. And while he was

seating her upon it, the knight took Gawain's horse and mounted, and began to send him charging hither and thither in all directions. Sir Gawain saw him galloping about the hill and laughed in amazement; but as he laughed he said:

'By my faith, sir knight, you're foolish to make my horse leap about like that. Dismount and give him to me, for you could easily hurt yourself and reopen your wounds.'

But he replied: 'Hold your tongue, Gawain. You'd better take the packhorse, for you've lost the horse! I like the way he goes, and I'm taking him with me for my own!'

'What! I come here to help you and you'd do me wrong? Don't you dare take my horse, for it would be treachery.'

'Gawain, whatever it might cost me, I'd like to tear your heart from your belly with both hands!'

'This reminds me of a proverb,' Gawain replied. "'Do some men a good deed and your neck will bleed". I'd like to know why you'd have my heart, and why you're taking my horse; for never in my life have I wished or done you any harm. I don't think I've done anything to deserve it, for I've never seen you before, to my knowledge.'

'Yes, you have, Gawain. You saw me and did me a great disgrace. Don't you remember the man you tormented by forcing him against his will to eat with the dogs for a month, with his hands tied behind his back? I tell you that was a foolish deed, and now you're paying for it.'

'Are you, then, Greoreas, who abducted the girl and had your way with her? Yet you knew full well that in King Arthur's land girls are protected; the king has given them a safeguard, and watches over them and ensures their safe conduct. I can't believe that you hate me or seek to do me harm for what I did to you, for I did it for the sake of justice, which is established and imposed throughout the king's land.'

'Gawain, you exacted justice upon me, I remember that well. And now you must suffer the justice that I'll exact: I'm taking Gringalet, for that's the best revenge I can have for now; and you'll have to change to the packhorse from which you toppled the squire, for there's no other swap you can make!'

With that Greoreas left him and raced off after his sweetheart, who was riding swiftly away, and he followed her with all speed.

And the evil girl laughed at Sir Gawain and said: 'Oh, vassal, vassal, what are you going to do? It may well be said of you now: "there's one born every day"! God save me, it's great fun trailing you! I'll gladly follow wherever you go. If only the packhorse you've taken from the squire were a mare! I tell you, I wish it were, for your disgrace would be greater still!'

Then Sir Gawain, having no choice, mounted the stupid, trotting packhorse. It was a most ugly beast, with a thin neck and a fat head and long, limp ears, and all the imperfections of age: its lips sagged a full finger's length apart, its eyes were cloudy and dim, its hooves covered in sores, and its flanks were hard and slashed by spurs. It was long and thin, with a skinny rump and a bent spine. The reins and headpiece of the bridle were made of thin cord, and the saddle, which had seen better days, had no blanket. And the stirrups were so short and weak that he did not dare put his weight in them.

'Oh, truly,' cried the girl, plaguing him, 'things are turning out well! I shall be glad indeed to go where you like! It's only right that I should follow you willingly for a week or a fortnight, or three weeks or a month, for you're finely harnessed, and mounted on a splendid charger; yes, you look just like a knight who should escort a girl! Oh, what pleasure I shall take in seeing your misfortunes. Give your horse a bit of a spur and test him – but watch out: he's like lightning! Oh yes, I'll follow you, for understand I'll never leave till disgrace has truly befallen you, as it surely will.'

And he replied: 'Dear friend, you may say what you like, but it isn't right for a girl to speak so impolitely when she's more than ten years old; she should be well-mannered and courteous and polite, if she's bright enough to learn.'

'What! You want to teach me lessons, do you, sir knight of misadventure? I don't want your instruction! Ride on and hold your tongue, for you're equipped now as I wanted you to be.'

And so they rode on till evening, and neither of them said a word. Sir Gawain went ahead and she rode behind. He did not know what to do with his packhorse, for he could not get a canter or a gallop out of it however hard he tried. It went at a walk whether he liked it or not, for if he dug in his spurs he had a dreadful ride: it shook up his insides so much that he could not bear to have it go faster than walking-pace.

So on he rode upon the packhorse through wild and lonely forests, until he came to a flat land beside a deep river, so wide that no sling of mangonel or catapult could have thrown a stone across, and it was beyond the range of any crossbow. On the other side a castle stood, overlooking the river, very well appointed and very strong and very rich. I've no desire to tell a lie; the castle was built upon a cliff, and so splendidly that no living man's eyes have ever beheld so fine a fortress: there was a great hall set upon a sheer rock, built entirely of grey marble, and in the hall were a good five hundred open windows, all filled with girls and ladies, gazing out before them at the meadows and flowery gardens. Many of the girls were dressed in samite, and most wore silken gowns of different colours, all brocaded with gold. There

they leaned at the windows, and from outside they could be seen from the waist up, with their shining heads and their comely bodies.

The most evil woman in the world, who was now riding ahead of Sir Gawain, came straight down to the river. She stopped there and stepped down from the little mottled palfrey; and on the bank she found a boat, which was fastened and padlocked to a stone. But there was a paddle in the boat, and on the stone lay the key to the lock. The evil-hearted girl climbed into the craft and led her palfrey in after her, as she had done many times before.

‘Vassal,’ she cried, ‘dismount now and climb in here with me along with your packhorse – it’s as skinny as a chicken! – and take up this boat’s anchor; for you’ll be in a sorry plight if you don’t cross this river quickly – or can’t swim fast!’

‘What, girl? Why?’

‘You haven’t seen what I can see, knight: if you had you’d flee with all speed!’

Sir Gawain looked round then and saw a knight coming across the meadow, fully armed; and he asked: ‘If you don’t mind, friend, tell me who that knight is: he’s riding my horse, stolen from me by that traitor whom I healed of his wounds this morning.’

‘I’ll tell you, by Saint Martin,’ the girl said cheerfully, ‘but you may be sure I wouldn’t tell you for all the world if I thought it would be to your benefit! But since I’m certain he’s coming for your misfortune I shan’t hide it from you: he’s Greoreas’s nephew; he’s sent him after you, and I’ll tell you exactly why, since you’ve asked. His uncle’s ordered him to track you to your death and to take him back your head. That’s why I advise you to dismount and climb in here and flee, unless you want to die right there.’

‘I certainly won’t flee because of him, girl. I’ll wait for him.’

‘Well truly, I shan’t stop you!’ she replied. ‘I’m saying nothing. Oh, what a fine charge, what a gallop you’ll make in front of those beautiful girls up there, leaning at the windows! They’re only there because of you – it’s because of you they’ve come. So charge! They’ll love it, with you mounted on that mighty charger! You look just like a knight who should be jousting with another!’

‘Whatever it may cost me, girl, I’m not going to shirk this. I’m going out to meet him, for I’d be overjoyed if I could win back my horse.’

And with that he headed back to the meadow, and turned the head of his packhorse towards the knight who was spurring across the sandy riverbank. Sir Gawain prepared to meet him, and braced himself so firmly in the stirrups that he snapped the left one clean off; so he let the right one go and just waited for the knight – the packhorse would not move: for all his spurring he could not make it stir.

‘Alas!’ he cried. ‘A packhorse is no mount for a knight when he wants to do combat!’

And meanwhile the knight was spurring towards him on Gawain’s own horse – and it wasn’t one to hobble – and he gave Gawain such a blow with his lance that it bent like a bow and snapped clean across, leaving the head in his shield. And Sir Gawain struck him on the top half of his shield, and with such force that it smashed clean through both shield and mail-coat and brought him crashing down in the fine sand. Sir Gawain reached out and took hold of his horse and jumped into the saddle. This adventure was so sweet to him and his heart was so filled with joy that he had never felt so happy in his life. He rode back to the girl who had climbed into the boat – but there was no sign of either boat or girl. He was most displeased at losing the girl; he did not know what had become of her.

While he was thinking about the girl he saw a skiff coming from the castle, guided by a pilot. And when the pilot reached the bank he said:

‘Sir, I bring you greetings from the girls yonder; and they send you word not to withhold my rightful possession: return it to me if you will.’

And Sir Gawain replied: ‘God bless you and all the company of girls. You’ll never lose anything on my account which you could claim to be yours by right: I’ve no wish to wrong you. What is it you want from me?’

‘Sir, I saw you topple a knight here whose horse I should rightfully have. Unless you mean to do me wrong you ought to hand the horse to me.’

And Gawain said: ‘It would be a great hardship for me, my friend, to give up what you say is yours, for I’d have to continue on foot.’

‘Shame upon you, knight! Those girls will think you most disloyal and wicked now, if you won’t return what’s mine by right. For whenever a knight has been unhorsed on this bank and I’ve known of it, I’ve never failed to have his mount. And if I didn’t get the horse I didn’t fail to get the knight.’

And Sir Gawain said: ‘I’ll not refuse you the knight, my friend: take him – I give him to you!’

‘In faith sir,’ said the pilot, ‘that’s no gift! I think you’d have trouble taking him yourself if he decided to defend himself against you. But if you’ve got it in you, go and capture him and bring him to me, and you can keep what’s rightfully mine.’

‘Friend, if I dismount and go on foot, can I trust you to keep my horse in good faith?’

‘Certainly,’ he said. ‘I’ll keep him for you faithfully, and gladly give him back to you: I’ll never wrong you in any way as long as I live – I promise and swear it.’

‘I’ll trust you, then,’ said Sir Gawain, ‘on your promise and your word.’

And so he climbed from his horse and entrusted it to him, and the pilot took it, saying that he would guard it faithfully. Then Sir Gawain set out, sword drawn, towards the knight – who had no need of further trouble, for he was so badly wounded in the side that he had lost a good deal of blood. Sir Gawain came up to him.

‘Sir,’ said the knight, in great difficulty, ‘I can’t hide it – I’ve such a grievous wound that I can do without receiving worse; I’ve lost a gallon of blood – I submit to your mercy.’

‘Get up, then,’ said Sir Gawain.

And the knight struggled up, and Sir Gawain led him back to the pilot, who thanked him deeply. Then Gawain asked him to tell him about the girl he had led there, if he had any information about where she had gone. And the pilot replied:

‘Sir, forget about her, wherever she may have gone, for she’s not a girl: no, she’s worse than Satan, for on this bank she’s caused many a knight to be beheaded. If you’ll take my advice you’ll come now and take such lodging as I can offer, for it’s no good staying here on this riverbank: it’s a wild place, and full of great marvels.’

‘If that’s your advice I’ll take it, friend, whatever may befall me.’

And so he did as the pilot advised. His horse was taken aboard and he climbed in after, and they set out and sailed to the other bank. The pilot’s house was close to the water, and was such that a count could have disembarked there; he had every comfort in that house. The pilot led his guest and his prisoner inside, and gave them the finest welcome that he could. Sir Gawain was served with everything befitting a worthy man: he dined on plover and pheasant and partridge and venison, and the wines were strong and clear, white and red, new and old. The pilot was delighted with his prisoner, and with his guest. They dined for a long while, until finally the table was cleared away and they washed their hands again.

Sir Gawain’s host and lodging that night were much to his liking: he deeply appreciated the pilot’s hospitality, and it pleased him greatly.

The next morning, as soon as he saw the day break, he rose as he should and as was his custom; and the pilot rose likewise to look after his guest. They both went and leaned at the windows of a turret, and Sir Gawain

gazed out over the countryside, which was beautiful indeed. He saw the forests and the plains and the castle on the cliff.

‘Host,’ he said, ‘if you don’t mind I’d like to ask you: who is the lord of this land and that castle?’

But his host replied: ‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘You don’t know? You astonish me: you’re a retainer of the castle and it brings you a handsome revenue, yet you don’t know who is its lord?’

‘I can tell you in all truthfulness,’ he said, ‘that I don’t know and have never known.’

‘Then tell me, kind host, who defends and guards the castle?’

‘It’s very finely guarded, sir: there are five hundred weapons – bows as well as crossbows – always ready to shoot. If the castle were ever threatened they’d shoot ceaselessly and never tire, so ingeniously are they arranged. But I’ll tell you this much: there is a queen at the castle, a most noble, rich and wise lady, and of the highest lineage. She came to live in this land with her great treasure of gold and silver, and made the mighty house that you see before you; and she brought with her a lady whom she dearly loves, whom she calls queen and daughter. This other lady has a daughter, too, who does nothing to debase or shame her line, for I don’t think there’s a girl of fairer looks or manners beneath heaven. And the hall is well protected indeed by magic and enchantment, as I’ll tell you now if you wish to hear. In that great hall a clerk well-versed in astronomy, whom the queen brought with her, has created such great marvels that you’ve never heard their like; for no knight can enter there and live as long as it takes to ride a league, if he is tainted with any evil vice of cupidity, lying or avarice. A coward or a traitor cannot endure there; the disloyal and the perjurers cannot survive, but die there promptly. But there are many squires, gathered there from many lands, serving at the castle as a training for arms; there are well over five hundred, some bearded, others not: a hundred have neither beards nor moustaches, a hundred more have beards just beginning, a hundred others shave and crop their beards each week, and there are a hundred who are whiter than wool and a hundred who are turning grey. And there are old ladies without husbands or lords: they’ve been wrongfully disinherited of their lands and positions since their husbands died. And with the two queens there are orphaned girls who are kept with great honour. All these people go about their lives at the castle, nursing a wild and impossible hope: they’re waiting for a knight to come and support them, who’ll restore the ladies to their positions, give husbands to the girls and make the squires knights. But all the sea will turn to ice before they find a knight who can stay in that hall, for he would have to be handsome and wise, wholly free of cupidity, worthy and bold, noble and loyal, and clean of all baseness and wickedness. If such a knight came he could be lord of the



castle, and restore their lands to the ladies and bring an end to the deadly wars, and have the girls all married and knight the squires, and cast out the enchantments of the hall without delay.'

This news delighted Sir Gawain and appealed to him greatly. 'Host,' he said, 'let's go down. Have my arms and my horse brought to me at once, for I don't want to dally here – I want to go.'

'Where sir? Oh, stay – God keep you – today and tomorrow and longer still.'

'Bless your house, host, but that shall not be. I'm going, God help me, to see those girls and the marvels of the hall.'

'Hush, sir! If it please God, you'll not do such a foolish thing. Take my advice and stay.'

'Hush, host! Do you take me for a faint-hearted coward? God forsake my soul if I ever take such advice.'

'In faith, sir, I'll hold my tongue, for I'll be wasting my breath. Go, since you want to so earnestly, but it grieves me. But I'll guide you there – and I tell you, no escort could be more valuable to you than I. But I want to ask a favour of you.'

'What favour, host? Tell me.'

'Grant it first.'

'Good host, I'll do your will, provided it's not shameful.'

Then he commanded that his horse be brought from the stable, ready to ride, and called for his arms again, and they were brought to him. He armed and mounted and set off, and the pilot likewise mounted his palfrey, wanting to lead Gawain faithfully to where he did not wish him to go.

They rode on until, at the foot of the steps before the hall, they found a one-legged man sitting all alone on a bundle of straw. He had a false leg made of silver or silver-plated, inlaid here and there with gold and precious stones. The one-legged man's hands were not idle, for he had a knife and was busy sharpening an ash-wood stick. He did not address the two riding past him, and they said nothing to him.

The pilot drew Sir Gawain to him and said: 'Sir, what do you make of that one-legged man?'

'His false leg isn't made of poplar, that's certain,' said Gawain. 'It looks beautiful to me.'

'Before God,' said the pilot, 'he's rich indeed, with great and handsome revenues. You'd hear news now that would distress you greatly if I weren't accompanying and escorting you.'

And they rode on until they reached the hall. Its entrance was high indeed, and the doors were rich and beautiful: all the hinges and staples were of pure gold, so my source-book says. One of the doors was of ivory, most

finely carved; the other was of ebony, and likewise sculpted on its face; and both of them shone with gold and jewels. The paving of the hall was of many different colours: green and red, indigo and deep blue, most finely worked and polished. In the middle of the hall there stood a bed, and not one part of it was wooden: every bit of it was gold, except the cords, which were made of silver. I tell you no lie about the bed. Wherever the cords were interlaced there hung a little bell, and across it was spread a great coverlet of samite; and on each of the bed-posts was mounted a garnet, which yielded more light than four brightly burning candles. The bed stood on grotesque carved dogs with scowling faces; and the dogs were mounted on four casters, so smooth and swift that the bed could be sent from one end of the hall to the other at the push of a single finger. The bed was such that, truly, none like it was ever made for a king or count, or ever will be. And there it stood in the middle of the hall. And believe me, no part of that hall was made of chalk: the walls were of marble; and there were windows above, so clear that, through the glass, anyone watching carefully could see all who entered the hall as soon as they came through the door. The walls were painted in the finest and most expensive colours that can be described or made. I don't want to recount everything just now, but in that hall were a good four hundred windows closed and a hundred open.

Sir Gawain took a good look at the hall, high and low and here and there. And when he had looked all around, he called the pilot over and said: 'Dear host, I can't see anything here to make a man fear to enter this hall. What have you to say? Why did you warn me so earnestly against coming to see it? I'm going to sit on this bed and rest for a while: I've never seen one so sumptuous.'

'Oh, dear sir! God keep you from going near it! If you approach that bed you'll die the worst death that any knight has ever known!'

'What shall I do, then, host?'

'I'll tell you, since I see you're keen to keep your life. In my house, just before you came here, I asked a favour of you, though you didn't know what it was. Now I'll ask you to grant me that boon: return to your own land, and tell your friends and the people of your country how you've seen the most splendid hall that you and they have ever known.'

'Then I'll say God hates me and I'm damned! I'm sure you mean me well, host, but I tell you, not for all the world shall I give up sitting on this bed and seeing the girls I saw leaning at the windows last night.'

The pilot stepped back to enforce his point, saying: 'You won't see any of those girls! Go back the way you came, for there's no chance of your seeing them; but God save me, the girls and queens and ladies can see you at this very moment through those glass windows, from their chambers on the other side.'

‘In faith,’ cried Sir Gawain, ‘if I can’t see the girls I’ll at least sit on the bed, for I can’t believe such a bed was made except for one thing: to have a worthy man or a noble lady lie upon it. And I’m going to sit on it, upon my soul, whatever may befall me.’

The pilot saw there was no stopping him, and said nothing more. But he had no desire to stay in the hall and see him sit on the bed, and he took his leave, saying:

‘Sir, your death upsets and grieves me deeply. No knight has ever sat upon that bed and left it alive, for it is the Bed of Marvels, in which no-one sleeps or slumbers or rests or sits and rises from it alive and well. It’s a grievous pity that you’re going to put your life in pledge, never to be redeemed or ransomed. Since I can’t draw you away by love or argument, may God have mercy on your soul, for my heart couldn’t bear to see you die.’

And with that he left the hall. Sir Gawain, armed as he was, with his shield hung at his neck, sat down upon the bed. As he did so, the bed-cords made a mighty din as all the bells began to ring until the whole hall resounded; and just then all the windows opened, and the marvels and enchantments were now revealed, for down through the windows flew arrows and crossbow-bolts: more than seven hundred smashed into Sir Gawain’s shield, and he did not know what had hit him. The enchantment was such that no man could see where the bolts were coming from or who was shooting them. And you can well imagine the mighty din as the crossbows and bows were loosed. Gawain would not have been there then for a thousand marks. But suddenly the windows closed, without anybody pushing them. Sir Gawain began to pull out the bolts imbedded in his shield, and they had wounded him in several places and he was losing blood. But before he had drawn out all of them he was presented with another test: a villein kicked open a door, and a ravenous lion, strong and fierce, of wondrous size, leapt out of a vault and in through the door and attacked Sir Gawain with savage fury. Its claws tore through his shield as though through wax and it drove him to his knees; but Gawain leapt up instantly, drew his naked sword from its scabbard, and dealt the beast such a blow that he cut off its head and both its feet. Sir Gawain was jubilant, for the feet were left hanging on his shield by the claws – one on the inside and the other on the front.

Having killed the lion he sat down on the bed again, and his host came running back into the hall, his face beaming, and found Gawain sitting on the bed.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘you’ve nothing more to fear, I promise you! Take off all your armour now, for you’ve cast out all the enchantments of the hall for evermore, and you’ll be served and honoured here by young and old – may God be praised!’

Then a stream of squires appeared, dressed in the finest tunics, and they all went down on their knees and said: 'Good, dear, sweet sir, we offer our services to you: we've long awaited and yearned for your coming!'

'I was later than you'd have wished, it seems!'

Then some began to disarm him, while others went to stable his horse which had been left outside. And while he was being disarmed a most beautiful and comely girl entered, with a circlet of gold upon her head, and her hair was as bright as the gold or brighter. Her face was white, and illumined by Nature with a pure red hue. The girl was lithe and fair, with a comely build and a tall, fine bearing; and behind her came other girls, of considerable beauty. And a boy came in all alone, and on his shoulders was draped a gown, along with a tunic, a mantle and a surcoat. The mantle was lined with ermine, and with sable, black as a berry, and the cloth was of a rich red wool. Sir Gawain gazed in wonder at the girls he saw coming, and could not help jumping to his feet to meet them, saying:

'Welcome, young ladies!'

The first of them bowed to him and said: 'Good sir, my lady the queen sends you greetings, and commands all her people to hold you as their rightful lord and to come and serve you. I shall be the first to offer you my service in all faithfulness, and these girls here all hold you as their lord and have long desired your coming. They're overjoyed to see you, the finest of all worthy men. I've nothing more to say, sir, but we're ready to serve you.'

And with that they all knelt and bowed to him, vowing to serve and honour him. He bade them rise again immediately and be seated; the sight of them pleased him greatly, partly because of their beauty, but more because they were making him their prince and lord. He rejoiced more than he had ever done at the honour that God had granted him.

Then the girl stepped forward and said: 'My lady sends you this gown to don before she sees you, for she, being full of courtesy and wisdom, thinks you'll have suffered great toil and heat and hardship. So put it on and see if it fits you, for wise men guard against the cold after being hot, for it endangers and benumbs the blood. So my lady the queen sends you an ermine robe, to protect you from the cold; for just as water turns to ice, so blood can stop its flow and harden when a man shivers after being hot.'

And Sir Gawain replied, like the most courteous knight in the world: 'May that Lord in whom no good thing is lacking guard my lady the queen – and guard you, too, for speaking so kindly and being courteous and fair. The lady must be wise indeed, I think, having such courteous messengers! She certainly knows a knight's needs, when she sends me such a gown to wear! I thank her for it; give her my deepest thanks.'

'I shall, I promise you,' said the girl, 'most willingly. And in the

meantime you can put on the gown and view the lie of the land from the windows; or if you like, climb the tower and look at the forests and meadows and rivers until I return.'

With that the girl turned away; and Sir Gawain donned the gown, which was rich indeed, and fastened the neck with a buckle which hung on the collar. Then he decided to go and look at the view from the tower, and he set off with his host. They climbed a spiral staircase at the side of the vaulted hall, until they reached the top of the tower and saw the country all around, fairer than any man could describe. Sir Gawain gazed at the river and the meadowlands and the forests, teeming with game, and looked at his host and said:

'By God, host, I'd love to live here and go hunting and shooting in those forests!'

'Sir,' said the pilot, 'you'd better say no more of that. It's been laid down, as I've often heard tell, that whoever was so loved by God that he came to be called master and lord and protector here would, rightly or wrongly, never be able to leave this house. So it's no good talking of hunting and bows, for this is where you stay: you'll never leave here again.'

'Silence, host!' Sir Gawain cried. 'Say no more or you'll drive me out of my mind! I tell you, if I couldn't go out when I wanted I could no more live here for seven days [than for seven score years].'

And with that he strode down from the tower and back into the hall. Lost in anger and troubled thought, he sat down on the bed again, his face morose and grim. At last the girl returned, and when Sir Gawain saw her he rose to meet her, angry as he was, and greeted her. But she saw that his speech and countenance had changed, and realised something had angered him. But she did not dare refer to it; instead she said:

'Sir, my lady will come and see you whenever you wish. And dinner is ready now, and you may eat if you like, either down here or up above.'

But Sir Gawain replied: 'I've no wish for food, my dear. A curse upon my body if I eat or celebrate before I hear news I badly need – news to comfort me.'

The girl returned at once in consternation, and the queen summoned her and asked her for news, saying: 'Dear grand-daughter, how did you find the good lord whom God has sent us?'

'Oh, my lady, honoured queen, I'm wounded and dying of grief for the good, kind-hearted lord; for the only words he'll utter are of anger and rage. I can't tell you why, for he didn't tell me and I didn't dare to ask. But I can tell you this: the first time I saw him today I found him so polite and fair of speech and happy that one could never tire of listening to his words or

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\* A line accidentally omitted in MS 12576.

gazing at his joyful face. And now suddenly he's changed and would gladly be dead, I think, for everything he hears displeases him.'

'Don't worry, grand-daughter. He'll calm down when he sees me. However great his rage may be, I'll soon cast it out and set joy in its place.'

Then the queen set off and came to the hall, and with her went the other queen, who was only too pleased to go; and with them they took a good two hundred and fifty girls and at least as many squires. The heart often guesses right, and as soon as Sir Gawain saw the queen coming, holding the other by the hand, his heart told him that she was the queen of whom he had heard; he guessed with ease, seeing her white tresses which hung down to her hips, and the white mottled silk she wore, finely worked with golden flowers. He was not slow to go and meet her; and they greeted each other, and she said:

'I am lady of this castle, sir, second to you. I yield the lordship to you, for you have well deserved it. But are you of King Arthur's household?'

'Yes indeed, lady.'

'And tell me, are you one of the knights of the watch, who have done many feats of prowess?'

'No, lady.'

'I believe you. And are you one of the Round Table, who are the most esteemed in all the world?'

'Lady,' he said, 'I wouldn't dare to say that I'm one of the most esteemed; I don't consider myself one of the finest, nor do I think I'm one of the worst.'

And she replied: 'Good sir, that is a most courteous reply, claiming neither the fame of the finest nor the censure of the worst. But tell me now of King Lot: how many sons did he have by his wife?'

'Four, my lady.'

'Tell me their names.'

'Gawain was the eldest, lady, and the next was Engrevain, the proud one with strong hands; the other two are named Gaheriet and Guerrehet.'

And the queen said: 'God help me, sir, those are indeed their names, I think. I would to God they were all together here with us! But tell me now, do you know King Urien?'

'Yes, lady.'

'Has he a son at court?'

'Yes, lady, he has two, of great renown: one of them is named Sir Yvain, the courteous and polite. I'm happier all day if I see him in the morning, for I find him so wise and courteous. The other is also called Yvain, but he's not his full brother: that's why he's called the Bastard. He outfights any knight who does battle with him. They're both at court, and most worthy, wise and courteous.'

‘And King Arthur, good sir,’ she said, ‘how is he faring now?’

‘Better than ever: in finer health and spirits, and stronger.’

‘In faith, sir, that’s as it should be, for King Arthur is a child. Why, he’s certainly no more than a hundred years old – no, he can’t be. But I’d like you to tell me just one thing more, if you don’t mind: how is the queen, how is she faring?’

‘Truly, lady, she is so courteous and beautiful and wise that God never made a race or land in which so fair a lady could be found. There has never been a lady of such renown since God formed the first woman from Adam’s rib. And she is justly renowned: for just as a wise teacher teaches little children, so my lady the queen instructs and teaches everyone; all goodness stems and passes down from her. No-one can leave my lady without good guidance. She knows so well each person’s worth, and what she needs to do to please him. No man does any good or honourable deed that he has not learned from my lady. And no man, however unhappy, leaves my lady with his mind still troubled.’

‘Nor will you, sir, leave me so.’

‘I believe you, lady,’ he said, ‘for before I saw you I didn’t care what happened to me, such was my despair and grief. But now I’m as happy and joyful as I could ever be.’

‘Sir,’ said the white-haired queen, ‘in the name of God who gave me life, your happiness will double yet, and your joy will increase constantly and never fail. And since you’re now at ease and happy, dinner is ready, and you may eat whenever you wish and wherever you like: if you wish you may eat up above, or if you prefer you can come and eat in the chambers below.’

‘Lady, I wouldn’t exchange this hall for any room, for I’ve been told that no knight has ever sat or dined here before.’

‘No, sir, none that ever left again – or stayed alive for as long as it would take to ride a league.’

‘Then I shall dine here, my lady, by your leave.’

‘I grant you that, sir, willingly. You shall be the first knight who has ever dined here.’

With that the queen departed, leaving two hundred and fifty of her most beautiful girls with him. They dined there with him in the hall, and served him and ensured his comfort, providing for his every wish. And squires served him joyfully at dinner, some of them white-haired, some greying and others not. Others had yet to grow a beard, and two of these came and knelt before him: one of them cutting meat for him and the other pouring wine. Sir Gawain seated his host beside him. And the dinner was not short: it lasted longer than a day around Trinity, for it was dark, black night and many great torches were burning before the meal was over. There

was lively talking over dinner, and afterwards they danced for a long while before taking to their beds, as they all rejoiced with all their hearts for their lord whom they dearly loved.

And when he decided to retire he lay down on the Bed of Marvels. Beneath his head one of the girls placed a pillow, which made him sleep most peacefully.

When the time came to wake next morning, a gown of ermine and samite had been prepared for him; and the pilot of whom I've told you came and roused him, and arranged his dressing and washing of hands. And Clarissant was there, too, the worthy, fair, honourable, wise and courteous girl. Then she went into the chambers to her grandmother the queen, who asked her:

'By the faith you owe me, grand-daughter, has your lord risen yet?'

'Yes, lady, some while ago.'

'Where is he, dear grand-daughter?'

'He went to the turret, my lady; I don't know if he's come down yet.'

'I shall go to him; and if it please God, he shall have only joy and happiness today.'

With that the queen rose, eager to go and see Sir Gawain. She spotted him high up at the windows of a turret, watching a girl and a fully armed knight riding across a meadow. The two queens came, side by side, to where Sir Gawain stood watching, and found him and his host at two windows.

'Sir,' said the queens together, 'a happy rising to you. May today be a joyful day for you. May that glorious Father grant it so, who made His daughter His mother.'

'May the one who sent His son to Earth to advance Christianity grant you great joy, lady. But come to this window if you will, and tell me who that girl can be, coming this way. There's a knight with her, carrying a quartered shield.'

The lady looked down at them and said: 'I'll tell you now: it's the one who accompanied you here last night – may the fires of Hell consume her! But don't concern yourself with her – she's an arrogant and wicked woman. And forget about the knight she's brought with her, I beg you; for I tell you truly, he's the most courageous of all knights. He doesn't play at fighting: I've seen him kill many knights at this landing-place.'

'By your leave, lady,' said Sir Gawain, 'I wish to go and speak to the girl.'

'God grant, sir, that I never give you leave to harm yourself! Leave her to her own affairs – she's a terrible girl. You'll never, if it please God, leave



this hall for such a pointless cause. And you must never leave here at all, unless you wish to do us wrong.'

'Oh, come now, good-hearted queen! That distresses me! I'd think myself ill rewarded at this hall if I could never leave. God grant that I be not a prisoner here so long.'

'Oh, lady!' said the pilot, 'let him do as he wishes. Don't hold him back against his will, for he might die of grief.'

'Then I shall let him go,' said the queen, 'on condition that, if God guards him from death, he'll return here tonight.'

'Have no fear, lady,' he said. 'I'll return if I can. But I ask and beg a favour of you: if you don't mind, please don't ask my name until seven days have passed.'

'If that's your wish, sir, I'll refrain from asking,' said the queen, 'for I don't want your ill-will. But if you hadn't forbidden it, your name would have been the first thing I'd have asked of you.'

And so they came down from the turret; and squires came running to arm him, and they fetched his horse and he mounted, fully armed. Then he rode down to the landing-place, accompanied by the pilot, and they both climbed into the boat. Oarsmen rowed them from the bank and across to the other side, and Sir Gawain stepped forth.

**A**nd the other knight said to the pitiless girl: 'Tell me, my dear, this knight coming towards us armed – do you know him?'

'No,' said the girl, 'but he's the one who brought me here last night.'

'God save me,' he replied, 'he's the very man I've been looking for! I was sorely afraid he'd escaped me, for no knight born of a mother crosses the border of Galvoie to go and boast that he's come from this land if I have him within my reach! And since God has led him to me, this one shall be seized and held!'

Thereupon the knight, without a challenge or threat, set his shield on his arm, thrust in his spurs and charged. And Sir Gawain headed for him and struck him such a blow that he wounded him gravely in the arm and side. It was not a mortal wound, for his mail-coat held together so well that the whole lance-head could not break through; but a full finger's length of the tip pierced his body and bore him to the ground. He got to his feet and saw, to his dismay, the blood from his arm and side flowing down his white hauberk. He attacked Sir Gawain with his sword, but was soon so tired that

he could hold out no longer and had to cry for mercy. Sir Gawain received his assurances, and then handed him to the pilot who was waiting for him. Meanwhile the wicked girl had climbed from her palfrey. Gawain came up to her and greeted her, and said:

‘Remount, my good friend, for I’m not going to leave you here. You’re coming with me where I must go, back across the river.’

‘Oh, knight!’ she cried. ‘How high and mighty you are now! You’d have had a real battle on your hands if my friend had not been tired by old wounds. He’d have put an end to your lies and silenced your prattling tongue. Have you ever been checkmated in the corner of the board? That’s how silent you’d have been! So tell me truly: do you really think you’re of greater worth than he because you’ve defeated him? You must often have seen that the weak can sometimes beat the strong. But listen: you’ve put my sweetheart in the boat; if you left this landing-place and came with me beneath that tree, and did something that he would always do for me when I wished, then I’d admit you were his equal, and wouldn’t despise you any more.’

‘If it’s only that far, girl,’ he said, ‘I’ve no reason to refuse your wish.’

And she said: ‘God grant you never return from there.’

And with that they set off, she in front and he behind. And the girls and ladies in the hall tore their hair and rent their gowns in dismay, crying:

‘Oh, alas! Alas! Why do we not die, when we see the one who was to have been our lord going to his death and downfall? That evil, wicked girl goes at his right hand, leading him to the place from where no knight returns. Alas! We’re accursed just when we thought our luck was blessed, for God had sent us one endowed with all good qualities, lacking nothing – neither courage nor any other virtues.’

Thus they lamented for their lord as they watched him go with the wicked girl.

When she and Sir Gawain reached the tree he called to her, saying: ‘Tell me now, dear girl, have I done my duty, or is there something more you want from me? I’ll do it if I can, rather than lose your favour.’

Then the girl said to him: ‘Do you see that deep ford ahead, where the banks are so high? My love used to cross there, and I don’t know any easier place.’

‘Oh, dear girl, I fear that’s impossible; for the bank’s so high all the way along that no-one could go down it.’

‘You daren’t go across, I know!’ cried the girl. ‘I didn’t think you’d have the heart to try, for this is the Perilous Ford, which no-one dares cross on any account, unless he is exceptional.’

At that Sir Gawain led his horse down to the bank, and saw the

deep water below and the sheer bank beyond. But the river was narrow, and when he saw this Sir Gawain said to himself that his horse had cleared many greater ditches; and he thought he had often heard it said that whoever could cross the deep water of the Perilous Ford would be renowned as the finest knight in the world. So he drew away from the river and came galloping back to leap across. But he failed; he did not take the jump well, and came down in the middle of the ford. But his horse swam on until he got all four hooves on land, and gathered himself for a leap, and launched himself forward and up on to the great, high bank. Once there, he stood stock still, unable to go another step, and Sir Gawain dismounted of necessity, for he saw that his horse was exhausted. So he dismounted at once and decided to take off the saddle; he did so, and turned it upside down to dry. Then he removed the horse's saddle-cloth and wiped the water from his back and flanks and legs.

At last he put the saddle on again and mounted once more, and rode on at a walk until he caught sight of a knight out hunting with a sparrowhawk; and in the field before him he had two small retrievers. The knight was more handsome than any tongue could tell.

Sir Gawain rode up and greeted him and said: 'Good sir, may God who made you fairer than any living man give you joy and good fortune.'

And the knight was quick to reply, saying: 'You, sir, are good and worthy and gracious. But tell me if you will: how did you come to leave the wicked girl alone over there? What happened to her companion?'

'Sir,' said Sir Gawain, 'a knight with a quartered shield was with her when I met her.'

'And what did you do?'

'I defeated him in combat.'

'And what became of him then?'

'The pilot took him away, for he said he should be his prisoner.'

'Indeed, dear brother, he told you the truth. The girl was once my love, but she would never deign to love me or call me her sweetheart. And I promise you, I never kissed her except by force, and I never had my way with her for I loved her against her will. I had robbed her of a love of hers whose company she used to share; I killed him and led her off and strove in every way to serve her. But my efforts were wasted, for she sought the chance to leave me as soon as she could, and took for her love the knight from whom you've just parted her. And he's no joke, that knight! He's worthy indeed, so help me God; and yet from that day forth he never dared come anywhere near me! But today you've done something that no knight has ever dared before; and in so doing your valour has made you the finest and most praised knight in the world. It took the greatest courage to leap into the Perilous Ford, and I tell you truly, no knight has ever come through it before.'

‘Then the girl lied to me, sir,’ said Sir Gawain, ‘for she led me to believe that her sweetheart crossed it every day for love of her!’

‘Did the traitress tell you that? Oh, I wish she’d drowned! She must be possessed by a host of demons to tell you such a tale. She hates you, there’s no denying it! That devil – may God confound her! – meant to have you drowned in the deep and roaring water. But promise me something now, and in return I’ll swear to you that if you ask me anything – whether it be for good or ill – I’ll not hide the truth from you if I know it; and you likewise must promise me to tell me truthfully all I wish to know if you can.’

They exchanged these promises, and Sir Gawain was the first to start questioning, saying: ‘Sir, tell me about the city I can see over there: who does it belong to, and what’s it called?’

‘I can certainly tell you that, friend, for it belongs to me entirely: I owe no part of it to any man born – I am vassal to God alone. It’s called Orquenseles.’

‘And what’s your name?’

‘Guiromelant.’

‘I’ve often heard it said, sir, that you’re most worthy and valiant, and lord of a very great land. And what’s the name of the girl of whom no good word is spoken near or far, as you yourself have testified?’

‘I can testify indeed,’ he said, ‘that she’s greatly to be feared, for she’s full of scorn and malice. That’s why she’s called the Haughty Maiden of Nogres – which is where she was born, though she was taken from there when she was very young.’

‘And what’s the name of her love who’s gone to be the pilot’s prisoner – whether he likes it or not?’

‘I tell you, friend, he’s an extraordinary knight, and he’s called the Proud Knight of the Narrow Pass; he guards the border of Galvoie.’

‘And what’s the name of the noble, handsome castle I came from today, where I ate and drank last night?’

At that Guiromelant turned his back in sorrow and began to move away. But Sir Gawain reminded him: ‘Sir, sir, remember your promise and answer me.’

Guiromelant stopped and turned his head, and said: ‘Damn and curse the hour I saw you and gave you that promise! Be gone; I declare you free of your vow, and you absolve me of mine. I’d planned to ask you news of the place, but it seems you know as much about that castle as you do about the moon.’

‘Sir,’ said Gawain, ‘I was there last night and lay upon the Bed of Marvels. There’s none like it in the world; no man has ever seen its equal.’

‘By God,’ he replied, ‘what astounding news! It’s delightful listening

to your fantasies: like being entertained by a story-teller! I see it now – you're a minstrel! Why, I thought you were a knight and had done some feat of prowess yonder! But come now, tell me truly: did you do any worthy deeds there? And what did you see at the castle?

And Sir Gawain told him: 'Sir, when I sat upon the bed there was a great commotion in the hall. Don't think I'm lying: the bed-cords groaned and the bells upon them rang, and closed windows opened by themselves and crossbow-bolts and smooth arrows smashed into my shield. And in it were stuck the claws of a huge, fierce, bristling lion which had been chained in a vault for a long while. The lion was sent to attack me by a villein who set it loose, and it leapt at me so mightily and struck at my shield and plunged in its claws so hard that it couldn't pull them free. If you doubt my words, look at the claws still hanging here. I cut off its head, thank God, and its feet, too. What do you think of these marks of proof?'

At this, Guiromelant jumped from his horse and went down on his knees and clasped his hands together, and begged Gawain to forgive his foolish words.

'I forgive you,' he said. 'Remount now.'

And Guiromelant did so, filled with shame for his foolishness, and said: 'God save me, sir, I didn't think there could be a knight anywhere, near or far, who would ever have the honour that's befallen you. But tell me, did you see the white-haired queen? Did you ask her who she was and where she was from?'

'I never thought to ask her that,' he replied, 'but I saw her and spoke to her.'

'Then I'll tell you,' said Guiromelant. 'She's King Arthur's mother.'

'By the faith I owe God and His power, King Arthur hasn't had a mother for a long time – not for sixty years or more, I think!'

'But it's true, sir; she's his mother. When his father Uterpandragon was buried, Queen Ygerne came to this country, bringing all her treasure, and built that castle on the rock, and the rich and beautiful hall that I've heard you describe. And I'm sure you'll have seen the other lady, too, the other queen, a great and beautiful lady, who was the wife of King Lot and the mother of the one whom I wish every misfortune – Gawain.'

'I know Gawain well, good sir, and I've heard he's not had a mother for a good twenty years at least.'

'But she's his mother, sir, you may be sure. She lived with her mother, and was with child; the child was the noble and beautiful girl who is my love and, it must be said, the sister of Gawain – may God bring him the deepest shame! Truly, he wouldn't escape with his head if I had the upper hand and he was within my reach as you are now: I'd cut his head off on the spot! And

his sister wouldn't stop me tearing his heart from his chest with my bare hands; I hate him so much.'

'Upon my soul,' said Sir Gawain, 'you don't love in the same way as I. If I loved a girl or a lady, then for her sake I'd love and serve all her family.'

'You're right, I agree. But when I remember how Gawain's father killed mine, I can't feel any goodwill towards him; and with his own hands Gawain himself killed one of my closest cousins, a valiant and worthy knight. But I've never had the chance to take revenge. But do this favour for me now: return to the castle and take this ring to my love for me. I'd have you present it to her as a gift from me; and tell her I believe and trust that her love is such that she would rather her brother Gawain died a bitter death than that I should hurt my smallest toe. Send my love my greetings and give her this ring from me, her sweetheart.'

Sir Gawain set the ring on his little finger and said: 'Sir, by the faith I owe you, you have a wise and courteous girl for your love, a noble woman of high lineage, and fair and comely and kindhearted, if she agrees to what you've said.'

And Guiromelant said: 'Sir, you'll be doing me a great favour, I promise you, if you take this ring as a present to my beloved, for I love her deeply. And I'll reward you for it, for I'll tell you the name of that castle as you asked. It's called the Rock of Canguin. Many fine, rich clothes are woven there, green and red, and many fine woollen stuffs, which are sold and bought in great quantities. Now I've told you all you wished to know, and without a word of a lie, and you've spoken well in return. Do you wish to ask me anything else?'

'No, sir, only that I may leave.'

Then Guiromelant said: 'Before you go, sir, tell me your name if you will.'

And Sir Gawain said: 'God help me, sir, my name shall never be kept from you. I am the one you hate so much. I am Gawain.'

'You are Gawain?'

'Yes, truly, the nephew of King Arthur.'

'In faith, then you're very bold or very foolish to tell me your name when you know I hate you mortally! Oh, if only I had my helmet and my shield! If I were armed as you are, I'd cut off your head this instant – nothing would stop me! But if you dare to wait for me I'll fetch my arms and return to do battle, and bring three or four men to witness it. Alternatively, if you wish, we'll wait for seven days, and on the seventh return here fully armed; and you will summon King Arthur and his queen and all their people, and I'll assemble the knights from all my kingdom. Then our battle won't be fought

in secret: all who come will see it. For a battle between such worthy men as the two of us are deemed to be should not be fought without witnesses; it's only right that ladies and knights should be present, for when one of us is vanquished and everybody knows of it, the victor will have a thousand times more honour than if he alone knew.'

'Sir,' said Sir Gawain, 'I'd gladly do without all this, if you would agree to avoid battle. For if I've done you any wrong I'll willingly make amends acceptable both to your friends and mine, so that all is just and fair.'

But Guiromelant said: 'I can't think what justice there can be if you daren't do battle with me. I've suggested two courses of action; now choose which one you like: either wait for me here, if you dare, while I go and fetch my arms, or summon all the people of your land to come here in seven days. At Pentecost King Arthur will be holding court at Orquenie, I'm told, which is only two days' ride from here. Your messenger could find the king and his people there, all equipped and ready. Send for him – that would be best, for a day's respite is a precious thing.'

And Sir Gawain replied: 'God save me, the court will indeed be there; you've been told quite rightly. And I swear by this hand that I'll send to him tomorrow, or before I sleep a wink.'

'Gawain,' he said, 'I'm going to take you to the finest bridge in the world. The river is very deep and swift, and no man alive could cross it or jump to the other bank.'

But Sir Gawain replied: 'I'm not going to seek any ford or bridge, come what may, for the treacherous girl will think it cowardice. No, I'll keep my promise to her and go straight across.'

With that he thrust in his spurs, and his horse leapt nimbly across the water, quite untroubled. When the girl who had so misled him with her words saw him coming towards her, she tethered her horse to the tree and came towards him on foot. And her heart and attitude had changed, for she greeted him most humbly, and said she had come to plead for mercy, admitting her guilt, for she knew he had suffered greatly because of her.

'Good sir,' she said, 'listen now, and I'll tell you why I've been so haughty towards all the knights in the world who've taken me in their company. I want to explain, if you don't mind. That knight – God damn him! – who was talking to you over there, he ill bestowed his love on me, for he loved me and I hated him, because – I shan't conceal it – he'd caused me great pain by killing the knight who was my sweetheart. Then he thought to do me the honour of enticing me with his love; but his efforts were vain, for at the first opportunity I escaped from him and joined company with the knight from whom you took me today. Losing him doesn't bother me at all, but ever since death robbed me of my first love I've been mad and spoken haughtily

and acted wickedly and crazily; I didn't care who I crossed: I tormented them deliberately, because I wanted to find one whose temper was such that I could drive him wild with anger so that he'd cut me to pieces – I've yearned for death for a long time now. Mete out justice now, sir; such justice that no girl who ever hears of me will dare speak shamefully to a knight again.'

'Dear girl,' said Sir Gawain, 'why should I punish you? May it never please the Son of God that you suffer any harm from me. Mount up now, without delay, and we'll go to that mighty castle. The boatman's at the landing-place, waiting to ferry us across.'

'I'll do exactly as you wish, sir,' said the girl.

Then she climbed into the saddle of her little palfrey with its long mane, and they rode down to the pilot, who happily ferried them over the river.

The ladies and girls, who had been lamenting bitterly for him, saw them coming. All the squires at the hall, too, had been out of their minds with grief, but now their rejoicing was the greatest ever seen. The queen was sitting, awaiting him, outside the hall, and had commanded all the girls to take each other by the hand and to dance and celebrate. And so they began their rejoicing to greet Sir Gawain, singing and dancing all around, and he came and dismounted in their midst. The ladies and girls and both the queens embraced him and addressed him joyfully, and with great celebration they took the armour from his legs and arms and breast and head. The girl he had brought was greeted with joy, as well: everyone served her willingly – but for his sake, not for hers. They moved on, celebrating, to the hall and all sat down together.

And Sir Gawain took his sister and seated her beside him on the Bed of Marvels, and whispered to her softly: 'Young lady, I bring you a golden ring from across the river, with a brilliant green emerald. A knight sends it to you as a love-token with his greetings, and says that you're his sweetheart.'

'I believe him, sir,' she said. 'But if I love him at all it's from a distance, for he's never seen me, nor I him, except from across the river. He's sworn his love for me for a long time now, for which I thank him; yet he's never come to the castle. But he kept sending messengers to beg for my love until I granted it, I confess. But that's all the sweetheart I am to him as yet.'

'Oh, dear girl! He's already boasting that you'd rather your brother Sir Gawain were dead than that he had hurt his toe!'

'What! Sir, I'm amazed he could say such a foolish thing! By God, I never thought he was so ill-mannered! He's made a great mistake in sending such a message. Alas! my brother doesn't even know I'm born, and has never seen me. Guiromelant's quite wrong; for by my soul, I wouldn't have my brother harmed, any more than myself.'



While they were talking together and the ladies were waiting for them, the white-haired queen said to the other queen, seated beside her: 'My dear, what do you make of the lord sitting next to your daughter, my granddaughter? He's been whispering to her for a long while; I don't know what he's saying, but I'm delighted, as we both should be, for it's a mark of great nobility that he's drawn to the fairest and wisest in the hall. How right he is! I wish to God he would marry her, and that she was as pleasing to him as Lavinia to Aeneas!'

'Oh, lady,' said the other queen, 'may God so incline his heart that they may be like brother and sister; that he may love her so dearly, and she him, that they may be as one flesh.'

The lady meant by her prayer that Gawain should love her and take her for his wife; she had not recognised her son. They would indeed be like brother and sister, for there would be no other kind of love between them once they knew how they were related; and their mother would not rejoice for the reason she imagined!

Sir Gawain spoke with his beautiful sister for a long time; then he turned and called to a boy at his right hand, the one who seemed the most worthy and diligent and willing, and the brightest and most able of all the squires in the hall. Then he went down to a chamber, taking only the boy with him.

When they reached there Sir Gawain said: 'You seem to be a worthy soul, boy, and bright and clever. I'm going to tell you a secret, and I advise you to keep it: you'll profit greatly if you do. I'm going to send you to a place where you'll be received with joy.'

'Sir, may my tongue be torn from my mouth before a single word that you want hidden crosses my lips.'

'Then, brother,' said Sir Gawain, 'you're to go to my lord King Arthur – for I am his nephew, Gawain. The way is neither long nor hard, for the king has set up court for Pentecost at the city of Orquenie. But if the journey costs you dear, you'll be repaid by me. When you come before the king you'll find him in low spirits; but when you give him my greetings he'll be filled with joy. Everyone at the court will be happy when they hear you bring news from me. You're to tell the king that, by the faith he owes me since he's my lord and I'm his vassal, he mustn't fail on any account to appear before me encamped in the meadow below this tower on the fifth day of Pentecost. And he's to bring all the company that's gathered at his court, nobility and common folk alike, for I'm committed to battle with a knight who respects neither me nor the king – he thinks him a man of little worth. The knight is Guiromelant, who hates him mortally. You're to tell the queen, too, that she must come, by the great faith there should be between us since she's my lady and my friend. And

when she hears the news she won't fail, for my sake, to bring all the girls and ladies who are at court that day. But one thing worries me: have you a good hunting-horse to carry you there swiftly?'

The boy replied that there was a fine one, big and fast and strong, that he could take for his use.

'Excellent!' said Sir Gawain.

The boy took him quickly down to the stables and led out some strong, well-rested hunting-horses, one of which was ready to ride, for he had had it newly shod, and it lacked neither saddle nor bridle.

'In faith, boy,' said Sir Gawain, 'you're well equipped! Go now, and may the lord of all kings give you a good journey there and back, and guide you on the right path.'

So he sent the boy on his way, and led him down to the river where he told the pilot to ferry him across. He did so, and it would not tire him, for he had a good number of oarsmen.

And so the boy crossed the river, and was soon on the right road for the city of Orquenie; anyone with the wit to ask the way can travel anywhere in the world.

Meanwhile Sir Gawain returned to the hall, where he passed the time in great joy and pleasure, for everyone loved and served him. The queen had baths of hot water prepared in five hundred vats, and bade all the squires go in to wash and bathe. Robes specially made for them were ready when they left the baths: the cloth was woven with golden thread and the lining was of ermine. Then the squires spent all night in the chapel until after matins, standing all the while, never kneeling. And in the morning Sir Gawain, with his own hands, fastened the right spur on each of them and girded on their swords and dubbed them. He now had a company of fully five hundred new knights.

Meanwhile the boy had reached the city of Orquenie, where the king was holding a court befitting such a high feast-day. The crippled and the sick, watching the boy ride by, said:

'He's come on urgent business. I think he's brought some news or message to the court from afar. Whatever his news may be, he'll find the king deaf and dumb, he's so full of grief and anguish. And who'll be able to counsel him when he's heard what the messenger has to say?'

'Go on with you!' said others. 'What are you doing prattling on about the king's business? You should be dismayed and distraught that we've lost the one who defended us all in the name of God, and brought us great good out of love and charity.'

Throughout the city the poor people lamented so for Sir Gawain, whom they dearly loved. The boy rode on until he found the king sitting in

his hall, with a hundred counts palatine and a hundred kings and a hundred dukes seated around him. The king was deep in mournful thought, seeing the great host of nobility but no sign of his nephew; his distress was such that he fainted and fell. The first to reach him and help him up was certainly not slow, for everyone rushed to his aid. The lady Lores was sitting in a gallery, and saw the grief that had stricken the hall. She ran down from the gallery and came in dismay to the queen. When the queen saw her she asked her what was wrong,\*

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\* In the majority of the *Perceval* manuscripts, there is no indication of any change of author: MS 12576, like them, continues without any break. But in another Bibliothèque Nationale manuscript, fonds français 794, appear the words ‘*Explicit* the old *Perceval*’, and in the Berne manuscript, at the same point, ‘*Explicit* the romance of *Perceval*’. (The Berne manuscript does not contain the Continuations at all).

## THE FIRST CONTINUATION

and what had alarmed her so.

‘Oh, noble, honoured queen! Nothing can console me! I’ve just seen a messenger arrive, and believe me, the king has never been so dismayed or grieved so bitterly at any message he’s received. All his men are grieving equally, and truly, I think the messenger has brought some news that’s upset the whole court. The king has fainted! Whatever’s happened, I fear that God may be reproved for this by every man alive – He will be, He’s bound to be.’

The queen turned pale and fainted on the flagstoned floor. Then you would have heard ladies and girls lamenting loudly. I tell you, the girls tore at their dresses and their hair: no man ever saw such bitter grieving.

The king recovered from his faint, and the boy came up to him and said: ‘God bless you, king, and all your good company. I bring you such greetings as befit a king from your nephew, Gawain.’

Hearing this, the king leapt to his feet; he had never been so happy as he was at this news! It was such a welcome joy to him that he took the boy in his arms and swept him from his hunting-horse; and all the court, seeing this, longed to know what the boy had told the king. And the king said to him:

‘Friend, may God guard and aid my dear nephew Gawain and you. I love him no less than myself. Tell me, how is Gawain? Is he in good health and spirits?’

‘God give me joy, sir, I left him well and happy in a castle he’s conquered not far from here; there’s none in all the world more splendid or more finely situated. He requests and summons you, as his uncle and his lord, to aid and honour him as his great need requires. He needs your help, for he’s accepted a challenge to single combat, and he begs and summons you to come without fail and guard him against treachery. He wants to rebut Guiromelant’s boast that he’ll bring him to shame. I tell you truly, neither you nor Gawain, nor any of your friends, have a more mortal enemy. In time of need a man sees who his true friends are: Sir Gawain has sent me to the one who supports those in need against the proud.’

I can tell you in all truthfulness, never was a court so beset by grief so soon restored to joy. Everyone’s heart, without exception, exulted at the news. They no longer felt any cause for grief, now that they knew that the

one held to be the most courteous of the age, unsurpassed by count or king, the most great-hearted, most valiant and the finest at arms, was alive. Then you would have seen a jubilant court, as harps sang and hurdy-gurdies played and the whole hall rang with music. No man alive could describe the sweet melodies they made. They celebrated endlessly, and they had the best cause in the world: happiness and love inspired them – a splendid cause for rejoicing; I can't think of a finer one.

Lady Ysave of Carahet heard the rejoicing in the hall, and from the gallery where she was sitting she ran straight to the queen and said: 'My lady, I think we're about to hear good news! The king is filled with happiness and has greeted the messenger with joy; it's a reassuring sign! I think you'll hear good news of Sir Gawain today: so says the sweet music that's ringing in the hall. My heart tells me we'll soon have cause to rejoice for the nephew of my lord the king!'

'Dear lady, may God hear your prayer; it's my wish, too, and the wish of all these ladies and maids and these courteous girls.'

The queen rose, and was in such a hurry that she did not even think to don a mantle. She ran to the hall without mantle or cloak, and hurried in. All the ladies and maids and noble girls threw off their mantles and raced after her. No ladies ever left their chambers in such a rush as these, or ever entered a king's hall in such a state of disarray.

The king leaned towards the boy and said: 'Run to the queen, friend, and tell her the news that's so delighted me. I'd rather she heard it from you than from anyone, even me.'

The boy went to her without more ado and said: 'May God who dwells above and sets the good at His right hand protect you and your dear company, lady; so Sir Gawain wishes.'

The fair-faced queen replied: 'God save you and give him joy and happiness! Is he safe and in good health?'

'Yes, lady, and full of joy. And as your good, dear friend he bids you go to his aid by the faith you owe him. Go to him with all the girls and maids and ladies who have come to this court; bring them all in your company. Shame upon those who are friends in word alone: a true friend is as one with you, backing up his words with deeds. Gawain hasn't known before if he's any true friends, but now he will! No-one knows as well as a man in need whether his friendship is returned, for true friends are revealed when they see you in distress. God save me, a man who lacks nothing can never know if he's loved or hated.'

When Kay the seneschal heard this he replied in courteous words; but often before he had spoken scathingly and mockingly of Sir Gawain. But what of that? An abrasive man can be worth twenty-two of pleasant speech

who are faint-hearted and worthless and weak when it comes to action; for a man whose custom is to flatter melts away like foam when help is needed urgently: there are friends of that kind near and far.

'My lords,' said the seneschal, 'I think, without question, we should all thank God that Sir Gawain is alive; we were more anguished and dejected at losing him than joyful at the presence of the rest! Let us thank almighty God for keeping him safe and sound so long. We can truly see that a worthy man brings many great gains and great profit; that's why the fear alone that he might have died by some mischance caused us such dismay. As God's my witness, it's true what they say: no-one knows a good man's worth until he's gone. God has done our lord King Arthur and all of us a great honour; for there were a good thirty thousand of us grieving and downcast, but God has brought light and day to us, now that the one who's full of courtliness is alive and happy. We'd never known such anguish, but our happiness and joy have been restored by the good, fair, noble and worthy one who is so kind to all men that no-one knows his equal in all the world.'

With that he bade that two trumpets be sounded. Then you would have seen the pages, all noble, fair and handsome youths, with white towels at the ready. There was no place for villeins or for fools, for they would not have been allowed to serve there. And I tell you, without a word of a lie, the wash-basins were worth a fortune: most of them were of fine gold, and the rest of bright silver; and they served the ladies and knights with them most graciously and willingly. Then everybody sat down in the hall.

There were so many dishes that I shan't try to describe them; but I tell you, never has such a splendid feast lasted a shorter time or been received with such joy in any court; none so swift has ever been seen! Their love for Gawain drove them to finish their feast with speed. And straight after, by God, you'd have seen so many pennons laced on lances, and so many fine Spanish mules, so many chargers and palfreys saddled! Everyone was terrified of not being packed in time. Never, I think, have people been so eager for a journey. You'd have seen so many chests and splendid coffers loaded. And the king delayed no longer: he mounted and rode from the city, with fully thirty thousand knights and fifteen thousand ladies and girls and maids. No man has ever seen such an army raised as rode that day from Orquenie. There were many splendid waggons to carry the king's equipment, his provisions and his pavilions: his baggage-train was of an astounding length. The line stretched out across the plains, and those at the rear had to camp a league from the place where the foremost lodged, in a meadow beside a river.

They set out again early the next day; and the boy led them and guided them joyfully through forests and across fair open land, with plenty of feasting all the way, straight to the castle where Sir Gawain now was lord. The

king reached there on the seventh day, and the boy came up to him and said: 'There's the castle, sir, that your good nephew's won.'

The king stepped down; and then you would have seen them all dismount and pitch their tents and pavilions. And the Welshmen among them, most skilled in the craft, built a great number of lodges in the Welsh manner, of interwoven branches; and they made shelters for their horses, and for other purposes, too, by taking boughs from the forest and stripping off their leaves, and the cooks were provided with the smaller twigs and branches.

Yvain, King Urien's son, and Gifflet, the son of Do, arrived with the queen, whom they were escorting. And in their company, which was well endowed with ladies, came three thousand knights, and none of them lacked a fine warhorse; and behind them came the great convoy of wagons – you never saw one so great. The queen dismounted at her tent, already pitched for her.

Queen Ygerne was in the upper chambers of the hall, and saw the great host stretching all along the meadow. She was terrified at the sight, and her heart was faint and trembling. She took her daughter by the hand and said:

'Norcadet my daughter, we've lived a long while, and now our time has come, for we're besieged! I've never seen so many men amassed, so many shining helmets and shimmering shields. Look at all the swords and lances! And down there on the riverbank, are they ladies or a fairy band?'

'God help me, I don't know, dear lady. But I've never seen girls and ladies and maids in such a throng, and leading an army and going off to war: what a terrifying sight!'

Just then Sir Gawain and his sister Clarissant came from a chamber, and as soon as she saw him Ygerne rushed to him and said: 'Oh my good, dear friend, look down there at the mighty army besieging us, filling all the meadows! And look, dear friend, on that side is an army of girls and ladies! Sir, you asked a favour of me for love's sake: that I shouldn't ask your name for seven days, or enquire about your lineage. I've refrained completely, and haven't said a word. But now, you know, the seventh day has passed, and I'd like to know your name.'

'I shall indeed tell you, lady, for I've never hidden it from anyone. My name is Gawain.'

She flung her arms around him that very instant, and kissed his eyes and lips and face. And her daughter was beside herself, her heart leaping and soaring for joy, such joy as had kept her wide awake on the day when he was born, and she kissed his face and breast.

'My good, dear friend,' said Queen Ygerne, 'by the faith I owe almighty God, I am the mother of King Arthur, and this is my daughter: your mother.'

But when Gawain's sister Clarissant heard this, she rushed to her chamber and began to grieve desperately, because her brother knew all about her love for Guiromelant, the very man who had challenged him to battle.

'Gawain, dear grandson,' said Queen Ygerne, 'you can see our plight: they're besieging us without doubt. For the love of God, what are we to do?'

'My lady, there's no danger. That's King Arthur, your son.'

'Is that true?'

'Yes, lady. It's he, have no fear.'

'I can't wait to see him! I've never been so happy in my life!'

And Gawain said: 'By your leave, my lady, I'd like to cross the river and speak to him.'

She could not help kissing him: he had many a willing kiss from his grandmother and from his mother alike. Then he left the ladies and mounted a swift horse, and crossed the river with ten worthy and able knights.

Kay was the very first to see him, as he came from the tent of King Do. He galloped with all his might to King Arthur's pavilion and joyfully announced: 'Here comes your nephew, sire!'

And he dismounted before the king. The king mounted a palfrey, in too much haste to wait for another horse, and rode to meet his nephew with all the speed his mount could summon. And as soon as he reached him he kissed him as fast as he could, twenty times on the lips and face before he had said a word. You may be sure he was not displeased to see his nephew!

And Sir Gawain said: 'Great joy awaits you, sir, for your mother is longing to see you and speak to you, and rightly so.'

The king smiled at the knights and then said: 'My dear, sweet nephew, by the faith I owe my father's soul, I haven't had a mother for fifty years!'

'With respect, sir, yes, you have – I can say so in all truthfulness. When Uterpandragon died, Ygerne fled with a great treasure, seeking the loneliest land there was, until she found this place. And with the great wealth she'd brought she had this castle built and made it her home. I know of no finer or better one. And when my father King Lot, who held Orquenie, lost his life, my mother – your sister – came to this castle and lived with her mother and yours, giving up and abandoning all our land. She was left with child, and bore a daughter who's there now in the castle: a beautiful, comely and most worthy girl.'

The king and all those present were overjoyed at this astounding news. And the queen kissed Gawain sweetly, as did a hundred other ladies



and girls of worth. He would happily have done without many of those kisses; but when some good thing is desired, it is taken by whoever can take it, not according to the bestower's will! All the king's host were filled with joy. And as for the great king's mother, who was still up above in the hall, listen now to what she did that night.

With her in the castle she had five hundred newly-dubbed knights, all of high lineage, of excellent families, and wise. She gave orders that all their arms – which were wonderful, full of precious stones – should be placed at all the windows of the chambers and the hall and on the battlements, so that the jewels, truly, threw as brilliant a light on King Arthur's host as if it had been noon. They were astounded by the light, and thought a spell had been cast on them; and the king was stricken silent, thinking he had been bewitched, and greatly fearing that Gawain had been tricked by sorcery. But Gawain managed to convince the king that he should make his way there now with no escort but four companions, secretly summoned, and the queen and three of her maids.

So they came down to the river and passed across, and went straight on to the castle. And Queen Ygerne, her head crowned with flowers, received her son King Arthur with indescribable joy, and welcomed the gracious Queen Guinevere, too, with the greatest happiness. But let me tell you what was happening now amongst the king's host.

Shortly after the king had gone, Kay the seneschal arrived with three others to take private counsel with his lord; and when they found that the king was not in his tent they were terrified. As for the girls and the ladies and maids, they went to look for the queen in her pavilion, and were all dismayed when they could not find their lady. The whole host was in turmoil – they had never been so distraught: all the men were grieving for their lord, and all the women for their lost lady. Such was their despair that, if day had been approaching rather than night, they would certainly have struck camp instantly, in consternation and disarray. They all armed rapidly, donning their mail-coats. The cowardly and the brave alike all took up arms without delay. The army kept guard earnestly that night, for fear of being taken by surprise.

**A**s soon as day broke King Arthur heard mass, and then quickly crossed the river and rode back to his army with the five hundred newly-dubbed knights of the castle and fifty beautiful girls and ladies. All the host were amazed when they saw their lord King Arthur coming. If he had arrived a moment later they would all have been departing and setting fire to the lodges, but they were so overjoyed at seeing him return that all such plans were

forgotten. He dismounted at his splendid pavilion, and everyone else at his own, and the queen at hers with many gracious ladies and all the girls. Then Sir Gawain, without more ado, told the king exactly why he had summoned him: how he had agreed to do battle, and that it was due to be fought that day. Then he made confession to one bishop Solomon, who addressed many good words and sermons to him, and gave him kind instruction. Sir Gawain humbly confessed all his sins to him; and when the holy man heard them and saw that he repented from the heart, he gave him most worthy absolution in the name of God and Holy Mary and their sweet company. Then he blessed him with the sign of the cross, and told him to have complete faith in God; now that he was truly confessed he had nothing to fear, for God would always save him when he called on Him with a good heart.

With that their talking ceased. And thereupon there was no fine charger anywhere in all the king's host that was not brought and presented to Gawain. And he could boast likewise that there was no fine sword in the entire army that was not offered to him then, and anyone who had a good helmet or lance presented it to Gawain. But he would not change his arms for anyone's; though he did take one of the horses that he had sent back to King Arthur's court when he went in search of the lance after escaping from the tower where the mob had besieged him.\* He called for the horse, and he was led before the great king's pavilion. Sir Gawain had him fitted with a saddle from his fresh, new equipment. He was called Guilodien, and there was no finer horse in all this earthly world, and no-one knew a bolder one; and his dappled coat was so sleek and handsome that they did not add a saddle-cloth. They clad Sir Gawain in his armour most splendidly, with a smooth padded doublet of cotton underneath, and equipped him with all the arms he would need both for attack and for defence: everything was perfect – he needed nothing more or less. Gifflet and Yvain, who loved him dearly, armed him with their own hands and with great skill.

As soon as he was ready Sir Gawain rose and looked towards the Perilous Ford; and suddenly he saw a great company of knights emerge from behind a hill: they numbered a good three thousand. First he caught sight of the heads of their lances, and then he saw their cognizances – pennons and banners of many kinds; then he saw their shining helms and dazzling shields, and then the heads of the worthy knights and the heads of their swift horses. They advanced at a walk in serried ranks across the plain until they reached a tree close to King Arthur's army, and there they all halted. And then behind them, unless I am much mistaken, Gawain saw another company advancing, in fine and impressive order, and there were as many knights in this company as in the first. They did not tarry, but rode straight

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\* Above, page 72.

to the tree where the others were waiting quietly. They turned to their left where they saw a beautiful meadow, and there they drew rein alongside the first company. Thereupon the third company appeared: you'll never see such splendid knights as those that came then, and without a lie there were four thousand of them, each bearing a handsome shield and a fine, straight lance. The plain was not at all narrow, but broad and long and flat. And the one at their head did not let a single man break ranks or any horse move ahead of another: they advanced in tight formation. Their arms were bright and costly; and their lances were not bare, but hung with costly wimples and beautiful, pleated sleeves, most delicate and white. Thus they assembled, all eager to show their worth if the need or occasion arose.

Their lord led them to the tree they could see, where the others were awaiting them. Then the three companies joined together into one, and King Arthur's men estimated their numbers at ten thousand; there were at least that many knights – so said everyone who saw them and tried to guess their strength. And straight after them came another company, and they were certainly no rabble: for there were at least three thousand ladies and girls of worth, with bright and shining faces. Before them came musicians playing tunes on the hurdy-gurdy, and harpers playing sweet airs on their harps. They came joyfully to the tree where they saw their knights gathered, and dismounted alongside them on their right, in the middle of the plain.

King Arthur in turn commanded fifteen thousand of his men to arm and assemble in battalions – whatever happened, he did not want his army to be caught off guard – and they did the king's bidding without delay; and the queen sat down beneath a clump of trees in the middle of the plain, accompanied by a good three thousand of the most worthy and beautiful ladies and girls living at that time.

Thus it was that the entire plain was filled with ladies and knights and handsome arms and chargers. No man has ever seen, or will ever see, so many all together: so the story says.

Sir Gawain called to Gifflet and Sir Yvain. 'Go,' he said, 'out into the plain. By that tree, in that great company, I think you'll find the one with whom I'm to do battle. And you needn't ask for a description: you'll know him, I know you will, as soon as you set eyes on him, for there's not a more handsome or courteous knight in all the world, nor one more fierce. Tell him that I'm ready now to carry out my promise.'

They mounted as soon as they had received the command, and set off at a gallop towards Guiromelant's army. And every knight in all the isles of the sea who bore any hatred for King Arthur had come to face him in that host. Sir Gawain's two messengers headed straight for the company beneath the tree, and soon found Guiromelant: he was standing on a sumptuous cloth

from Africa, resting his arms on the shoulders of two knights, while a good number of pages and squires knelt before him, lacing his iron leggings. He wore a long gown, half deep purple cloth and half rich padded stuff, as is necessary with armour; and his forehead was protected with quilt to stop the chain-mail being driven into the flesh. I don't know why I should describe his great beauty, except that no-one has ever seen a more handsome creature in human shape; I tell you truly, no man could possess such beauty. There was a chamberlain before him who had dressed him in his hauberk, and two squires were going round him taking the greatest care that nothing needed altering or adding or removing. They had soon arranged everything perfectly, not wanting anything to be amiss and hinder him in battle.

As soon as his knights saw Gifflet and Sir Yvain coming, they made the crowd give way; and seeing this, the two messengers dismounted from their palfreys\*. They knew who Guiromelant must be as soon as they saw him, and came straight to him; but he addressed them first, saying:

'Welcome, worthy knights.'

Yvain replied most courteously: 'You've forestalled us, sir, in greeting us first. We should have done so to you. We're messengers; Sir Gawain has sent us to tell you that you may be sure he is ready to fulfil his pledge without delay.'

And he replied: 'As God's my witness, so am I! But tell me your names if you will, good sirs.'

'Willingly,' said Gifflet first. 'His name is Sir Yvain, and he's the son of King Urien. And my name is Gifflet, the son of Do; I was born at Cardueil.'

Guiromelant replied immediately: 'Sir Gawain is valiant and courteous indeed, it seems: he's sent me the two knights I most desired to see in all the world. But I tell you truly, you're to tell him from me that I'm his most deadly enemy. Listen! I swear to you, Sir Yvain, with certain truth, that – so help me God – if I can defeat and vanquish him in battle, the whole world together couldn't save him: I'll have his head before I leave him.'

'That will never happen, sir, if it please God,' said Sir Yvain, 'for he's such a wise and worthy man, and so are you, that the battle you've undertaken will be sensibly and judiciously abandoned, and peace made to the honour of both parties, so that all your friends will be happy and rejoice, and so will his, truly.'

Then Guiromelant replied: 'So help me God who made the world, I consider you so worthy and wise that I shall send no messengers to Gawain

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\* The palfrey (palefroi) was used for journeys and, as here, for errands, in contrast to the charger (destrier) used in combat. The palfrey is often referred to also as a lady's mount.

but you and your friend Gifflet. But you're to tell Sir Gawain this from me: I'm ready to fulfil my promise and our agreement. You can go now, for I've nothing more to say to him.'

And so they mounted and set off, and returned to the king's pavilion where Sir Gawain was awaiting them, fully armed.

Sir Yvain told him: 'Your adversary sends you this message pure and simple: he's ready to fulfil his promise to you without delay.'

'Then what is there to do but mount?' said Sir Gawain.

Yvain held his stirrup, and Sir Gawain mounted Guilodien at once, fully armed. And as soon as he was in the saddle he took his shield by the strap and slung it round his neck. There were at least ten squires before him, each holding a lance, waiting to see which one he would choose. He examined them carefully, and then called to Yvonet, one of his squires, who was holding one with a stout, square shaft of ash and a bright, sharp head of steel. Upon it he fixed a rich pennon, subtly embroidered with gold; no eyes have ever beheld one so richly worked. The lovely lady Guilorete had made it, and sent it to Gawain a long time before as a love token. He took it with him now because it came from his love, and I'm sure it would boost his courage when the time came.

**H**e rode from the king's army just as I have described, and Guiromelant rode from the other side as swiftly, lance in hand and shield shining in the sun – a gold shield it was, with a red band at the top. He looked every inch a knight, and his horse was clad in yellow samite at the rear and red at the head.

The plain was beautiful and flat, and incredibly full of knights and fair ladies. And there were more than a thousand girls who stepped through the ranks to sit at the front for a better view of the combat.

They did not waste time in talking; as soon as they entered the field and saw each other, without more ado, without any oaths or discussing of terms, the two knights who had agreed to battle fixed their shields on their arms like the skilled warriors that they were and set them firmly between their chests and the necks of their swift horses; then they lowered their pennons and thrust in their spurs. Both horses surged forward, and I tell you, they shot faster than a bolt loosed from a crossbow; and there were no ruts or rocks to upset their charge – to all who watched it seemed that they would surely fly! Their riders were not sparing with their spurs; and when they were about to meet, to give greater power to their blows they supported their sharp lance-heads on their shields, and struck with such force that they pierced their hauberks, tearing clean through the chain-mail and the tunics

next to their skin, and the bright, sharp points burst out behind. Their horses were charging so fast that there was no restraining them, and they rushed on with such fury that the knights, as they passed, could not help but collide so heavily, bodies and shields together, that they grazed all the skin from their faces and knees, and all four, lords and mounts, came crashing to the ground in a heap. But they were worthy and splendid knights and leapt nimbly to their feet, and quickly tore out the lances embedded in their shields. Then they drew their naked swords and raised their shields up high. You'll never hear of such a fierce combat as the first between these two. They came at each other in a fury, and dealt such fearsome blows with their swords upon their shining helmets that they drove them in and dented them. And down came the swords again instantly, smashing leather and wood, and whatever they met, from their shields. There was nothing halfhearted about these blows! They hated each other mortally. You would have seen blow after mighty blow stuck there. They struck sparks from their helmets, smote off the circles\* and sent them flying, and won and yielded ground in turn. And you would have seen them recover so fast from each blow that the watching host were amazed that they could be joined so long without drawing back. But neither had any intention of leaving the other as long as he could endure the combat and had breath left in him. With great reluctance and pain they did begin to draw back a little, because of the wearying heat. But as soon as they had recovered their breath they returned to the fray with fury and passion. With their sharp and naked swords they exchanged such great and frequent blows upon their shimmering helms that they were gravely hurt and stunned. Wherever their swords struck, pieces flew from their shields. Guiromelant fought on all day with strength and vigour, proving his power as he mounted hard and bitter attacks upon his foe in view of everyone. Honours in the battle were still quite even, as all those present said, and his men were overjoyed to see him defend and attack so well.

These fine and valiant knights were locked together until noon. And then, I tell you truly, as soon as that hour had come, Sir Gawain recovered his courage and strength and vigour. He shook off his weariness and the effects of the heat, and once past noon he felt stronger and fresher than he had at the start. Swiftly and without delay, now that his strength had revived, he came fiercely with his naked sword towards Guiromelant – who had hitherto harried him so hard – and attacked him furiously with all his strength. He struck him on the helm and stove it in right on the forehead; he would have cut right through to his head if his sword had not slipped; but it came down on his shield with such might that it sliced a great wedge off the side. Gawain prepared to strike again, and Guiromelant did likewise; and such was their

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\* Reinforcing bands around the helmet.

fury that with the hewing of their sharpened blades they cut up their shields until all that hung from their necks were the straps and the nails that had fixed them to the painted leather covers.\* Blood flowed down to their heels from their flushed, stained bodies; for with no shields left to protect them, they rained mighty blows on each other's mailcoats and wounded each other terribly. They cut and hewed the tender flesh beneath their shirts with the great and awesome blows that they exchanged; but I can tell you truly that Guiromelant, now tired and weakening, was driven back willy-nilly by Sir Gawain. For every blow he gave Gawain, Gawain returned three, forcing him backward repeatedly: he could hardly take any more. The king's host, who had earlier been in such dismay, could rejoice again, seeing the good knight Gawain harrying the other and driving him back, and they began to whisper that he would soon have vanquished him. And those who loved Guiromelant and had earlier been rejoicing were now downcast; all his people were lost in grief.

But regardless of their joy or grief, whoever had the better or worse of the combat, Clarissant's sorrow was the same. If either of them were disgraced or killed, she would surely die. She came before the king her uncle and fell straight at his feet in view of all his worthy host, and begged him in God's name for mercy.

'For the love of God, sire,' she cried, 'show me that you love me! End this battle, I beg you, between my brother and the other knight! Give him to me as a husband, for he has bestowed his love on me, and I have granted mine to him; I'll never take another on any account.'

The king replied kind-heartedly, but said: 'I can't, dear niece, I tell you truly, and my heart is so much the sadder. It's a custom of chivalry, and I've observed it all my life, that once a knight has entered the field to do battle, and has his helmet laced and his right spur fastened, he must not be drawn from the battle unless he so requests. But go to your brother now, quickly, and beg him tenderly to stop the battle at once, and to give Guiromelant to you as a husband since you love him. He's a most noble man of great renown, and such a fine and handsome knight that there's no king or count who could surpass him; it would be a very great shame if anything but good befell him.'

**T**hen Clarissant set out eagerly; and it was a most courageous deed she did, as she ran, bare-headed and without a cloak, before that great assembly to the combat in the middle of the plain, and begged Sir Gawain for

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\* Shields were made of wood, with a leather covering on which were painted the knight's arms or other decorations.

mercy, to stop the battle for the love of God, and to give her Guiromelant for her husband: he would be doing her a great honour if he did, for she would then have a fine man for her love. And Sir Gawain replied instantly:

‘God help me, dear sister, I’d rejoice in my heart if he could be persuaded, but I don’t know that he’d agree. And I can’t deny it: I’ll not grant your request until he’s withdrawn his accusation of treachery against me.’

The king delayed no longer but went straight after his niece. The debate lasted a long while, with Clarissant weeping constantly. But Sir Gawain promised them that, if Guiromelant retracted the accusation he had made and his honour were safe, he would certainly grant that he could take his sister for his wife.

‘But if he won’t withdraw the charge that pains my heart, let him don his mail-coat again tomorrow and return to battle armed as he is now.’

They agreed to this, and nothing more was said. Then Sir Gawain departed, riding slowly off towards his lodging. He was swiftly disarmed, and there was great rejoicing there all that night.

King Arthur had Guiromelant disarmed at once, and mounted him on a palfrey and led him off with him and the fair Clarissant. There was great celebration all night long, and when day broke next morning the king told his niece to dress; and when she was dressed she was led to the church, looking fair and elegant and beautifully attired. And the worthy knight Guiromelant received her from an archbishop’s hand. There were many bishops and priors and abbots at the wedding, and much laughter and merry-making. The jongleurs made a mighty din and the whole court rejoiced: it was a great service indeed.

But while they were still at church Gawain returned to court, fully armed. Sir Kay ran to him, and asked him at once why he was armed at such an hour. And Sir Gawain replied immediately:

‘I’m going to do battle, sir. Is the king up yet?’

‘Oh, sir! You’ve put yourself out for nothing! Peace has been made! He’s married your sister.’

‘Married? You don’t mean it?’

‘I tell you, sir,’ said Kay, ‘they’re still at church, listening to the holy service.’

‘How could my uncle do me such a disgrace and injustice and deal me such a base insult as to give my sister to the man who was charging me with treachery? And to marry her without my assent or agreement! You can go and tell the king that I shall never be his vassal or return to him or his land, until he comes and seeks me in a strange and distant country with three thousand knights of worth, finely dressed and equipped.’

With that Gawain turned and rode swiftly away. And Sir Kay went



straight to the church and was not slow to speak; he said: 'You must know, sire, you've lost your nephew. He's sworn never to return to court, because you've given his sister to his enemy, despite his expressly forbidding it, before he'd withdrawn his charge. He'll no longer hold you as his friend or his uncle or his lord.'

When the king heard this he was stricken with the deepest anguish he had ever felt in his life; he nearly went out of his mind with grief. The king and his noble company were all downcast; the joy they had been feeling fled away and they were lost in sorrow. Guinevere was grief-stricken, and Ygerne fainted; and Clarissant held herself to blame, grieving bitterly that Gawain had left the king's court because of her impulsive act.

The king gave orders for his palfrey to be saddled at once, and told the squires to pack the chests and load the ponies. They cleared all the lodgings straight away, taking mantles and cloaks and robes, goblets and blankets and tablecloths, and filling coffers and cases with golden cups and drinking-bowls. Some ran to saddle the horses, others led them to the king. No-one was left behind, bald or long-haired, knight or girl or lady. Guiromelant and his wife and the three queens mounted, and princes, barons, dukes and counts set out with King Arthur; but I'd make the story far too long if I tried to name them all. There was no laughter or joy in the king's host now; they could not have been more sorrowful as they made their way back, with a train of horses led by the bridle and their arms and shields borne along. Nothing could comfort them, for they thought they had lost Gawain, and it grieved them deeply. No-one, I think, has ever seen so many nobles all together in search of a single knight. All the worthy and noble men of the land went with the king in a mighty crowd; not a single one was left behind. They were reckoned to number sixty thousand as they left the place – not counting the beautiful ladies and girls, of whom there were many; but I couldn't tell you their number without the risk of putting falsehoods in my story. But I tell you truly, all the king's companions were downcast and grieving, and there's no need to ask why.

And so the king rode on, deep in troubled thought, with his noble company; and the queen went, too, as distracted as he.

**B**ut I'll tell you no more about them for now; I'm going to turn to Gawain, who was riding steadily through a wood, this way and that, until he suddenly found himself by a river which was deep and wide and rushing. He looked at the high, rocky bank and saw that there was no ford or bridge or crossing-place. He carried on down the river's edge, looking for a plank or a boat or a crossing. On he rode along the bank, fully armed and

deeply troubled.

And then his thoughts began to turn, and he remembered the lance he had been seeking; but he did not know where or to which land chance had now led him. He told himself he had been a fool, and felt he had delayed too long; he yearned now to fulfil his vow, but there was no-one to approach to ask the way. He decided to ride on until he met a knight or man-at-arms or girl who could give him the information he needed. And so he turned away from the bank and began to clamber up a rock, goading his horse with his spurs. He finally reached the top; and Gawain, that knight so full of all good qualities, knew that it was one day in Lent, but that was all – he knew none of those lands or plains: he was almost mad with frustration.

He gazed far along the riverbank, and then suddenly saw something to cheer him, for just at the edge of a forest he caught a glimpse of a tower, and it was huge and tall. I have Chrétien to vouch for that, who was full of praise for the fortress. Gawain set off towards it at once, happier now and greatly cheered. He rode on until he reached the gate, and found the drawbridge lowered. He passed through the gate – it was wide open – and did not delay, but dismounted immediately. More than a hundred boys appeared, all eager to serve him, and gave his mount to the master of the stables who provided him with oats and hay. They then led Sir Gawain to be disarmed in an antechamber; and from there to Limoges there was none so rich and beautiful, paved with marble and strewn with fresh grass. They brought him a brand new gown lined with grey and white fur, and Gawain, who proved his worth in all knightly deeds, took it and donned it straight away. And then, without the slightest delay, the boys led him, looking most confident and impressive, from the chamber to the hall.

There they found an extremely handsome, white-haired nobleman sitting on a bed; he was certainly not a penitent or an ill-bred man, or a servant or a layabout: his gown alone was worth a hundred marks, and his hat was not made of straw but of rich sable covered with Alexandrine silk, and on top of the hat there was a most beautiful circle of gold, full of jaspers and sardonyx and other handsome stones, the finest that one could ever possess. His wealth was clearly very great. He was lying on the bed, leaning on his elbow; and it seemed indeed that he could have lived in great happiness, for he would have been a lord of great riches, if his body had not been maimed, rendering him helpless. But I don't want to say any more just now to explain how that had happened.

When Gawain came before him as he sat upon the bed, in that house which had good servants and a fine retinue of courteous speech and gracious manners, he greeted him at once, and Sir Gawain returned his greeting instantly. And the good man entirely forgot his troubles and

received Gawain at his side. He seated him comfortably on the bed, and then asked him where he was from, and from which land. Gawain replied quite openly, for he had nothing to be ashamed of. They talked about many things, for they were comfortable and at ease, and everyone in the house was happy, lord and knight alike.

When the cooks had prepared and arranged the dinner, the well trained servants brought two basins full of hot water to wash their hands, and another brought a towel to dry them. And as soon as they had dried their hands, two servants, as swiftly as they could, brought in trestles of cypress wood, and on these they placed the table – and such a one that you would think I was telling the wildest tales if I told you what it was like. A boy standing to one side spread the cloth upon it; and the king of Halape never ate on one so white. The whole hall was equally white, for there were many candles burning there, spreading a great brightness. And thereupon they sat down to dine.

But they had not been seated long before they saw a boy come from a chamber, and I don't think any man has ever seen one more handsome. Anyone looking closely would have said he was the fairest in all the world. In his hand he was holding a white lance with a rounded shaft. He came across the crowded hall and passed before Sir Gawain. And the lance-head bled, and did not stop bleeding until he had passed through the hall. And after him Gawain saw a beautiful girl come through the door of the chamber, and he could not take his eyes off her, so delightful did he find her. In her hands she was carrying a small silver trencher, and she passed before all the people there, following the lance. And next, truly, Sir Gawain saw two boys holding candlesticks laden with brightly burning candles. Sir Gawain was burning to ask who these people were and from what land. And while he was thus absorbed he saw, coming through the hall behind the boys, another girl, slim and straight, of the loveliest appearance, but she was grieving bitterly. Between her hands she held aloft the Holy Grail for all to see. Gawain saw it quite clearly, and longed to know why the girl was weeping so bitterly. He did not know where she had come from or what she was carrying; but all the while that she passed by he was wondering why she was so unhappy and would not stop crying. As everyone watched she went swiftly past and straight into another chamber. And when she had disappeared with the Grail, four servants followed carrying a bier covered with a royal silk, and in the bier there was a body. And on the silken covering lay a sword which was broken across the middle. But anyone who did not already know would have found it hard to see the break, for the sword looked quite intact. The four carried the bier and passed through the hall. None of the people gathered there addressed them in any way; nor did the bearers say a word. Gawain

was filled with wonder, and seeing all these marvellous things he longed to ask who the people were and why they had come, and where they had come from and where they were going. All four servants with the bier passed into a chamber. But they had only just vanished and been gone for an instant when the boy reappeared carrying the white lance with the head that bled – though it had neither flesh nor veins; and the girl with the silver trencher passed quickly back before everyone; and then the two boys reappeared with the candlesticks; then back came the Grail with its many precious stones, carried by the weeping girl; then the bier, after only the briefest pause. That night they passed through the house three times like this, so that everyone in the hall saw them with perfect clarity. And Gawain, along with all the others, saw them and was filled with wonder, believing without any doubt that this was the Grail and the lance that he had vowed to seek. He drew close up to the worthy man and asked him the significance of the Grail and the lance, and why the girl was crying. And then, without a moment's pause, he asked why the bier was being carried thus – if it were possible he would like to be told, if he did not mind – and why the furbished sword was lying on top of the bier. And the one who was full of nobility replied that he would certainly tell him if he was worthy to know such things, and summoning four boys he said:

‘Go and bring me my good sword.’

They went and brought it; and know this: it was broken. Two of the boys gave it to him, placing it in his hands in pieces. One of his nieces had sent it to him as a token of affection. He took the sword and gave it to Sir Gawain, who was so eager to find out the truth. Then the lord said to him, without further explanation:

‘If you can mend this blade and make the pieces join together so that the sword is whole again, you'll be able to know the truth and significance of the bier and the Grail and the lance, and why the girl weeps.’

Without a moment's hesitation Gawain took the pieces and put them together; and they joined together perfectly as though they were one again: everyone who saw it thought it was repaired. Then the lord said:

‘Take the blade by the point and pull. If you don't pull one piece from the other, you can be sure I'll tell you the secret and the purest truth about the Grail and the lance and the bier.’

And Gawain took the sword and pulled, but he jerked and broke one piece from the other at the first tug. The lord said:

‘You have not yet achieved enough as a knight to be able to know the truth about these things; for I promise you, the one who will come to know the truth will be esteemed and praised as the finest knight in the world. But you may well yet come to know the truth, and win by your chivalry glory and influence above all others.’

While he was speaking Sir Gawain listened, and with such intense attention to every word he said that he fell asleep upon the table.

Now please don't think I'm telling tales in what I'm about to say; I won't tell you a word of a lie if I can help it – not knowingly. Gawain stayed fast asleep until he awoke the next day; and he was astounded to find himself in a marsh with his arms and equipment, and saw his horse tethered to a tree by a hedged field. He was dismayed and downcast to find himself there. And he was deeply distressed and furious with himself at having failed to learn the truth about the mysteries: it pained his heart most bitterly – he would not have missed that at any price. His whole body shivered and shook with anguish.

He took up his arms and armed himself, and then came to the elm where his horse was tethered. He mounted and set off, deep in troubled thought.

**A**nd I tell you, his thoughts finally turned to remembering his promise,\* and he was so alarmed that he trembled with anguish in every limb, for he feared he would not be able to arrive for his battle in time. He spurred his horse with all his strength, until he came to a forest. Nothing he saw there pleased him at all: he felt only annoyance and vexation. So he rode up a mountain, high and pointed and steep and great, and beyond the mountain Gawain came upon a beautiful, flowery open land, over which he saw a nobleman and a girl riding. He went to meet them and courteously asked them where they were heading. But the nobleman replied most aggressively, saying:

‘What’s it to do with you? You’d do better to keep your mouth shut than to start a row. What business is it of yours which way I’m going?’

‘Come now,’ said Sir Gawain, ‘don’t be so ill-mannered. Answer my question, that’s all I ask. I don’t mean any harm by it.’

‘By God the spirit,’ he cried, ‘I think you’re base and stupid and a fool! You’ll know nothing about my business if I can help it. But the reason for *your* journey won’t be kept from me, whatever it may be, for good or ill; and I want to know your name. So tell me the truth now – I demand it.’

Gawain held his tongue no longer, but replied: ‘My name shall not be hidden from you, since you wish to know it. I’ll tell you most certainly: the Britons call me Gawain, and I’m King Arthur’s nephew.’

‘By the faith I owe almighty God!’ the noble cried immediately. ‘It’s Gawain I’ve been looking for! Now I’ve found you, thanks be to God, and

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\* i.e. his promise to Guigambresil that he would return to Escavalon either with the Bleeding Lance or to do combat. See above, p. 72.

know this now: I challenge you! Today I'll avenge my father's death. For as long as I see you in good health I'll never smile again; I long to bring you disgrace and shame! My right is beyond dispute, and may Christ give me the power to prove it.'

And with that he drew away from Gawain and set his lance in its rest. Without a pause they came charging at each other full tilt, and struck their shields with all their might, smashing wood from them both and shattering their lances, thick and square though they were. They rammed them into the shields, and each lance, without a doubt, smashed through by a palm's width and a half. Then they attacked each other with their swords of tempered steel, exchanging mighty blows on their heads and necks and shields and hauberks. Neither wood nor iron could stop the blows they dealt each other, as they both struck out with all their strength, going all out to wound the other. They did not squander blows: they both dealt them with perfect aim. No count or king has ever seen a battle better fought, nor will a better ever be seen; for each man strove with all his might to overpower the other and to bring him to grief and humble him.

But finally the point came where the one who was wearier called a halt, saying: 'That's enough! And I'll tell you why, Gawain: if I kill you or you kill me, it wouldn't add to your renown in any way, for one of us alone wouldn't be believed, since no-one has seen or known of our combat. So I suggest this battle be postponed for now on the conditions that I'll prescribe: I'll have your assurance that whenever I find you at a court, however long it may be from now, as soon as I summon you to fulfil your promise you'll fight me without delay, and look for no excuse.'

Gawain swore and promised this, and said: 'Since it's your desire and wish to have a postponement, I want to know your name before you go.'

'I tell you, sir,' he said, 'my name is Disnadaret; I'm much more fond of war than peace, and never tire of doing battle. And now, good sir, tell me where you're going from here.'

'I'm not going to dally, my friend. There's a certain matter I must pursue, for I've a battle to fight before the king of Escavalon. But by Saint Ladre of Avalon, I think I've already delayed too long: I've been under oath to go there since the summer, and I'm afraid I'll not be there in time. I must be on my way; I'm going now – I commend you to God.'

And Disnadaret likewise commended him to the Lord God.

**T**hen Gawain set out across the heath along a well-made road, and journeyed on by day and night until he reached Escavalon. He

dismounted at a mounting-block right before the tower. He kept his sword and all his equipment except his lance: he was feeling wary and cautious because he was not exactly loved there. He climbed up to the hall, fully armed, and came before the king; and he said to him:

‘By my faith, sire, I’ve come to fulfil my promise. I’ve toiled desperately in search of the Grail and the lance: I’ve been searching for the past forty days, but without success. And since I can’t bring you the lance I’ve come to yield myself as your prisoner, for I’ve no wish to act dishonestly.’

With that he stopped and said no more, remaining there in silence. But Guigambresil was quick to stand, and declared that, come what may, he would do battle with Gawain.

‘For I tell you, I won’t be denied it any longer, now that he’s returned. I won’t be denied it for anything.’

‘My friend,’ said the king, ‘I’ll see what my men have to say about this, for I’m sure they’ll judge the matter fairly, for both your sakes.’

The king rose with more than a hundred barons to take counsel. He was handsomely and nobly dressed in a rich red silk; and unless my source-book is telling lies, he was most handsome and courteous.

And while the king was deliberating, a great knight suddenly appeared, leading two war-horses which were clad in iron right down to the ground. On their bridles the reins and bits were so well fixed that no-one could ever have seized either bit or rein.\* And behind him came two serving-men, carrying two lances of ash with iron heads, and the heads were long and sharp. A third carried a shield; and I tell you, never was such a shield hung at a knight’s neck: there were five steel spikes, sharp and pointed, fixed in it next to the boss; and along the top of the shield were another hundred spikes or more, and on the bottom of the shield was a sharp steel nail. Thus equipped he arrived at the court. All the people ran and flocked to see him. And as soon as he caught sight of Gawain, the knight said, straight to his face:

‘I summon you now to keep your promise.’

The king came straight back from his deliberations, and the knight explained the matter to him, in the presence of the great crowd that had packed into the court. He requested Gawain to fulfil the promise he had made on the heath three days before in the presence of his girl. But Guigambresil on the other hand was reminding him of his oath to him, saying that he must either deliver the lance as he had vowed or fight him on the spot. But Disnadaret demanded that a decision be made in his favour, for Gawain had promised that as soon as he found him in the presence of a court, then, come what may, he would do combat with him: so he wanted him to do battle now.

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\* An obvious danger to a knight in combat, as an enemy could thus make him lose control of his horse.

But Guigambresil claimed hotly that *his* battle should be fought, and said he wanted to hear judgement passed at once, of necessity; and Disnadaret said the same. So the king ordered the peers of all his land to retire and come to a decision, to consider and determine whether Sir Gawain should fight alone against them both together or against each one separately. The peers went, as the king commanded, to decide.

One of them said: 'My lords, I say he should fight against them both.'

Three or four stood up and judged that he should not. But the one who was most learned in law pointed out to them and rightly proved that, since both of them had Gawain's word, he should fight them both together, without postponement, without ransom, without respite, without delay. All the peers who did not share his view were shocked by what he said, but he explained the matter to them, for he knew all there was to know about law. All the peers listened as he began:

'Would Gawain not be breaking a solemn oath, if he failed to keep his promise to the one and also to the other? He swore he'd do battle with the knight wherever he found him – and he's found him here. So I say and maintain that it's only right that he should do combat with them both together.'

All the barons assented to this judgement without further dispute. They left their deliberation, and without any commotion or altercation they went to tell the king what had been said. Those who had made the decision announced it to the king before everyone, an eager spokesman saying:

'Sire, the court has decided that Gawain, alone though he is, must fight against them both, since neither will postpone his battle with him.'

'Have them prepare then, immediately,' announced the king.

They told Guigambresil to arm at once, and he was quick about it, as boys rushed to bring him his arms and worked busily until they had clad him in armour from top to toe. The boys did not delay but set his helmet on his head, and around his neck they hung his shield, emblazoned with a leopard. And Disnadaret, too, was fastening his handsome and magnificent arms. I tell you, he greatly impressed the people who were ranged on every side. They had gone to the light-slits in the great tower, and to sit at the windows of the hall, to get a better view of the battle.

Now, there was a boy at the court, a cousin of Gawain, who ran at once and mounted to tell King Arthur this news which had greatly upset him; for neither Arthur nor his knights knew about Gawain's postponed battle against Guigambresil, or how he was pitched against two such fine men as the knights who were to fight him together without delay. The boy could not shake off his grief, and left the castle at once on a swift hunting-



horse and rode with all possible speed to summon help for Sir Gawain. As chance would have it, in a valley a league from the castle he met Kay the seneschal. Kay was mounted on a charger, and saw the boy riding towards him and hailed him straight away. The boy reined in his horse as well as he could and with great skill, and they both halted there in the valley and Sir Kay asked him:

‘My good, dear friend, tell me now, if you’ve time and no objection, whose is that handsome castle up ahead?’

‘God save me, sir,’ the boy replied, ‘it’s so strong that it fears no attack. It belongs to the king of Escavalon, and truly, there’s none from here to Avalon more finely positioned or so strong, that’s certain. A battle’s about to take place there: a single knight against two.’

‘In faith,’ said Sir Kay immediately, ‘that’s an uneven match! It’s a most dishonourable battle! No-one in whom there’s an ounce of good should allow a properly ordered contest at his court where one man’s forced to fight against two. May Christ stand by the single knight, and take his side and keep him from harm today; I only wish I knew the man.’

‘He’s a very fine knight indeed, sir.’

‘Tell me, dear friend,’ said Kay to the boy, ‘who are the two who’ll be fighting together?’

‘One of them is called Disnadaret, and he’s a fierce and aggressive knight indeed. The other’s name is Guigambresil, who’s thought to be much more affable.’

‘In faith, I know them both well. The single knight’s fallen into bad hands, I think! Who is he?’

‘I tell you, sir, it’s Gawain, the son of King Lot – tear out both my eyes if I’ve told you a word of a lie. And it grieves me bitterly.’

‘And tell me,’ said Kay, ‘where are you going now?’

‘To King Arthur, sir.’

‘What for?’

‘To tell him the news. And to have him order his knights to mount as fast as they can, and to come with his army to rescue his nephew at Escavalon, for his own good. But I don’t know where I’d find him.’

And thereupon Kay cried ‘alas!’ more than a hundred times; and without waiting another instant he set off with the boy to tell the king the news; I tell you, he was deeply dismayed. They raced on until they reached the army, and found the king and all his noble company camped in a meadow beside a fast-flowing river. Kay did not delay but ran straight to the king, and told him of the terrible plight that Gawain his nephew faced. And when the king heard this, the amazing news filled him with joy and anguish: joy because he had found his nephew, but bitter grief for his dire straits. There

was no laughter or joking in the king's host.

The king asked: 'When is the battle to be?'

'Now, sire!' said the boy who had brought the news.

'Where?'

'At Escavalon; so hurry and let's go, for there's no time to lose: just as I left they were about to join battle!'

King Arthur trembled with fear, and had orders passed throughout his army to follow him immediately: not a single knight was to stay behind. All the men of the good king of Britain's host mounted; not a squire or servant remained. And when they were all ready they set off after the king at once.

Sir Yvain was deeply alarmed when he heard of Gawain's plight, and he commanded that his horse be saddled. His bidding was done at once and, being the fine knight that he was, he did not dally long: as soon as he was mounted he set off before everyone else, and spurred on all the way until he reached Escavalon; and once there he did not hesitate, come what may, to go before the king. And once before him he said, without greeting him:

'I am a knight of King Arthur, who has sent me here: you must believe what I say. I've come on urgent business: he's been told that you mean to make his nephew Gawain go straight out and fight against two knights. But my lord sends me to entreat you for friendship's sake to postpone this battle just a little; that is all he asks.'

And straight away the king commanded the knights who were guarding the field to delay the start of the combat. And, unless my source-book is telling lies, it was not long before King Arthur arrived. The king of Escavalon went out with a great host to meet him, giving him a fine and handsome welcome like the well-bred soul he was. And truly, I admire him for that, for he always honoured worthy men and enjoyed their company. And wise men say: "He who honours a worthy man soon earns a great reward; but he who serves a wicked man ill bestows his service". There's nothing good to be said about wicked men; but by Saint Peter of Rome, finding a worthy man is quite an event, for they're few and far between! And when one really comes to know some of those thought to be worthy, one often finds, to put it plainly, nothing in them but a bag of wind! The wicked often deceive people and turn their heads by appearances: there are some very stupid folk who praise a man for his apparent worth, not according to his deeds or wisdom. Such a man has humble and kindly looks, but is never happy as long as he knows that some good is about to befall a worthy man. That's why I advise you to bestow your service elsewhere if it's bringing you neither pleasure nor profit. But as for this king of Escavalon, it seems to me that his appearances were true to his deeds, as had been proved by himself and by others before. And he would, without fail, be handsomely rewarded for his service as he strove to honour the good

King Arthur. He made every effort to do so, knowing he had found a worthy man! For indeed, Arthur's worth had been witnessed in many places; and the king who now received him with such honour would not be wasting his efforts: they would surely bring him a great reward.

Sir Gawain was jubilant; he could have soared for joy when he caught sight of his uncle the king, who would soon, unless I'm much mistaken, make peace in the battle which Gawain's two enemies were so eager to fight.

When King Arthur arrived he was received most splendidly by the court: he was honoured highly in Escavalon, believe me. Then you would have seen the high nobles retire together to arrange peace. Guigambresil and Disnadaret, so keen to do combat, were called to take counsel with them; and peace-terms were discussed, and the knights were earnestly implored to accept them, until they agreed, assenting to the king's will and the advice of his counsellors. The agreement was quick and very happy, for King Arthur had a grand-daughter whom Guigambresil took at once for his wife; her name was Tancree la Petite, and she was of perfect beauty and intelligence. Arthur gave her to him to confirm the peace, and all the court approved of the marriage, being so pleased to have peace made. And Disnadaret happily took Beatris, who was full of noble qualities; she, too, was a grand-daughter of King Arthur, and he gave her to him; there was none more beautiful in all the world. They were married in the hall, and there were a good many mitres and crosiers there, and knights and other people, all delighted at the confirmation of peace. And so all was settled according to the plan of the king who governed Britain. The two knights became his liegemen, both holding their lands as his vassals.

So as I've described – and every word is true – Sir Gawain was absolved of the oath he had made after he had been so shamefully ill-treated in the tower with the girl'. He was delighted by this turn of events, for Guigambresil freed him from the oath entirely – he would never be arraigned again.

In all the isles of the sea there was no prince one could name waging war on King Arthur who did not make peace with him and pay him homage there before all his noble company. Whether grudgingly or willingly, they all declared their allegiance to him that day, with the sole exception of Brun de Branlant. Arthur marched against him, as soon as the peace of which I have told you, agreed between the king and his knights, was properly confirmed. He stayed for three full days with his mother and sister, who loved him dearly with a true heart; then he took his leave and set off.

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\* i.e. when besieged by the mob. See above, p. 72.

## (SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 2054 – 12690)

*Arthur and his army march to Brun de Branlant's castle, drive the defenders inside and begin a long siege. As food supplies run low, Lore de Branlant and her cousin Ysmaine make a desperate plea to Yvain from the castle windows, and he persuades Arthur to send them food. He does so, so much indeed that the packhorse carrying the supplies drops dead.*

*The siege is thus prolonged, but the supplies are not enough, and Brun de Branlant, determined not to surrender, makes a sally at dawn to raid King Arthur's stores. Gawain leaps from his bed as the cry is raised, and impetuously pursues them, armed only with a lance and shield. Brun wounds him gravely and the raiders escape to the castle.*

*It is three and a half months before Gawain recovers. Then he mounts his horse Gringalet and sets out to see if he has regained his strength. Arthur is worried, but Gawain promises to take no risks and to return quickly. But he rides on and on until, on the third day, he stumbles upon a beautiful pavilion. There he finds a girl who, when she hears who he is, offers herself to him entirely and 'loses the name of maiden'. He leaves her then, but promises to return after a certain time to find her and take her away with him.*

*Her father now arrives and, hearing about her seduction, races after Gawain and demands that he fight with him. Gawain kills him in the combat that follows. Then the girl's brother, Bran de Lis, likewise pursues him and demands battle to avenge his sister and his father. In the ensuing fight Gawain's old wound breaks open and he begins to lose blood. Bran de Lis agrees to postpone the combat until it can be held before witnesses, but on one condition: that Gawain will then fight with him just as Bran may chance to find him, even if he is unarmed. Gawain now returns to King Arthur's camp, so ill and weak from loss of blood that he can hardly stay in his saddle.*

*Brun de Branlant's castle is finally starved to surrender, Brun pays homage to King Arthur, and the siege is ended. Gawain is carried to his castle, where he stays until he has fully recovered from his wounds.*

*Arthur marries his niece Ysave de Carahet to King Caradeus of Nantes. But she is desperately loved by a knight named Eliavret, who is also a sorcerer, able to change animals and birds into human form. He substitutes for Ysave first a greyhound bitch, then a sow and then a mare in Caradeus's bed on the three nights after the wedding, and takes Ysave for himself. On the third night a son is conceived.*

*The son is born and named Carados, and when he grows older he is sent to King Arthur to be trained as a knight.*

*One Pentecost Arthur holds a great court, and on the eve of the feast he*

*knights Carados. The next day an unknown knight arrives and offers to exchange blows with anyone present. 'If any knight here can behead me with a single blow of this sword and I can then recover from the blow, he may be sure that, a year from now, the blow will be returned – if he dares to wait for it.' He is full of scorn for Arthur's court when no-one takes up the challenge. But then Carados accepts, and strikes off the knight's head with a single blow. But the knight picks up his head by the hair, sets it back on his shoulders and: 'Carados', he says, 'I'll be back a year from today. Don't fail to be here on any account.'*

*When he returns the following year Arthur and Guinevere offer him riches and girls in exchange for Carados, but he refuses. Carados kneels to be beheaded, the knight raises his sword, most of those watching faint in horror, but the knight stops and lifts Carados to his feet. He takes him aside and reveals that he is his father Eliavret, and tells him of the bitch, the sow and the mare. Then he departs, leaving Carados horrified.*

*Carados goes home to Nantes, and when he tells of his mother's infidelity King Caradeus locks her in a tower for safe keeping, but unbeknown to him this does not prevent Eliavret, with his sorcery, entering whenever he pleases.*

*Carados sets out for Arthur's court once more. But on the way he has a long battle to save Cador of Cornwall and his sister Guinier from a knight named Alardin, a suitor spurned by Guinier, who has just wounded Cador in combat. After his defeat Alardin takes Carados, Guinier and Cador to his pavilion, where Cador is healed of his wounds and they all relax together to the gentle sounds of music and the sweet smell of herbs.*

*The next day they set out together for King Arthur's court at Carlion, where a great tournament has begun, one side led by Cadoalant, king of Ireland, and the other led by King Ris of Brecheliande. Alardin and Cador join King Cadoalant, and Carados fights with Ris. The tournament rages on and on, and is brought to a halt only when Carados and Gawain, locked in combat as they fight on opposing sides, reveal their identities to each other, cast down their arms and refuse to fight on. Carados is declared the finest knight at the tournament. And as the tourney breaks up King Arthur gives his niece Guigenor to Alardin for his wife, and her companion Ydain to Cador, and Carados is to marry Guinier, Cador's sister.*

*Carados now hears that his mother's imprisonment has not stopped Eliavret visiting her, so he returns and catches them together; revenge is exacted upon the sorcerer by making him lie with a bitch, then a sow, then a mare. With the bitch he conceives a mastiff named Guinalot, with the sow a boar named Tortain, and with the mare a horse named Lorigal. The poet comments that: 'All these three, truly, were brothers on his father's side to Carados.'*

*Carados's mother demands revenge upon her son for their humiliation, and Eliavret causes an enchanted serpent to fix itself to Carados's arm. It will*

*stay there, immovable, for two and a half years, and then Carados will die. Doctors are summoned from England, France and all over the world, but none can remove the snake or revive the ailing Carados.*

*Arthur is deeply distressed by this news and sets out for Nantes. Guinier and Cador do likewise, but Carados, afraid that Guinier will stop loving him when she sees how he has changed, flees to a hermit to pray for release from the snake and to do penance for his sin in humiliating his father and mother. Guinier, Arthur and the others are distraught at Carados's disappearance. Arthur and Cador seek him in many lands, until Cador finds him at last.*

*Cador returns to Nantes and learns from Carados's mother how the serpent can be removed. Carados is placed in a vat of vinegar, with Guinier beside him in a vat of milk. The vinegar burns at the serpent, and Guinier cries out: 'Evil serpent, look at my breasts, so white and fair ... Leave his arm now and take hold of my breasts ... for the vinegar is burning you.' And while the hermit sings mass and they all appeal to Christ, the serpent, feeling the burning of the vinegar, leaps for Guinier's breast; Cador suddenly strikes out with his sword and beheads the snake; but he also cuts off the tip of Guinier's breast. Carados is now healed of the serpent's poisonous grasp, but his arm has been shortened by the snake and he is henceforth known as Carados Shortarm.*

*Carados's father dies, and he succeeds him as King of Nantes and marries Guinier.*

*Carados goes out hunting one day. It begins to rain, but he sees a brilliant light coming swiftly through the forest and hears the sweet singing of a vast array of birds. A knight approaches, surrounded by the light, untouched by the rain, leading a girl on a white mule. Carados follows the knight to his home and finds that it is none other than Alardin. Alardin gives him the boss of a magic shield, which will restore in gold any part of the body that has been cut off. Carados returns to Guinier, places it on her breast, and she is cured.*

*At Pentecost King Arthur summons a great court at Carlion, and a strange knight arrives and presents a magnificent drinking-horn named Boënet to the king. It turns water into wine, but only a man whose wife or sweetheart has been entirely faithful to him can drink from it without spilling the wine. Guinevere asks Arthur not to drink from it: 'It's an enchantment to bring shame upon honest people'. But Arthur insists. . . and spills the wine. So do all the other knights at the court, except for Carados, and they are all resentful of his success, just as the women are jealous of Guinier. Carados decides to send Guinier home, fearful of Queen Guinevere's envy.*

*King Arthur, out hunting one day in spring, decides to reward his followers for their excellent service to him by holding an even greater court than usual, at Carnevent at the feast of Pentecost. A magnificent company assembles there, but Arthur, seeing an empty place, begins to weep, and when Gawain*

asks him why, he accuses all his knights of treason. They deny it vehemently, but Arthur insists that they have betrayed him by making no attempt to rescue Gifflet from the Proud Castle where he has been imprisoned for three years. (See above, page 00). The knights all agree that it is shameful, and vow to rescue Gifflet.

Arthur sets out across Britain with a company of chosen knights, and finds large stretches of land laid waste. They go without food for three days, but finally see a house. Kay goes ahead to ask for food, and finds a dwarf roasting a plump peacock on a spit. When the dwarf fails to reply to Kay's first address, Kay is none too polite to him and gives him something of a battering, whereupon the dwarf's master appears and flattens Kay with a blow with the roasted peacock. Kay returns to Arthur saying he could get no food, but Gawain is politely welcomed at the house and goes back to fetch the king. The dwarf reveals what happened to Kay, much to everyone's amusement.

Next day they set out again, and once more have to go without food for two days. Then they come upon the tracks of a band of knights, and Gawain rides on and finds a deserted castle with food laid ready in the hall. He fetches the king and his company, who enter the castle and begin to eat. But through a half-opened door Gawain sees a shield hanging in the adjoining room. His blood races, and he swiftly arms himself. Arthur refuses to eat until he says what is wrong, and Gawain reluctantly tells of his adventure with the sister of Bran de Lis. The shield is Bran's, whom he has promised to fight the next time they meet, either armed or unarmed, just as Bran chances to find him.

Kay chases a dog that passes through the hall, and follows it from room to room and into a garden, where he finds Bran de Lis and his followers. Bran recognises him at once, and Kay is forced to admit that Gawain is in the hall with King Arthur. Although he is half-way through being disarmed, Bran de Lis rushes into the hall, and is furious when he finds Gawain armed and ready. They decide to fight immediately, and the battle is long. Then a young woman arrives, and seeing that Gawain is losing, she leaves and returns with a five-year-old boy, and tells the child to beg Bran de Lis not to kill his father – the woman is Bran's sister. The boy clutches Bran by the leg and pleads with him, but Bran de Lis replies: 'Get out of here, you son of a whore', and viciously kicks the child aside. Arthur rebukes him for this baseness, and while he holds Bran in conversation Gawain has time to recover. He returns to the attack and the tables are turned: Gawain is now on top, and the woman sends the boy to plead with him to spare his uncle. Gawain does indeed slacken his attack, but Bran charges again. The woman places the child between them, and the boy playfully tries to catch their flashing swords. Arthur can bear it no longer and stops the fight, and reconciles Gawain and Bran. He spends a fortnight at Bran's castle and then sets out once more, and Bran de Lis goes with him.

They finally arrive at the Proud Castle, which is very heavily defended.



*Lucan the butler is granted the first joust the next day, and unhorses the castle's champion. But he does not bring the knight back as a prisoner, and Bran de Lis explains that, had he done so, the castle would have surrendered. Lucan, most upset, gallops back for a second joust with a new champion, but this time he is defeated and taken prisoner. His only consolation is being imprisoned with Gifflet, who is overjoyed at the news of Arthur's arrival.*

*The next day Bran de Lis fights with the castle's champion and is victorious and takes him prisoner. On the following day Kay fights; it is a close contest, but his opponent forces him beyond the bounds of the jousting-field and also captures his horse. Kay does nothing for his dignity by trying to claim victory, and all Arthur's followers laugh at him.*

*There is to be no fighting from noon on Saturday until Monday morning, so Bran de Lis suggests a hunt. Gawain becomes separated from the hunting-party and meets a knight sitting beneath a pine tree. When the knight refuses to speak to him, Gawain tries to pick him up to carry him back to Arthur. The knight is furious and threatens to kill Gawain, saying that he wants to be left to die. So Gawain rides on, and meets a young lady who is worried that she may have caused the death of the knight by failing to arrive to marry him in time. Gawain comforts her by saying that the knight is still alive and she continues on her way. Gawain returns to King Arthur, and Bran de Lis says that the knight is the Riche Soldoier, lord of the Proud Castle, and the young lady is his sweetheart.*

*The next day it is Yvain's turn to fight the champion sent from the castle, and he is victorious and takes the knight prisoner. The captive tells Arthur and his knights that the champion on the following day will be the Riche Soldoier himself, and Gawain asks permission to fight for Arthur against him. The battle is very even, but the Riche Soldoier is worn down by the heat and Gawain finally wins. But the Soldoier will not ask for mercy – he is so sure that his sweetheart will die of grief if she hears of his defeat that he would rather be killed. But he vows that he and all his followers will surrender to Arthur if Gawain will pretend to have lost the battle until the lady can be taken elsewhere out of reach of the truth. Gawain says to himself that it would be a terrible cruelty to kill such a fine knight, and agrees to the bargain. They go into the castle to tell the lady the white lie, but the sight of Gawain being apparently led away as a prisoner fills Arthur's forces with despair. But shortly Gawain reappears, bringing with him Gifflet, Lucan and the Riche Soldoier, who surrenders to the king.*

*On their return journey Arthur and his company stop at Bran de Lis's castle, only to find that Gawain's young son has been abducted by unknown men. Arthur and all the rest vow to go in search of the child, but Gawain says he 'knows nothing about searching for children', and that he will return to Britain instead, with whatever message Arthur may care to give him. The king tells him to return with Kay and Gifflet and to tell Queen Guinevere that he will meet her*



*in a month's time at a certain crossroads, after he has searched for Gawain's son. Gawain takes the message as requested, and at the end of the month Guinevere travels to the crossroads with her retinue.*

She said she would not move until the king arrived. Many counts and barons went, and had a great number of tents and lodges and pavilions pitched there. And so they stayed there and waited, as arranged, for their lord. The king's tent was pitched right by the crossroads. The queen had many good knights with her as she waited for her lord to return; they spent their time most pleasantly. The hunters had great success in the forests, for they were full of game.

**I**t was a beautiful evening, one Tuesday during their wait for the king. The queen was playing backgammon, her favourite game, with King Urien, and Sir Gawain and many good knights of worth were sitting watching. Darkness was just beginning to fall when they saw an armed knight approaching on a warhorse, and he rode right past them without uttering a word to anyone. The queen was annoyed by this, and said to them:

‘That knight showed little respect for me: he didn't turn to me or greet me in any way. I'd very much like to know his name and find out who he is.’ Then she said to Kay the seneschal: ‘Kay, mount your horse and bring him here to me.’

‘Willingly.’

And he went and armed at once; for truly, he always did his utmost to fulfil the queen's commands. He took off his costly gown, lined with ermine, and quickly armed and mounted and rode swiftly off in pursuit – he was certainly no slacker! – and raced on until he caught up with him, and cried:

‘Stop there, my good man! It was rash of you to go riding past the pavilions without asking leave of the queen and her company. Come back, and make it quick!’

But the knight replied: ‘God help me, sir, I didn't do it out of haughtiness; no-one could tell you of a more urgent task than mine, and I can't turn back now.’

‘God save me,’ said Kay, ‘I don't care what you say; if you don't turn back, vassal, I'll kill your horse.’

And the knight replied: ‘You'd be doing me a great dishonour – and cutting short my journey, for I'm no good at walking! I tell you, there isn't a worse walker than me anywhere! But my task's so urgent that I've still a very

long way to ride tonight, my good, kind sir. You can tell the queen, truly, that when I return I'll gladly speak with her, and beg her mercy for having not done so now.'

But Kay was unimpressed by this, and charged towards the knight to strike him. And when the knight saw him coming he sent his horse leaping forward, and struck Kay so hard as they met that he sent him flying head over heels across his saddle-bow. His legs flew skyward and he nearly broke his neck as the knight brought him crashing rudely to the ground. Then the knight came up and took his horse by the reins and rode away with it. And Kay returned shame-faced on foot, much to the delight of some hundred, though they did not dare breathe a word. He began to tell them a great lie about what had happened, such a lie as no-one had ever dreamed up before.

'My lady,' he said, 'that knight's a haughty villain! He said the most dreadful things about you that anyone's ever heard.'

But Sir Gawain replied: 'By all the world's saints, Sir Kay, don't ever say that a worthy man could insult my lady. Leave the knight alone; don't start talking wicked nonsense just because he took your horse – that would be shameful of you.'

'Go, dear nephew,' said the queen, 'and bring him here to me.'

'Gladly, my lady,' he replied.

Then his horse was brought to him, and he mounted, quite unarmed, dressed in a mantle of deep red cloth. He took a wand in his hand' and set off swiftly; but the knight had not been soft with his spurs, and it was almost dark when Gawain caught up with him. He greeted him most courteously, and the knight cheerfully drew rein when he heard Sir Gawain say:

'I beg you, sir, and the queen of all Britain and Ireland summons you, to come back to her. It would be most kind and courteous of you.'

And the knight replied: 'God help me, sir, I can't; but tell me your name – don't hide it from me.'

'Sir,' he said, 'my name is Gawain.'

'Ah, sir! You may be sure of this: if I could return for any man's sake, I would do so for yours more willingly than for anyone's, by the faith I owe Saint Peter of Rome. But I can't give up the journey I've undertaken – not for anyone. What more can I say? Only that no-one can complete the task but I. And yet I do believe that you could do so – but you'd have the utmost difficulty.'

'Sir,' said Sir Gawain, 'I beg you, with clasped hands and all courtesy, turn back with me and come to the queen, for the seneschal you saw earlier would have her take you for an arrogant villain and a shameless rogue. He's been spreading lies about you in the queen's pavilion before many of her

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\* i.e. as a sign of peace.

noble company – though most of them think it wrong of him.’

And the knight replied: ‘What do I care about Kay or anything he says? But for you, my very dear sir, I’ll do whatever you wish. But truly, my mission will have to be abandoned if I return, unless you take it up for me.’

Then Sir Gawain said to the knight, who was not base or haughty, or any of the things that Kay had claimed: ‘Many thanks, sir. I promise and swear to you, as I am a true knight, that I’ll give you all the help I can. By Christ who sees all, if I were the only man in the world I’d carry out this mission. If God preserves my strength you’ll not be let down.’

Then the knight replied: ‘I’ve great faith and trust in your friendship, good sir. I’m ready and willing now to go wherever you wish to take me.’

And so they started to make their way back. And as for Kay’s horse, I do believe they left it to wander at will; they did not deign to take it back, but rode swiftly on their way.

**A**nd I tell you truly that, as they came to the pavilions and were riding past the first of them, the knight suddenly gave a lurch and uttered a terrible scream of anguish, crying:

‘Oh, Sir Gawain! I’m dead, truly I am! And it’s a shame and a crime that I should be killed while under your protection! But I think you’ll do as you promised me, if it please God. So take my arms right away, and arm yourself and mount my horse, for he’ll lead you directly, without fail, on the great mission that I was to have carried out.’ Then he uttered another cry, and began to say: ‘Lord God, why have they killed me? I’ve never done them any wrong.’

Sir Gawain gazed at him, utterly bewildered by his cries, for he had not seen or heard anyone strike or aim a blow at him. Then he saw him topple forward in a faint across his horse’s neck, and he began to bleed heavily, for he had been struck through the body: from the other side jutted the head of a javelin that had been hurled at him. And Sir Gawain, weeping, said to him:

‘Sir, whoever dealt you this blow has done me a great disgrace.’

The knight fell dead without another word; and no-one had asked him his name or who he was, or where he was going or where he was from. Then a great crowd of people gathered there, and all began to weep most bitterly. They did not know who had killed him, but, rightly or wrongly, they accused Kay. They all said that Kay had killed him, but he denied it and objected vigorously. Sir Gawain blazed red with rage and fury, and he went and struck Kay so hard that he sent him staggering. He almost knocked him down, but the knights came and intervened. He would have made Kay suffer if they had not held him back so soon. And in the presence of them all he

cried in rage:

‘You’ll answer for his death yet, you utter traitor! I’m sure, quite sure, that he was killed by your hands!’

Kay vanished through the crowd as fast as he could, saying not a word in reply. And Sir Gawain took the body and had it carried on his shield straight to the queen’s pavilion. He wept as he bowed to her and said:

‘My lady, here is the knight who was to have been brought to you. He was coming without the slightest objection, and now he’s been killed while under your protection: that brings shame upon you, as everyone knows. Here is the body – what a pity it is! – of a man who was courteous and wise. And I think it’ll bring *me* disgrace, as well; no man has ever suffered such dishonour as I have tonight, for I tell you truly, it seems as though I betrayed him.’

Then he had the body disarmed, and they all went to gaze at it; and the knights and barons mourned for his body and his beauty, saying: ‘God! Where was such a handsome knight born?’

Not one of them recognised him or knew which land he was from. What more can I tell you? Sir Gawain took the knight’s arms at once and armed, and mounted the horse that the knight who now lay dead in the pavilion had been riding.

The queen, weeping with sorrow and anguish, asked him: ‘What is it, dear nephew? What are you going to do? Don’t hide it from me or keep it secret – tell me, my good, dear sir.’

‘Truly, my lady, I can’t tell you, for I don’t know myself. But I tell you this in all seriousness: I must carry out this mission even if it leads me to death, for I gave the knight my promise. I can’t tell you anything more, but this horse is to lead me directly on the path and way – though I don’t know where or to what land, or the task I’m meant to pursue. My lady, have the knight’s death examined and investigated, so that I know the truth when I return. I’ll never be truly happy again until I’ve avenged him.’

With that he took his leave and departed; he would not stay that night at all, in spite of the prayers of all the knights and barons. They were distraught at seeing their lord’s good nephew leave; they could not say or guess to what land he would go. But Sir Gawain set off, leaving the dead knight in their hands.

**A**ccording to my source it was a dark, black night, and it thundered in long peals, and rained, and there was such a terrible gale that trees were torn apart. Lightning bolts fell thick and fast, and they were so terrible that it is a wonder that the noble Sir Gawain did not die. But his great righteousness and his generous heart saved him wherever he was. And I tell you truly, that

night in particular he was protected by God, whose aid is unfailing.

All that night the noble Gawain journeyed on as his horse took him, until he came to a chapel at a great and beautiful crossroads in the middle of the forest. To escape from the storm that assailed him and the thunder and lightning that beset him from every side, he came to the door, and found it open. And he could see the altar, quite uncovered, with no cloth or anything on top except a great candlestick, beautifully made of fine gold, with a tall and brightly burning candle which shed a brilliant light. Seeing this, Sir Gawain began to think that he would go inside and rest until the weather had calmed and the mighty wind had dropped a little. So in he went, still on horseback, and looked up and down and here and there and right and left; and then he saw, coming straight through a window behind the altar, a hand, so black and ghastly that no-one has ever seen one so dreadful; and it grasped the candle and snuffed it out. Then there came a voice, groaning so terribly that the whole chapel shook. The horse snorted and reared violently, almost throwing Sir Gawain down. He raised his right hand and crossed himself and rode out of the chapel. And the terrible weather abated then, and the torrential rain stopped dead; there was no more wind and not a drop of rain: the night became clear and pure. Sir Gawain rode swiftly away.

No-one should repeat or describe the great wonders he encountered, which gave him many fearful moments. Anyone who does so will be sorry, for they are part of the mystery of the Grail. Anyone who decides to tell of them, except as they should be told, will suffer great ill and woe.

After that, I tell you truly, Gawain rode on all night without stopping, in consternation and dismay and fear, until the morning when he saw day break. Then he surveyed the land and was amazed, for in one night he had crossed the whole land of Britain. He then passed into a great forest, and his journey through it lasted from the morning until the sun was about to set, when he emerged into open country and saw the sea. The good horse that carried him galloped swiftly down towards it. Sir Gawain had stayed awake all night and ridden hard all day, and had been swept by gales and rain, and had had nothing to eat or drink; he was terribly tired and rode now very heavily, for he so longed to sleep that he could hardly keep upright. The horse was tugging and pulling at the bit, and Gawain loosened his grip a little, letting him go as he pleased; and the horse bore him on until, just as night fell, he reached the sea. But that, much to his vexation, was as far as he could go.

But then the horse headed for a causeway that he saw before him, stretching far out to sea. As soon as the good horse reached it he set out along it eagerly. The causeway was not wide, but it was planted on both sides with cypresses, pines and laurels, and the branches of the trees met overhead

to cover it completely. Sir Gawain bent down and peered right along the causeway, and there, far off in the distance, he saw a glow like a blazing fire. The horse wanted to go there right away, but Sir Gawain would not let him because of the raging sea: it was pounding at the causeway as though it would smash it to pieces and tear down all the trees, which crashed together constantly and howled in agony as the mighty gale assailed them. Sir Gawain was afraid, and rightly so, to set out along the causeway, and said he would wait for day to break before he would attempt it. But the horse was leaping and rearing and making such a storm that Gawain could not calm him; and he took the bit between his teeth and wrenched the reins from Gawain's hands, and whether his rider liked it or not, he leapt forward on to the causeway. And what did the good knight do then? He gave him free rein and let him go as he pleased, and gave him hard and frequent pricks with his spurs, and the horse galloped onward. Sir Gawain rode on until midnight, and still did not find the light he had seen.

**B**ut he kept to the causeway and journeyed on until he came to a great hall, tall and wide and long indeed: it was easily the length of a crossbow shot. He found a great crowd of people there, and dismounted in their midst and was received with great honour. And the common people said to him:

'May your coming be blessed and honoured, good sir; we have yearned and longed for it!'

Then they led him to the fire, and when they had disarmed him a boy brought a mantle lined with grey and white fur in which he dressed him. But after he had been sitting by the fire for a while and they had seen his face, they stared at him in bewilderment and whispered to each other:

'God, who's this? This isn't the one.'

What should I tell you? Suddenly, in the winking of an eye, the great crowd vanished as though they had never been there. Sir Gawain was left in consternation, most upset to find that every one of the crowd had gone. He was alarmed and dismayed at being left alone, and worried, too, having seen them whispering. No-one should be surprised if he was apprehensive. Vexed and wary, not feeling at all secure, he looked down the hall and saw, right in the middle, an immensely long bier. As soon as he saw this he raised his hand and crossed himself, for I tell you, he was afraid. On the bier a great cloth of red Grecian samite had been laid in honour, with a cross of golden thread in the middle; it covered the bier entirely. And at the four corners burned great candles, standing in four candlesticks which were worth a fortune – the gold would have weighed at least a hundred marks.\* Four rich

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\* A mark equals eight ounces.

and costly censers of fine gold likewise hung from the candlesticks, all full of spices yielding the sweetest fragrance; I tell you truly, the scent they gave was so wonderful that no man has ever smelled anything so fine. On the samite that I've described there was just one half of a broken sword – the upper half, with the sword's point – lying, according to the text, right on the dead man's breast. Sir Gawain's head and heart sank; he was alarmed and afraid at being there all alone. His dismay and anguish and his worry and confusion were such that he did not know what to do. The bier and the knight who lay upon it filled him with awe. And in the midst of his consternation he looked up and saw, first of all, a magnificent silver cross enter, laden with the richest and most miraculous gems. A tall cleric was holding the cross, and it took all his strength; on top of his alb he wore a splendid tunic of sumptuous cloth from Constantinople. After this he saw a great procession of canons, all in ceremonial dress, with rich silk copes. They gathered all around the bier, and immediately began the vigil for the dead with all honour, singing it with a simple grace. And as they sang four clerics perfumed the air around the bier with the four censers that hung from the candlesticks.

When they had finished the service and all departed, the hall filled with people again. And I tell you truly, you never saw such bitter mourning since the hour you were born as then began around the bier. Sir Gawain prayed to God to keep him from all trouble, and showed a bold front. Then, still deep in worried thought, he sat down, for he had been standing for a long time, and buried his eyes in his hands.

But then he heard a great tumult approaching, and he looked up instantly and saw the hall filled with the people he had found when he first arrived. He saw the first of them holding white napkins and great tablecloths, whiter than lilies or snow, which they spread upon the tables. Then out of a chamber came a tall and strong-limbed knight, who seemed to be a wise and noble man indeed. He was not very old but his hair was flecked with white, and he was most nobly dressed. He was carrying a sceptre in his hand, and on his head he wore a crown of fine and pure and blazing gold. There was not a more handsome or distinguished man in all Christendom. Then they cried:

'Bring water for the king!'

It was brought, and he washed, and then commanded that water be provided for Sir Gawain. Then he took him by the right hand, and courteously and graciously seated him at his side to dine. He did all he could to honour him. And as soon as the king and all of them were seated, loaves were set on all the tables. The rich Grail, without anybody carrying it, served them splendidly, coming and going swiftly before all the knights. And the butler served them with wine most handsomely in cups of silver and fine gold. And meanwhile the Grail passed back and forth, and the good knight, I assure

you, could not understand who was carrying it. It served at least seven full courses, and served them richly and handsomely to all the tables in great silver bowls: as soon as one course was removed, so the next was presented – it served them beautifully indeed. Sir Gawain gazed at it, astounded at the way it served: there one moment, here the next. He thought it truly incredible that it could come and go so rapidly, serving all the knights.

When they had eaten at leisure, the king gave orders to clear the tables. And as soon as he said the word, there was no-one, great or small, who did not go immediately, with the lord at the head of them all, leaving the tables completely empty. Don't imagine that Sir Gawain was untroubled at being left alone: he was quite dismayed, and prayed to the Lord God to do all in his power to guard him against distress and harm and sorcery. And just then, at the head of the high table, he saw a lance with a head as white as snow. It was propped upright in a rich silver vase, with two candles burning before it, shedding a great light throughout the hall. From the tip of the head sprang a trickle of blood which ran down the lance and into the rich basin. All around the lance, right down to the grip, were traced the paths of the drops as they fell into the vessel. But no matter how much it bled, the vase would not be filled, for the blood passed through a broad pipe of dazzling green emerald into a channel of gold, which, by a brilliant and ingenious plan, flowed out of the hall – but he could not see where to. Sir Gawain said to himself that he had never seen such a marvel, and he was astonished by the lance, which was made of wood and yet bled.

While he was pondering on all this he heard the door of a chamber open; through it he saw the lord appear, holding the sword that Gawain had brought there. You must understand that this was the one that had belonged to the knight I mentioned earlier, who was killed outside the queen's pavilion. The king now addressed Sir Gawain, bidding him rise from his seat, and led him up to the bier. The king began to weep bitterly over the body that lay upon it, and you'll now hear what he said:

'God grant that the great misfortune lying here, which is causing the kingdom to perish, may be avenged, so that the people may be happy again and return to live once more in the land which has been so ravaged and ruined by this death and by this sword.'

Then he drew it, and it was broken: he was holding only one half. Weeping piteously, he offered it to Sir Gawain, and the good knight took it. The other missing half was lying on the dead man's breast. The king took it in his hands and said this, no more, no less:

'My good, dear, gentle sir, this sword, if it please God, will be repaired by you. Put the two pieces together. And know this, in all truthfulness: you need have no doubt that, if the two halves join together, you will be the finest



knight anywhere in the whole wide world.'

Then the good knight took it and set the two fragments together; but he could not join them in such a way as to mend the sword. The king was filled with grief. He very gently placed it straight back on the dead man's breast where it had lain before, and sheathed the other half again; and I tell you, he was utterly distraught that they had not been joined together. He carried the sword in one hand, and took his guest Sir Gawain by the other, and led him into a chamber.

He found a good number of knights there, and a great crowd of other people. They sat down before a bed on a costly silken cloth covered with wheeled patterns. The king said to him softly:

'My good, dear friend, don't be upset by what I tell you. You have not achieved the mission on which you came; but if God were henceforth to increase your prowess so as to bring about your return, then you might achieve it and mend the sword. Know this, in certain truth: no-one can achieve the mission if he cannot repair the sword. The one who had begun it has remained in your land; I don't know what's kept him, but we've been waiting for him for a long time. But truly, I know it took great courage for you to come here; if you'd like any of the riches that we have in this land, you'll have them willingly: nothing will be denied you. And ask whatever you like about the wonders you've seen, good sir, and we'll tell you the truth about them – you'll have no lies from us.'

Sir Gawain had stayed awake and been sorely taxed all the night before, and he dearly longed to sleep. But he yearned still more to hear about the wonders he had seen, and he forced himself to stay awake, and asked about the things that puzzled him:

'Sir, I saw a lance in the hall just now, bleeding heavily. I beg you now, in God's name, tell me truly where the blood comes from so copiously, springing from the lance's point; and tell me about the knight who lies dead on the bier in the hall; and how the sword will be repaired; and please tell me, for I'd love to know, how the body is to be avenged.'

'Since you've asked, dear friend, you shall know at once, without more ado. No-one before has ever dared ask what you have asked me, and it shall not be kept from you. I'll tell you first about the lance and its beginning: how great misfortune and woe came of it, but also great honour – God so arranged it, for our well-being and salvation. It is the very lance, undoubtedly, with which the Son of God was struck in the side, right to the heart, on the day when He was hung on the cross. The one who struck Him was called Longinus, but later he was granted mercy, and his soul is safe and at peace. Ever since that day the lance has bled constantly, and it will shed blood in the place you saw everlastingly, until the world's end: so God has instituted, for

it will not move from there until the day when He comes to judge the living and the dead. It seems to me, my good, dear sir, that the men who beat Him and nailed Him on the cross should be deeply afraid. When they see Our Lord bleed as freshly as He did then, they'll be in great torment; but we'll be rejoicing, for His blood will be our ransom. I can't tell you, sir, the joy which that blow has won for us! But the other blow – the blow dealt with this badly made and tempered sword – has robbed us of that joy: we've lost it all. Such a foul and evil blow has never been struck by any sword, for it has brought the ruin of many dukes and princes and barons, many ladies and girls and noble maidens. You've heard a good deal about the great disaster which brought us here. The kingdom of Logres and the whole of the country was ruined by the blow that this sword dealt. And I shan't keep from you who the man is who lost his life, or who it was who struck him; you've never heard such an astounding story.'

**A**t that he began to weep, and as he wept he told the truth of the matter, which he knew so well. But just as he began he saw that Sir Gawain was asleep. He did not want to wake him; instead he cut short his story and left him to rest. And Sir Gawain slept all night, not waking until morning, when he found himself beside the sea on a towering cliff and saw his arms and his horse beside him in the shadow of a rock. He was utterly bewildered, for he could not see any castle, house, hall, wall or tower.

Then he said: 'It's no good staying here.' And he fetched his arms and armed swiftly, and mounted his horse at once. He knew he had disgraced himself by falling asleep, for through his slumbering he had lost the chance to hear the great wonders of the castle; he grieved bitterly in his heart.

'Oh God!' he cried, 'the noble, worthy, wise and courteous king was telling me so graciously the secrets of all the great wonders, and I fell asleep – it grieves me.'

Then he said he would devote all his energy to feats of arms, and willingly suffer toil and hardship, to see if he could find that court again, so that he could ask all about the Grail, and how it had done the service he had seen the night before in the rich hall where he had been. Never, he said, would he return to Britain until he had accomplished more knightly deeds than was his custom. With that he set off and rode swiftly across the country.

Never have eyes beheld a land so rich in wood and water and meadowland; yet this was the ruined kingdom. It was only since the previous midnight that God had restored the rivers to their courses in that land, as Sir Gawain now saw them. And all the woods, I do believe, had turned green again as soon as he had asked why the lance bled so terribly. He might have

peopled the kingdom once again, but this was all he achieved because he had asked nothing more. So all the people who saw him pass blessed him, but also cried to him loudly, saying:

‘Sir, you’ve ruined and betrayed us! You’ve brought us great comfort, most certainly, and should be happy and joyful; but truly, you should be distressed, too, and should hate yourself for having failed to hear what the Grail was for. No-one could describe the great joy that would have come from that, and you should now be sad and grieving.’

So said all who saw him, though they said it with great love. And I tell you, he wandered through many lands and toiled hard in feats of arms; and it was a long time before he would return to Britain. I haven’t time to tell you more about the battles Gawain won or the marvels he encountered; or to say more about the knight, or from what family or land he came, who was killed at the queen’s pavilion.

(SYNOPSIS of VERSES 13603–15322)

*Gawain’s son, never found by Arthur and his search-party,\* has been taken into the household of a young lady. One day he goes riding with her through a forest, and they meet a knight who passes them by without addressing her. The lady tells Gawain’s son to go and ask the knight his name, and to strike him if he refuses to give it. Off he goes and, when the knight does indeed refuse, the boy unintentionally kills him. A knight again passes them by, and again the boy is sent in pursuit, but this time he is wounded because he does not want to use a brand new shield presented to him by the lady, for fear of damaging it. He returns to the lady, who promises to give him a better shield, and she leads him to a pavilion beside a ford, where he is to challenge all who try to cross.*

*One afternoon, after waiting at the ford all day without anyone coming, the boy has a fierce fight with an unknown knight. The knight, seeing how young the boy is, asks him his name, and when he learns that he is Gawain’s son he surrenders to him and to the lady. Then the knight reveals that he is none other than Gawain, and they go together to King Arthur’s court at Carlion, where they are given a joyful reception, and Gawain tells the court of his adventures, and of the Grail, the lance, the bier and the sword. He hears that his brother Guerrebet and others have gone in search of him through many lands.*

*One night a storm keeps Arthur awake, and as he looks out over the sea he sees a light like a star approaching. As it draws nearer he sees that it is a boat being pulled by a swan. He goes down to meet it with two chamberlains, and*

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\* Above, p. 135.

## First Continuation

*finds a dead knight lying on board with the broken end of a lance sticking in his chest. Arthur also finds letters addressed to him, asking that the dead man, who had been a king, be placed in his hall for a year and a day. If the lance has not by then been removed, the body may be buried, but if anyone can pull out the lance-stump he must avenge the knight's death by striking the murderer in the same place with that same iron lance-head. Arthur and his chamberlains carry the body to the hall.*

*Next morning Gawain and the other knights are surprised to find it there. Arthur tells them what the letters had said, from which they learn also that anyone who fails to avenge the knight after drawing the lance from the body 'will be disgraced and shamed as Guerrehet was in the garden'. They have no idea what this may mean.*

*Guerrehet, in his search for his brother Gawain, comes one day to a most beautiful castle, but finds it deserted. He wanders from room to room and then, opening a window, he sees a garden full of rich and precious fruits, with two pavilions pitched there. He notices a dwarf going from one pavilion to the other, so decides there must be people there. He climbs through the window into the garden and enters one of the tents, where he finds a girl sitting nursing a wounded knight. He greets the knight, but the knight is furious at Guerrehet for intruding. A boy who is waiting upon the knight tells his master not to worry, for Guerrehet will soon see the Little Knight, who is sure to bring him to shame.*

*Almost at once a remarkably small knight appears and challenges Guerrehet to battle. In the ensuing combat Guerrehet is defeated, and is forced to promise either to return in a year's time to fight again or to serve the wounded knight as a weaver along with many other prisoners. Guerrehet opts for the former.*

*But as he leaves the garden and climbs back through the window, he finds the previously deserted castle packed with people who taunt him mercilessly for his defeat at the hands of the tiny knight, and assure him that his disgrace will be made known everywhere. Even the townspeople outside the castle hurl abuse – and rubbish – at him.*

*Hearing that his brother Gawain is back with King Arthur, Guerrehet returns and finds the king and Gawain at Tintagel. Some time later the knights at court ask Guerrehet about the strange reference in the letters to his 'disgrace in the garden'. Guerrehet says that the letters must be false – he has suffered no such disgrace.*

*Later still, standing beside the body, which he deeply dislikes as a reminder of his shameful defeat, Guerrehet lays a hand upon the lance-stump. A splinter sticks in his finger and the lance-head comes clean out of the body. He furiously takes it away and attaches it to one of his own lances.*

*At Easter, while the court is at Carlion, Kay is puzzled by Guerrehet's*

*constant gloom and asks Arthur to find out the reason. Arthur does not want to ask such an insensitive question, but he agrees to fulfil Kay's request, and when commanded to speak, Guerrehet reveals what happened in the garden, and then leaves the court at once.*

*Guerrehet returns to the castle on the day that he had promised, and encounters the little knight again, riding towards him on his tiny horse, 'looking like a monkey on a greyhound'. They fight again as arranged, but this time Guerrehet kills the little knight. His master, the knight who had before lain wounded in the tent, now fights Guerrehet, and is struck through the chest and killed with the lance-head that Guerrehet had taken from the body in Arthur's hall. A young lady now comes and tells Guerrehet that he has avenged the dead knight. She takes him to a castle that had belonged to the avenged knight, where he is received with the greatest rejoicing.*

*He goes to sleep on a beautiful cloth, and the next morning is below the city of Carlion, lying on a rich bed in the boat pulled by the swan. King Arthur enters the boat and finds Guerrehet asleep. The lady who has accompanied Guerrehet on his voyage tells Arthur that the dead knight was King Brangemor, the son of a mortal father and a fairy mother, and that, when the body leaves the court, King Arthur will shortly see something wonderful. The body is returned to the swan-boat, and Arthur and his knights watch it sail swiftly away.*

*The First Continuation ends here.*

## THE SECOND CONTINUATION

I'll tell you no more about them just yet; now you're going to hear about the bold knight who had been searching through many kingdoms for the court which housed the bleeding lance. He suffered so much pain and toil, without ever finding it, that it would be hard to recount the places where Perceval went and the wonders he encountered. But I'll tell you this much: one Tuesday he left the hermit to whom he had confessed the sins he had committed,\* and journeyed through many lands and encountered many trials and adventures which are not recorded. But one Saturday morning he was riding along a road at the edge of a forest – a beautiful forest, most pleasing to him – and came upon a wasteland. He had to ride right across this wilderness for two days without food or drink until, on the third day, he found himself in a plain, and journeyed on until the third hour†.

**T**hen he looked around, lost and confused, and there in the plain to his left he saw a strong and handsome castle; he could see no building, house or hut, outside the surrounding wall. The walls, as he saw, were so strong and high that no assault could do them harm, though there was no ditch around them. Above the gateway was a tower, very strong, very rich and very handsome: no man has ever seen one so fair. And that was the only tower or turret. The gate was entirely of ebony, a wood which will never be burned by fire and will never rot. Perceval, as soon as he saw it, said to himself that the castle stood in a very poor place. He rode around it until he came before the gate, but found it closed. He gazed at it for a long while, for never in his life had he seen a gate of such beauty. Only the finest of craftsmen could have made it: the nails were of gold, as were the rich and handsome hinges; and fixed to the gate was a ring of pure gold, from which hung a splendid horn of ivory, whiter than snow, by a long strap of gold-embroidered cloth. It was magnificently adorned. Perceval went straight up to the horn, and vowed that God should never lend him aid again if he left there before he had sounded the horn. He took off his helmet straight away, and having bared his head he blew the horn with such awesome strength that he filled the whole plain all around with the horn's voice. He had not paused long after sounding the

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\* i.e. in Chrétien: above pp. 75-76

† 9 o'clock in the morning.

horn before he heard, he thought, people moving and talking in the castle. A man was saying:

‘Did you hear? The horn has never been blown like that before! Whoever blew it so powerfully must be full of valour. Bring me my arms at once!’

Perceval was bewildered when he heard this, for he could see no-one. Then he peered through a chink in the gate and saw a boy going past carrying a gold shield finely decorated with *gules*\* and emblazoned with two lions rampant made of ermine. The shield’s strap was of a rich, gold-embroidered cloth, and the handles were made of a rich Grecian silk: it was splendidly made indeed. The boy who carried it entered a great hall, and I can tell you without a word of a lie that Perceval would have dearly loved to own such a magnificent shield, for he thought it very beautiful.

He stood there for a long time, hearing no-one. Then he blew the horn again, very loudly, a good deal more so than before, and at once heard a man say:

‘Thanks be to God! I’ve heard wonders now, indeed I have! For truly, the finest knight living in the world has sounded the horn, and will soon be well and truly tested!’

Then Perceval took the horn again and blew it a third time, giving it such a mighty breath that the whole castle resounded.

‘By the Lord who never lies,’ a man said, ‘this knight will conquer anyone he meets in combat.’

Perceval heard every word of this. Then he saw a fully armed knight come out of the hall, mounted on a most handsome charger covered with Grecian samite emblazoned with a snow-white lion. He was accompanied by a host of knights, ladies, boys and squires. And straight away they unbarred the rich and finely wrought gate, and when the worthy and noble Perceval saw them he drew back hurriedly to avoid the coming throng. There was a beautiful almond tree in a meadow outside the castle, and he stopped there and waited quietly. And the other knight rode swiftly from the town in his splendid arms, most richly adorned. A crown of fine gold that he wore upon his helmet suited him perfectly, and I can assure you that there were many precious stones set all around it: it was a beautiful piece indeed, and a sign that he was a king – which he was: of Ireland and of Norway. And as soon as the king rode out, many people recognised Perceval’s horse and the shield he bore. The king’s heart was filled with pity, and he said, with great affection:

‘Good Lord God, I believe my dear friend has lost his life; for since

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\* ‘Gueules’ were pieces of skin cut from the throat of certain animals and used to decorate shields. Later the word came to mean the colour red in heraldry.

he went to Britain I haven't seen him or heard any word of him, but now I see his horse, I think, beneath that knight who's carrying a shield exactly like his. Oh God! he was born in an evil hour! Dear Lord God, it's a great loss for this land if he's been killed.'

With that he galloped into the meadow and challenged Perceval fiercely on the spot. And I tell you, they were both swift to thrust in their spurs, and they lowered their pennons and attacked each other vigorously; and as they met they struck each other on the shield so hard that they made their lances bend; and the Lord of the Horn smashed his and shivered it down to his fist, such were his strength and worth; and Perceval struck him so fiercely that he bore him to the ground; and the two horses collided so mightily, head on, that they came crashing to the ground in a heap. And when the good knight Perceval saw that his horse was down, he leapt straight to his feet and cut off the horse's head with his sword, crying:

'You've disgraced me! My body has never fallen before, and it would still be untoppled were it not for you, you wretched packhorse!'

But enough of that. The Lord of the Horn came to the attack, and Perceval waited for him; the attacker struck, assailing him in a fury. He attacked most fearfully, and Perceval defended brilliantly. Then you would have seen shields pierced and helmets smashed, and they began such a mighty battle that, I promise you, no-one has ever seen such a fearsome combat between two knights. Perceval saw that the man he was fighting was a fine knight indeed, and worthy and powerful and fierce, and he feared him at first and defended himself cautiously. He felt sure he was of lesser worth than the knight who was assailing him so hard, for he had been a proven knight before Perceval was even dubbed, and he was greatly in awe of him. The knight was dealing mighty blows wherever he saw the chance, so much so that Perceval realised he was dead if he did not put up a better defence. So he came swiftly to the attack, and in no time at all he had smashed apart the shield he had so coveted. Then you would have seen some mighty blows and a fierce battle, tightly locked, as they grappled and struggled ferociously, each striving whole-heartedly to ruin and confound his foe. The battle lasted a long while, until finally, I tell you truly, all those watching wept with pity for them both, truly anguished at having no power to part them. The noble knights fought on until Perceval sensed his foe was tiring and greatly weakening. He pressed him harder and harried him so terribly that he began to drive him back. Then the Lord of the Horn cried:

'Hold, friend! Stop your blows! Don't hide your name from me, for I'd like to know it, if you please.'

And Perceval replied truthfully, saying: 'Sir, my name is Perceval.'

'You're the finest and most renowned knight,' said the Lord of the



Horn, ‘ever born of a mother. God help me, I’d be a fool indeed to fight on now! Have mercy, sir, and take my sword: this battle is over, for you’ve vanquished and conquered me. I didn’t think there was a man alive who could defeat me or provide such a challenge. Sir, I yield myself and my sword and my land and everything I own to your command, for I know no-one of greater worth than you.’

‘Sir,’ replied Perceval, ‘I thank you deeply for this honour; and I’ll forgive you all my ill-will, provided that you’ll go and surrender to King Arthur on my behalf.’

And the Lord of the Horn agreed to set out as soon as he was healed and had recovered, for his strength had been gravely sapped. And thus they made peace. And straight away the boys and squires came running into the meadow to unlace their helmets; they disarmed them with every care, and then led them both into the castle, where they provided them with all the comfort they could, laying them down in two beautiful beds which were made up side by side. No man was ever honoured as highly as the good knight Perceval. The lord provided the most splendid lodging, placing the service of his guest before everything else, for he was very fond of him. No-one could describe the honour that was paid to him during this stay.

He stayed at the castle without a worry or a care until, one day, he heard that there was a marvellous pillar on the great peak of the Mont Dolerous; in this pillar there were many holes, but no-one could tether his horse to it\* unless he was a very fine knight. When Perceval heard this he said:

‘In God’s name, what am I doing here? Truly, I shan’t rest until I find that pillar, for if I could go there I would know for certain whether I’m a good knight.’

The lord had everything necessary prepared, and Perceval armed without delay and mounted and set off, while the Lord of the Horn made his way to King Arthur’s court, for he had to yield himself as his prisoner.

**H**e kept to his path and journeyed on and came straight to Carlion, where he was directed to the king. The king had assembled all the good, esteemed knights of his kingdom to hold court on All Saints’ Day, as you have heard.† And it was on that very day, I assure you, that they were greeted by this fair adventure, as the King of the Horn arrived just as the king was sitting down to dine. He dismounted at once and came straight up to the table, and spoke most courteously, saying:

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\* The manuscript says ‘lead his horse to it’, but that is inconsistent with what happens later.

† It is briefly mentioned at the end of the First Continuation.

'God bless you, King, and all your fair company.'

And the king did not stay silent, but said: 'I bid you welcome.'

Then the Lord of the Horn replied: 'On behalf of the most valiant knight in the world, Perceval the Welshman, I surrender to you, my good lord king. There is no land or fief under heaven where there lives a finer knight than Perceval: he's a bold and worthy knight indeed. I surrender to you on his behalf, sire, and I tell you truly, I am king and lord of Ireland. And I can tell you this much from him: that he will never return here, and will never stay in any town for two whole days on any account, until, he says, he has found the bleeding lance.'

The king leapt to his feet when he heard this news, for it was a delight and a joy to him. He came up and embraced the knight, and kissed his eyes and then his face; for never in his life before had he been so overjoyed by any news. Then he said:

'Know this, my lords, each and every one of you: by the King who never lies, I shall set out tomorrow as soon as it is light, to search for the good knight. And as long as I have health and life I shall not stop searching through strange lands and countries till I find him. You're all proven traitors: you should have gone to seek him long ago!'

All the good knights of worth humbly begged the king's forgiveness, and vowed that they would set out whenever he wished and search for Perceval everywhere: no matter how distant the land, they would search until they found him. But I'll say no more about them for now, for that's not part of my purpose here; I must tell you about Perceval, word for word, without digression, and what happened when he left the Castle of the Horn.

(SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 20007–22551)

*Perceval comes to a river and is sure that it is the one where (in Chrétien's romance) he had first seen the Fisher King. He rides along it and comes to a little castle where a young lady offers to ferry him across. But Perceval's horse will not board her boat, and another ferryman tells Perceval that the girl means to drown him. Perceval crosses with the ferryman instead, who shows him the way to the castle of the Fisher King, but Perceval turns aside and heads for a beautiful castle that he had seen from the other side of the river.*

*The hall is deserted. Perceval sits on a luxurious bed and suddenly sees a door open. He goes through it and finds a magnificent chessboard with the pieces all set up. He moves a pawn and to his amazement the opposing pieces counter his move. The pieces play against him and checkmate him three times. Enraged,*

*he sweeps the pieces into the skirt of his hauberk, and is about to hurl them from a window into the river below when a beautiful girl appears at another window and tells him to stop. He agrees to put the chessmen back if she will come and keep him company, and when she does so he finds her so beautiful that he falls in love with her at once. He says that he loves her more than his life, and he kisses her and 'would have done more if he had been able and if she had consented', but she says she will grant him her love only if he brings her the head of a white stag which he must hunt in a park nearby. She lends him her dog, which he must take care to bring back. He promises to do so, and sets off with the dog.*

*He finds the stag almost at once and chases it and kills it and cuts off its head. But just as he does so a girl rides swiftly down, seizes the dog and carries it off. Perceval catches her, but she refuses to return the dog, because he has taken her stag without her leave and she hates the girl who sent him to kill it. She will return it only if Perceval will go to a nearby tomb where he will meet a knight to whom he must say: 'Knight, what are you doing here?'. As Perceval calls to the knight through a window in the side of the tomb, the knight appears behind him, clad all in black, and forces Perceval to do battle. While they are locked in combat another knight rides down and carries off the dog and the stag's head. Perceval is finding the black knight a formidable opponent, but he gets the upper hand and forces the knight to take refuge in the tomb. He cries out to him for news of where the dog will have been taken, but the black knight will not reply. Perceval rides off in despair, but soon sees the girl who had taken the dog the first time. But as he rides swiftly in pursuit she will not answer any of his questions, telling him nothing about the black knight or the knight who took the stag's head and the dog.*

*Perceval now rides on and comes to a castle, but nobody comes to greet him. Beside the door of a chamber he sees a Danish axe hanging. He takes it and enters the chamber, and as he looks through a window he sees a tent pitched in a meadow below, guarded by a lion. He finds a stairway down to the meadow and the lion attacks him, but he kills it and enters the tent with his sword covered in the lion's blood. This terrifies a girl inside the tent, and her cries wake a knight who is sleeping there. He is enraged at the death of his lion, and he and Perceval engage in a furious combat. Perceval is victorious, but he spares the knight's life on condition that he will surrender to King Arthur. The knight agrees, but unfortunately for Perceval, he knows nothing about the knight who has stolen the dog and the stag's head. The defeated knight, whose name is Abriorin, surrenders to Arthur at Carlion, and Arthur frees him and makes him a knight of the Round Table.*

*About noon, Perceval finds a dead knight lying beneath an oak with a lance-wound and a sword-wound showing that he has been killed in battle. Then Perceval finds a girl sitting mournfully beside a spring, and when she tells him*

*that she has lost her sweetheart and describes his shield, Perceval has to tell her that he is lying dead in the forest. She faints, and when she comes to, she says that the knight's name was Odinal.*

*Perceval rides on and comes to a river, and on the other side he sees a beautiful tower. He crosses a bridge and enters it, but finds it completely empty. But there is a table set up ready for a meal, and so, after setting his horse free to graze outside, Perceval sits down and eats and drinks his fill. Then suddenly a girl enters in a miserable state, thin and haggard and raggedly dressed. She tells Perceval that he will pay dearly for his meal, for the tower belongs to a giant who kills any knight who comes there, and who has held her captive for two and a half years. She advises Perceval to arm at once. The giant appears and kills Perceval's horse with his club. Perceval advances on him, determined to avenge his horse, and inflicts three terrible wounds upon the giant and kills him. He stays in the tower that night, and leaves next morning on a black horse which has been kept in a cellar.*

*As Perceval rides on he meets a Welshman running through the forest, who tells him that he has seen a terrifying crested serpent, and that if Perceval carries on he will encounter a fearful adventure. Perceval now comes to a ford in a river, and beside it is an inscribed marble stone and a rich tent; and outside the tent is a white horse, a white shield and a white lance. He decides that white contains only good, and goes to take lodging in the tent. But when he lets his horse drink at the ford a knight appears and rebukes him for it. The knight takes the white shield and mounts the white horse and does battle with Perceval. Perceval wins and orders the white knight to surrender to King Arthur. The knight tells him that he has been defending the ford against all comers for five years, as the stone's inscription instructed him to do, fighting any knight who tried to water his horse there. Perceval refuses to assume the task of guarding it in his place, and they go their separate ways next morning. The white knight finds Arthur at Winchester, and is accepted as a member of the king's household.*

*Perceval journeys on and spends a sleepless and hungry night in the forest, watching over his horse, for want of anywhere to lodge. The next day he sees a beautiful girl sitting beneath a tree. She tells him that she is waiting for her sweetheart to come, and he does so, and challenges Perceval to fight. The battle is long, and the knight, exasperated by Perceval's endurance, asks him his name. When he hears that he is Perceval he throws down his sword and embraces him and admits defeat, and reveals that he is Gawain's son, 'the Fair Unknown'. He says that Gawain is hoping to see Perceval at court at Christmas. Perceval, the Fair Unknown and his sweetheart all spend the night at a nearby castle, and go their separate ways next day, parting at a fork in the road.*

And Perceval rode on alone all day until noon, when he emerged from the

forest and came upon a most beautiful land, finely laboured on all sides, filled with wheat and barley like the lands of the abbeys of Citeaux or Clairvaux. Perceval greatly wondered to what country he had come, for it was at least two years since he had seen a land so richly endowed with all good things, so plentiful and populous. Then he looked across the country and saw a very fine castle, of which all the walls and battlements were whiter than new-fallen snow. And to describe it truthfully, it had five splendid and handsome towers, all identical: one in the middle and four all round. But they were not all of the same colour: the one in the centre was red – don't look so surprised! – and the others were all whiter than snow settled on a bough. The sea beat at the wall's foot. The River Hongres<sup>\*</sup> flowed on the other side, and it was always full of salmon, pike, perch and sturgeon. There was a great township inside the walls, nobly peopled with knights and serving-men, burgesses and merchants, liberal, courteous and well-bred, trading in furs of white and grey, in silk, samite and the finest cloth, in Byzantine and Norman coin, in horses and vessels of gold and silver and every other material, in pepper and wax, iron and metal, in cloves and zedoary and spices of many kinds, most precious and expensive. There was such an abundance of all these things that never before has any man heard of its like in any castle or city. It all came by sea from Alexandria and Slavonia, from Babylon and Aumariel<sup>†</sup>, from great Mecca and Calabria, from Jerusalem and Caesarea, from Acre, which stands at the ocean's edge, and from beyond the Saracen lands: the abundant riches of the castle came from everywhere.

There were two abbeys in the town, magnificently housed, with beautiful churches, handsome towers and splendid belfries, richly roofed with lead. Perceval was delighted by the sight of this handsome castle, and spurred his horse on until he reached the bridge, which was the most beautiful and most perfectly built in the world; for according to my source-book, which bears true testimony and should certainly be believed, there was a tall, newly-built tower at the entrance, with a gate through which the highway passed; and the bridge itself stood upon vaulted arches, and was so designed that it could be raised permanently at night; and there were crenellated barbicans on either side. Beyond the bridge, towards the castle, another tower had been built, fortified with high battlements; and there were many great towers of wood and many other fine fortifications, all newly built, surrounding all the castle.

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Perceval rode through the gate and on through the town, gazing

\* The manuscripts vary considerably here. Some read 'havres' (harbour), but others read variously Ombres, Ambres, Hombres or simply 'une aigue' (a river). MS 12576 reads 'Hongres', which I have followed. It seems that most scribes aimed for a geographical name, perhaps based on Humber.

† Almeria?

about him in delight; and there in the streets he saw many knights and servants, townsmen and girls and rich young ladies, most nobly dressed.

He did not stop until he reached the great hall, where four boys came rushing to meet him and helped him from his horse and took his shield and lance, and without delay they led him into the handsome hall.

A young lady came up to meet him, and she was of the greatest beauty; and twenty knights accompanied her. They all greeted Perceval and honoured him most highly, for they thought him very handsome and of noble bearing. They seated him on a carpet embroidered with silver flowers and disarmed him, and brought him a short mantle of silken cloth lined with ermine. Then straight away the young lady confided in a girl, whispering to her secretly, so that no-one else could hear.

'I've never seen,' she said, 'any man in this mortal world who more resembled Perceval, my sweet friend whom I love so much and who suffered such danger on my account, winning back all my land for me, and vanquishing my enemies, Engygeron and Clamadeus.'

'Before God, my lady,' the girl replied, 'I do believe it *is* Perceval!'

And thereupon the young lady took him by the hand and led him with her, and they sat down together on a rich silken cloth decorated with wheels. Perceval was in no way disconcerted and had no desire to hold his tongue; he was quick to ask her the name of the castle, and her own. The girl was only too pleased at this, for she did not want him to stay silent.

'Sir,' she said, 'all who live in these parts call the castle Beaurepaire. And my name is Blancheflor. And now,' she said, 'tell me your name, good sir, at once.'

Perceval heard this and gave a slight sigh, and blushed; and he looked at the girl, whose face was so clear, and as he gazed he became so lost in thought that he could not utter a word. But then, out of courtesy, he turned his eyes away a little, and replied to her sweetly, saying:

'Young lady, I shan't make a long sermon out of telling you my name, for that would not be courteous. God bless me, I'm called Perceval: that's my name. I was born and raised in Wales.'

When the girl heard this her heart leapt for joy, and she could not hide her feelings but began to kiss him more than a hundred times in a row. And knights and servants and girls and squires came to see the knight; they gazed at him, one and all, and Blancheflor then said to them:

'My lords, this is the good, worthy, noble Perceval, who saved my land and rescued my fief when Clamadeus was waging war on me. You're to consider him your lord.'

Then there was great jubilation in the hall – you've never heard the

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\* Above, pp. 27-33.

like; and the news spread through the city, and ladies and girls came running and the whole town rang with joy; there were more than thirty thousand all rejoicing for Perceval. If I told you the truth about the celebrations you wouldn't believe me for all the world! The bells rang in all the churches, and incense burned throughout the streets; and silken cloths adorned with gold were hung from the windows, beautifying the place still more. The celebration lasted all that day, not ceasing until late at night, for the moon shone down serenely. Then finally the great hall began to empty, as the burgesses and merchants left, with the women, boys and little children – all those who did not belong at court and had no business there; but there remained four thousand knights and ladies and maids and noble girls, and serving-men and boys and squires. The hall was filled with a brilliant light, for there were so many candles blazing there that no-one could tell their number.

Now Perceval was a lord indeed; now he had everything he could wish; now his heart had no cause for sorrow; now it was filled with happiness and joy; now he no longer knew any sadness; now he could see his beautiful love, who was fairer than a flower upon a sapling; now he had the one of whom he had dreamed when he found the three drops of blood in the frozen snow.\*

They called for water, and it was brought at once, in silver basins; the ladies and the girls washed first, and afterwards the knights. Great cloths were spread upon the tables, with knives and salt-bowls and rich and costly cups, and all the proper and necessary things. Such abundant riches appeared that no man's tongue could tell them all and no clerk's pen could set them down. Then everyone – both girls and knights – sat down to dine in great joy and happiness. Perceval sat beside Blancheflor, whose colour was finer than a rose in bud.

There were so many dishes that it would take forever to list them all and it would only bore you; but you may be sure of this: Perceval was more than contented, for he had before his eyes what he never thought he would see again. He felt in his heart and said, quite rightly, that great luck and good fortune had led him to where he had thought he would never return.

After they had eaten at their leisure they had the cloths removed; and the gentle-hearted Blancheflor had Perceval's bed made in the richest of chambers, all lined with wooden panelling. And in the hall there was a high, clear ring of music, wonderful to hear.

The rejoicing and celebration went on till nearly midnight, and then everyone departed, retiring to their houses in the town. The great hall was left quite empty; only the household now remained, and they took Perceval and laid him down in a magnificent and costly bed. And Blancheflor, filled

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\* Above, pp. 49-50

with happiness and joy, lay down to rest in a chamber next to his. Then the candles, which burned brightly in the chambers and lit the whole palace, were taken away. And all who had been serving there that night went to bed and fell asleep, for they were very tired and weary.

But though they might sleep, Perceval stayed wide awake, still overwhelmed at having found his love. Nor had Blanchefflor's thoughts drifted: she rose without delay and donned a white gown of ermine and left her chamber. All alone, without a chambermaid, she came to Perceval's bed, drew back the blanket and lay down beside her love. She whispered to him:

'Don't think it wicked or foolish that I've come here for your love, for I've longed for you so much. And I tell you in all truthfulness, I would never take a husband if it meant being untrue to you.'

Perceval took her in his arms, for he greatly desired the pleasure of her embrace, and he found it pleasing indeed. He kissed her a hundred times without stopping, I don't want to tell you about the rest of what happened; but if Perceval did not fail to do more, Blanchefflor did not object, for she was so full of courtesy that on no account would she refuse anything he wished to do.

They spoke of many things, and asked each other all kinds of questions.

Perceval asked his love: 'My lady, please tell me, when was this castle rebuilt? The walls seem to be brand new, and so do the towers, and there are many ladies and girls and knights and burgesses and serving-men, all rich and well-to-do. It's well peopled with all kinds of folk, and the town and the country are beautiful.'

'In faith, sir,' she said, 'I must tell you the truth. This castle was badly damaged after it had been besieged by Engygeron – as you know very well, for it was you who raised the siege and delivered me and my land. But I couldn't be married to you, for that was not yet your wish. So I remained alone and lost, while you set off for other lands, I don't know where, in search of adventures to enhance your glory. And I didn't know whom to trust: I was terribly afraid because of the great wrongs I had suffered. And so I was left in deep sorrow: my troubled mind knew no rest or comfort. And truly, I wished then that I were dead and buried, and that my soul had left my body. My heart was quite distraught, until those who had been taken prisoner were set free and returned; and the people of this land, who had fled because of the war, came back to the castle when they heard the news; their return delighted me! Then I took counsel with the worthy men – for I was still very ill at ease – and by their advice I sent for craftsmen, a host of masons and carpenters; and I had the walls all rebuilt and new towers constructed. That's what I did, in all truthfulness, as you can see yourself. Now I've told you everything.



And in the morning, without delay, you'll marry me and the land will be yours; and you'll keep it in peace: there'll be no war. There are a thousand knights in the fief, who'll all accept you as their lord.'

'Truly, my love,' said Perceval, 'I can't do that yet, for I've undertaken a journey that I wouldn't give up for all the wealth in Friesland. But as soon as I return I shall come straight back to you.'

'Sir,' said Blanchefflor, 'I don't know what will come of this, but it isn't right for such a worthy man as you to abandon what he's vowed to do, no matter what anyone tells him – not even for his love's sake. When you left me the other year, I remember clearly that you said you'd go and find your mother, and that once you'd seen her you'd return to me without delay. So I waited for you from then till now, however long that is, and I shall wait again, whether it hurts me or not; for I'd rather suffer agony, and have my heart made dark and sad, than go against your will. I'll do just as you wish, since I can't hold you back either by force or by pleading. And even if I could it would be a very great wrong on my part if I did so and angered you, for a lady shouldn't do anything to displease or annoy her love. If she's come to love him with a noble love that's true and sure, she should bear the pain that wrings her heart.'

Then she embraced him tightly and kissed him sweetly twenty times, and with a heart full of sorrow she said:

'There's nothing for it: you'll leave whenever you wish. But stay just two days more, and then you can go freshly equipped.'

Perceval agreed to this, but most unwillingly, for he was eager to be on his way.

Then day began to break, and Blanchefflor rose and kissed her love; she was grieving bitterly in her heart at what had been said, but she showed no outward sign of it. She returned to her own bed and lay down straight away; and in spite of all her troubled thoughts she fell asleep at once, for she was very tired after staying awake all night. And Perceval, too, fell fast asleep.

The weather was beautiful and calm, and the sun shone brightly through the windows, filling the handsome hall with light. And straight away the bells rang, summoning people to mass. Then you could have seen knights and their servants coming without delay to the great, handsome and finely built palace; from there to Carahais there was none more beautiful or finely situated in any land – you could not have found its equal anywhere. Perceval awoke when he heard the noise; and his fair love Blanchefflor, who was such a comely, beautiful, sweet and charming girl, was already dressed and ready. She sent a maid to Perceval, whom she loved so dearly, with a gown of silk embroidered with gold, the finest that any man has ever seen. She hurried straight to his bed and presented it to him. Perceval was delighted with it,

and rose and donned the gown, which was beautifully made and cut and very richly worked. Then, without more ado, he left the chamber and entered the great hall, where he found knights on all sides, and townsmen and honoured ladies, all richly dressed, and squires and other folk, who greeted him most nobly and with the high honour that they owed their lord who had rescued them from the terrible plight into which Engygeron had plunged them. And he returned their joyful greetings.

Just then the fair Blancheflor appeared from her chamber, clothed in white samite adorned with golden flowers and silver stars; I don't think any man has ever seen such a rich and beautiful gown. Her mantle was made of the same cloth and richly lined with ermine; no man born of a woman ever beheld such a beautiful girl. Perceval went to meet her; they greeted each other, and went to the church together to hear mass. Everyone who saw them was filled with wonder, and said that if you searched all the lands and seas you could never find a couple as beautiful as those two. They looked so fair that people went more to see them than to hear the mass of the Holy Spirit.

After mass they returned to the hall. The servants had prepared the meal, and the squires brought water in basins of enamelled silver; all the ladies washed and sat down to eat, and with them the knights, of whom there were a great many – fully five hundred, so we read in the source-book, which is entirely true. And as for the dishes, you can trust me that they were as abundant as anyone could wish.

After they had eaten with great delight, they all had nutmegs instead of fruit, and cloves and zedoary, and then they drank before the tables were cleared. Then merry-making began such as no-one could describe; the festivities and gaiety lasted all day long, without interruption. There was not a word of sadness, of poverty or of growing old, only of joy and happiness. Even those who joined in least enjoyed themselves a good deal; and no-one held back: everyone involved was very happy.

Perceval stayed thus for three days, for his sweetheart begged him so earnestly: she was so upset on his account. And when the fourth morning came Blancheflor rose, grieving bitterly that he meant to leave; and she began to weep before him, and implored him most tenderly to postpone his journey just for one more day for her sake. But Perceval refused, saying he could delay no longer. He called for his arms and armed at once, and then had his charger brought to him; it had been very well groomed, and was richly equipped with bridle, breast-strap and a brand new saddle. And that was that. He kissed his love, whose heart was distraught and full of grief and sorrow: her eyes filled with tears and her heart with sighs, but she stood there in silence, not saying a word. Perceval addressed her most tenderly, saying:

‘In God's name, my love, don't be so upset and sad at heart, for by

Saint Gilles of Provence, I'll return to you as soon as I can!

Blanchefflor said not a word in reply: her heart was so gripped by grief and sorrow that she could not have spoken at any price, not even, I think, for 100,000 marks of fine silver. The hall was packed with ladies and knights and burgesses – they numbered more than four thousand – who had gathered there when they heard the news which brought them so little pleasure. The highest men of the town spent a long while in consultation with him, begging him not to refuse to marry Blanchefflor, who was beautiful and wise and rich. Perceval said he could not do so just yet, but asked them not to be displeased, for he would return from the task he had undertaken just as soon as he could, and then he would not leave the lady or the land for the rest of his life.

That was the end of their debate, and Perceval mounted his charger. A red quartered shield with a lion rampant of silver, newly made and decorated, was presented to him, and he took it and hung it at his neck at once. Then he took a lance of apple-wood with a great, sharp head of steel, and took his leave, commending them all to God. He rode from the castle and was on his way.

Blanchefflor was left, desolate and mournful, and everyone with her grieved bitterly for Perceval; knights, townsmen and servants, ladies, girls and children all wept and lamented. To the one who had suffered martyrdom and accepted the agony of the Cross to free His people from Hell, to the almighty King of all, they commended him a hundred thousand times.

(SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 23121–23532)

*Perceval journeys on, determined to find the dog and the stag's head and to learn the truth about the Grail and the bleeding lance. He meets a lady who is astoundingly ugly but is beautifully dressed and mounted on a splendid palfrey and accompanied by a handsome knight. When Perceval smiles at seeing such a curiously ill-matched couple, the knight is furious and challenges him to fight. Perceval defeats him, and the knight reveals that he is the 'Biau Mauvés', the 'Handsome Wicked Knight', and says that his sweetheart Rosete is in his eyes the most beautiful woman in the world. Perceval sends him to King Arthur, and bids him tell the king of his love for the ugly lady.*

*The knight and Rosete find King Arthur at Karadigan. Kay mocks the knight for loving her, but Arthur rebukes him for always speaking so rudely and cruelly, and makes the knight a member of his household. And the ugly woman becomes thereafter the most beautiful young lady in the land.*

But I must leave that now; I want to return to Perceval, who had a long ride

that day. He journeyed on until evening, but could find no house where he could take lodging; he slept out in the forest, and had nothing to eat all night and was in great discomfort. His horse grazed on the grass around him, which was heavy with dew, until morning came and the sun began to shine. Then Perceval mounted without delay, and rode on until about nine o'clock. He passed into the great forest where he had been many times before, but he hardly recognised it at all, for it was a very long time since he had been there. But as he looked ahead he saw a beautiful tree, tall and wide; he held his horse still and thought for a moment.

'God,' he said, 'I think I'm near my mother's house! But I don't think I've any brother or sister there, or any other friend. It was by this tree that the knight spoke to me and told me about King Arthur,\* who granted me the red arms. God help me, I've no idea how I got here! There's nothing I'd like more than to learn the truth about my mother – may God have mercy on her soul.'

Then he wept most tenderly; he was seized by pity for his mother – and it came quite naturally, from the heart. He rode swiftly through the forest, following the paths and tracks which he had come to know so long before, until he came to open ground and saw the house that had been his mother's.

'Oh God, my aid, my dear Father!' he cried. 'I can see what I've so longed to see!'

And so saying he rode on and came to the bridge. A boy had seen him, and came rushing from the house to meet him and greeted him at once. But Perceval did not want to dismount, and rode straight into the house. He found a good number of boys there, all fair and handsome and very well dressed.

'Welcome, sir!' they said to him, and paid him every respect. He dismounted then, and they disarmed him and brought him a mantle; but they did not look closely or recognise him at all, either by his face or by his manner; so they did not remember him.

Just then there appeared from a chamber a most beautiful girl, as white as a new flower in May, and very richly dressed. She came straight to Perceval, and greeted him most nobly in the name of God the King of majesty. Perceval greeted her in return; he knew very well that she was his sister, but he did not want to reveal his heart to any of them: first he wanted to ask and learn how long ago his mother had died, and if he had any other sisters or a brother or an uncle, or any other relatives or friends.

They sat down together on a carpet, finely decorated with flowers and animals. The girl commanded a boy to hurry with the food, and then

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\* i.e. at the very beginning of Chrétien's romance.

asked Perceval most courteously:

‘Where did you sleep last night, sir?’

‘In a place where I had little pleasure or comfort,’ said Perceval. ‘In the forest.’

And immediately the girl began to shed tears. Perceval saw her sigh, and said to her: ‘What’s the matter, my dear girl?’

‘Sir,’ she replied, ‘you’ve reminded me of my brother, whom I haven’t seen since I was very small, and I don’t know if he’s alive or dead; but he’s all my comfort and the hope of my life. I can’t tell you anything more about him, but whenever I see a knight, my heart can’t help but be moved to tears.’

‘Truly, my friend,’ said Perceval, ‘no-one should be surprised at that. But tell me now how long it is since your mother died, which has caused your heart such pain, and if you’ve any sisters or brothers besides the one you’ve mentioned.’

‘Truly, good sir,’ she said, ‘I think I can tell you that for sure: I’ve no other brothers or sisters, which often grieves me, for I’m all alone out here in this wood. And fully ten years and four months ago my brother rode off into that great forest to find sport. He was carrying three javelins to throw, and it was quite early in the morning; and he saw five knights, fully armed, bedecked with all their armour, coming along his path. He was still a child, and he asked them who had equipped them thus, and they said it was King Arthur. I don’t know if they said anything more, but he came home then, and no plea – from his mother or from anyone else – was of any avail; regardless of the grief or sorrow he caused, he set off for the king’s court. I don’t know how he fared, for I’ve heard nothing of him since. But when she saw him leave here my mother collapsed and fainted, and passed away and died there and then. That was fully ten years ago. An uncle of mine, a hermit, who lives near here in the wood, carried her body to his hermitage. Since then I’ve lived here in this house, with good reason to feel sad at heart – which I do, and often. That’s the position; and I’ve kept nothing from you.’

Perceval wept for pity. She looked at him and saw him turning pale, and a stream of tears running down his cheeks; and she said to him, most tenderly:

‘Good sir, I’d be very glad to know your name, if you’d tell me.’

And Perceval said: ‘On no account would I hide my name.’

But with all his heart he would rather have died than have said a word. He sighed from deep within him, and then at last replied, saying: ‘Sister, I was baptised with the name of Perceval.’

When she heard that his name was Perceval she recognised him at once; and she was so overcome that she could not look at him or address him at all: she stood there speechless. Perceval embraced her tenderly and told her

that he was her brother, and that her mother had died because of him, and when she heard this she fell in a faint. Perceval helped her up and she came to and kissed him, and she forgot all her troubles as they rejoiced together. Just then the servants entered, intending to set up the table, and were astounded to see their young lady kissing the stranger: they thought it shameful! But when she explained that it was Perceval her brother, everyone in the house raised their hands to God. No-one has ever seen such rejoicing as theirs.

Water was brought in two basins, and then they sat down and the table was set. What more need I tell you? They had food in abundance, and whatever their hearts desired, for the house was very well stocked; and they drank plenty of clear, strong wine, matured in the cask. As they ate they talked a great deal and asked all kinds of questions. The girl could not stop gazing at her beloved brother, and kissing and embracing him.

When they had eaten all they wished they had the tablecloths removed by the servants who had been waiting on them. Then they rose from the table and went together to take their ease in a garden at the foot of the bridge, for it was not yet the ninth hour.\* Perceval told his sister that he would go to the hermitage, for he wished to talk to his uncle, whom he had not seen since his childhood, and to assume some penance for his sins, as was only right; and to see the tomb where his mother was buried, who had lost her life because of him.

‘Sir,’ she replied, ‘that would be a worthy deed. And take me with you: then the company will be finer still! I’ll lead you, you may be sure, on the right paths through the forest.’

And Perceval said: ‘God help me, I’ll take you there most willingly. So come: let’s not delay!’

They had their horses saddled and led to the foot of the bridge, and the girl mounted at once; she knew the country very well – better than anyone alive. And Perceval donned his tight-meshed, damascened hauberk, and laced on his brightly gemmed helmet; and with his shield hung at his neck he mounted, and looked a worthy man and a noble knight indeed. He set off, lance in hand, and went after his sister, who had gone a little way ahead.

They rode on together until they entered the great forest, and followed the straightest possible path to the house of the good hermit. But even though they were in their own land they were not, it seems, free and clear of war. Perceval glanced to one side, and saw an armed knight come riding down a slope on a great dappled horse, uncommonly strong and swift. Perceval quickened his pace, urging his sister along beside him; and the knight, seeing him moving swiftly down the path, dug in his spurs and came

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\* 3 o’clock in the afternoon.

galloping at Perceval, and his only words were:

‘I challenge you for the girl! I want her – she’s very beautiful!’

‘Truly, good sir,’ said Perceval, ‘you might speak more courteously, if you please; she’s my sister, and on no account would I let any man abduct her.’

‘No,’ cried the knight, ‘not a man who was too afraid of you to take her! But I’ll have both your girl and your horse! So unless you’ve the courage to defend her, just leave the girl with me and be on your way – I’ll let you go.’

Perceval felt nothing but rage, and he drew rein a little and cried in utmost anger: ‘I challenge you, sir knight, for the girl and the horse: I love my sister more than you think. I’m not so easily brow-beaten that I’d let you have her just because of your crazy words.’

When the knight heard this he was filled with anger. They both drew their good horses back to gather speed for the charge; then they let their mounts go and drove in their spurs. Their hearts were fiercer than a cornered lion or boar; the knight struck Perceval high on the shield with such force that he shattered his lance right down to his fist; Perceval did not fall, but struck the knight so mightily on his silver-painted shield that he thrust the sharp-headed lance straight through it and through the tight-meshed mailcoat and clean through his body, so that fully two feet of lance burst out behind. The knight was pitched dead from his horse in full flight. Perceval pulled his lance from the body with its head all bloody, and left the knight lying there on the ground, and set off on his way.

He gave the knight’s charger to his sister to lead by the bridle; then they began to ride faster than they had done before, for the day was drawing to a close.

**T**hey rode on until they reached the hermitage there in the wood. The moon was shining, bright and beautiful. Perceval called at the wicket-gate – the house was all enclosed for fear of wild beasts. The good hermit, the holy man, who was full of religion and led a most holy life, was in his chapel, deep in prayer to God; but as soon as he heard the cry he rose at once. The worthy man had no servant or guard or gate-keeper with him, or any other creature but himself. He came straight to the gate and opened it. Perceval greeted him most nobly, as did his sister. The hermit saw that they needed lodging, but did not recognise them. He made a sign to them, meaning that they should enter, that they would be lodged. But for all the gold in the world he would not say a word, since night had come and the sun was down. The wise and worthy Perceval dismounted, and took his sister, whom he loved and greatly esteemed, and set her down from her palfrey. Then he took off the

horses' bridles and left them to graze in the grassy enclosure, and the worthy hermit brought them a mixture of bran and oats. And then, it seems, he made a sign to Perceval and his sister to ask them if they wanted to eat; but they said they did not. And so he left them, and returned to his chapel, a most beautiful place, and prayed for a long while to God.

Perceval slept outside on the green grass beside his sister, until the next morning when day came and the sun was bright and high. Then Perceval awoke and went straight to the chapel, where his uncle was already dressed and ready to say mass. Perceval sighed with all his heart for the misdeeds and the sins with which he was so stained; and he said his paternoster, for he knew no other prayer at all, long or short. His mother had taught him that one as best she could, most finely and with a willing and devoted heart, like the good and exceptional woman that she was.

The worthy hermit, filled with the Holy Spirit, sang the mass of God. Perceval listened attentively, and saw that he was helped by the angel whom the Lord God sent from heaven. And when the service was over the hermit did not stay, but left the chapel, and as soon as he saw the girl he realised that she was his niece; but he did not recognise Perceval, for he had never seen him before\*.

He greeted them both and said: 'What are you doing here, niece?'

'Sir,' she replied, 'I'm filled with joy, for the Lord God has brought me great help by sending back my brother whom I thought I'd lost. Here he is – it's Perceval, who brought my mother such distress, as you know, dear uncle.'

The hermit sighed from the heart, and seated Perceval at his side, and said to him: 'My good, dear friend, your father and I were brothers. And your mother lies here; I had her brought here and buried before my altar.'

Then the hermit rose and went into the chapel, which was remarkably beautiful. He showed Perceval the tomb, which was covered with a silken cloth and yielded a fragrance of indescribable sweetness. Perceval began to weep as he remembered his mother. His uncle took him by the hand, and seated him beside him and comforted him, and then, very kindly, begged him to tell him about his life in all honesty: whether he was happy, and where he had come from, and how he was faring now. Perceval told him everything, omitting nothing; how he had been out in search of adventures, which often proved great and formidable; he told him of everything he had done since King Arthur had dubbed him and given him the red arms; and the holy man was amazed. And then he told him how he had lodged at the house of

\* There was some confusion amongst the scribes here: some, like the scribe of MS 12576, assume that this is a different hermit uncle to the one met by Perceval in Chrétien's poem (above, pp. 74-76.); others say 'he had not seen him for a long time' and imply in other phrases that he is the same one.



the Fisher King, who was of such great worth; and how he had fallen asleep\* and left the house without knowing the truth about the things he had seen; and how he had visited his uncle in the forest.† And he went straight on and told him everything: about the game of chess and the girl, and the story of the knight in the tomb, and the knight who had carried off the head and the dog, and how he had followed him through the great, thick forest without finding any trace of him. And then he told him in exact detail about the lion, and how he had killed it beneath the tree and sent the knight to King Arthur with the girl who was so beautiful and fair. He told him of all his deeds and encounters just as you have heard in this work. And he did so without a word of a lie: he would not have lied for a thousand marks of gold, or for all the treasure of Alexander the Greek or of Porrus the king of India.

Then the hermit asked him: 'Dear nephew, do you always travel with two horses?'

'No, before God, my good dear sir. I've only one, and want no more. But I met a knight yesterday evening as night was falling, out there in the great, thick forest, who insulted me most terribly and struck me – so hard that he broke his lance on my shield. So I struck him with such might that my lance went a good two feet through his body. I left him dead on the ground and brought his horse back here. If you'd like to accept the horse, take him – he's just outside. He's keen and fast, and gentler than a lamb, and he gives a smoother ride than any ship!'

'I've no use for him,' said the hermit. 'And you should be most displeased at killing men like that.'

And the hermit, the holy and deeply religious man, implored him to remember his soul, and to think of the One who made, and will unmake, us all. Then Perceval sighed most tenderly from the heart, and said to him:

'God help me, sir! I wish I could find an explanation for the lance that bleeds from the point, and for the Grail, and for the sword‡ which can be repaired by one knight alone – though I can't tell you who he is or will be, for I haven't yet learned that much; but I shall find out in time. And when I know the truth, there is nothing you could say to me, dear uncle, that I would not strive with all my power to do to attain Paradise above; I give you my

\* This is possibly confusing Perceval's experiences with those of Gawain in the First Continuation (above, pages 124 and 145); but in Chrétien's poem Perceval does indeed sleep there before leaving the next day.

† Again this scribe, along with others, assumes that this is a different uncle to the one in Chrétien. Other scribes omit this phrase.

‡ Strictly speaking, Perceval knows nothing about the Broken Sword, which is introduced in the First Continuation when Gawain visits the Fisher King (above, p. 123). It has now become, however, a vital added element in the romance.

solemn word. It must be so – I've vowed to follow this through, and cannot abandon it.'

But the worthy man said: 'I'll say nothing more about that – not for now.'

With that they left the chapel and went to the worthy hermit's beautiful, tiny house where all three sat down together. The holy man, it seems, brought them food, and I'll tell you all the dishes they had: that morning the holy man, who loved them dearly, gave them white bread and bunches of grapes. The angel had brought them to him at Our Lord's command, and did so every day, for the hermit was such a worthy man that he lived solely by the glory of God. And he set clear water before them and they drank their fill. Water was the only thing drunk by the holy hermit, who was free of all vices and endowed with great goodness and cleansed of his sins, for which he often sought God's forgiveness; he never had wine, spiced or otherwise, or any other drink in his house, you may be sure of that.

When they had eaten they rose, and Perceval said they should be on their way, for it was a long journey home, and the day was already bright and full. But first, it seems, the holy hermit gave them a long sermon and taught them many good lessons: about God, and the Passion and Resurrection that our true and faithful Master endured for us, and how He went to Hell and broke down the gates with His divine power and set free all those who had been imprisoned, whom the Devil had dragged there with his determined might, always eager as he is to seize us and bring us to our doom.

'Nephew,' he said, 'you must heed this. If you don't already know it you must learn it and believe it like a good Christian. Honour and good may come of it: honour in this mortal world, and good in the other, the principal, with the One who has all goodness in His power. Anyone who fails to serve and honour Him is sure, sooner or later, to be deeply disgraced before he meets his end. But when God, in His mercy, sees that a man is bent on doing evil and wicked deeds, He won't destroy him instantly, but suffers patiently until the man reflects and ponders in his conscience upon the great evils that he's done. And when he has truly considered them he sheds tears and sighs from the heart, and prays to the One who is lord of all to have mercy for the wrongs he has committed in this world. And when God, who is full of gentleness, sees the sinner's repentant and confessing heart, He relieves him of his sins. But when he won't repent or expiate his sins but continues to do the evil things that bring him pleasure – but little profit – Death takes him unawares, and he loses his body and his soul. Loses? Yes! For there's no-one, however religious or saintly, who would dare to ask God to give that man rest in Paradise; and such prayers would never be heard. No, the man goes to stinking Hell, where he suffers such torment as no man could describe and

no heart could contemplate. Heed what I say, dear nephew.'

And Perceval replied: 'I do indeed, and believe it entirely. And if it please God, I shall be in Heaven yet, in His household with His glorious company.'

'God grant it,' said the hermit, 'as my heart would wish.'

And with that they stayed no longer but departed, taking their leave of the hermit without delay. They set off swiftly, and rode on at such a steady pace, pressing their horses onward, that they had soon passed right through the great forest and reached their fortress home; but night was very near. Then all the household appeared, and helped the girl dismount and took charge of the horses. Then they went into the house.

The girl called for food to be prepared at once, while Perceval quickly disarmed. The tables were set up straight away, and the servants brought them water. Perceval and his sister washed and sat down without another word. They had barbel, salmon, perch and pike in abundance, for they ate no meat that night.

After they had eaten with great delight they made a bed for Perceval, a high bed of fine new silk, with blankets and a quilt of rich cloth made in Constantinople – no man ever saw one more handsome – and white linen sheets, and pillows and coverlets of costly ermine; they prepared the bed most beautifully, and did not take long. Then they returned to Perceval and took off his shoes and put him to bed; he was soon asleep, for he was very tired. And his sister, who loved him with a true heart, retired to her chamber and prepared for bed without saying or doing anything more.

They both slept all night long. But as soon as there was a crack of day and the sun began to shine, lighting the whole world with the brilliance of its rays, Perceval, who was no wicked man, rose at once. By the time the young lady with the shining face came to his chamber, expecting to find him in bed, he had already been up for a good while. His mailcoat was brought to him; he had already put on his greaves and laced on his knee-pieces, and was now about to don his hauberk. When his sister saw him she rushed to him in dismay and took him in her arms, saying:

'What are you doing, dear brother? My heart's distraught: I don't know what I'll do if you leave me. There's nothing for it – I'll go with you or die of grief! If I don't go, and you leave me here in dismay, my life will be short. I've been left an orphan here in this wood, as you've seen for yourself; would you then leave me like this, all alone and lost? You're my brother: it would be wicked of you.'

'Sister,' he said, 'have no fear: I'll return to you very soon. But I can't postpone the work I've undertaken. Be good now, and behave nobly, and stop your grieving: it'll achieve nothing, for I won't stay even for your sake.'

What is the point of lengthening their words and conversation? He left his sister, dismayed though she was to see him go – as was the whole household: they all wept together, inconsolably. Perceval rode on without stopping, spurring all the way, until he passed into the great forest.

(SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 24222–25432)

*Perceval spends two nights without lodging, sleeping in the forest. On the third day he finds a rich castle of red and yellow marble standing beside a river. He rides through the gate and it shuts behind him, but there is no-one to be seen. In the hall, standing on four small columns, he finds a table of brass, six yards long and three feet wide, with a steel hammer hanging from it by a silver chain. Perceval hits the brass table three times with the hammer, and a beautiful girl appears at a window and rebukes him for doing so, but tells him he is free to lodge there and to sleep where he likes. But then she disappears, and Perceval scours every room without finding anyone else at all. So he returns to the hall and strikes the table three more times. Another girl appears at the window, and tells him that if he does it again the tower will come crumbling down and kill everyone, including him. But Perceval will not be cowed, and threatens to strike it two hundred times or more unless the lady of the castle will receive him and give him food and lodging. He is now given a splendid welcome by a host of girls, and led before the lady, who tells him that he has come to the Castle of the Maidens, where they have everything they need, and which was built not by masons but by four beautiful girls. She explains that if a knight fails to strike the table he will see no-one and receive no hospitality; but if he is a wise and courteous knight, brave enough to hit it two or three times in spite of all warnings, he will be lodged and welcomed lavishly. Perceval, very weary, falls asleep beside the lady, and she has a fine bed made for him and lays him down to sleep there. When he wakes next morning he finds himself beneath a great oak tree, with his arms and his horse ready beside him: the Castle of the Maidens has vanished.*

*Perceval rides on and finds a huge tree in the middle of a glade, with a beautiful tent pitched nearby. Sitting beneath the tree is a girl, and hanging on it is the stag's head that he has been looking for. But the dog is nowhere to be seen. The girl tells Perceval that his time has come and that it will be a dire day for him. He takes the stag's head from the tree, and then suddenly sees a knight chasing a stag with the help of the stolen dog. Perceval asks for it to be returned, but the knight refuses and they do battle. Perceval is victorious, but grants the knight mercy provided he will surrender to King Arthur. The knight gives his name as Garsulas, and the girl's name is Crassens the Fair. Garsulas assures Perceval that*

*he knows nothing about the girl of the Chessboard Castle; but he reveals that the black knight who fought Perceval at the tomb was his half-brother, who had one day fallen in love with a beautiful girl whom he had met by a spring. The girl had promised to grant him her love if he would do whatever she asked. He had agreed, and travelled with her for three days. Then, while he slept in the forest, the girl had built around him a magnificent castle which, she said, would be quite invisible to anyone passing by. She had also built a tomb with a knight on horseback painted on it. To fulfil the promise made to her, Garsulas's half-brother had had to agree to fight any passing knight who read the words upon the tomb. He did so, and had defeated every knight who came – until the arrival of Perceval.*

*Perceval declines Garsulas's offer of lodging, for it is not yet mid-afternoon, and takes the stag's head and the dog and sets off. Garsalus and his sweetheart set out next morning for King Arthur's court, where they tell the whole story and are received into the royal household.*

Now settle down and listen, like noble and well-bred souls, to the continuing story of Perceval, who was riding on alone through the great, thick forest. He had the head of the antlered stag tied to the back of his saddle, and carried the dog before him, stroking him frequently. He prayed to God the mighty King to guide his steps so that he might find the girl with the beautiful chessboard and the priceless chessmen.

'God!' he said, 'if I could return and see the girl who's fairer than a siren, with a fresher, healthier colour than a rose or a lily or an emerald or a ruby, how happy I'd be!'

While he was pondering on his sorrowful thoughts, he looked ahead and saw a mule, whiter than snow frozen on a branch in February. It had a bridle of gold and a golden saddle – a lady's saddle, a most beautiful one, and all brand new; and a saddle-cloth of samite: no-one has ever seen one more handsome. The mule was all alone, and coming swiftly down towards Perceval. The way was very narrow, not more than a pace across. The white mule raced down and met Perceval right in the middle of his path; then it stopped, and stood motionless across his way. The day was already drawing to a close and night was about to fall. Perceval took a long look at this mule. He saw the bridle and the saddle, which was wonderfully rich – he had never seen its like, he thought, in all his life: it was so splendidly adorned.

While he was gazing at the beautiful mule and the harness and the saddle, he noticed a girl along the path: a comely and graceful girl, but she seemed to be in a most sorrowful way; she was approaching on foot, with her dress turned up. And to tell the truth about her and her great beauty, no-one so lovely was ever born or beheld. She was flushed from walking,

and glowed with such brilliance that she seemed to have descended from Paradise: she seemed indeed a spiritual being. She wore a most delightful silken gown adorned with golden flowers: none so rich or lovely ever appeared from any treasure-chest, and it was perfectly fresh and new. As Perceval gazed at the girl she filled him with delight – as she should have done: a girl of such complexion should delight anyone. Then, in a loud voice, she cried:

‘Sir knight, give me back that mule. It’s made me very angry today. Just after dinner I dismounted beneath a tree, and it suddenly left me and I haven’t been able to catch it since.’

‘Truly, my friend,’ said Perceval, ‘I’ll gladly help you. Come here and I’ll help you mount.’

But she swore by God above that she would have no help in mounting, whatever he said, but asked him just to hold the mule still on the path, for once she had hold of the reins she could quite easily mount by herself. Perceval heard and looked at her, and she, without a moment’s delay, came up to the white mule and did not dally long, but leapt straight into the saddle and led the mule swiftly back up the path. Perceval began to ride beside her most courteously, and politely asked her where she had come from and where she was going, and where she would be lodging that night – for it was now beginning to turn pitch dark.

‘Sir,’ she said, ‘I’m not going to give you any illusions. If you’ve any business to pursue, pursue it; for if you come with me until nightfall you’ll place little value on your life. So turn back; I don’t want your company any more.’

‘God bless me, fair lady,’ said Perceval, ‘no business or task I have will stop me going with you.’

She was most aggrieved by his words and began to beg him, by the faith he owed holy Mary, to leave her be. And while they were immersed in argument, night had come, smothering the light of day; and it was dark indeed, for the moon was on the wane and did not appear. And the tall and leafy forest spread vast shadows, and there was no star to be seen in all the firmament; and the winds had grown so still that there was not the slightest breeze. The girl riding beside Perceval on the white mule said that she was completely blind, it was so pitch dark and black.

‘Fair lady,’ he said, ‘it would be a good idea to stay on this path with me till morning. I can hear you, but I can’t see you at all; it’s hard to ride like this.’

She replied at once that she would never stop with him; she was angry that he had been there so long, but did not know how to get rid of him.

‘If, good sir, you were as noble-hearted as you should be, you

wouldn't follow me so long against my will. But unless I'm much mistaken you'll repent of it before you see day break.'

And so saying she quickened her pace, and the moon began to rise. Perceval rode after her, for he wanted the girl to tell him exactly what was on her mind, and why she forbade him to ride with her. While he was pondering on this he noticed, far off in the distance, a light like a burning candle. He peered at it for a long time; and before long he thought he could see five of them burning, so bright and clear that it seemed as if the great, dense forest was blazing with their light on every side: it was surely supernatural. And he thought, too, that the bright red flame reached right up to the clouds. He decided to talk to the girl and ask her where this great light came from which seemed to be so distant. He called to her, saying:

'Tell me about the fire I can see ahead.'

But she made no reply, for she was not there: she had left him and ridden off without a word. But Perceval was not angry; indeed he smiled a little, and was not dismayed or scared at all. Instead he vowed to himself that, come what may, he would ride on and find the light; fear was not going to stop him. So he quickened his pace, much more so than before. But suddenly all was plunged into darkness, and a mighty wind arose, bringing such violent, limitless rain that he thought the earth and the forest would be swept away. Perceval was filled with awe; he covered his head with his shield and took shelter beneath a tree until the terrible weather had passed. Aghast and dismayed, he had to endure this plight until it was almost day. Then the rain stopped and the night grew calm, and the weather began to turn fair; Perceval's heart was lightened then, and he set out on his way once more.

He looked ahead and all around, expecting to see the light as before; but he could see no sign of it, and could not remember in which direction he had earlier caught sight of it. He was sad and downhearted, but nonetheless rode on until he came to a glade, most beautiful, though not very wide or long. It was now almost dawn, and the night was so fine that I don't think Perceval had a care in the world, despite his earlier discomfort; for trouble is soon forgotten when God restores joy to the sufferer. Sir Perceval decided to rest a little and let his weary horse graze. So he halted in the glade and placed his lance and shield beneath a tall, leafy tree. The grass was new and fresh, and he took off the bridle, and then the saddle, and let his horse graze and rest and be refreshed. And Perceval lay down with his head on his shield, feeling very tired and weak, and soon fell fast asleep. The dog was beside him, lying peacefully at his feet, not leaving him or straying off at all; it was as if Perceval had fed him all the days of his life: he made a fine companion.

And so Perceval slept, and did not wake until the bright sun had

risen, lighting up the day. A good part of the morning had already gone; it was almost nine o'clock, and was beginning to get very hot. He rose at once, without delay, saddled and quickly packed his horse, and mounted with his dog. With his shield slung at his neck he set out swiftly through the wood once more, and rode on like this till noon. Then he looked beneath a beautiful tree with green grass growing all around, and saw the girl he had lost in the forest that night, and her mule beside her, richly decked with its handsome harness of fine silver and its silken saddle adorned with silver flowers. When Perceval recognised her he greeted her most courteously in the name of God omnipotent who dwells in the firmament above, and she replied with pleasant words. Perceval dismounted straight away when he heard her address him kindly, and said:

'Young lady, I'd be glad to know your name, and why you left me last night when I saw the light from the bright red flame.'

'Don't be surprised that I lost touch with you,' said the beautiful and comely girl, 'for the air was so dark that I couldn't see a thing; and I was afraid of meeting a knight who had made me swear not to accept the company of any man alive until I returned to him. I wanted to keep my promise, and no-one should blame me for that. But I can tell you truly, since he left me yesterday I haven't seen any sign of him. If you've seen him or heard news of him, please tell me – don't conceal it.'

'God bless me, lady,' said Perceval, 'I haven't heard a word or any mention of him. But tell me his name, and what he's rightly called.'

'Sir,' she said, 'he was baptised with the name of Brun the Pitiless. He's a fine knight and mightily esteemed, I assure you.'

'Indeed, fair lady,' said Perceval, 'I've heard of him. I think I'd know him if I saw him. Now tell me, if you will: when you left me last night, were you caught by the tempest which beset me so terribly?'

'No indeed, sir,' she replied, 'I didn't see any rain or storm; the night was fair and beautiful, and calm and windless and serene – I've never seen a more pleasant one in my life. As for the light you saw, have you ever heard of the rich king fisherman? He lives near here beside a river, and he was in the forest last night: he's very fond of the place. That was the source of the great light you mentioned. Sir, the fire which burned so brilliantly is a sign that the Grail, so beautiful and precious, in which the clear and glorious blood of the king of kings was gathered when He was hung upon the Cross, was with the Fisher King in the forest, for the Devil cannot harm or lead to sin any man who sees its light. That's why the king has the Grail carried there with him, for he's a holy and deeply religious man and leads a most saintly life. He prays constantly to Our Lord, who never forgets a worthy man who repents of the wrongs committed in his youth, to accept him at His side in Heaven and to



keep him from all wrongful sin.’

Anyone who had then seen Perceval’s face would have said that no man was ever so distracted, short of losing his mind. Astounded by the girl’s words, he begged her to tell him more about the Grail and, in God’s name, not to conceal the truth and all the secrets about the rich Fisher King: how he had come to have the Grail, and who had given him the lance with the head which bled from its tip. But the girl, who was most wise and prudent, and quick and skilful in replying, said:

‘Sir, I can’t tell you anything more about that; I mustn’t. If you’d been my lord for a hundred years, I would still not dare to tell you more or let another word pass my lips; for it is a most sacred thing, and should not be spoken of by any lady, young or old, or any girl; nor even by any man born, unless he’s an ordained priest or a man who leads a holy life, coveting nothing, and treating others as he would have them treat him. Such a man could speak and tell of the Grail, and of the wonders which no man could hear without shaking and trembling and turning pale with fear. Now I’ve told you the truth. Mount again, sir, if you will, and come with me; you can have something to eat – it’s high time, you know, for a weary man who hasn’t slept all night.’

Perceval agreed; he went most willingly, for he still hoped to hear some wonders from her. He told the girl to mount the white mule without delay, and wanted to help her, but she would not let him: she told him to mount his own horse at once, and then they set off.

They rode on without stopping until they came to a valley. There they caught sight of a magnificent tent, and a girl outside it, of most beautiful appearance, dressed in a gown of rich grey cloth from Friesland; there she stood, outside the tent. As soon as Perceval saw her he greeted her in the name of God, and the girl replied at once in the sweetest terms. The other girl, riding with Perceval, quickly dismounted at the door of the tent, leaving her mule standing quietly. What should I tell you about Perceval? He dismounted and took off his horse’s bridle, leaving him to graze freely on the fresh, young, green grass. The head of the white stag which he had found he left on the saddle, but he was still holding the dog, and he carried him into the pavilion to which he was led by the girl, who gave him a joyful welcome. There’s no need to go into greater detail, but as the story says, they sat down and the table was set, and they ate plenty of whatever they wished, having all the food their hearts desired and all the best wines in the world. They talked of many things as they sat and dined. The girl who had led him there began at once to ask about the dog: in which land he had found him, and where he was taking him, and if the dog had ever caught any game; and why he had the head of the white stag tied to his saddle, so fully antlered. Perceval told her the whole story

from start to finish: how he had caught the stag in the forest, and how the little dog was given to him at the beautiful castle, and how he went to the tomb where he found the knight. He told her everything in due order: how he had lost the dog again, and had tracked him down and won him back in combat.

'Whatever happens, my lady,' he said, 'I promised the girl who gave me the dog that I'd return him to her without fail. And since I'd hate to wrong such a noble and good-hearted lady, I'm taking her dog back to her. And if she keeps the promise that she made to me when I left to hunt the stag, I can assure you I'll have nothing to complain of!'

'Truly, sir,' said the girl, 'if it's as you say, you should indeed take it back to her. Do you know her name, or the castle where you saw her before you set out on your hunt, and do you know your way there?'

'God help me, no, dear lady, I've no idea. But I tell you truly, she's the fairest girl in all the world's expanse.'

With that he fell silent and said no more. When they had eaten their fill they rose from the table; and Perceval, who was eager to hear where the good king lived who had the Grail in his charge, asked the girl:

'Tell me, do you know the splendid court where that blessed king lives who guards the rich Grail and the lance that sheds the drop of red blood from its tip?'

'Yes, before God,' she replied, 'I do indeed, and I'll tell you how to find it – if you'll keep to the way and not stray from it.'

When Perceval heard this he set the bridle on his horse without a moment's delay and, fully armed, shield slung at his neck, he mounted. He was beside himself with joy. He returned to the girl and took his leave. But the girl said:

'Please don't go just yet. It would be discourteous to leave me before you've told me your name. Tell me at once: I'd like to know.'

And he replied: 'Lady, may God keep me from shame, I'm known everywhere by the name of Perceval. Now show me the way to the Fisher King's court – and may God grant me joy and honour.'

'Gladly, sir,' she said. 'There are so many roads and paths that you'll never know which way to go. But if you'll lead your charger by the reins and ride upon my mule, who's whiter than any living being, she'll go straight all the way to the ivory bridge over the river Marmonde, which is swift and wide and deep. She'll take you there most faithfully. And when she's done so, cross the bridge as you please and let the mule return; she'll come straight back. But stay here until the morning: you'll travel much better then.'

'Please don't say that, young lady,' said Perceval. 'But truly, I'd be very glad to hear about your friend Brun.'

'I tell you in all truthfulness, I met a knight who told me that a

girl had led Brun away with her, for she needed his help urgently to save her love who had been taken prisoner and locked in a tower. The one who had imprisoned him had sworn to her that if she found a knight courageous, bold and fierce enough to do combat with him in the field and could fight so well as to unhorse and vanquish him, then her love would be returned to her. So my dear Brun has gone with her, for he's worthy indeed and greatly feared; God keep him from misfortune! But there's nothing for it now: I can see you want to go at once. Take this ring of mine with you; its stone is rich and precious indeed. And by the faith I owe you, as long as you wear it on your finger, my white mule will carry you safely, without any fear, wherever you want to go. And you need have no fear of crossing the ivory bridge. But if by folly or misfortune you come to lose the ring, you may be sure of this: the mule will return and won't move another step for you, be it in a forest or a river, in a glade or on a heath, in a city or a castle. And if the ring falls into someone else's hands, the mule could likewise carry him as far as he wished to go. Put my ring on your finger.'

She offered it to him, and he bowed a little and took the ring and placed it on his middle finger, thanking her in the name of God.

'Now hear me, sir,' she said. 'I must have my mule and my ring back as soon as we meet again, without delay or hesitation.'

'By God who made the firmament,' said Perceval, 'I wouldn't anger you, dear friend, for all the riches in the whole wide world; you're so noble and good-hearted. I wouldn't want to do you any wrong as long as I live.'

Then he took his leave, and left her in the tent of embroidered silk. He crossed the beautiful open ground, which did not last long, and passed into the great forest, which was very fair and lovely. He had the stag's head tied to his charger's saddle, but he carried the dog with him constantly, for he was very fond of him. The mule took to the path at a good, full pace, and Perceval's horse followed behind. So on he rode as you have heard, following many roads and tracks. The mule kept straight on the right path, and Perceval did not try to lead her off: he gave her a free rein, and she kept steadily on, most agreeably and trustily. Perceval kept looking at the ring on his finger, and saw the splendid, handsome jewel: he gazed at it intently. He rode on all day long until evening, but encountered nothing worth relating – so says the true story of Perceval; but there are now many worthy fellows going round these courts as story-tellers, who are twisting the good tales, distancing them from their sources and adding so many lies that the stories are ruined and the good books dishonoured. And those who hear and listen to them don't know what good stories are: no, when those minstrels sit in their houses for the night and they get them to relate some adventure – unrhymed\* – they think

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An interestingly disparaging view of the prose romances.

they've heard the whole story; but they'll never hear it in their lives. They make them believe a pack of lies; and they're good at padding and stringing them out. So let me tell you now about Perceval.

He rode hard all day long, until the sun had set and the light of day was gone. But what's the use of a story that gets too detailed? He lay in the forest all that night, and had no joy or pleasure, and nothing to eat or drink, but guarded the white mule and his horse until daybreak. It was a beautiful morning, and he bridled them and mounted, and took to the road again at once upon the mule, who knew exactly which path to take.

He rode on until the first hour<sup>\*</sup> gazing long and hard at the ring with the holy stone. He did not stop until he reached the river, where he found a bridge of ivory. He halted at once at the foot of the bridge, and looked down at the river, which was half as wide again as a crossbow's range. And I tell you truly, it was amazingly swift, and so deep and perilous that no craft or barge, however great or broad or ribbed with iron or steel, could have survived its passage. The bridge above was so intricately wrought and adorned that no tongue of man or pen of clerk could describe it. It measured only two and a half feet in width, and the ivory of which it was made was so transparently fine that, without a lie, the water could be seen through it as it rushed beneath like a tempest. But Perceval dallied on the bank no longer; he gave the mule free rein and she climbed right on to the fragile bridge. Perceval drew his good horse after him by the reins, for he loved him dearly and did not want to leave him behind. The white mule did not falter, but walked as surely and securely as if she had been on solid ground; but the charger crossed with difficulty, most fearfully. And behind him the bridge, so perilous and fearsome to cross, was crumbling all away: Perceval thought it would collapse into the void, for it was shaking so mightily and furiously that he thought pieces were crashing into the river. But Perceval was not afraid, for he had faith in the mule, who bore him fearlessly and beautifully and safely across the bridge, so that he felt neither ill nor pain, nor fear nor terror nor dismay.

Once he was across he looked ahead, and at the edge of the wood he saw a vassal in the prime of life, who appeared to be a wise and worthy man indeed. An ivory horn hung at his neck, finely adorned with chisel-work; and he had a sword in his hand, and was leading two greyhounds with him. He was mounted on a most splendid horse, handsome and strong and swift. He was lightly clad, with his sleeves rolled up, and was finely shod in tall boots from England. You could have searched far and wide before finding a man of finer appearance. Perceval took a long look at him, and was then the first to

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\* Six o'clock in the morning.

offer a greeting; and the vassal said, most courteously:

‘May that God who made you, dear sir, grant you health, honour and joy, and guide you on the path to attaining what your heart desires.’

And Perceval replied: ‘Kind sir, may God on high hear your prayer; and may He grant you through His powers joy and honour and a holy life, and keep you from coveting another man’s possessions. Now tell me what name I should call you – don’t keep it from me.’

‘I’ve no wish to conceal it, sir,’ he said, ‘I’m known everywhere as Briol of the Burnt Forest. And now I’d gladly know yours.’

‘I’ll tell you truly, my dear friend. In my country I’m called Perceval: I was born in Wales. But by the faith you owe God, if you know a direct road to the court of the good Fisher King, it would be most kind of you to tell me.’

‘Sir,’ said Briol, ‘there’s something else I want to tell you first. If you wish to go to that court, you’ll need to be the finest and most accomplished of all knights; otherwise you cannot go there and achieve your aim. But if you’ll trust in my advice you could profit greatly and earn more esteem than I could ever say.’

‘Then tell me, kind sir,’ said Perceval, ‘at once.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Briol, ‘if you’ve heard of the bridge that no man can cross, or of the tournament that’s gathering at the Proud Castle, to which that good and marvellous king, the worthy and warlike Arthur, is to lead five hundred knights to the support of the men of the castle.’

‘God bless me, no,’ said Perceval, ‘I’ve heard nothing about it, sir.’

‘Come, then,’ said Briol, ‘I’ll take you there; and tonight I’ll gladly give you lodging at my house. And when day breaks tomorrow we’ll both go together to the bridge which is like no other; and if you can cross it you may truly boast that you have more glory and honour than your ancestors ever won.’

Perceval said he would go with him if he would lead him to the bridge and promise to accompany him to the great tournament. Briol agreed; he said that if Perceval could cross the high bridge he would accompany him constantly, even if it cost him his life; such was his promise. With that they set off straight through the forest in the direction of the bridge, and rode on towards their lodging without a halt, talking of one thing and another as they went. Briol noticed the stag’s head tied to the saddle of Perceval’s swift charger; he was deeply curious, and asked Perceval why he had such a huge and antlered stag’s head packed upon his horse. And as they rode along Perceval told him of the adventure, just as I’ve told it to you, keeping nothing back. And he showed him the dog, whom he dearly loved for his beauty; and he explained to him about the mule, just as you have heard in the story. But

he did not tell him about the fair and precious ring he wore; he kept that secret – I don't know why. Yet Briol saw it on his finger, and gazed at it most gladly.

On they rode until they caught sight of the walls of a castle, strong and impressive indeed, built of limestone and white marble. I would have you know that no house was ever better fortified: there was a great tower at the entrance, and a gate with a huge drawbridge – but that is all I shall say. They rode on until they crossed the bridge and came before the hall. A boy came down the stairway holding a horn in his hand; and as soon as Briol saw him he blew his own horn twice, and the boy replied immediately with a mighty blast, whereupon the courtyard filled with knights and members of the household. Briol commanded them to honour Perceval and to serve him as their lord, and then they dismounted, and the boys took their horses and led them to the stables. The wise and worthy Perceval asked nothing more of them but to take care of the white mule, which they did most willingly. Then two squires came, carrying two mantles, and they led the knights into the hall and disarmed them and dressed them in the mantles. Then a lady appeared from a chamber, most finely dressed in a richly dyed silken cloth. It would take me too long to describe her beauty here, but I will say this much: she was neither low-born nor foolish! She came up and embraced her lord Briol, and gave Perceval a joyous welcome. The three sat down together on a rich cloth of silk; then Briol left his lady with Perceval and went down to hasten preparations for dinner. He returned at once and went into a panelled chamber hung with silken drapes, where he found one of his daughters making a mantle-cord; she was as beautiful as a siren or a fairy. She rose and greeted her father nobly, and he took her by the hand and led her into the great hall and up to Perceval, who was sitting beside the lady, telling her many things in answer to her questions. When he saw the girl with the shining face he rose at once and greeted her most nobly; and she, so radiant of complexion, bowed to him and sat down at his side. And Briol, who loved and cherished her, said:

‘Dear daughter, entertain this lord with joy and honour, for he is a worthy and courteous knight indeed.’

For the moment nothing more was said. Tables were set up in the beautiful hall, and boys and servants and squires brought water without delay. The lady and the girl, so courteous and fair, and after them the knights, sat down together to dine – it was time to do so, for it was past the ninth hour\*. The girl with the radiant complexion dined with the noble-hearted Perceval. They had food of the very finest kind, and wine from Poitiers, the delight of all who like strong wine; but I shan't list and describe all their dishes, for you

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\* After 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

may be sure they had everything they wished or desired. They talked of many things and recalled many a witty tale. They sat at the tables, it seems, until vespers, when they all rose together and went out to the bridge, the finest in all the world. There they gazed down at the water and watched the fishes swim, and out at the forest and the meadow, so beautiful and deep in flower. And so they happily passed the time until night drew near and their beds were made ready. Then they returned to the hall, lit now by many candles. Perceval was holding the girl by the left hand, and he asked her all about herself, and whether she had a sweetheart.

‘Sir,’ she replied, ‘it wouldn’t be right for me to have a sweetheart yet, for I know enough about it to be sure I’m too young; I’ve no need of one just now. Nor have I learned enough yet to be able to talk of love without saying the wrong things, so I’ve no desire to try! But if I wanted to yield my heart to love, then, by the faith I owe Saint Giles and by three leaves of the Gospel, I’d have a fair and handsome lover, a good and high-born knight, but it’s not yet my desire or wish. No, I’m not eager to find a lover or to be any man’s sweetheart; yet I like to be with people who have loved, and who have experienced the pain one has to suffer before enjoying love’s rewards. Yes, I gladly follow such people, to listen to them and learn some useful lessons.’

Perceval heard her words with pleasure and smiled at what she said.

‘Truly, friend,’ he said, ‘I dearly wish it were three o’clock again, so that I could spend a long time with you!’

Just then four servants came, bringing wine and fruit, and candles in great plenty, as many as they wished and needed. The knights ate the fruit and drank the wine with pleasure, and then the squires took Perceval to lie down to sleep in the richest of beds. The lady had already gone, and so had the radiant girl, to her magnificent chamber: so the story assures us.

All the boys of the household rose at the crack of dawn, and because of the noise and commotion Perceval rose early, too; but before he had fully dressed Briol came from his chamber and nobly greeted him in the name of God the king of majesty, and then told a boy to hurry and get their horses ready. He did not need a second command: he did as ordered admirably, harnessing the horses splendidly and leading them before the hall.

‘Sir Perceval,’ said Briol, ‘listen to what I have to say. We’re going now, and I don’t know when we’ll be able to return. If you’ll take my advice, you’ll leave behind the stag’s head and the dog, and the mule you’re so fond of, until after the tournament. But if you want to take your horse, you shall have him at once.’

Perceval replied immediately that he would certainly take him; then they swiftly armed themselves with everything a knight should have. Just

then the lady came from the rich chamber, and with her came the girl, and they greeted the knights in the name of God who made the new grass and the flowers grow in the fields. Perceval rose to meet them, and the girl helped him to lace his helmet on his head, while the lady laced her lord's. Then, without much more ado, they mounted their horses and took their leave, and set off swiftly across the bridge. They headed towards the forest, which was great and green and thick with trees, and it did not take them long; and once they were in the forest they rode and journeyed on across heath and meadow, ford and mire, until they came to the river where stood the bridge of great renown. And if you will listen to me awhile, I will describe it to you, briefly and exactly. It was made of wood, and built in such a way that from the bank it sloped upwards all the way to the middle, where it stopped – there was nothing more beyond – so that no-one could ride across. A pillar of bright copper, of enormous worth, supported it where it stopped. It was fully the length of a bowshot, and Perceval gazed at it and at the water that rushed below, and asked Briol in the name of love and companionship to tell him what he knew about the bridge, and who had built it, and how and why he had come to leave it unfinished.

'Sir,' said Briol, 'I can tell you all about it. If you'll listen, I'll tell you briefly both the beginning and the end. Once, some time ago, in this thick forest there was a strongly fortified house which a knight from another land had built. He had no wife or child or heir, but he was greatly feared and dreaded, and praised and respected for his skill at arms; and he had a splendid household: fully twenty knights rode with him from his hall. Then one Christmas he went to the king's court. I believe it was then at Quinprecorentin, and it was a great and splendid court indeed. The lord of the Proud Castle had also come to this feast, and he challenged him to combat, and the battle took place at the court. After an exhausting struggle the Proud Knight was wounded and outfought and vanquished. But Baladigan's child, his neighbour, was deeply upset; and he pursued this knight of the forest and threatened him with war. The knight owned not a foot of land except a single manor here in this forest, but he was very powerful – though his power was not to last. One day he went to his house and took counsel with his followers as to how he could deal with the men of the Proud Castle. One of his advisers, a worthy knight indeed, said that because of this river, so swift and mighty, he would never be able to assail them, but if someone could find an ingenious way of crossing it, the war would soon be won. For the time being nothing more was said. But before the month was out, the knight went out to hunt a great, strong, massive boar. He started it in a thicket, and hunted it and followed it for so long that he lost his way completely and night drew in upon him. He lost track of the boar in the dark, and it fled swiftly



away. But his three dogs followed it courageously: they wouldn't leave it, come what may. Finally they approached a house: it was a tall house, built of stone, with a great gate at the entrance, but there was no wall or ditch around it, nor any tower or bailey; there was nothing to be seen but the gate and the tall, expansive house. The boar came rushing up and went straight through the gate. I don't know quite what happened, except that the dogs lost all sight of it and were utterly bewildered. The knight, spurring his horse in pursuit of them, saw the great gate and the house, and outside it the dogs who had lost their quarry; this was not at all their custom and he was quite astonished. It was a lovely, tranquil night and the moon was shining brightly, shedding a clear and generous light. The knight called three times at the first door of the house; but he could have called for a month and no-one would have answered or come to speak to him. When he saw that nobody was going to come he blew three long, loud blasts on the horn that hung at his neck; and the great, thick forest rang with the sound. When the horn's voice was heard a girl appeared: she was very fair and lovely, and dressed in an ermine cloak. My heart tells me that no-one more beautiful was ever born or beheld. She leaned at the window and cried:

“God help me! Who is making such a din, and made me start up from my bed?”

‘And he replied at once: “Lady, I'm a knight confounded by the paths and tracks – I'm completely lost! It would be a great honour and courtesy to give me lodging tonight.”

“God bless me, sir,” she replied straightway, “I'll gladly give you lodging: you need say no more.”

‘And thereupon he was admitted through the rear door of the hall. He dismounted, and there was a boy ready to take his horse and give it hay and barley. And the lady, who was full of courtesy and goodness, graciously led the knight into the house and said she was deeply sorry he'd not come sooner. The house was well strewn with a mixture of grass and rushes, and there was a brilliant light from many candles: never was such an abundance seen. The lady called at once for water to be brought for the knight, and as soon as it was done they both sat down together. I don't know what else I should tell you: they had good wine in plenty, and excellent rabbit pies, and other food befitting the hour. But that's all I'll say, for too long a tale is tiresome. But the story goes that the lady asked him to tell her truly what his name was and what had brought him from his land. The knight was only too pleased to talk with her, and told her everything. He did not make a long sermon of it, but swiftly recounted the tale of his visit to the court. He told her all, and how he dearly longed to finish his feud if only he could cross the river; and how he had chased the boar. When the lady had heard his story to

the end, she pretended not to know what to say – yet she knew very well. Of the magic arts and necromancy and ingenious devices she knew more than any man alive; and truly, she was so in love with the knight that she couldn't live without him – without him she was bereft of all strength and power. She asked his name again, and what he was rightly called.

“Garismedes is my name,” he said.

“Sir,” she replied, “if you'll grant me a favour, I'll fulfil your wish of being able to cross the great river, so swift and stormy.”

“The knight was quite astonished, but he swore to do whatever she wished, be it good or ill – nothing would be too much trouble. The high-born lady thanked him, and told him instantly that she'd loved him deeply for a very long time; and now she wanted him to stay with her and take her as his wife; and Garismedes agreed. Then the lady rose at once and had the table cleared and the knight stripped of his clothes and shoes. Then, without the slightest delay, she led him to her bed to lie with her, and strove to serve him in every way, and to do just as he wished.

‘In the morning when day broke and the sunrise could be seen, Garismedes asked her to keep her promise about the crossing of the river. She replied that he would cross it within three days provided he would wait there for her, and he agreed. Then she left him and came here without delay, and by skill and the art of necromancy she made the bridge that you see there. Before the day was out she had made the half on this side of the river; I don't know who helped her. But I do know this much: that same day her lover Garismedes was killed by misadventure in the forest; for a great and mighty knight struck him clean through the body with a lance. The lady heard the news at nightfall, and was beside herself with anguish: I can't describe her pain. She wouldn't build any more of the bridge, and declared in her distress that the bridge would never be completed, and no man would ever be able to cross it, unless he were the most praiseworthy knight in all the world's expanse in combat and in chivalry, in largess and in courtliness, in honouring and serving God, and in respect for Holy Church, and in all the virtues that a man born of woman may possess. And thus it remains, that's all I know. Many a knight has come here and tried to cross the bridge, with very little success. Try yourself if you will; and if you can cross you can go to the tournament without me. There's the bridge: try now.’

Perceval did not delay, but climbed straight on his horse. And when he stepped out on to the bridge which had never before been crossed, it let out a groan, so terrible and so hideous that it sounded as if it were crumbling and splintering and falling all to pieces; and when the noise stopped, the foot of the bridge, which was fixed to the riverbank, suddenly tore itself away and swung right round and fixed itself to the ground on the other side. Briol saw

and realised that Perceval was the finest, boldest, bravest knight in the world, beyond all doubt. And with all the breath he could summon he cried aloud:

‘Sir Perceval, you must go to the tournament alone, without me, for I cannot cross here. Ride on now as fast as you can, for it will soon be past the ninth hour.’

Perceval heard him instantly, and rode straight down from the bridge and set off into the great forest. He rode on alone, rejoicing in his heart at having crossed the bridge.

**H**e rode on, deep in thought, until he caught sight of the Proud Castle. The good, brave knights of King Arthur’s household had already sallied into the fields and drawn up in line of battle. I know that with the king were his nephew Sir Gawain, and Yvain, King Urien’s son, who was so gentle and noble, and Kay the seneschal, and Lucan who was the master butler, and Saigremor and Bedivere, Gaheriet and Engrevain. And Yvain of the White Hands was there, and Yvain the Bastard; and Tor, King Aret’s son, and Tallar of Rougemont, a knight of great renown; and Erec, King Lac’s son, and Lancelot of the Lake. And with him in his company was Elis of the ill-cut coat, the son of Galesche; and Moradas, who had married the Danish girl who had called the tourney together. On the other side, at the end of the field, was the mighty king of Ireland, and three thousand Irishmen with him. And Aguisial, king of Scotland, was there with all his knights; and the noble Brien of the Isles, too, with a splendid company. The good Welshman Perceval rode down to join them, for he wanted to joust with the royal companies and do such deeds of chivalry as everyone would envy. The battalions were drawn up and deployed on each side, and the ranks quivered in anticipation and the ensigns billowed in the wind; helmets shone and shields shimmered; then the horses reared and strained at the bit, and down they advanced to join battle. Kay asked permission to begin the tourney, and King Arthur granted it, and without more ado Kay came riding forward in eager bounds. Perceval recognized him well and charged towards him, spurring his horse to a greater speed than a falcon swooping on a dove. Kay came to meet him like a worthy knight, and as the horses rushed together the knights struck each other full on their shields; Kay’s lance smashed and flew in half, but Perceval thrust his an arm’s length through Kay’s shield and pierced his fine and close-meshed mailcoat; and as they met he crashed into him with such force that he sent him flying over his horse’s rump and tumbling to the ground; and he seized the horse and led it away. Kay had difficulty mounting again, for he was slightly wounded.

The *mêlée* was now so violent that the very earth trembled. The king of Ireland went to fight Saigremor, and smashed right through his

gold-striped shield; but Saigremor returned the blow and beat him from his stirrups to the ground; but Irishmen came to help him to his feet.

The tourney now intensified; every knight was fighting now, and some were bleeding; they clashed and struck each other down, and sent sparks flying from their shields and helms of steel. The most skilled at arms did wonders; and Gawain was as great as ever, capturing the king of Scotland who had arms of great worth. And on the other side Perceval was dealing mighty, weighty blows with his sword; the Scots and Irish had a great colleague in him! Through the tourney rode Perceval the Welshman, his furbished sword of steel in hand, intent not upon winning booty but on performing feats of chivalry.

The deeds of arms, assaults and *mêlées* went on till evening was almost done, when they broke up and departed. Perceval returned to the bridge and rode straight on to it, and it swung round to the other side where it had been before. Briol caught sight of Perceval and, laughing, asked him how he was; he replied, smiling and cheerful, that he was well and happy.

‘Did the tournament take place?’

‘Yes, and it was very great,’ said Perceval. ‘But let’s think of other things: of board and lodging for tonight – I’ve eaten nothing all day.’

Briol replied affectionately: ‘Sir, I think tonight we’ll have the finest lodging possible!’

They set off then without delay, riding through the forest until they came to a great valley. There they found a chapel and the cell of a hermit, who led a most holy and excellent life there in the wood, entirely devoted to God. He was a wise and worthy man indeed, and Briol’s cousin. They went straight in and sat down to supper. I shan’t tell you any more, but they were made most welcome, and had as much as they wished of such as can be found in a forest hermitage, until the next morning at the crack of dawn.

Now I shall tell you about King Arthur. He had returned to the Proud Castle along with all his admirable knights. They swiftly disarmed and donned rich gowns and entered the hall. King Arthur went to Kay to see if he was hurt at all. He sent two doctors to him, but they said he had suffered no harm. The knights had laughed a good deal at the seneschal behind his back, because he had been toppled from his horse at the first encounter, in full view of a thousand knights or more. Even the king had made fun of him; and he asked the knights if they had recognised the knight who had unseated Kay. They said they did not know who he was and had never seen his shield.

‘Truly,’ said Sir Gawain, ‘I know this much: he’s a worthy and noble knight indeed, and I want you all to know that he’s won this evening’s prize.’

Then a horn was blown to call for the water, and the king washed

and took his seat at the table. Then all the worthy knights sat down to dine; but it would be tiresome and laborious to describe all their dishes.

Instead I want to tell you of those outside the castle – of the Scots and of the king of Ireland, who were lodged upon the heath; and many other esteemed knights, who had searched and scoured everywhere for the knight they had seen that evening. But try as they might, they could find no-one who had any word of him or knew where he was lodged. They knew nothing of him at all, but they all agreed he had performed better than anyone. They spent the whole night talking about it, and in revelry, until morning came and the sun was bright and fair and beautiful. Within the castle and without they made ready, and breakfasted on bread and wine. Then straight away their fine chargers were harnessed and covered with emblems, and pennons were tied to their smooth ash lances. And without delay the knights put on their iron greaves, and laced on their knee-pieces and donned their white mailcoats. Those from within the castle and without were armed and assembled in the field. It was the most beautiful stretch of ground ever seen, where the grass was green and lush – a perfect place for tourneying. There you would have seen many splendid chargers, handsomely caparisoned, and lances and so many banners that it was a marvel. And there were so many shields, vermillion, gold, and red, and silver, that all the country shone with them. They were divided and deployed and arranged on both sides: they had only to join battle now.

Sir Perceval had not stopped riding since early morning, travelling swiftly on until he reached the tournament. But he was completely unrecognised, for he had left his arms with Briol who had exchanged them for his own, which were very fine. And so he was not spotted by those who were looking out for him and longing to learn from which land he came, since he had shown such prowess.

(SYNOPSIS OF THE SECOND DAY OF THE TOURNAMENT\*)

*Perceval sees King Arthur and his knights ride out and deploy in magnificent array, company by company. Arthur has such countless numbers of men that it seems to Perceval as if the entire world is there together. But he decides not to joint them but to fight against them as he did on the first day, to test his worth against the finest. He first charges and topples Sir Yvain, then a series of others in quick succession, and Arthur is astonished to see this 'master of the finest knights of my great household' and wishes that he knew him and could make him a knight of the Round Table.*

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\* In Professor Roach's edition of the Second Continuation, the text of this part of the manuscript is given in Appendix VII.

*The tournament is fiercely contested all over the field, and Arthur topples the king of Ireland. Then Gawain sees Perceval, though without recognising him, and attacks him to avenge his defeated companions. They bring each other down and fight on with their swords. Perceval cuts clean through Gawain's shield and into his mailcoat, 'but God through His power came to Sir Gawain's aid and the blow did not reach the flesh'. Sir Gawain wants to return the blow, but their combat is broken up by the chaos of the tourney raging all around. They both remount riderless horses, and Perceval fells many more with his sword, including Tallar and Saigremor. The tournament is ferocious, with knights falling on every side: there are empty stirrups everywhere. Perceval is doing plenty of damage: 'no-one he strikes remains in the saddle'; and inspired by his example 'even the most cowardly Irish become bold'. But Arthur and his knights rally and begin to gain the upper hand once more. But back comes Perceval to the attack, and brings down Carador, Cliges, Tor and Ydres. Gawain, alarmed at seeing his companions toppled, charges at Perceval again, and they fight a second fearsome combat, smashing their shields, helmets and hauberks – but again they are separated by the press of the tournament. But soon they meet again, swooping down at each other like sparrowhawks or falcons on their prey; they exchange terrible blows and only Sir Gawain's mail hood saves him; this time Perceval brings Gawain and his horse down and rides back into the press leaving Gawain on the ground. Carador, Alardin, Cador, Kay, Saigremor, Yvain and Gawain, having all been unhorsed by Perceval that day, now charge towards him all together. They bring him down, but he leaps up and begins to defend himself. Gawain calls upon him to surrender, for he is a great knight and it would be a sin if he were killed; but Perceval refuses and gives them a tremendous fight. They cannot capture him, and the knights from the Scots and Irish side come to his rescue and he escapes, wounding Kay badly in the process.*

*Back rides Perceval through the press, winning combat after combat. He unhorses Saigremor yet again, and then meets Lancelot and topples him and asks him to cry for mercy. But Gawain intervenes and stuns Perceval with a blow on the helmet, and they begin another fearsome combat. Gawain has never met such an adversary in his life, and longs to know his name and where he is from. He steps back a little, almost exhausted, and Perceval began to laugh quietly beneath his helmet, and called to Gawain: "How are you, Sir Gawain? Here I am, ready for battle". Gawain sees that Perceval is quite undaunted, and is sure that 'there was no equal of this knight in all the world'. Gawain asks him his name, but Perceval will not give it, and taunts Gawain by asking him: 'now that you've taken me prisoner, where are you going to keep me?' Gawain is furious, and returns to the attack, but once again the press of the tournament breaks up their fight.*

*Finally night comes and the tournament ends, leaving many dead and wounded all over the field. Perceval immediately slips away into the forest and crosses the bridge once more: it swings round as before to the other bank. He*

*rejoins Briol and they lodge at the hermitage again.*

*Meanwhile Arthur's knights return to the castle, and all their talk is of Perceval, longing to know who the knight can be who had 'toppled all the finest knights to be found in this world'. Arthur, yearning to have him as a member of his household, rides out with a company of his foremost knights to the Irish camp. They ask for Perceval everywhere, but no-one knows where he is. Arthur and Sir Gawain are distraught, and search-parties are sent out everywhere that night, but their hunt is fruitless.*

*Briol and Perceval rise early next morning, take their leave of the hermit, and head for Briol's house.*

I tell you, night was very near when they arrived there; they exchanged few words, but dismounted, and four boys ran up and took their horses and led them off to fine stables. The two knights entered the hall; and before they had disarmed, the lady and the daughter appeared from a great chamber hung with rich oriental cloth and silk. Perceval was the first to see them; he had just removed his mailcoat, but still had on his shoulder-pieces of embroidered cloth; and he had unlaced one greave, and was shod only as far as the ankle; in this state he rose to meet them and embraced them. And the lady spoke with words of joyful welcome. The daughter, modest and gentle, called for two handsome gowns of scarlet cloth, fresh and new, and came and dressed the knights. Then, without more ado, she had the candles lit, and orders were given for the food to be brought without delay. The servants were far from slow, and said that the tables could be set at once. Those whose task it was set and prepared the tables and promptly brought water, and the knights washed and sat down. The girl with the shining face and upright heart dined with Perceval, and the lady with her lord. They had good and plentiful food, I can tell you, and there is no point in claiming that they were sparing with the wine!

When they had dined as long as they wished they rose, and the table was cleared. In the long, wide hall a bed was made for Perceval; he was deeply tired, but he asked the girl earnestly for his mule and his dog, for there was nothing he wanted to see so much, and they were brought to him at once. When he was completely at ease he lay down, very tired, for it was far into the night; and the others likewise all went to their beds.

Perceval slept all night, not waking until the bright sun had risen and the day was radiant. Then he dressed and called for his arms; a boy brought them for him and helped him to arm. He had his horse saddled, and packed the stag's head behind; and the mule was ready, saddled and harnessed. There was no more to be said; but when Briol saw that he was

about to mount and set off he held him back, saying:

‘Sir, I can’t say I approve of this! Your body hasn’t ceased toiling for sixteen days. You haven’t rested in all that time, neither you nor your horse. I beg one single favour of you, in the name of love and courtesy and friendship and by the faith you owe God: that you stay here today, just until tomorrow. Then you can go wherever you wish. You can surely grant me that.’

‘Truly, friend,’ said Perceval, ‘I can’t stay here today: if I did so I would be perjuring myself. So you mustn’t ask me to stay and break my oath. You’ve shown me so much honour and kindness that I love you more than anyone; and I want you to know this: if you ever have need of me, I shall never fail to come to your aid.’

Briol heard this and thanked him deeply; for he knew very well that there was no worthier knight from there to the city of Rome, and he loved and cherished him the more for that. One should indeed value above all things a worthy man who proves his goodness, when God grants that one finds such a man.

Then the lady came and greeted him most nobly, and with her came the beautiful girl, who begged him at once to stay if he could. But he told them he would not, for he had a very long journey to make. It is tiresome to lengthen the story: Perceval mounted his horse and turned to the ladies and took his leave; then he departed. He rode out through the gate, carrying the stag’s head and the dog, which he loved and held most dear.

**H**e rode straight on and passed into the forest, and rode hard and pressed on all day until evening. Along a great, broad road he came upon a cross and a tree, and a tomb covered by a marble slab. Perceval halted beneath the tree and looked at the tomb and the cross, and at the marble slab which lay on top; and he heard a knight crying desperately beneath. He climbed from the white mule and came up to the tomb. And the man inside cried out again:

‘Dear Lord God, have mercy! Shall I ever get out of here?’

And Perceval quickly asked him: ‘Whoever’s crying so down there, are you on God’s side?’

And he replied to Perceval: ‘Yes, my good dear sir, I’m a wretched knight, the most unfortunate and afflicted ever born of woman!’

Perceval was amazed at this, and said: ‘Friend, tell me how I can help you, and how I can lift this stone and let you out.’

And he replied: ‘My good dear friend, since you’re willing to help me, all you have to do is cut a good lever from that tree so that you can lift the marble slab. That’s how you can help me.’



Perceval, without more ado, did exactly as he asked: he lifted the marble slab right up and held it until the knight was out. In face and limbs and body he was a truly handsome knight. Perceval was the first to speak, saying:

‘Sir knight, we must lower this heavy marble back in place.’

And he stood beside the lever, propping up the marble slab. The knight came up to Perceval, who was still holding it in his hands. Without a word he barged Perceval so hard with his knees and arms and side that he sent him tumbling into the tomb; and he let the marble crash down so hard that, without a word of a lie, all the ground shook and trembled with the weight of the slab – for it was far from light, but great beyond measure. Then the knight began to cry:

‘Now you’ll have to guard this place, as I have done for a long time! All who go pursuing folly come to grief! I’ve bestowed a home on you from which you’ll never escape. You’ll die and perish there! You’ll find no joy, but will die, I’m sure, before you ever leave.’

And he came up to the mule and mounted at once, asking for no man’s leave, and began to dig in his spurs, intending to take her and set off on his way. But the mule stood as firm as if she had been tied to the tree. The knight was filled with rage, quite speechless with anger. He jumped from the mule and came straight up to the horse, and cast aside the stag’s head that was tied to the saddle. Then he mounted without delay; but he took neither the shield nor the lance, nor did he look at the dog that stood completely still beside the white mule. Instead he beat and kicked at the horse with all his might, aiming to ride away. But for all his beating he could not make the horse move.

‘What’s this?’ he cried. ‘This horse won’t move: either it holds me in contempt or the knight has charmed it, and enchanted the mule he’s brought, as well; for it won’t go forward or backward for all Saint Peter’s wealth.’

He dismounted, deeply vexed, and came back to the mule. Then he paused for a moment, and losing his evil frown, he lifted the marble slab and said to Perceval:

‘Come out, sir. It would be wicked and wrong of me to do you harm. And I couldn’t even if I wanted, for I know in truth that you’re the most praiseworthy, refined and accomplished knight, the best endowed with all knightly virtues, living. And if you want to surpass and exceed the whole world in arms, then follow this grassy path to the great peak of the Mont Dolerous.’

Then Perceval stepped out and the knight leapt into the grave without another word. The marble fell back on top of him, and with such force that the whole earth seemed to quake. Perceval cried out to him with

all his might to speak up and reveal his name, and why he had returned to the tomb, but the knight replied:

‘You’ll hear nothing more now; but you’ll know soon for sure – before the year is out.’

The worthy and valiant Perceval could see that he would say no more, so he returned to his horse and tied the stag’s head on again; then he mounted the mule at once and picked up the dog and set off swiftly on his way. The path was thick with grass, and difficult and thorny.

He did not stop until three o’clock, when he found a girl sitting beneath a huge oak tree. She was dressed in samite, fresh and new; and on her head she wore a beautiful head-dress of leaves, most finely made. She was very richly dressed, and had not removed her wimple: indeed, she was so well muzzled that she could barely see. Perceval came straight up and greeted her. She rose to meet him, took off her wimple, and said at once:

‘Sir, I want my white mule and my ring, as was promised when I gave them to you.’

Hearing this, Perceval dismounted instantly and went and embraced her. The girl, who was not short of wisdom, asked him to tell her if he had been to the court of the Fisher King, and what news he had heard, and if he knew about the lance and what the Grail was, and if he had asked about the sword which could not be repaired, and about the obscure and secret mysteries which no knight would ever know until such time as the one came who was endowed with all knightly qualities. That knight would be so blessed and of such renown that he would learn the truth and be held as the finest knight who ever was or ever will be in the world.

‘Lady,’ said Perceval, ‘in the name of God, the Lord of all, when I crossed the ivory bridge I met a most worthy man. He lodged me splendidly, and told me of the high bridge that no-one had ever been able to cross, and of the tourney that was gathering before the Proud Castle; so that, by the faith I owe you, I’m afraid I haven’t been to that most esteemed king of noble valour. But if it please God in whom I believe, I’ll go there soon, and not be diverted.’

He climbed from the mule at once and returned her, and the ring, to the girl; she mounted swiftly, without taking her leave, and rode off, much to Perceval’s amazement. He was now quite bewildered, for he did not know which path to take or in which direction to turn to find the court of the king called the Fisher. At last he decided to let his horse graze until daybreak the next morning. So he saw to his horse and then stayed awake, deep in troubled reflection.

(SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 27599–31040)

*Perceval rides on next morning, praying that he might find the court of the Fisher*

*King and the castle where he had seen the beautiful girl and the magic chessboard. Suddenly he hears a voice in a tree which tells him that if he follows the dog it will lead him to where he found it. So he sets it down, delighted, and follows it for a long time, the dog running on 'with its head lowered, as if it were tracking a beast'. Finally they come to a castle beside a river, and Perceval enters the hall but finds no-one. The dog runs ahead and sits on a bed, and Perceval follows and sees the magic chessboard set up beside it. He is just about to move a pawn when the beautiful girl enters. She greets the dog joyfully, but rebukes Perceval for delaying his return so long. But when Perceval explains how the stag's head and the dog had been stolen from him she forgives him, and lets him kiss her twice, passionately. Then he asks her about the chessboard, and she tells him how a girl, highly skilled in necromancy and astrology, had given it to Morgan la Fee, King Arthur's sister, who had later passed it on to her, the girl of the chessboard castle. Perceval and the girl dine together, and then a bed is made for him in the hall. Perceval lies awake thinking of the girl 'who resembled a fairy in her beauty'. Then she comes to his bed, prepared to keep the promise she had made to grant him her love if he brought back the head of the white stag. 'But Perceval had vowed to keep his virginity, and I tell you truly, he did not touch her carnally'.*

*He insists on leaving the next day, but says he will return once he has been to the court of the Fisher King. She leads him down to a boat in which he crosses the river, and she says that on the other side he will find a road which will take him straight to the Fisher King.*

*But Perceval turns off the road and follows a tangled, thorny path all day. As night draws in he finds a knight hanging from an oak tree by his feet. He has been suffering there for a day and a half and is in agony, and begs Perceval to take him down. Perceval does so and the knight thanks him deeply. He says that his name is Bagomedes, and that he was hung on the tree by Kay and three other knights who were returning from the Mont Dolerous, all nearly deranged by their failure to tether their horses to the pillar there, a feat which can be accomplished only by the finest knight in the world. Perceval instantly decides to go to the Mont Dolerous and try the test, while Bagomedes says he will go to Arthur's court and seek vengeance on Kay. Perceval asks him to greet the king and his knights for him, and to tell them that he is well. Then he sets off for the Mont Dolerous.*

*Bagomedes finds Arthur holding high court at Caradigan at the feast of Saint John. The king is bitterly unhappy at the absence of Perceval, who has sent so many knights to him as prisoners, and at the lack of news of him. So Bagomedes is more than welcome when he greets the king on Perceval's behalf. But Bagomedes refuses to dismount until he has revenge upon Kay for the shameful injury he had done him. Kay denies ever having seen the knight, but Bagomedes tells the whole story to the court, and he and Kay meet in judicial battle. Bagomedes wounds and unhorses Kay in full view of everyone, and is about to attack him with his sword*

*when Arthur intervenes and asks the queen to reconcile them, which she does.*

*As they dine afterwards, Arthur talks again of Perceval, and Gawain declares that he will seek him as far as Mont Dolerous. One after another, a great number of the other knights say they will do the same. They gather next morning outside the city and set off on their way, Gawain saying that he hopes to return to the house of the Fisher King. Gawain, Yvain and Lancelot part at a fork in the road, and the story now follows Gawain.*

*He spends the first night at a hermitage with very little comfort, and rides on the next day until he sees a shield hanging on a tree. A beautiful girl is sitting nearby, and when she hears that his name is Gawain she invites him to come to her house. Just then her brother, a handsome but very small knight, rides up and, when she tells him that it is Gawain, he is delighted and likewise invites him to come to their house and dine. Gawain asks him about the shield on the tree, and the little knight replies that no knight must carry it unless he is full of strength, wisdom and honour and has a sweetheart who loves him truly and faithfully. Any knight without these qualities will be dishonoured if he tries to use the shield, but it will double the powers of a knight lucky enough to possess them all.*

*They go to their house and sit down to dine. A messenger suddenly arrives from Arthur's court, and tells them that Kay has heard about the shield and is determined to use it in a tournament to be held the following Tuesday. The little knight agrees to take the shield to the tournament if Gawain will go there with him. Gawain agrees to do so.*

*The little knight then sets off to guard the shield on the tree, and Gawain is left with the knight's sister, Tancree. She tells him that she has been in love with him for a long time, and he embraces her and swears to be her true love, and she yields quite willingly as they 'kissed and embraced until Gawain plucked the flower'.*

*When evening comes the little knight returns from guarding the shield, and says that no challengers have come for it that day. Their beds are prepared for them, but much to the girl's annoyance she cannot share Gawain's because her brother's has been made right next to his. She 'wished that her brother and the household were all in the Orient', and lies awake almost till morning.*

*Early the next day Gawain and the little knight set out for the tournament, and on the following Monday they arrive at the Blanche Lande where knights are gathering for the tourney. They send the shield to Arthur with the message that any man who can carry it through two jousts without being unhorsed will win the tournament. Kay claims it immediately for the very first joust. He mounts his horse, hangs the shield round his neck, thrusts in his spurs, charges at the little knight, strikes with his lance, and is sent head over heels to the ground. A good hundred people see this, and all roar with laughter. Arthur has*

*many of his other knights try the shield, but they all suffer the same fate, much to Kay's delight, and they throw it down in the middle of the field. Gawain, who to avoid being recognised has not been carrying a shield, picks it up as the battle rages, and carries it without mishap all day long, defeating all attackers.*

*When night comes he and the little knight slip away into the forest. Arthur, impressed by their exploits, is eager to know who they are, but no-one knows anything about them. On the second day of the tournament Arthur's forces lose, 'because', said everyone, 'the lord of chivalry, the wise and worthy Gawain, was not there'.*

*Gawain and the little knight ride home, and the girl Tancree is delighted to see Gawain return. But once again, much to her frustration, the beds are arranged in such a way that she cannot sleep with Gawain, and she curses the servants for putting them so close together.*

*In the morning Gawain departs, and the girl calls herself a fool for bestowing her love upon a man who will win any woman. 'Before the month is out there'll be two or three more beautiful than I who'll love him just the same'. She is sure she will never see him again.*

*Gawain journeys on, and early one morning he meets a fully armed knight sitting quite still upon his horse, his head bowed as though sleeping. The knight's horse runs off when it sees Sir Gawain's, and Gawain chases after him, hoping for information about the Fisher King or the Mont Dolerous. He finally catches up with him, and shakes him gently until he raises his head. The knight is annoyed at being disturbed, and explains that he has been deep in thought about his sweetheart, who has been stolen from him by a most powerful knight whom he has no hope of defeating. Gawain says he will rescue her, and he rides on with the Pensive Knight until they come to a tent in a meadow. Inside it is the stolen girl, and outside it, mounted on a splendid horse, is the knight who stole her. He refuses to return her peacefully, and he and Gawain join battle. Gawain finally forces him to cry for mercy, and he relinquishes the girl and agrees to surrender to King Arthur. His name, he says, is Ban de la Lande. The Pensive Knight and his sweetheart are reunited. Ban sets off the next day and finds Arthur at Escavalon, and is accepted into the royal household.*

*Meanwhile Gawain rides on, hoping to find a hermitage where he can lodge for the night; but he finds nowhere at all, and spends a hard night without shelter in the forest.*

As soon as day broke and the sun was bright, Gawain remounted at once and rode hard until midday. In the distance, on open ground, he noticed a knight, fully armed, well furnished and equipped, mounted on a great, swift

charger. And he had, I believe, a shield painted gold and blue. He seemed a most assured knight, strong and bold and alert. Gawain saw him and headed towards him, and he likewise rode down to meet Gawain. As soon as they were within earshot of each other the knight greeted Gawain and asked his name at once.

‘I’ve never concealed my name,’ he said, ‘and shall not do so now. I was baptised, my dear sir, with the name of Gawain.’

When the knight heard this he seemed overjoyed, and Gawain immediately asked him his.

‘Sir,’ the knight replied, ‘I am Giglain, your son, whom King Arthur named the Fair Unknown.’

Hearing this, Gawain was filled with joy and said: ‘Dear boy, I truly didn’t recognise you and was certainly not expecting you! When did you last see my lord?’

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘a fortnight ago tomorrow, I think.’

‘How is the king? Is he well?’

‘Yes indeed, sir. And he bids you, no matter what your business, to return to him without delay, for he is troubled and enraged by King Carras, lord of Recesse, who never ceases, day or night, to attack and capture his men and reduce his towns to ashes. The king is in dismay, and has sent people in search of you throughout the land, for he needs your aid. He has assembled a great army, and I know that if you were there he would move against King Carras and wage war on him and capture all his land. He hates him deeply, and is warning him that he won’t be mounting a cattle raid – he wants only Carras himself.’

When Gawain heard this his heart burned with grief and rage. And he began to tell Giglain that he would go to his uncle’s court, but first he would strive to find the Fisher King.

‘I shall never rest,’ he said, ‘until I’ve been there and learned the truth about the knight who rode past the tent of my lady the queen, and whom Kay tried to bring back by demands and high-handedness<sup>†</sup>. But his force and insolence were to no avail, I assure you! Instead I led the knight back with gentle words, and promised without hesitation that if he couldn’t fulfil the quest he’d undertaken, then I would mount his horse and complete it for him. We returned to the queen’s tent, but before we could enter he fell dead from his horse. So I mounted without delay and rode on until, around midnight, I came across a chapel in the middle of a wood. I went in as fast

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\* Perceval met him earlier in the Second Continuation: above, p. 155

† Gawain here recounts his adventures towards the end of the First Continuation: above, beginning at p. 136. The details of the story are not entirely consistent.

as I could, for the night was so dark, so dense, so stormy, that it seemed as if the sky were being torn apart and the great forest crumbling. So I entered the chapel, and it was most beautiful and pleasant. There was an altar in the middle with a single candle burning on it, shedding a brilliant light. I'd not been there long when, I promise you, I saw a man's hand appear from the altar, blacker by far than any ink, and it snuffed out the candle immediately. I left the chapel at once, for it had terrified me, and rode on until, on the third day, I came to a rich castle, where all the walls and battlements were most handsomely designed. I couldn't find a living soul, but in a splendid hall, all hung with cloth from Thessaly, I found a body lying on a bier, covered with a sumptuous purple cloth. I gazed at it for a little, and then saw a brilliant light all around it, and a crowd of people crying and lamenting wondrously. They didn't say a word to me or address me in any way. And they disappeared so suddenly that I didn't know what had become of them or which way they had gone. I stayed there in bewilderment until a knight suddenly appeared from a chamber. There were three servants with him who welcomed me with the greatest honour and stripped me of my arms and took care of my horse; I've never been treated with such honour at any court. They led me to a chamber painted with flowers, that's all I know, and knights rose as I entered, and so did their lord – who was a king, I can assure you: his countenance made that clear. And then, without more ado, we all sat down to dine; I dined with the king himself, for he insisted. I saw a boy carrying a lance with an iron head, and from the tip sprang a drop of blood. Another boy came holding a naked sword which was broken across the middle, and he presented it to the king. The king commanded me to put the pieces together; I did so, but I couldn't make them join. The king shook his head and said that I could not achieve the task for which I'd come. I was filled with shame, as you can imagine, and my face turned red; but I saw something else which comforted me greatly, because there was also a grail, the like of which was never seen. It was carried by a girl, most elegant and beautiful; and it served the whole table and set bread before the king. I watched this in delight. Then the king said:

“My good, dear friend, ask me whatever you like about what your eyes have seen, and I shall tell you the truth.”

“So I asked him why the lance bled so profusely; and he told me at once that it was truly the lance with which Our Lord was struck when He was set upon the Cross. But I enquired and asked no more, for I was so preoccupied, and began to feel very sleepy after eating. So the king had a bed made for me, where I slept most sweetly until daybreak the next morning. Before the sun was fully up I found myself upon a rock along with my arms and my horse. I armed at once – I had no desire to dally – and set off, for I wanted to find out about everything I've told you. God bless me, that's why

I left my land – and also to seek Perceval, who I heard had gone to the pillar on Mont Dolerous in search of adventure.’

Giglain replied directly that it was less than a year since he had spoken to Perceval in the forest of Monbrehan.

‘And he asked me a great deal about King Arthur and his men, and also about you. And he told me that, if he could, nothing would stop him coming to see you and the king before the dispersal of the court which is to be held at Christmas.’

Gawain replied: ‘I wish he would, so help me God! Then I’d return with him to seek the king of whom I’ve spoken. And I’m certain that through Perceval I could learn and hear and understand something of the lance and the Grail.’

With that they set off along a forest path, wide and well beaten. They followed it, day and night and morning and evening, until, I tell you truly, at the very end of the week they came at last to the castle of Caradigan. They were received most splendidly, but King Arthur was not there: he had gathered all his knights at Escavalon; there were many kings, many princes, and many barons of great power in his company. So before day dawned Gawain was on the road again, and he journeyed on by day and night until he reached Escavalon. King Arthur and the queen and his knights were overjoyed at his coming, and the king explained the reason for assembling his people.

Gawain replied: ‘Truly, King Carras has committed a great outrage, and so has his brother King Gaudras, who used to be Lord of the Desert. They won’t escape without loss unless they surrender, I promise you. Let your men be armed and your battalions arrayed; then let us ride at once to your enemies’ lands. We’ll reduce their towns and towers and castles to flame and ash, and if King Carras can be caught, then do with him what you will.’

The king vowed to do so. He called for the trumpets and the great silver horns to sound; and the army made ready and drew up and deployed, and as the sun rose they struck camp and set off through the forest, riding straight on, across good ground and bad, not holding back with bridle or reins, until they all reached the land of their enemies. What else should I tell you? They set fire to all their castles, destroying many, and cast down many high towers, which were poorly defended, and trapped their quarry everywhere. The long and the short of it is: they laid waste all the land. King Carras had assembled a great band of men and knights, but when he heard that Arthur was burning his land, he could think of no way to defend himself; and he was well aware that if Arthur caught him he could expect no mercy. So he retreated with all his forces to a castle he had overlooking the sea, very rich and strong, and there King Arthur laid siege to him.

He besieged him for two months or more, I believe, but still he



could not take the castle. Arthur was enraged, and swore to God and all His saints that he would not leave the castle until he had captured and destroyed it. This was announced to King Carras inside the castle, and he was far from happy, but he made no outward show of it. He sent word to Gawain, asking him to come, if he would, to the gate, which was splendid and strong, and Gawain went at once. King Carras then spoke to him, and begged him to help him, that he might make peace with his uncle King Arthur; thenceforth he would always be at his command and serve him faithfully. Sir Gawain replied that he would gladly do all he could to help him, and returned to the king and told him what Carras had said.

When King Arthur heard this he said: 'Dear nephew, I agree to it, but first I'd like the advice of my knights and yourself.'

'Sire,' said Gawain, 'we say that you should accept this offer of peace and homage and amends he has made. What one thinks is winning can often be losing, as you have seen yourself many times. If we had done battle, someone would have been killed in combat for whom your heart would have grieved all the days of your life. One should not give folly so much free rein that it cannot be restrained when necessary to avoid heavy loss. You'll have complete power over King Gaudras\* of the Desert.'

'Dear nephew,' said the king, 'let it be just as you wish.'

Then the worthy Gawain summoned King Carras, and he came at once and fell at Arthur's feet, but he was promptly raised again by the king's own hand: he forgave him his ill-will and allowed him to keep his land.

Then the army withdrew, all returning to their own lands; and King Arthur and his household returned to Escavalon. But as he dismounted at the mounting-block he was sad and downhearted, for he now had only three hundred knights left in his company. He swore to God that he had never in all his days had so few knights, even when his court was dispersed. And so Gawain stayed with him, and the story says nothing more about him for the moment. Now, if you wish, you can hear the continuing story of Perceval.

**G**autier de Denet, who has recorded what follows, recounts how the good and loyal knight Perceval rode for nearly fifteen days after leaving the tree from which he had released Bagomedes, and met with no adventure or encounter worth relating, until he passed into a huge and beautiful forest. And in a tall tree he saw a child sitting on a branch, so high up that he could not have been reached even with a lance. I've no wish to tell a word of a lie: in his hand he was holding an apple, and from here to the city of Rome you

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\* The manuscript reads 'Clamados', but the reference is surely meant to be to Gaudras, mentioned above, p. 199.

would not find so beautiful a being; and he was most richly dressed. He did not look even five years old, too young to be without his mother. Perceval looked long at him, and turned his horse towards the tree. He halted beneath it and greeted him, and the child was quick to return his greeting. Perceval asked him to climb down, but he said he would not.

‘You have no authority over me,’ said the child, ‘my good dear sir. By the faith I owe almighty God, although you’re a knight I owe you homage for nothing of mine, and if I do I renounce all rights to it and yield it to you. Many words have been said to me and have reached my ears and truly had no effect on me: yours affect me not at all.’

‘So it seems,’ said Perceval. ‘But tell me truly, am I on the right road for the house of the Fisher King?’

The child boldly replied: ‘My good and gentle friend, you may well be; but I don’t think I’m yet so learned as to be able to answer all you might ask.’

‘In faith,’ said Perceval, ‘none of the things I want to ask you requires great thought before you reply. I want to ask your name, and which land you’re from, and why you’re sitting on that branch like that; and if you can tell me anything about the Fisher King. That’s all I want to know.’

The child replied that he would tell him nothing about any of those things – neither truth nor falsehood, nothing at all. But he should know this much:

‘You could go tomorrow to the pillar on the Mont Dolerous, where you’ll hear news, I believe, that will delight you.’

Then he stood up on the branch and climbed swiftly to a higher one; he hardly lingered there at all, but climbed from branch to branch right to the top of the tree, which was wondrously high. Perceval watched in astonishment, quite speechless, unable to say another word: he just stood there in amazement. And unseen by Perceval the little child disappeared and vanished from the tree, leaving Perceval still down below, peering all around. Unable to see any sign of him, he set off on his way again, just as the day was fading. He slept that night at the house of a hermit, who received him most happily and gave him all he could provide.

Morning came, and before the sun was fully up Perceval armed once more and took to the road. He was soon at a gallop, and drove his horse hard until almost noon; then he caught sight of the Mont Dolerous far off in the distance: it was very high indeed, and Perceval was filled with wonder.

He reached the foot of the mountain, the most beautiful in all the world. He paused awhile and then dismounted, for he saw that his horse was sweating and tired from the swift ride, and he left him to graze and rest, and took off the bridle and saddle. Then he looked up and saw a girl approaching

from the top of the mountain. She was mounted on a greyish palfrey which bore her swiftly along; none more handsome or more finely harnessed was ever seen, and Perceval looked long at it. Then he greeted the girl on the palfrey, and she replied most graciously. And she said:

‘In God’s name, sir, have mercy on yourself and on me!’

‘How do you mean, dear girl?’

‘Don’t go to the top of this mountain, for it would be folly indeed! No-one goes there and returns alive without the greatest difficulty. My love went there this morning, the most esteemed of all men living in the world, and I don’t know what has become of him. I’ve searched high and low, but can see no sign of him at all, and my heart is dark and sad. And a lady I met yonder told me that he’d lost his mind and rushed off this way like a man turned wild! Now I’m all alone and lost in this distant land. I don’t know what to do or say; my heart is full of grief and despair. But if you’ll remount and avoid this mountain, I’ll gladly come with you and serve you at your will.’

Perceval would not lie to her: he swore and vowed that he would not depart, which grieved her deeply, for she was terrified of the great forest, so vast and lonely. But she crossed the plain and rode on until she plunged into the wood. Then Perceval took his bridle and mounted, and rode on alone to the top of the Mont Dolerous.

He gazed at the pillar and its magnificent workmanship: it was made and overlaid with copper, and polished, I believe, from head to foot; and it was as high as a crossbow-bolt could fly. It was surrounded by fifteen crosses, all at least sixty feet in height. I don’t believe any human soul has seen so fine a piece of work as the story, all written at Fescanz,\* describes for us. Perceval was astounded by the sight of such great wonders. Five of the fifteen crosses were red, five were whiter than snow on a branch, and the rest, for sure, were a beautiful shade of blue; and all the colours were natural. And they were made of solid stone to last forever. Perceval gazed at these beautiful crosses, and then looked long at the pillar, golden and tall and beautiful, and saw a ring attached to it. I don’t know if it was gold or silver, but it was worth a tower full of treasure. Around it was written in letters of fine silver – and in Latin, not a word of any other language – that no knight should dare to tether his horse to the pillar unless he was the equal of the finest knight in all the world. Perceval could not read, but he had heard as much from the knight he had met who had pushed him into the tomb and had told him all about it. He dismounted and took the reins and tied them to the ring. He left his horse standing quietly, and leaned his shield against the handsome pillar. He propped his lance against it, too – his lance with its sharp steel

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Fécamp?

head. He stood there, quite still, and took off his helmet to hear and see if anything would happen. And suddenly a girl appeared, riding a white mule. Never in any land, near or far, have I heard of a girl more finely dressed than the one on the white mule. And as for her beauty, it would take me the longest day of summer and more to do full justice to her. So it's better that I keep quiet rather than say something you wouldn't credit. This delightful girl rode steadily up and dismounted on the green grass before Perceval. She greeted him graciously in the name of God who never lies, and bowed to him with a true and humble heart. Perceval returned her greeting, gazing at her in wonder. The girl said nothing more, but walked straight up to the fine charger tethered to the ring and stroked his head and neck with her mantle, giving him the kindest and most courteous of welcomes. Perceval was upset by this; it seemed shameful to him that such a beautiful and lovely girl should be stroking his horse. He thought he would be reproached for it, for a knight should not let a beautiful lady serve him in such a way; for there is another service she can perform more pleasing to all Christian men. If I turned my mind to telling you which service is so fine and good and splendid, I might soon bore you by lengthening the story, and I think it would be taken ill! So I'll tell you about Perceval, who came up to the girl and said:

'Young lady, leave this now.'

But she swore that she was doing it gladly, with a true heart. 'Sir,' she said, 'I know beyond all doubt and fear that the whole world should worship and honour and bow to you and your horse, more than to any saint at any altar, for no knight in all this world can equal you, who have brought your horse to the Mont Dolerous and tied him to the ring on the tall pillar. You can now boast that you have greater honour than any knight of woman born has ever had in all his life.'

'My friend,' said Perceval, 'say what you like, but there are a good many finer than I about! It would be quite wrong of me to consider myself the best.'

'Sir,' she said, 'you speak most nobly and honourably. But enough: you must come down now to my pavilion. You'll be treated with all possible honour, before God you will!'

Perceval agreed, and they both mounted and set off. They rode straight down to the tent, which was huge and most beautiful and rich, pitched on a heath below the mountain, in the shadow of a fir. The lady and the young knight dismounted, to be received with joy by knights and a host of beautiful girls and ladies; and a bevy of serving men came and disarmed Perceval from head to toe most courteously. Then the lady with the shining face led him to the tent and gave him a splendid gown of green samite bedecked with fur. The squires now hurried to set up the tables, and

they all sat down to dine; but there's no need to talk of that. When they had eaten, the tables and cloths were removed at once. The sun was now fading and about to set and night was fast approaching, so it was rather dark. In that grassy spot, so pleasant and broad and long and fair, Perceval and the young lady sat down together on the green grass while the squires prepared beds in the pavilion. Perceval was questioning her, asking her kindly to tell him her name and where she was from, and why she had pitched her pavilion there beside the mountain, so forbidding and strange. And she said:

'Good, gentle sir, I think I can tell you that quite simply. My name is the Lady of the High Peak of Mont Dolerous. I have a castle nearby beyond the mountain, most finely situated, but I came to lodge here a good ten days ago, because a boy came and informed me, not a month back, that he had been at the court of King Arthur in Britain. The queen herself was there, and he also saw Sir Gawain, Gifflet the son of Do, and Yvain and Lancelot and Saigremor, and the boy of the Circle of Gold, so courteous and strong, and a good fifty of the finest knights of the court; and they made a vow that they would come to the pillar on the Mont Dolerous. That's why I had my pavilion brought and pitched here: I wanted to see the cream of knighthood I've named to you. I don't want to say anything more about them for now; but if you'd like to hear the true facts about the pillar, I'll willingly tell you.'

'Truly,' said Perceval, 'if you'd tell me the story and strange history of the pillar, no knight would hear it more gladly than I.'

'Then listen, sir,' she said. 'When King Arthur was born, he was the most beautiful creature that Nature had ever made, applying all her powers to his creation. The king his father was told that three ladies had been present at his birth. The mistress of the three said that Arthur would have esteem and valour and wisdom and prowess and great honour, and greater courage and worth than any man of woman born. When Uterpandragon heard this he rejoiced in his heart, as he was bound to do for his son. One day he was in his castle in the forest of Gloecestre, sitting at a window overlooking a lake. He was gazing at the water and the meadow and the beautiful forest when a girl appeared before him, most splendidly attired.

"Sir", she said, "the other day I went out for a pleasant ride, and rode right on until evening. In the middle of a beautiful meadow, beside a stream from a spring, I found a girl sitting; I sat down beside her to rest awhile, and we began talking as one does of one thing and another, until finally she told me that you had a son who would be held in greater esteem and awe than his father who was a king and emperor. She said no more and I took my leave and stayed with her no longer. I've searched for you and now have found you, and I've told you this so that you may cherish the child, who'll be of great service to many men."

‘The king had a magician whom people called Merlin, and while the girl was talking he’d been standing nearby, listening, but not saying a word. The king saw him and called to him, saying:

“Wise sir, do you know anything about all this?”

“Sire”, said Merlin, “I know indeed that he will be of very great might, and more generous and noble than any Christian man has ever been. In his household he will have many kings and princes and barons, and a hundred more in his company as good as he at enduring the greatest battle. I trust this will not displease you, sire.”

‘Uterpandragon began to laugh with joy at what he’d heard, for he believed Merlin more than anyone in his land, great and wide and filled with worthy men though it was. Then the king summoned Merlin to tell him just one thing if he could, out of love for him: how he could identify, if he wished, the finest knight in his land at enduring battle and combat, and the most endowed with all knightly qualities. Merlin said that he would indeed tell him, but he needed just a fortnight’s respite. The king replied that such a respite would be gladly granted. So Merlin left the court at once, and began searching through great forests and mountains and heaths and plains, until he found this great peak. Then he set to work and made the crosses and the pillar – by skill, by the art of necromancy. My mother was then still young, no more than sixty\* years of age; and she came here, which proved to be folly, for she couldn’t break away from him when she thought to depart: instead she became his mistress, at his will. And he built for her the beautiful house that I mentioned a minute ago. When the time came for him to return to Uterpandragon, he found him at Carlion in Wales. There in his hall, in the presence of a thousand knights or more, and counts and dukes, he told the king that he had found a pillar to which no-one could tether his horse except the finest knight in all his land. The king heard this and was greatly pleased; and he led several fine knights of high esteem to the pillar, but it ill befell them there. Merlin left the court and came to live with my mother – and in time became my father. You shouldn’t doubt my words, for I’ve told you the story as true as the Paternoster. But enough: night is upon us; let’s go and sleep and rest. But first I want to ask you who told you the way when you came here. Tell me, dear sir.’

‘Lady,’ he replied, ‘it was a knight I found in a tomb beneath a great, leafy oak. He was crying there with all his might, appealing desperately to God and His saints for their help, and to that lady of mercy, my lady Holy Mary. I listened for a moment, and then did all I could to free him from the tomb, though a huge marble slab covered him. When he was free and beneath the tree I was left holding the stone, and I was sure, by Saint Peter, that he would come and help me lower the great slab. But indeed he didn’t;

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\* MS 12576 and others say sixty. Others forty, thirty, or twenty!

instead he pushed me into the tomb, and there I was left bewildered, not knowing what had happened or how! The marble fell back over me with such force that, I promise you, I thought I'd never escape in all my life. The foul-hearted knight insulted and mocked me; then he went up to my mule and mounted, intending, I think, to lead her off. But for all his spurring he couldn't make her move. Instead he had to free me from the tomb, and he climbed back inside and told me that, if I wanted to win honour, I should go straight to the pillar on the Mont Dolerous without delay; that was all he would say to me. So I took to the road, and rode on until finally I came here and met you.'

'So help me glorious God,' said the girl, 'my good, dear sir, if you'd killed and destroyed that knight you'd have done great good and won God's gratitude; for he's tricked and robbed many good men who've passed that way. He lies in that tomb constantly, and whenever anyone passes by he cries out, as you know, until he's freed from the tomb. Then he kills them and steals their belongings. That's what he always does.'

'Then truly, dear lady,' said Perceval, 'he's a wicked man indeed; but if it please God and the Holy Spirit, he'll have his just reward.'

With that he fell silent and said no more. But the lady said to him: 'Good sir, I haven't yet learned your name.'

Like a courteous and well-bred knight he told her with a good grace. Then squires and serving men appeared bringing wine, and they drank; and without much further talking the young lady went to her bed in a most beautiful chamber made for her in the pavilion. And in a rich and luxurious bed, most handsomely prepared, the worthy Perceval lay down. He slept all night without stirring, until God, the lord of all things, made the blazing sun appear to light up all the world. Then the brave and mighty knight rose and dressed, and clad himself in all his armour: his helmet laced, his sword girt on, his lance in hand – which was sullied only with dark, congealed blood – his shield slung round his neck and well equipped, he mounted his fine charger. And the young lady mounted likewise without delay, and they set out from the tent.

They rode on through the valley until they found a broad path through the great, leafy forest.

'Sir,' said the fair young lady, 'now tell me, if you will, to which land you're going.'

And he replied most tenderly, saying: 'I'm going to the court of the Fisher King, if I can find the way.'

'Oh yes, sir, take the path you see ahead. Have no doubt – it'll lead you straight there. If you ride swiftly and keep to the path you'll be there tomorrow morning.'

With that she took her leave and left him. And Perceval commended her to God and rode swiftly away.

He rode on along the wide, beaten track until noon. Then a great swirling cloud began to churn the air, and thunder and lightning and rain swept down so violently that Perceval could barely see for the mighty storm. All the beasts of the forest shook with fear of the tempest, and even the hugest trees were torn down everywhere. Until three o'clock neither the storm nor the wind abated. But Perceval battled on, not stopping despite the terrible weather, and rode on until night fell. And when the moon appeared, the night became so calm and soft and tranquil that never in his life, since the day he was born, had he seen a night so fine. And the stars gleaming in the firmament shone so brightly that each one could be clearly seen. Perceval rode on through the moonlight, so beautiful and lovely. All his heart and mind were set on recalling what he had seen before when the good king had given him lodging and he had beheld the bleeding lance. And he longed above all to know what the Grail was, which the girl had been carrying who was so humble and pious and mindful of honour: the rich and precious Grail, so beautiful and glorious and adorned with precious stones. Pondering deeply on these things he rode along, and swore that if he ever found that house again, he would ask the king the truth about them all.

He was still thinking about this when he looked ahead and saw, a long way off, a great and leafy oak, right in the middle of his path. And on the tree, I assure you, there were more than a thousand candles, of miraculous size, it seemed to him; ten or fifteen or twenty or thirty on every branch. Perceval did not linger but rode straight on towards the tree, which seemed to be ablaze with candles; but with each approaching step, the great light faded away to nothing. Perceval galloped straight on, not stopping till he reached the tree. But when he arrived he found not a single candle, large or small. Just then he caught sight of a chapel a little beyond the tree, and he thought he had never seen one more lovely or more beautifully appointed; and through the open door he could see a candle inside, burning. He dismounted, leaving his horse standing quietly by the wall. Then he entered the chapel and looked up and down, but saw not a mortal man, woman, or any living thing; but on the altar, I assure you, there lay a slain knight. Over him was spread a rich, dyed samite cloth, embroidered with many golden flowers, and before him burned a single candle, no more, no less. Perceval was quite bewildered, and listened hard for a sound of someone approaching. He suffered this frustration for a long while – hating having to linger there, but not wishing to leave – until the approach of midnight. Then he stepped out of the chapel



to unbridle his horse. But he had not gone two paces from the door when the light which had lit the chapel was suddenly extinguished. Perceval was well aware of it, but refused to be alarmed, and did not shake or tremble. He mounted without delay and soon left the chapel – and the tree of which I’ve told you – far behind.

He pondered deeply in his heart upon these wonders he had seen. He rode on, deep in thought, until he came upon a fork in the path beside a beautiful oak tree, tall and wide; there was fresh, green grass beneath it, long and thick. He dismounted at once and unbridled his horse, and left him there to graze and feed until the morning was fair and clear. Then Sir Perceval mounted again and journeyed on all morning. The forest was beautiful and thick with green, and the sun was shining brightly. Suddenly he heard a great horn sound three long blasts, far off in the distance; and hearing this he turned that way immediately and headed on with all speed, most eager to find its source. Then he listened again, and heard a little hunting horn sound three times, as though it were a call. He did not know what it meant; but he rode on towards the sound of the horn until he saw a pack of dogs coming in pursuit of a huge boar, and four hunters came behind, following close after them on fine hunting horses. Perceval rode up to meet them and greeted them most nobly, and one of them drew rein and asked him where he was going. Perceval replied that he was searching for the house of the rich Fisher King.

‘By God the Creator,’ said the huntsman, ‘we are all in his service; and if you cross the peak you can clearly see ahead, you’ll find the hall and the fortified tower beside the river, not a league and a half away.’

At that Perceval left him and rode away, overjoyed at the news he had heard. Then he saw a girl approaching, coming straight towards him, most richly dressed in indigo samite with silver flowers. She was mounted on a dappled palfrey, and wore a wimple but no mantle. She had a fine, pure beauty. She rode down at an easy pace, and as soon as Perceval met her he greeted her most nobly in the name of God who never lies. And the girl replied:

‘May He bring you joy and honour. Now tell me, please, where you lodged last night, or if you slept in the forest.’

‘Truly friend,’ said Perceval, ‘I wouldn’t lie to you: I was in the forest all night.’

Then he told her straight away about the tree and the brilliant light, and how he had been in the chapel with the body of the dead knight, and how, when he stepped outside to unbridle his horse, the candle which had been burning alone in the chapel had been snuffed out.

‘Truly,’ said the girl, ‘this is of great significance. You are to learn the

truth about the lance and the Holy Grail.'

Then Perceval told her how he had seen the child in the tree, so very young and small that he did not believe he could yet have left his mother.

'Dear girl,' he said, 'if you could tell me why he wouldn't speak to me, and why he disappeared, truly, I would be very glad to hear.'

'Before God, sir, I couldn't,' said the wise girl, 'for if I did it would do you harm, I think. God would not have me utter any words to make you think me foolish; for everything you've told me is a sign of the holy secret of which you'll soon hear news.'

With that the girl rode swiftly away at once, and for all his calling after her, she would not say another word. So he set off towards the court of the Fisher King, following the path that the huntsmen had shown him, over the mountain-top.

**H**e rode on until he caught sight of the castle standing near the river; and he was not slow about it – he forced his horse on eagerly. Perceval entered the castle, and servants came from all sides and greeted him with the utmost joy. But why should I lengthen the story? They took care of his horse, and disarmed Perceval and dressed him in a long mantle; then they passed through the great hall and led him into a chamber. Never had a finer one been seen since the time of Judas Machabeus. It was not painted as other chambers are, for looking upward one could see the ceiling illumined all with fine gold and little silver stars, but there was no other decoration: on the walls round about there was no blue or vermilion, or green or red or any other colour; instead they were lined on every side with boards of gold and silver. And unless my source is deceiving me, there were images worked into the gold, inlaid with many precious stones which lit up all the chamber. No-one entering that room could fail to wonder who could have created such a place, and Perceval was amazed indeed.

He found the king sitting inside, and greeted him nobly in the name of the king of Paradise; and the good king replied most kindly like the gentle man he was. But I don't want to lengthen the story: he seated Perceval at his side, who was longing to see the Grail for which he had been striving so long. And the lance, too, with the bleeding head, he would be most glad to see; his heart was set upon it, but he did not see it yet. The good king politely enquired where he had slept the night before, and he told him it was in the forest. And then he told him straight away about the chapel he had found, and how he had gone inside and seen the knight lying upon the rich cloth; and how, when he went out through the door, the candle had been extinguished: he told him the whole story.

‘And sire,’ he said, ‘so help me God, beyond the forest I found a little child in a great, leafy tree, sitting high up on a branch, who vanished after saying just a word or two to me. And he told me no secrets about anything, I promise you, except about the Mont Dolerous – he told me that there I would encounter something very pleasing to me. And that was true, indeed: what I saw and heard delighted me, for there are many wonders there.’

The king heard this and sighed, and asked him if he had seen anything else that had puzzled him. And Perceval replied: ‘No indeed, sire; but if it’s no trouble to you, I’d gladly ask you, if you know and if I dared, about the child I saw in the tree, who vanished almost instantly. And what was the significance of his climbing from branch to branch, right to the very top? And then, if you don’t mind, I’d like to know about the slain knight in the chapel; and about the tree and the candles: so help me God, all these things have mystified me, and I’d be very glad to hear about them if I could find someone willing to explain.’

He said no more and fell to thinking. All the knights then washed, and the king had Perceval eat with him from his own bowl. They had not been seated long when a girl, fairer than an April flower upon a sapling’s branch, appeared from a beautiful chamber. She was holding the Holy Grail in her hands, and passed before the table. A moment later another girl came – a fairer one was never seen – dressed in white, embroidered silk. She was carrying the lance which dripped blood from its tip. And a boy followed after her, carrying a naked sword which was broken clean in half across the middle. He laid it on the table, on the corner by the king. Perceval was in turmoil, finding it very hard to start: he did not know what to ask first – about the Grail or the lance, or the white and naked sword which was broken across the middle. The king kept summoning him to eat well, asking him repeatedly. And back came the girl, holding in her hands the Grail, so glorious and holy; and behind her came the one with the lance. Perceval leaned towards the king, and said to him:

‘Truly, my good sire, I would dearly love to hear the truth about the grail which has passed before us twice, and also about the lance that bleeds, if it’s no trouble and toil to you; whom does it serve and what is done with it? And when you’ve explained all that to me, tell me as well about the broken sword, and if it will ever be repaired and drawn in the field of battle.’

The king replied: ‘Dear gentle friend, you have asked me a very great deal, but I shall tell you the truth about it all. I’ll tell you first about the child, for that is the beginning. I tell you, with all certainty, that he was a divine being, and felt such hatred for you, because of the great and criminal sins with which you were stained, that he would not say a word to you. And know this: he gave you an important lesson when he climbed from branch

to branch to the top of the great tree; and I shall tell you why, my friend,' said the kind and courteous king. 'When God first made the Earth and all the creatures in it, the birds and fishes and wild beasts, they were made with their faces always earthward, searching for their food. But God did not wish to make man thus; instead He raised man's face to see the vast height of the firmament and the riches with which the Lord God lit the whole world He had made. And so that he should remember the One who had made him so beautiful and so noble, like Himself, God did not wish to make man in anyone's likeness but His own. And now they repay Him by straying from His commandments and devoting themselves to sin. The child who went from the tree and mounted heavenwards was showing you symbolically that you should think of the Creator high in Heaven, and without delay, so that He may be sure to receive your soul and set it in His Paradise; for, my good dear friend, you have been enmeshed in folly for a long while. He is a fool indeed who forgets God for the sake of earthly gain, for then he loses the praise and riches that God promises to His faithful. But of the tree that you saw lit up with candles, which so astonished you, and of the chapel and the body of the dead knight, and of the lance and of the Grail, you'll hear me say neither good nor ill until you've eaten.'

With that he fell silent: for the moment he would say no more. Perceval was so on edge that he would neither eat nor drink, and the good king very gently summoned him again to eat. Perceval was deep in thought, but said to the king:

'God help me, sire, before dinner is finished I'd be very glad to hear at least about the sword which is lying on the table, truly I would, if I didn't think it would be a trouble.'

And the king replied: 'My good dear sir, I'll tell you now, since that's your wish, the facts about the sword. If some worthy man – a man full of chivalry, loyal and free of wickedness, who believed in God and honoured Him, and also loved Holy Church, which God calls His wife – if such a man laid his hand upon the sword and set the pieces together, I think that in a moment it would be whole again. Look: here is the sword. Take it, please, and join the two pieces. Then I'll tell you about the knight at the chapel, and afterwards about the rich Grail and the lance with the royal head, and anything else you wish. Have no fear: you'll hear about the adventures which have been so harsh and hard and fearsome beyond measure. And when you hear them you will be amazed. But first, I beg you, place your hand upon the sword, for by you, I believe, it will be repaired.'

Perceval said that he would do so, but that he was not so worthy or so good that he would be able to mend the sword. He took the pieces and put them together immediately; and the steel blade joined so finely and so

instantly that the day it was made it had seemed no newer or better furbished or more handsome. But just by the join there remained a very small notch, not big at all. The king, so kind and gentle, said:

‘Now listen, dear sir: you have striven hard at the art of arms as I would hope, I know you have. From this test we know for sure that, of all men now living in all the world, there is none of greater worth than you in combat or in battle; but you have not yet done enough to have God bestow on you the praise, esteem and courtesy, the wisdom and the chivalry, to enable us to say that of all knights you were the most endowed with all high qualities.’

Perceval was so lost in astonishment that he did not know what to say; and he sighed so deeply that all those seated at dinner marvelled. The king looked at Perceval and flung his arms around his neck with the utmost joy, like the courteous and noble man he was, and said:

‘My good, dear friend, be lord of my house. I willingly bestow upon you everything I have, and henceforth will hold you dearer than any man alive.’

At that the boy who had brought the sword hurriedly returned, and took it and wrapped it in a silken cloth and carried it away; and Perceval felt greatly comforted\*

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\* In most manuscripts, this final line is followed by the first line of the Third Continuation (p. 299 below), but MS 12576 inserts a separate continuation by Gerbert.

## GERBERT DE MONTREUIL'S CONTINUATION

as he spoke with the Fisher King, but he felt a sinner indeed since he could not know the truth about the Grail. But he politely and eagerly asked the king to tell him, if he did not mind, where the Grail he had seen was going and who was served from it, and why the lance bled. The king replied at once, saying:

‘My friend, after dinner you shall hear things that will delight you, but I shall not speak about the Grail, nor will you yet know the secret of the lance. You have not fully served the one who will reveal the secrets to you, until the notch in this sword, which seems to have been cut with a chisel, has been repaired and joined by your hands. But listen – I will tell you this: I know of no man in this world who can ever know about these things but you; but make sure you do not lose that prize through sin. And if you do fall into sin and anger God, then confess and repent and abandon sin and do thorough penance. And know this, too, and never doubt it: that if you can return here, it could well be that you’ll repair the notch, and then you could ask about the Grail and the lance; and truly then, you may be sure, you would know the profound truth, the secrets and the divine mystery.’

Perceval sighed, and wondered what sin or offence prevented him from learning the secrets of the Grail; but the king would reveal no more, except that he made him realise that it was a dire sin he had committed towards his mother when she had fallen dead at the foot of the bridge outside the gate on the day when he had left her. And he said that until he had atoned for that sin, and others, the secrets of the Grail would not be told or revealed to him. Then four servants opened the door of a chamber and carried the king away to his bed; others removed the table and whatever there was to be cleared. And they made a bed beside the fire, most rich and handsome and splendid; it was set upon a silver frame, and the sheets were rich and costly indeed. Perceval lay down, and when he was bedded the others dispersed to their many lodgings, for there were a good number of halls and chambers there.

At midnight bells rang out so loud and clear that Perceval, who had been asleep awhile, started up, wide awake. He peered ahead, and saw a light

so bright that, in the fields on the fairest summer's day, none brighter is ever seen. Then he heard a song so sweet that it seemed to him quite glorious, and it grieved him deeply that it was so short-lived, that beautiful, precious, sweet and glorious song of God and His sweet mother. Perceval laid his head down again, but heard a voice that cried out to him three times, saying:

'Perceval, I have been sent to you. Go tomorrow, my good, dear friend, and seek the house where you were born, and go to the aid of your sister who is in the hands of strangers – though they are treating her well and nobly. I commend you to God; I must leave you now.'

With that the voice departed, leaving Perceval deep in thought; he was to suffer still more toil before he saw the Grail again. He was longing to be off once more, for he had no wish to stop until he could learn all the mysteries of the Grail. But now he laid his head down again, and after a while he fell asleep, and slept and rested till daybreak.

When it was light he awoke, but was astonished to see neither hall nor house; instead he found himself in a most beautiful meadow, beneath a flowered bush. There is no man endowed with sufficient skill to describe that meadow's beauty, however hard he might try; a river ran through the middle, but never, upon my soul, have I heard of one so beautiful. Perceval, to his astonishment, saw his horse saddled and bridled, and he stirred himself now and armed and mounted.

'What's happening?' he said to himself. 'What is this? I don't think any earthly man has been through what I've experienced. By the Saviour, I was lodged last night, I remember clearly, at the house of the rich Fisher King; and I saw the Grail, and the lance which bleeds unceasingly, though it has neither vein nor joint, and the sword which I joined together – except for the notch which has still to be repaired: that much is still to be done. And now I find myself here all alone. By your grace, my dear lord God, show me the way to my mother's house.'

With this prayer on his lips, Perceval rode along by the river through the middle of the beautiful meadow. Then ahead of him he saw a crenellated ring of wall, and was filled with wonder, for one half of the wall was red and the other half white. Perceval swore that before he went on he would learn, if he could, what people were within, and he rode around it until he found a gate. He was much heartened, thinking he would be able to enter, but there was no way of doing so: he found the gate shut fast. So he cried out, calling for the gate to be unlocked, but no-one said a word; yet he could hear loud sounds of rejoicing inside, with pipes and organs, harps and hurdy-gurdies playing; and the melodies were so beautiful and sweet that Perceval forgot

all the troubles he had known since the moment he was born. Then he called out again, saying:

‘Come on, open the gate, let me come in and see your rejoicing.’

But he heard not a word in reply.

‘In faith,’ he said, ‘I see they scorn my call.’

Without more ado he drew his sword of steel and hammered on the gate with the pommel; but at the third blow he dealt, such terrible thunder and lightning fell that it seemed like the end of the world, and the sword of fine steel broke in half across the middle. Perceval was furious when he saw his good, prized sword broken in two; and one piece was lying on the ground. Then suddenly, a moment or two later, a man came to the gate with hair as white as snow. He opened the wicket a little and saw Perceval clad all in iron, and said:

‘What do you want, vassal, shouting and calling at our gate? Great sin has driven you to bellow here; the devil who made you do so has brought you much misfortune. Your sword now needs to be repaired, for I see it’s broken across the middle; and you have thus lengthened by seven whole years and a half your toil to see the lance that bleeds; nor, I promise you, will you learn the secrets of the Grail until you have done so much that all your sins and misdeeds have been forgiven and washed away by confession, with true repentance and deeds of penance, which will free you of all evil.’

‘Oh, good sir!’ cried Perceval. ‘Open your wicket-gate wide, for I can see so great a light shining inside that it seems a most glorious place to be – I can see everyone laughing with joy.’

The worthy man replied politely, saying: ‘Vassal, you will see no more till you return here. But it may well be that, if you can return, you will witness all our joy, and will know without doubt the certain truth about the Grail, and why the lance bleeds – those things for which you’ve toiled so hard.’

‘Oh, dear sir!’ cried Perceval, ‘tell me if my sword will ever be repaired.’

‘Yes,’ the worthy man replied. ‘The one who made it knows the hazard which caused it to be broken. Take it to him, and it will be repaired; no-one else will ever do so.’ Then the worthy man continued: ‘Wait here: I’ll be back in a moment with something that will help you, have no doubt, for I feel great pity for you.’

He went at once, but was soon back at the gate, carrying a small, round, perfectly neat letter. It looked as if it could be swiftly read, but anyone who tried would find it a tiring task, for a year from now he would still not have finished, though the words were very short. The worthy man came straight back and handed the letter to Perceval.



‘Vassal,’ he said, ‘you may be sure of this: you will never be tricked or defeated by an enemy, nor will any man, however lost or wild his mind, fail to recover his senses if he lays this letter on his head; but make sure it is never taken to an evil place. Vassal, you don’t know where you’re going; you’re seeking something so holy that it will never be attained by any man unless he is clean of all sins, and you are deeply stained with them. And I shall tell you in good faith that if there were as much faith in you as a tiny grain of salt, you could know and do a very great deal with ease. But a wicked man strives in vain; he thinks to achieve heavenly joy through earthly joy; but no! In spite of all esteem and prowess, wealth and courage, he can never attain the glory which we shall have on the Judgement Day. Perceval has seen quite openly the earthly Paradise; we, hereafter, shall have the celestial Paradise of such great glory. All men should desire to win the perfect joy which lasts forever and never ends. Go: you shall know no more for now; but remember the letter I gave you, friend.’

And with that he turned away.

**P**erceval, having listened to what the worthy man said, held the round letter in his hand. He ripped and tore off a piece of his silken surcoat, and vowed:

‘Wherever I may go from here, I’ll hang this letter from my neck; I’ll do it now.’

He did as he said immediately, and then quickly gathered up the pieces of his good sword and slid them into the scabbard. Then he turned his horse about and set off, riding swiftly across the meadow. But, chancing to glance back, he could see no sign of the enclosure he had seen before; he had not yet ridden the length of a bowshot, but all he could see was open ground.

He drove his horse on swiftly through the meadow until, towards evening, he left the meadowland behind. He now beheld fine open ground and arable, and beautiful pasture; and on one side were ploughed fields and vineyards and rivers and townships of many kinds, most populous and furnished with great riches. Perceval was astonished, and said:

‘In faith, this is a marvel: I’m amazed, and with good reason. Last evening when I came this way I found the land waste and deserted, and now I see it teeming with all kinds of wealth.’

Such were Perceval’s thoughts. And he looked ahead and saw the top of a fortified tower, two hundred feet high and a hundred wide, standing beside a lake at the top of a tall cliff, surrounded by a wall with many splendid turrets; and inside there were many handsome halls: from here to Thessaly, I

think, there was not a better built castle. Beneath it was a town more noble, beautiful and finely situated than any as far as Constantinople. A rushing river ran beneath it, bearing the most splendid fleet of boats that I have ever heard of in my life. Then Perceval turned his gaze and saw a great house in the middle of the lake: in no romance or any lay have I heard of one so delightful. He saw a peasant sowing corn in a field, and rode straight to him and asked him quickly who was the lord of the castle. And the peasant replied:

‘Go there, sir: they’re all waiting for you, and will receive you with great celebration.’

So he rode off at once, without delay, leaving the villein behind; and everyone at the castle was filled with joy when they saw him, and rushed to meet him with crosses, in procession, saying:

‘Sir, you have restored to us all the good things we had lost: thanks to you we have recovered our riches and our meadowlands, our goods and all our pasture-lands, and all worldly wealth!’

Perceval was led with much rejoicing to take lodging in the castle. Those who came to disarm him were certainly no shepherds! And they were joyful indeed. And when they had gently and graciously disarmed him, a most beautiful girl brought him a fur-lined robe, a surcoat and a mantle to wear, with a splendid purse on a belt which was fastened with a golden buckle inlaid with rich jewels; and when Perceval was thus arrayed there was not a more handsome man in all King Arthur’s kingdom, nor any so bold and strong. Just then a lady appeared from a chamber, and Nature never made a fairer, wiser or more courteous creature. The story tells that she had a most comely body and a charming face; please listen patiently while I describe her beauty to you, for I want to tell you properly. She was tall and young and elegant, upright in bearing and shapely, with a good firm body; she had fine shoulders, arms and sides, and a nicely slender waist, and hips as wide as one would wish, just perfect for bed-sport; her arms were long and round and full, her fingers long, her hands small; but I don’t think I could do justice to the beauty of her head: her hair shone brighter than gold – yes, it seemed indeed to be threads of gold, it was so fair; and her forehead was whiter than snow. Please don’t think it tiresome if I tell you all this, for I want to describe all her qualities as best I can: she had brown eyebrows and sparkling eyes, wide and innocent and laughing, and warm, red lips, and as shapely a nose as one could wish. I can’t believe you could find a more beautiful girl, for Nature, testing out Her skills, put all Her powers into her creation. The colour of her cheeks, I promise you, was a thousand times brighter than a rose on a May morning: white blended with red so perfectly that I marvel, as Nature did when creating her. I can tell you in all truthfulness, without a word of a lie, that her chin was quite the finest made of all time, and her neck

was beautiful and smooth. I was rash indeed to try to describe her: were I to practise a hundred times I would still not say the half of it, however hard I tried. But I'll gladly tell you this much: the whiteness of her chest was more perfect than any other; and what a pleasant encounter it would make, for her breasts were firm and nicely round – but why go on? No man on earth ever saw a lovelier creature. She was dressed in two layers of samite, one green and one red, and on her head she wore a chaplet, and it wasn't made of any coarse cloth – it was fine and handsome indeed, and emblazoned with two lion cubs. The girl's name was Escolasse. Oh, I promise you, to recount every detail is a vain hope – no-one could fully describe her beauty: it would be too great a task. As soon as Perceval caught sight of her he came up to greet her, but she did not give him time to do so – she greeted him first, in beautiful French, in which she was most adept.

'Sir,' she said, 'you have restored us to wealth and honour and freed us from great misery through your valour and your goodness, which no-one can ever hope to match. Welcome to this house! And welcome you shall be, if I can make you so.'

And Perceval, that noble knight, returned her greeting. 'Lady,' he said, 'I'm very glad I've been of service to you, so help me God. But I don't know what I've done for you and, by my soul, I'd gladly hear if you would tell me.'

'By my life, sir,' she replied, 'I think it only right that one should remember a good deed, and I've good reason to recall the great favour you've done for me. By God the Saviour, sir, I know you've been to the house of the Fisher King and asked about the Grail, which has brought us very great benefit, for in this kingdom every river and spring was dry, and the land was waste and deserted; now they are full and hale again. And when you asked, good sir, why the lance bled, you repaired the whole country, so that it is now rich and plentiful, well stocked with all the good things of which we were in dire need before. You have brought help to us all. But when you were there the first time and saw the Grail and the bleeding lance, you would have learned the truth and all its meaning if you had asked at once, and the rich king would have been healed of his wound, which often brings him grief and anguish; but I think that, if you devote all your energy and thought to it unceasingly, you may yet deserve to learn the perfect truth.'

With that their talking ended, but their joy did not. The young lady took Perceval's right hand at once and led him to a window to entertain him with conversation until nightfall when supper would be ready. Perceval leaned there and looked down at the great and beautiful lake which lay below the castle, and in the middle he saw the house\* – it would be a splendid place

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\* i.e. the house on the lake referred to above, page 217.

to live, for it was a lovely spot indeed. And while the tables were being set for dinner, Perceval continued to take his ease and, gazing down, saw the flame of a great furnace, bluer than azure, rising from a chimney in the middle of one side of the house. He asked the girl how a fire came to fling forth such a flame; and she replied:

‘I’ll gladly tell you the truth, sir, and without a word of falsehood. You shall hear it now, at once. In that house on the lake lives a very aged smith. A king gave him the house in return for three swords that he forged; there’s a forge at the house where he made all three. One of them consumed his efforts for a whole year, and it was sharp and strong, magnificently made; and he said that it would never be broken except by one hazard which he alone knew: by that hazard the splendid sword would be broken, and it would never be repaired except by him. And that strange, deep blue flame has never since gone out; yet no fire is kept there, and he has never since wished to forge again: were he given a coffer full of gold he still would not return to forging, for he knows that he will not live long after he has repaired that other sword. I’m telling you the truth, and I tell you this: at the foot of his bridge are two serpents in chains, and there is no man of woman born who could pass through his gate and return with life and limb except for the men of his own household, though the doors are always open. Now hear, dear friend, why the serpents have been placed there: it’s so that, if someone came to this land to repair the sword, the evil serpents would kill him if he tried to enter. Unless he flew like a bird, I promise you, he would be torn to pieces.’

When Perceval heard this he was overjoyed, for it seemed he had found the place where the pieces of his fine sword would be joined once more to make it strong and hard and tempered. Then he questioned the girl once again, saying:

‘Lady, tell me the name of this beautiful castle; it’s a delightful place to pass the time.’

‘Sir, it’s called Cothoatre; and the house below is called the Lake, which was once the house of King Frolac. Let’s go and have supper now, for it’s time.’

So they went and washed, for all was ready, and then went to dine at the high table. That night, God save me, Perceval was served most handsomely, and after supper they went to their beds. Perceval’s was rich and splendid: I have never seen a count’s or a prince’s more delightful or more noble. It was spread with two sheets from Constantinople, and at each corner there hung a little golden bell, which rang so very sweetly and in such delightful harmony that it sounded like a melody. Any man, however ill, who lay upon that bed would be released from all pain. Perceval lay down and found it rich and beautiful indeed; and the girl whispered sweetly in his ear

that if he wanted pleasure she would lie there with him in the bed, for he had deserved it. She looked so lovely to Perceval that he did not know whether to refuse or accept. His body and his limbs all trembled, and he remembered the quest he had undertaken for the Grail.

‘Truly,’ he thought, ‘I’m in a spot! Such a beautiful girl offers and presents her love to me, but I daren’t accept it. I think she means to deceive me – or else she always asks knights for love, and I’m not the first! But a man should always fear sin, both in word and deed, if he wants to conquer Paradise.’

Perceval shivered at this thought, and said to the girl: ‘Fair lady, I’ve no need of that just now. But truly, dear friend, I refuse you only because it would be a very great sin if I ruined your virginity or mine. I tell you, I’ve never yearned for such pleasure in my life, nor do I understand its purpose.’

The girl was filled with shame, and said: ‘As God’s my witness, sir, I said what I said to fulfil your wishes. Now that I see your desire is to shun the sport I offered you, that is my desire as well.’

At that she left without another word, and went to her chamber to sleep. Perceval tossed and turned, thinking about the Grail and nothing else; and thinking thus he fell asleep, until daybreak when the watch sounded the dawn.

**T**hen Perceval arose at once, impatient to be off. The girl was there when he arose, dressed in a deep, rich cloth. She begged him earnestly to stay, for she would honour him most highly if he would accept her service. But no plea or promise could persuade Perceval to delay. She led him to a rich and handsome chapel to hear mass, where they were told about Our Lady, the jewel of them all. After mass, without delay, she had food brought to him: a roast salted capon; and when he had eaten Perceval quickly armed, girding on his broken sword, and then mounted at once with his shield and his lance. To see him safely on his way the girl mounted, too, and all her people with her. Perceval was most taken with an axe that he saw hanging on a hook, and he went and took it; then he rode down through the castle with the girl named Escolasse at his side. Through the streets where he passed all the people came running in crowds and throngs, and they bowed low to him and loudly cried:

‘Sir, you’ve restored our joy and freed us from a terrible burden and returned us to prosperity, and we cannot but feel grief and sorrow at seeing you leave so soon.’

They shouted this on every side.

Perceval, carrying the axe, rode on until he came before the gate

where the serpents were chained to the bridge, huge and fierce and hideous and foul. I don't think any man ever beheld such a perilous passage. But he advanced towards them swiftly and dismounted. And the girl cried:

'Sir, what do you mean to do?'

'I mean, my lady, to repair my sword by entering this house and overcoming the two great serpents that I see here in chains.'

'Oh, gentle knight, have mercy! Do you want to die?'

'It's no use trying to stop me. I want to know if there is a man here who can repair my sword, for I was told a long while ago\* that if it were broken it would be mended here.'

Hearing this, all the people present begged him to have mercy, warning him to stay away from there. But for all their pleas Perceval would not delay a single moment. The girl was weeping tenderly, dissolving into tears for pity, and the people with her were uttering such a lament as you have never heard. Perceval advanced towards the bridge, holding his shield before his face, and saying a prayer, I believe, which he had learned. He took the axe in both hands and stepped on to the bridge to meet the two demon beasts. When the serpents saw Perceval coming they seemed to turn wild, rearing up in rage and preparing to kill him; and I swear they were plunging their claws into the very sandstone slabs of the bridge. Then they rushed towards him as fast as they could go, burning and blazing in their eagerness; Perceval waited until they had reached the full extent of their chains, and then charged at them in a fury, brandishing the great axe, and struck one such a blow that he sent both its feet flying a full two yards, and forced the beast back over the bridge a lance's length or more. The other flung itself at him and plunged both feet into his shield; no spear, however sharp, could have smashed through with such ease. When Perceval, alert as ever, saw that its two feet had broken through, he thrust the beast back with the shield and threw the strap off over his head. He was no fool for doing so, for it was so hampered by the shield that it could not use its legs. It was a fine ploy, and Perceval, seeing the serpent's plight, clutched his axe and struck the great beast between head and body, slicing clean through its neck to send the black and hideous head flying into the water. But the other serpent lashed its tail at Perceval, and sent him crashing down two yards behind. Perceval leapt up, clutching his axe which was keen indeed, sharper than the sharpest chisel†; and the serpent coiled and rolled into a ball and grasped so firmly with its hind legs' claws that it fixed them in a marble stone. Then out it

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\* In Chrétien, after his first visit to the Fisher King: above, page 43. Gerbert does not entirely follow the details of Chrétien, however, for Perceval breaks the sword almost immediately: above, page 46.

† Literally 'sharper than a mortising-axe'.

lashed in attack; and Perceval charged furiously with his axe and hacked through the throat and down to the entrails and into the bowels, and from its body a red smoke belched like a blazing fire. Perceval took the shield that the serpent had seized and pulled it from its claws; he hung it at his neck by the strap, and looked in wonder at the marks of the serpent's blow.

When the young lady and her people saw that Perceval had killed the two huge and hideous serpents, the anguish they had so deeply felt turned to joy. They brought him his horse and he mounted and set off, and rode on through the gate to find the lord of the house. Perceval greeted him with great respect, as was proper, for he saw that he was very old.

'God save you, sir,' he said.

But hearing this, the old man, white with age, was furious and said: 'Curse your coming! I know very well what it is you want. Did you enter here on wings?'

'No,' said Perceval. 'I defeated the two great crested serpents. I battled with them till I killed them both, thanks be to God; show me now, without delay, where I can find the smith who used to forge here.'

'What do you want with him?' the old man replied.

'God save me,' said Perceval, 'he must repair my sword.'

When the lord heard this he leapt to his feet, and trembled and turned pale; and he saw the sword at Perceval's side which he himself had made, and knew very well where it had been broken.

'Vassal,' he said, 'you have greatly sinned in breaking your sword, which I made many years ago. You broke it at the gate of Paradise, I see; and I tell you, I must repair it, or it will never be repaired.' With that he unlocked a wicket-gate and said: 'Dismount, vassal, and give me your sword. I'll join the pieces together; and there will never be any risk of it breaking again, whatever blow may be struck with it. This sword is meant for a worthy man, I promise you; it is never to be in a coward's hands.'

Perceval heard this and unfastened his sword at once and handed it to him. And the lord, who certainly lacked no skill, took a great pair of bellows and blew on the ever-burning fire. He took the pieces and set to work, and reformed the sword so perfectly that there was no sign that it had ever been broken. He burnished the blade immaculately, and repaired the inscription upon it; then he returned the sword to its scabbard and said:

'I will tell you now, vassal, that you should be counted the finest knight in the world. You have been through many perilous tests, and many winters and summers, too, for the sake of the Grail – and have more to go through yet, I think. And I can tell you this as well: I have not much longer to live.'

So saying, he handed him the sword. Perceval girded it on and took

his leave; then he mounted and set off on his way. He passed back through the gate and over the bridge; and the young lady Escolasse and her people came to meet him, and detained him as long as they could; but try as they might they could not keep him: he set off, and they accompanied him and guided him to a great road.

**T**hen Perceval departed, and the girl left him and headed back to her castle. Perceval, with his shield at his side, rode on without further delay; but he had not gone far from the castle when he heard bells ringing in all the churches, for Trebuchet,\* who had repaired his fine, sharp, solid sword, was dead.

Sir Perceval journeyed on, all day every day, across plains and mountains and valleys, until one evening he saw a tree in the middle of a meadow where there were two most delightful and beautiful girls; but they were in great distress, for they were both hung from the branches by their hair. And Perceval saw two armed knights fighting so fiercely that they kept beating each other to the ground, raining blows on each other's head with keen swords, faster than the wind. They were both suffering terribly, for they would not rest for a moment: they attacked one another so furiously that they hacked their helmets and shields to pieces. But neither could be defeated: they were both so engrossed in their combat that they felt neither pain nor wound. They had once been loyal companions and had loved each other dearly, but now they were so deeply embroiled that their blood was spilling from many places. When Perceval saw them battling he spurred on down to try and part them. But now they were so tired and battered that they were near to exhaustion: they both toppled and fell flat on their backs and passed out; lying as motionless as logs, they both looked devoid of life. Perceval, eager to hear and know the truth of what had happened, rode up to the tree without delay and took down the two girls. They were weeping and lamenting bitterly, and would gladly have died; and Perceval asked them kindly to explain what had befallen them. And one replied:

'I shall tell you all about it, sir, since you want to know. Sir, there is a terrible pillar on the Mont Dolerous which Merlin made by magic a long time ago and set upon the peak. May God who created the world confound the one who put it there, for he did great wickedness! There are fifteen crosses all around it, and he set a demon there, walled up inside the pillar. When anyone asks "Who is in there?" he will go mad at once, however wise or sharp his mind, unless he is the boldest in the world and the most upright in word and deed. Those two knights went there and called at the pillar, asking

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\* The name is given as Triboet in Chrétien: above, page 43.



“Who is in there?”, and they instantly turned wild and lost their memory completely, and hung us on this tree by our hair. We loved them dearly, but now they’ve killed each other in their madness, yet less than a month and a half ago they were good friends. They’ve killed and destroyed each other through devilry and sin.’

Perceval replied: ‘Tell me their names if you will, dear friend, for unless they’re dead they’ll both regain their senses before nightfall if I can manage it.’

‘One, sir, is the worthy Saigremor, and the other is Engrevain, who is neither faint-hearted nor weak in combat. They used to be the best of friends.’

When Perceval heard them named he quickly stepped from his stirrup and dismounted without delay; then he took his letter immediately and laid it upon Engrevain’s head, and at once he returned to his senses. Then Perceval came to Saigremor and quickly laid the letter upon his head; and he too was cured of his madness. But he was shocked indeed to feel his wounds and injuries, and he raised his head and saw Engrevain just opposite, whose heart was weak from the blood he had lost. They were both bewildered, not knowing how or why they were so grievously wounded; they remembered nothing that had happened since they had left the pillar where they had lost their minds and gone raving mad. They both climbed to their feet; and as they stood there, nothing surprised them more than the sight of Perceval who had dismounted, and they thought he must be responsible for their injuries and wounds. They each clutched a sword drenched in blood from top to bottom; and they were about to charge at Perceval with their naked swords when the girls came with hands clasped in prayer, crying:

‘Mercy! This noble knight has cured you of madness! It would be wicked of you to do him harm or injury.’

And Perceval said: ‘They’re like the cur who turns on his master when he’s rescued him from the wild beast. That’s how a wicked man repays the Christian who treats him with kindness and honour.’

When Saigremor saw the beautiful girls calling for mercy, and Perceval reminding them of the proverb, he accepted that he had done them some great favour. Then the girls told them all about their mishap and their plight, just as I have explained to you. And when the knights heard it they threw down their swords and went down on their knees in the meadow before Perceval, begging his forgiveness as a true friend. And Perceval raised them again, feeling pity and sorrow at their sadness, and kissed them both. The girls were most relieved when they saw their sweethearts healed of the torment into which the demon had cast them, causing them to fight one another.

And Saigremor and Engrevain could not wait to ask: 'In the name of God, sir, who are you? What's your name? Please tell us.'

And Perceval replied: 'I've no wish to hide it from you. Truly, I'm called Perceval the Welshman. Now I've told you mine and the girls have told me yours: we're well acquainted! But we must look for lodging now – it's high time.'

'We're ready and willing to do your will.'

Then they all mounted together, and the girls likewise, and rode on together until they came upon the house of a nobleman. They asked for lodging out of charity, and the worthy man granted it and made them a gift of all he had. All three entered and climbed from their horses; and the nobleman, who needed no lessons and was worthy of great esteem, helped the two young ladies to dismount, and ordered his serving-men to take care of their horses. His wife came running to the girls and kissed them, and talked with them sweetly, holding them by the hand. Saigremor and Engrevain, because they were wounded, were then disarmed and taken to bed. And the girls disarmed Perceval and dressed him in a robe which the nobleman presented him as a gift; and when he was dressed, you would not have found a more handsome man from the sea to Rencesval; but he was very worried about the two wounded knights.

The servants set up the tables beside the fire, and supper was prepared; they washed and sat down. They were served some five or six splendid dishes in great silver bowls. They were well fed indeed, and drank many good wines and clarets and spiced wines and syrups. After supper the lord of the house spoke most pleasantly with Perceval, and asked him his name. Perceval told him, and then asked him his.

'Sir,' he replied, 'my name is Gaudin of the White Shield. I have lived a long while, but I promise you that in all my life – God give me health – I have never had a guest whom I so desired to honour.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Perceval.

With that their talking ended, and they had the tables cleared away and afterwards their beds were made; and they made the two wounded knights eat a little, and quenched their thirst with some costly beverage. Then Perceval went to his bed, and fell asleep at once. The girls lay down before their sweethearts, for they wanted to look after them, being deeply worried about their wounds. And so they slept and rested, and passed the night away.

When Perceval saw day break he had no desire to linger; and he called for his arms at once from the servant to whom he had entrusted them. They were brought to him and he armed, fully and elegantly, and his horse was made ready for him. Then Sir Perceval came to Engrevain, Sir

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\* The setting of Roland's battle in *The Song of Roland*.

Gawain's brother, and also to Saigremor, and fondly took his leave of the two knights and the sweet and beautiful girls; and he asked a favour of his noble host, that he should take care of the knights and do all in his power to restore them to health; and the worthy man replied that he would treat them with all the honour, help and sustenance he could. Then Perceval mounted immediately and commended them to God. His host asked if he wanted him to guide him on his way, but Perceval replied that for now he had no need of guidance. And with that he rode off swiftly down a lonely path.

He journeyed on all day long and all the following week, and encountered many hard and fearsome adventures, and passed through many lands and many dire and evil passages. Then he entered the forest of Carlion, and pressed on until nearly three o'clock, when he heard the sound of a horn and the loud baying of dogs. Perceval spurred his bay horse in the direction of the horn, rejoicing at the sound; and he rode on until he caught sight of a man who blew the horn three times, and he headed towards him and called to him, saying:

'In whose service are you, my friend?'

'King Arthur's, sir,' he replied. 'And he's coming this way now, and his knights with him; they're hunting the white hart of the Black Knight. And my lady the queen is coming, too, with many other ladies. But I tell you, upon my soul, the hart cannot be caught, which has made the king sad and pale, for he had promised it to the queen and sworn to hunt it down.'

And while he was talking the king rode up, and with him came the king of the Irish and the king of Rodas, and the king of Dinas Clamadas, and also the king of Duveline. And Perceval saw many girls and young ladies coming with my lady the queen; he was delighted by the sight of the beautiful company. But when the king saw Perceval sitting armed upon his horse he did not recognise him; and no wonder, for his arms were so battered and rusty as to be indiscernible. When Perceval saw the queen he rode straight towards her and said like a well-bred and worthy knight:

'Welcome indeed to my lady! She is the jewel of them all in honour, wisdom, beauty, courtesy and goodness.'

And the queen replied: 'Good sir, may it please God to send you all that your heart cherishes and desires; but I would very much like to know your name and who you may or may not be, for I do not recognise you by your arms.'

'Lady, it shall not be kept from you. My correct name is Perceval the Welshman.'

When the queen heard this she reached towards him and threw her arms around his neck, saying: 'What a joy to have found you, my good, dear friend, a knight of proven worth and high and splendid prowess!'

And all the girls and ladies greeted him most nobly. King Arthur rode swiftly up to him, and all the others on horseback; and when the king heard who he was he was overjoyed, and embraced him over and over. The knights were elated and all were eager to see Perceval; and the king had him recount the troubles and hardships and obstacles he had encountered in the quest for the Grail which he had twice seen at the house of the Fisher King. But he explained how he was denied the right to hear who was served from the Grail, and had been plainly told that he was not worthy to know the Grail's secrets, and could not on any account know why the lance bled, though he had asked most earnestly. But he had repaired a sword which was broken in half – though imperfectly, for a notch remained in the blade; and until the notch was mended no-one would know anything about the Grail. Kay, hearing this, said to Perceval:

'You don't know much about forging! You, sir, have undertaken a quest which will cost you your skin, I think! You've suffered a lot of humiliation this summer, and gained very little. You're chasing after dreams and fancies; you're like a man who fools around all day, skipping and dancing, just to get attention. Yes, that's your game! To get people talking you go out looking for what can't be found. What foolishness! Do you think you're better than other men? No, you'll be old and grey before you've learned the slightest thing. Take my advice and stay here quietly with my lady this winter. The hundred devils of Hell have made you set your sights on what can't be seen or known.'

When the king heard this he was deeply upset and angry in his heart, for Kay had heaped reproach upon the knight he loved most in all the world; and he said to him at once:

'Sir Kay, your foolish tongue and your insolence are always troubling you. I think your heart would burst if you didn't vent your bitterness.'

'Sire,' said Perceval, 'his broken arm has healed, I see'. If he suffers for his evil tongue he needs some strong advice. He got a harsh reward when his collar-bone was broken.'

When Kay heard Perceval's retort he was filled with shame and his face fell. And the king embraced Perceval whom he cherished dearly, and abandoned the hunt.

**T**hey returned to Carlion. The cooks had prepared dinner and everything was ready: meat and poultry and fresh fish beyond count. And there were many kings and dukes and counts and many rich barons, and many

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\* Perceval broke Kay's arm when he rudely interrupted his meditation on the drops of blood in the snow (in Chrétien's romance, above, p. 51).

ladies of renown in the queen's company. My lady the queen sent a gown of costly cloth lined with ermine for Perceval to wear, which he did most gladly, having already disarmed. And as soon as he was dressed the king took him by the hand, and after washing they sat down at the table, and the queen and her girls and the ladies and the knights all sat down together. They were all dressed in short mantles, as was their custom at court. But Sir Gawain stood before the table and did not move. With him were Lancelot of the Lake, Yvain, and Erec the son of Lac, and a good twenty of the finest knights to be found there or anywhere, and they did not sit down. Suddenly Perceval looked up, and at the head of one table he saw a chair of strange appearance, which seemed to be very valuable. It was made of gold, inlaid and studded with many stones and richly enamelled; and it sat empty. Perceval gazed at it, and imagined it must have been placed there for the king, and that he would sit in it. But since the king was already seated, Perceval wondered why it was that no-one went to sit there. He called to the king and asked him to tell him, if he would, why nobody was sitting in the magnificent seat.

'Are you expecting a king or a prince to come and take the chair? I'd love to know why it remains empty. I can see so many knights standing with nowhere to sit; I've been watching them for a long time. So why? How is it that they daren't sit in the chair?'

And the king replied: 'Perceval, good sir, don't worry about that. It's of no consequence.'

But Perceval said: 'Now I'm sure you don't love me very dearly. So that God may keep you from harm in this world, both by word and deed, and that your soul may end in Paradise, tell me at once, without deceit, the truth about that chair; for you may be sure of this: I shall never eat in this house until I know why it is that no-one comes to sit there.'

When the king heard this he sighed deeply, and wept, and all the barons with him. And the queen, it seems, and all the girls wept and tore their robes with grief. Even Kay, who had mocked him, was grieving so much that it seemed he would surely die. He dismayed many men with his bitter grieving.

'Oh!' he cried, 'it was an evil day when that chair was brought here, for it has cost us many worthy men!'

Perceval was amazed by this lamenting, and said to the king: 'If I've done something wrong I'm willing to make amends, but I still want you to tell me why no-one sits in that chair.'

And the king, still weeping tenderly, said in a mournful voice: 'Oh, Perceval, I thought you'd bring me comfort and joy; now I'm to have only grief and pain.'

But Perceval urged him to tell at once. And the king said: 'Perceval,

my friend, the one who sent me that chair had little love for me or my honour. The fairy of Roche Menor sent it to me by a messenger – and may God send that messenger shame and misfortune! Before he would tell me anything he made me swear, upon my crown and by my life, that the chair would be placed as it is now on every high feast-day, and he said that one man would be worthy to sit in it: the one who was to win the praise and esteem of the whole world and learn what no-one else would ever know – the secrets of the Grail and the lance; he could sit there without fear. Now I've told you the truth.'

When Perceval had listened to this, he said: 'By Saint Leger, sire, just tell me this: has any man yet sat there?'

'Yes,' replied the king, 'as many as six good knights of my court. But if they sat there it was briefly, for the earth swallowed them up. May ever-truthful God keep you from sitting there.'

But Perceval said: 'I tell you, I'm going to sit there right away, no matter who tries to stop me. I shan't desist for anyone, and may God give me honour and joy.'

The queen heard this and fainted, and Sir Gawain railed against Death for not devouring him instantly. At the same time Perceval went and sat down in the chair. The king stood up in floods of tears and everyone fell back. The chair let out so loud a groan that it was heard throughout the hall and everyone shook with terror; and the ground beneath the seat cracked and split so wide apart that it no longer touched the chair at all – by two yards or more on every side the earth had split away. The chair hung motionless as if suspended in the air, moving neither back nor forth; but Perceval did not stir or pale, and felt no fear of anything. And before the earth closed up again and the cavernous pit was covered, out came the six knights who had been swallowed there. All six rose at Perceval's feet, and thereupon the earth closed up to cover the abyss. The adventure was completed. The king went rushing to Perceval, as did all the knights of the court. Kay the seneschal was so jubilant that he was singing for joy and laughing, and before the whole court he declared that he would not be so happy for a thousand pounds as he was at seeing Perceval safe and sound after sitting in the chair and the six returned to earth.

'In faith,' said Ydres the son of Nu, 'you've now done two courteous acts which should certainly be noted: first you wept and were beside yourself with grief when you thought that Perceval would be lost; and now you've rejoiced and sung because he's still alive. This must be counted to your credit! I tell you truly, it doesn't often happen that you say anything about anyone but baseness and offence, but now you've behaved most courteously.'

When Kay heard this banter he replied angrily, saying: 'Sir Ydres,

you've reproached me very rudely. You thought everything would be freely yours when you went to claim the sparrowhawk for some wrinkled, wizened hag\*. You thought the world of her when you gave her your love and took her to the sparrowhawk to claim and prove that no fairer girl could be found. But what happened when Erec and Enide arrived? You left the sparrowhawk with them!

Ydres, hearing this reproach, said: 'This will teach me to keep my mouth shut.'

The king, who had no time for this, bade them end their argument, and they did so without dispute. Then the king asked the knights who had returned from the pit how they had fared beneath the earth. And they told him that they had suffered much pain and hardship; and as for those wicked souls who prefer young men to girls:

'Truly, it's a wonder the earth doesn't swallow them all at once; they'll burn most terribly on the Judgement Day. You may be sure that the fairy who sent you the chair did so solely to make known what reward is in store for anyone tainted with that vice. Know that on the great Day of Judgement they will be in the deep pit of Hell, blacker than ink or iron. But the fairy knew very well that the one who was to complete the Grail quest and know its outcome has such a true and fine heart that he would free us from the abyss. No-one could express one tenth of his goodness and his valour. He is the one who will learn about the lance, and why the iron head bleeds. Perceval, dear friend, you have freed us from the foulest suffering and restored us to the greatest joy, and we would never have been released had it not been for your goodness.'

King Arthur was overjoyed at hearing the words of these knights, returning to tell what they had seen; and he said: 'Those who are stained with such a horrible sin may well be dismayed. I myself was dismayed when I heard it spoken of just now. Whoever is taken in such a sin will be damned at the end, and may his body be burned by a terrible fire, for I abhor that kind of carnal pleasure. Blessed be the man who cares for his wife or his sweetheart, and loves her dearly, and can call himself a loyal friend: blessed be that kind of loving.'

With that my lord King Arthur sat down again beside Perceval, and all the knights together, and the queen and her girls; and they all had whatever dishes they wished. And you may be sure indeed that Perceval was most honourably and nobly served with everything that took his fancy, and handsomely and at leisure.

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\* A reference to an early episode in Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide*, verses 550–1080.

## (SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 1613 – 2482)

*After dinner Perceval, still deep in thought about the Grail, sits at a window beside the queen. Suddenly he sees a lady approaching on a mule, tearing her hair in misery. Perceval arms and prepares to go and find out what is wrong, much to the dismay of the king and all the court, who beg him to stay. But Perceval replies that he must continue his quest, and 'had he been given the whole of Germany he still would not have stayed'.*

*Perceval rides out and meets the lady on the mule, and she tells him the reason for her grief: she had given herself to her sweetheart the night before their intended wedding, and he had then broken his promise to marry her. She is now searching, she says, for her cousin Perceval, who must take revenge on the faithless lover who is planning to marry another woman. Perceval does not reveal his identity, but promises to go with her and demand that the knight keep his word.*

*After lodging that night at the house of a prince, they come next day to a castle where they find great celebration everywhere, and learn that the marriage of the lady and the faithless knight is about to take place. They gallop on to get to the wedding in time, and just as the priest says 'If anyone knows any reason why this marriage should not take place, let him say so now', Perceval's cousin bursts forward to reveal the knight's vow to her. The knight hurls abuse at her, but Perceval demands that he take her for his wife. As the knight threatens Perceval the bride's father the count arrives, and Perceval explains to him and to all those present what the knight had done. He denies it, and there is nothing for it but to do battle. After a long combat Perceval forces the knight, whose name is Faradien, to admit defeat. He agrees to marry Perceval's cousin and to surrender to King Arthur, and when Perceval reveals who he is the knight is delighted, saying: 'You are the worthiest knight in the world, as the chair has testified'.*

*Perceval goes to the priest's house for dinner. The count sends four boys to him with fine wine, and Perceval sends the boys back to the count with his thanks and greetings. They take his message happily.*

I want to return to Perceval, who ate at his leisure of the plentiful dishes, given with pleasure by the priest, and they had good wine, clear as a tear. And after eating, Perceval armed and mounted and took his leave. The priest, like the courteous soul he was, commended him to God and blessed him with the sign of the cross, and directed him along the path to the right. Perceval rode on hard, following the path right through the forest all day long, until he saw a cross and a small church, old and ruined. Perceval hurried on and dismounted; and he tethered his horse to a stake beside him, laid down



his lance and shield, and tidied himself; then he entered the chapel. He appealed over and over to the mother of God, for her image was upon the altar, praying to her to keep him from harm and misfortune that day, and to grant that he might find the lance that bled unceasingly, and the Grail. Then he returned to his horse and removed his bridle, and tossed him some grass instead of hay, which he scythed with his sword; and with his silken surcoat he wiped his horse's head and back. Then he lay down, fully armed, beneath a thorn-bush and fell asleep at once.

Suddenly a demon appeared in the semblance of a girl, mounted on a black mule, and I don't believe a more beautiful woman was ever seen in any land. She kept saying: 'When will I find my love, whom I've been seeking so long?'

At this Perceval awoke and raised his head, surprised to hear the voice. The evil creature dismounted and said: 'Perceval, dear friend, you've caused me a great deal of trouble: I've been looking for you for more than a year, though I don't know whether it will have been of use or if I've been wasting my time. I tell you truly, if you wish to know all the secrets of the Grail and of the bleeding lance, you'll learn them swiftly through me, if you'll do my will completely and lie with me, for I adore and desire you so much that I'm dying for your love. If you wish to know the secret of the Grail you'll learn it through me, and be free of the toil that you've suffered so long. I tell you, my good, dear friend, I am the Fisher King's daughter, and for your love I have undertaken to reveal all the truth about the Grail to you tomorrow, for it's in my possession; and have no doubt: you shall also know the truth about the sword that you repaired except for the notch; just do as I wish, and quickly.'

Do you know why the demon pressed him so? To make him sin, because he wanted to break his chastity and prevent him knowing about the Grail. For the Devil goes wild when he sees a man disposed and committed to doing good. The demon pressed him again, immediately, in his effort to deceive him. But Perceval said:

'I can see you've a lot to learn: you're mad and misguided, and pursuing foolish goals. I've no wish to indulge in sport with you, for you're so bold in speech and inconstant with your love, unbecoming in a girl as beautiful and as comely as you, by God. Remember your honour, and remember God, and the holy cross where He was crucified.'

And Perceval made the sign of the cross; and when the demon saw that sign upon him, he flew off through the woods, creating such a tumult, such a tempest, that for a league and a half throughout the forest all the birds and beasts shook with fear.

Perceval, seeing this astonishing sight, drew his sword at once and marked a circle around his horse and himself; then he lay down his head, fearing nothing, and slept securely till dawn.

When he saw day break he rose, not wishing to linger, and saddled and bridled his horse, and then went into the chapel to say his usual prayers and to ask God to guide him. Then he crossed himself and left the chapel and mounted, and rode on all day long, and all that week. He suffered a good deal of toil and hardship, but pressed on until he came to the passes of Valbone, to the tall, strange forest which surrounded the mountain. He recognised the pass very well, for it was near that wood, while out with his javelins, that he had met the five knights and asked the first if he was God or an angel'. Yes, he recognised the area very well, for near there, as he realised, stood the house where his mother had lived. He wanted to go there right away, for when he had returned there before, and his sister had recognised him, he had promised to take her away from there, to lead her from that wild forest<sup>†</sup>. So he set off towards the house, and was filled with joy when he saw the tall tree with the marble stone beneath. He rode up at once; but the bridge was raised, for his beautiful sister was seated at dinner – and grieving bitterly, weeping over and over, lamenting terribly for her brother. She was deeply unhappy and hated her life – when she thought and pondered on her lot she found nothing at all to please her. Perceval came up to the gate and called out at the top of his voice.

'God help me!' said the girl. 'Who can that be, crying so loudly?'

She jumped up herself, and came down to the courtyard with her household running after her. When she saw Perceval, and recognised him by his looks and his horse and his arms, tears of joy streamed down her radiant face, and more than a hundred times she cried:

'Dear brother, welcome!'

She could not wait to lower the bridge, and she released the chain and brought it down and Perceval rode across. His sister kissed him more than a hundred times in no time at all before he had dismounted; and all the servants offered a hand to take his horse, and stabled him splendidly with plenty of fodder, for their labour had provided enough barley, oats and feed to last a hundred horses for months.

When Perceval was disarmed, his sister gave him clothes to wear which were worth, without a word of a lie, at least a thousand silver marks. Perceval washed his hands in two basins of pure gold that had been prepared for him; and then he sat down to dinner. His sister had plenty of venison and

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\* i.e. at the very beginning of Chrétien's romance.

† In the Second Continuation, above, p. 170.

capons to give him; nor was the wine scarce – it was plentiful and clear, as if it had been drawn from a pool in a great vase; the boys and servants had so much that their cups were always full. After he had eaten Perceval rested all day long, and then, when evening came, they sat down to supper. No-one has ever seen a count or the like sup more splendidly in so small a company. When they had eaten all they wished, his sister had a delightful bed made for Perceval in the hall, most richly adorned, for he wanted to lie down and rest, being very tired and weary. Then down he lay, and all around him lay the servants, who loved him dearly; and his sister went to her bed and slept most happily that night.

Perceval, fearing that he might stay too long out of pity and love for his servants, arose when day had dawned. His sister, who was already awake and up and dressed, asked him why he had risen so early, and where he was planning to go. And Perceval said:

‘By the faith I owe you, I want us both to mount now and ride to the hermitage in the wood, that holy hermit’s house where my mother was buried’; for this may be the last time I shall go there: I don’t know if I shall ever return to these parts or to this country.’

With that he bade that her mule and his horse be harnessed. Then he armed swiftly, and when he had done so his horse was brought to him promptly, as commanded. The servants asked him if his sister was going with him, and he said:

‘Yes, but we’ll be back this evening, if it please God.’

‘God grant that it be so,’ said each of the servants, weeping.

Meanwhile Perceval had set his sister on her mule; then he mounted and set off with all speed. They rode on through the forest together until they came to the little chapel. There they found the holy hermit who recognised them as soon as he saw them, and welcomed them with embraces and addressed them with sweet words. Perceval went to his mother’s tomb, and prayed to God in His gentleness to have mercy on her soul; then he wept, and said in a louder voice:

‘Oh, dear mother, the sins I’ve committed towards you have so burdened me that I shall never expiate them or gain God’s love, unless He will look on me with pity.’

He dismounted then, and told the hermit once again all the toil and hardship he had suffered in the quest for the Grail.

‘My good, dear friend,’ said the hermit, ‘abandon all evil vices: he is a miscreant and a hypocrite who thinks to gain God’s love and glory through proud and boastful ways. No! It takes afflictions, fasting, prayer

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\* The hermitage visited by Perceval and his sister in the Second Continuation: above, pp. 166 - 170.

and true repentance, and wearing a hair-shirt in penitence, and admitting all the sins one can in confession to a priest. Such are the arms with which a knight should arm himself if he wishes to love God and to be worthy and valiant. A knight's sword has two cutting edges: do you know why? It should be understood, I tell you truly, that one edge is for the defence of Holy Church, while the other should embody true earthly justice, protecting Christian people and upholding justice without trickery or covetousness. But know this: Holy Church's edge is broken, while the earthly edge cuts indeed: every knight cuts and hews the poor men and holds them to ransom, though they have done him no wrong. So that side of the sword is very sharp, and a knight who carries such a sword is deceiving God; and if he fails to mend his ways, the gate of Paradise will be closed to him. God keep you, my good, dear friend,' said the hermit, 'from such a sword, which might damn your soul.'

At the end of his sermon the hermit said a beautiful, glorious, most holy prayer, sweet and precious, that God might keep him from affliction. Then Perceval politely took his leave at once, and the hermit affectionately blessed them with the sign of the cross.

(SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 2796–4668)

*Perceval and his sister ride home, but depart the next day, much to the distress of their household, who collapse in grief.*

*As they journey on, a knight named Mordret appears and demands that Perceval surrender his sister to him. Perceval refuses and a battle begins. Mordret finally has to cry for mercy, and Perceval sends him to Arthur.*

*Perceval and his sister ride on and come to the Castle of the Maidens, which Perceval recognises instantly from the steel hammer and the table of copper.\* He is not given a very warm welcome when he first strikes the table and asks for lodging, and he is asked for his name and the name of his father. He says that his father was called Gales the Bald, but adds that he has never known his mother's name. The lady of the castle says that she will tell him the name of his mother, for she was of her lineage. Perceval is wounded from his battle with Mordret, but the lady treats him with the ointment used by the three Marys upon Jesus, and then tells him that his mother was named Philosofine. She was her cousin, and they had both brought the Grail to that land from across the sea, but 'it was later taken away by angels because this country was waste and full*

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\* Perceval first visited the Castle of the Maidens in the Second Continuation: above, p. 171. The table is there described as being made of brass.

*of sinful people; and it was carried to the house of the good Fisher King, where you have been'. She tells Perceval that he is wrong to take his sister with him on his quest for the Grail, and that he should leave her there at the Castle of the Maidens. Perceval agrees, and when he departs next morning he leaves his sister with 'the holy lady Ysabiaus'.*

*Meanwhile Faradien and Mordret, both recently defeated by Perceval, present themselves to King Arthur at Carlion. The following day a squire arrives and announces to Arthur and his court that a knight has come from a distant land across the sea to test himself against the knights of Arthur's household. Arthur calls upon Gifflet the son of Do to joust with this unknown knight; Gifflet is delighted to do so, but is defeated. Lancelot goes to avenge Gifflet, but even the great Lancelot, to everyone's amazement, is also beaten. Yvain attempts to gain revenge, but he, too, is wounded and unhorsed. Gawain now takes up the combat; he and the knight bring each other down, and fight on with their swords. Suddenly a minstrel runs to Arthur, having recognised the knight, and identifies him as Tristan, nephew of King Marc of Cornwall and lover of Marc's wife Yseut. Arthur immediately stops the fight, and when Gawain learns who the knight is he is as delighted as the king.*

*Later Tristan defeats every knight at the court – even Sir Gawain – at wrestling, but he is nonetheless loved by all – except the ladies whose lovers have been publicly defeated.*

*One day Tristan remembers his love Yseut, and decides to leave Arthur's court with a company of twelve knights, including Gawain, Yvain and Lancelot, to seek her. He and his companions disguise themselves in ragged clothes and carry musical instruments as though they were minstrels. They come to King Marc's city of Lancien, where a tournament is about to be fought between Marc and the King of the Hundred Knights. Marc's wife Yseut is watching the tourney, sad that her lover Tristan is not there. Tristan rides up and greets the king on behalf of his fellow minstrels, and Yseut jumps in surprise, thinking that it is Tristan's voice. But she tells herself that it cannot be. Tristan and his companions give a sample of their playing, and it is so good that Marc agrees to hire them.*

*Marc and his knights do poorly on the first day of the tournament. Then, as they dine that night, Tristan performs the lay of Chievrefueil,\* and Yseut again thinks that it is her lover's voice ... but Tristan's disguise includes a missing eye, so she wavers ... but finally convinced by the subject of the lay, she decides that it must be him.*

*The tournament continues next day, and Marc and his knights again do badly and are heading for defeat. And while the combat rages outside, Yseut*

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\* The lay of Chevrefoil by Marie de France, which concerns Tristan and Yseut.

takes Tristran to her chamber.

*Gawain is upset at Marc's impending defeat in the tourney, and persuades Tristran and the other supposed minstrels to go to his aid. Yseut provides them with arms, and they all ride out and turn the tide. And because they still have their musical instruments hung round their necks, the opposing knights are filled with shame at being overcome by minstrels. Marc is delighted, of course, as his side begins to win the tournament.*

*Just as Marc's opponents are fleeing, Perceval appears from the forest; and he is in a sorry state, with his arms all tattered, and mounted on a skinny black horse: he has had no success at all in his quest for the Grail. As he emerges from the trees he sees the tournament and Marc's opponents in disarray, and longs to ride to their support; but his horse is exhausted. Suddenly Kay catches sight of Perceval, and when he sees that his arms are so battered he advances on him, determined to pay him back for past humiliations. He mocks his miserable appearance, and in reply Perceval mocks his minstrel's gear: 'I tell you, I wouldn't lay my hands on a minstrel for a thousand marks'. Then they fight, and Perceval strikes Kay from his stirrups and jumps on to his horse; then he charges into the tournament and unhorses four of Tristran's companions. Then he meets Tristran, and fells him with a magnificent blow, laying him full length on the ground, unable to stand up. Just as he goes to take him prisoner, Lancelot, Yvain, Saigremor and Gawain attack him all at once; but Perceval defends himself brilliantly, and Gawain recognises him by his terrible blows. He asks him his name, but Perceval, who is sure that it is Gawain's voice but is puzzled by the musical instrument hanging from his neck, wants to know his first. They exchange names and stop their fight, and Perceval tells of his failure on the quest for the Grail, but repeats his determination to succeed.*

*Marc receives Perceval with great honour; and Gawain, together with Yvain and Perceval, asks a favour of Marc: that he forgive Tristran for his love of Yseut. Marc agrees, and asks Tristran to stay in his land.*

*Next day Marc presents Perceval with beautiful new arms, and he sets off with the knights of Arthur's court. They come to a chapel at a crossroads, and there Perceval leaves them to continue his quest, while Gawain says that he will head for the peak of Montesclaire.\* The other knights, sad at losing Perceval and Gawain, return to Arthur, who is alarmed that Gawain should be going to Montesclaire 'where no knight, no matter how worthy, could avoid death or imprisonment', and equally worried for Perceval's safety on the fearsome quest for the Grail. The story now returns to Perceval.*

Perceval rode on all alone, deep in thought, having passed through many

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\* Gawain had declared long ago that he would go and raise the siege of the girl of Montesclaire: in Chrétien, above, page 55.

lands and countries and encountered many fearsome, mighty, stern adventures. He passed into a vast forest, but rode and pressed on until he emerged on the other side; then he looked ahead, and there in a plain he saw a castle, of which all the walls and battlements were made of dressed stone. The barrier before the bridge was made of oak, with its bark still on. Perceval hurried on, for night was fast approaching. Then he saw, riding before him, five knights, fully armed and equipped; but their arms were battered, their gold shields pierced, their helmets split and dented, their horses weary and exhausted, and their swords notched and bent. Four of them were wringing their hands and lamenting bitterly, for they were gravely wounded, with blood spilling from their bodies: they had been in a grim battle indeed. These four were leading along the fifth, for whom they were grieving desperately, for unless I'm much mistaken he was wounded through the body by four spears and in the head by two swords, which had bitten through his helmet and down to the bone. They were certainly not galloping, but riding at a walk. Perceval was shocked indeed to see them in such a state, and before he left he wanted to know, if he could, exactly what had befallen them. And he was amazed, too, to see the land destroyed, laid waste and desolate, for all around the castle there was not a cottage or a house to be seen.

Perceval hailed the knights with friendly words. One of them, most kindly and soft in speech, said: 'May God through His power keep you from harm and loss and send you the fullest joy, as He most certainly can.'

'Oh, noble and kindly knight,' said Perceval, 'before I go, please tell me what has happened to you.'

'Sir,' he replied, 'it was cruel and hard, I can assure you. Never has so great a misfortune befallen anyone. But come and lodge with us tonight and I'll tell you everything, without a word of a lie; for I don't know of any house or resting-place where you'll find lodging except this castle within a long day's ride of here.'

And Perceval said: 'Many thanks.'

So they rode on towards the castle and the gate was opened for them. The people of the castle saw the loss they had suffered with the wounds to their lord.

'Alas!' they cried. 'This injury to our lord will never be repaired! Oh, alas! He has suffered strife and torment for so long!'

Such was their lament; but they took comfort in the presence of Perceval. The four sons carried their father into the hall, and removed his armour and bandaged his wounds, and treated him with an ointment – and themselves likewise, for they needed it: their bodies were far from whole, being covered in wounds. But they were all more concerned about their father than themselves, though they hid their grief and worry as well as

possible.

They honoured their guest as highly as they could, and had him nobly disarmed and dressed in a mantle of rich silken cloth lined with ermine, and had his horse stabled at once. Then they called for the table to be set up, and the lord was laid in a beautiful and costly bed near the table, by the fire. Perceval was served most handsomely: they had clean and hearty meats, plovers and partridges and ducks in jelly, and tender forest rabbits with plump kidneys, and an abundance of sea and freshwater fish. The knight who lay wounded on the bed spoke a little, calling his four sons to him.

'My children,' he said, 'make our guest comfortable and honour him, for if I could I would welcome him with honour and joy, for he seems to resemble very much the boy whom I once made a knight.'

When Perceval heard these words, he realised that this was the worthy man who had bestowed upon him the order which God had established in the world to uphold justice and to protect Holy Church. He looked at him and recognised him by what he had said, but nonetheless asked him his name. And the worthy man replied at once:

'Dear guest, my name in proper French is Gorneman de Gorhaut.'

Perceval heard this and felt both joy and sorrow: joy at hearing his name, but sorrow at his wounds.

'Sir, it's a calamity to me that you're wounded; and all my pleasure and happiness will be turned to grief until I've taken revenge upon the one who wounded you: he'll find a fearsome neighbour in me if I can track him down. I can't shrink from avenging you – may the supreme king guide me – for I'm the boy whom you equipped with arms and dubbed a knight, and you girded on my sword. That's the truth; and now tell me the whole story from beginning to end, if you will: explain why you've been done such harm, for if I can I'll take revenge or lose my head.'

Gorneman heard these words, and with a great struggle heaved himself on to one elbow. Now he knew for certain that this was Perceval whom he had made a knight. And he said:

'I'll tell you the fearsome story here and now. It's been going on for a long while, and still is – nor will it cease as long as this castle stands, and until I am destroyed. Every morning, every day, I find forty mighty knights, well armed and carrying the gold shields that they've captured, fresh and new. Their horses are big and strong and swift, and their lances are firm and sharp, sharper than a chisel<sup>†</sup>. Every day my four sons and I have to do

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\* Perceval had his first instruction in knightly ways from Gorneman in Chrétien: above, pp. 18-19.

† Literally 'sharper than a mortising-axe'.



battle with them. They've killed all my people. Each morning they come and attack me at the gate, and they're terrible and furious; and I have to go out against them, with no support except my sons here. And, dear sir, you still don't know exactly what befalls us: we have to fight them each day, I promise you, until we've destroyed them and left them dead in the field; then, when evening comes, we return home, not daring to remain there; but the following morning, by some miraculous power, we find them all quite safe and sound, and the battle begins all over again. And so we spend our lives in grievous torment, and have done so for a long time now, and will do so still, I'm certain; we're in despair. We fought them again today, but our efforts will have been in vain, for we'll find them there again tomorrow and do battle yet again. But I'm so gravely wounded that I can't be there tomorrow – my four sons will have to go without me into great peril and withstand their attacks.'

'My good, dear sir,' said Perceval, 'I swear to you by this hand that I will go with your sons tomorrow to defend both them and you, for it's only right that I repay the great service and goodness and kindness that I found in you before. I knew nothing of the world except what my mother had told me – and I still know little enough. When I saw the Grail and the lance which bleeds incessantly, I was dreadfully cautious and asked nothing about them, which has caused me a great deal of pain and anguish. If I had asked then, I would have known the whole truth; but I couldn't learn anything after that: I hadn't the sense to ask the truth! But since then I've scoured and searched and found it once more, and asked to be told the truth; and the king would have told me, but first I had to mend a splendid sword which was broken across the middle, and when I came to join the pieces a notch remained in it. And the king said I could ask as much as I liked, but I would learn nothing until I'd repaired and mended the notch in the sword; and he also said that I'd done something that made me unworthy of knowing the secrets either by word or sign. So the king wouldn't reveal the truth to me, and it worries me, for I don't know what wickedness or sin of mine is to blame; and I can't think of any sin, great or small, that I haven't confessed and done penance for – except one: I gave a promise of marriage to a most beautiful and lovely girl; she was your niece, I know, for she told me so a long time ago: it was Blancheflor of Beaurepaire. It's only right that I recognise that sin. I ended a war in which she was embroiled, and she loved me with a true heart and told me to take her and make her my wife. And I promised to be her love and to marry her and to do no wrong with any other. Now I remember: that's the sin, I think, with which I'm most tainted.'

Gorneman heard this and stretched a little towards Perceval, and said, like the worthy man he was:

‘My good, dear friend, seek God’s pardon and set your mind on marrying the lady as soon as you leave here. God is so full of mercy that He grants the requests of anyone who prays to Him with a true heart. And go willingly to hear mass – it is the most glorious and precious service of all; and whoever hears it can see with his own eyes the body of Jesus Christ when the priest consecrates the host and holds it in his hands – the very same, no more, no less, as was born of the Virgin and crucified. If you believe this firmly, and willingly go to hear mass, and fulfil the promise that you gave the girl when you undertook to marry her, if you do all this, I tell you upon my soul that you will repair the notch and learn all the secrets of the lance and the Grail.’

This was the lesson he taught Perceval, as he was well qualified to do. And Perceval listened to all he said and took in every word; and he bowed his head slightly, and prayed to God most humbly to grant by His power that he might deliver his host from the ones who meant to destroy both him and his land, and had cast them into great peril and inflicted such grave wounds and injuries. Then they washed and took to their beds.

**P**erceval lay down in bed but felt no joy or comfort, being so worried about his host. He would be distraught indeed if he could not free him from his suffering and torment.

When day broke all rose throughout the castle. The four brothers were quick to rise, gravely wounded though they were, and Perceval left his bed at once, most upset and worried. When he saw the four knights armed to meet the attacks of the forty, who had already come and were awaiting them at the foot of the bridge outside the gate, Perceval called for his arms to be brought, and they were, immediately. They were presented to him on a carpet of costly silk; and two boys ran to lace on his shoes, and knelt before him to arm and equip him. Now all five were fully armed, and there was nothing to mock in their appearance. Like noble souls they heard the mass of God and His sweet mother, most worthily said; then each of the sons took his leave of his father, who was still sorely wounded.

‘My sons,’ he said, ‘may it please God to lead you back, for I ask nothing more than to see you again, safe and sound.’

With that Perceval mounted outside the chapel door, and gently called to the four knights, saying that bread and wine should be brought for them – though I suspect they would soon need more than that – and that each should eat a sop. A boy brought them clear, bright wine in a large cup, while another cut the bread and dropped it into the vessel, which was not of aspen or fir but the finest silver. Each knight ate and drank of the wine just once,

that was all; then the gate was opened and they all rode out, their helmets laced. The knights came charging at them like wild things, and Perceval, his lance raised, rode to meet them at full speed, with all the brothers following him as fast as their horses could go. With a thrust of his lance of apple-wood Perceval struck the first knight such a blow that he pierced and smashed right through his shield, ripped and tore through his mail-coat and thrust the head clean through his body; may his soul be sent to the devils of Hell! Then he struck another so mightily on his striped gold shield that all his armour was of little use, and he plunged both head and shaft into his body, parting body and soul before he hit the ground. But the match was very far from even: there were still thirty-eight against five in the contest, and all thirty-eight were more than eager. Perceval killed eight with his lance, I think, before it shattered; and then they harried him hard indeed, smashing his shield to pieces, and hammering at him with their swords of steel like smiths upon an anvil. Perceval now had drawn his sword, frothing with rage and fury, and beheaded one of his fiercest attackers; he was giving them fearsome treatment! And the four brothers were proving their worth, launching themselves at full tilt into the thickest press. Perceval needed their help as he charged in among them. He struck one knight such a blow that he smashed off his helmet along with an ear, and his sword turned red as it plunged into the brain; he sliced another head to the nape of the neck; in all he severed seven heads. But he was sorely hurt and wounded, for they were all beating and battering at him, striking rings from his hauberk, splitting open his helmet. But the four brothers were not half-hearted: they were all dealing mighty blows. Yet if they had been badly wounded before, now they were a good deal worse: their helmets were split, their shields smashed, their hauberks pierced and their bodies gouged with wounds from head to foot. One of them was caught by a sword-blow to the scalp, and the other three pulled him from the fray and covered him up well away from the battle; then they returned to the combat. So now there were only four of them; but they battled on and struck at the enemy until only twenty of the forty remained, and they withdrew for a moment to reorganise and pause awhile and rearrange their arms. But Perceval charged into the press, his shield held firm before his breast; and the three brothers were at the ready, and in they galloped after him, determined to do well. Battle was joined again. Perceval with his keen sword struck out so awesomely that the three brothers regained their courage and their will to fight, seeing Perceval's noble display; and he kept dealing blows and enduring the battle till the afternoon passed and evening approached. Still Perceval spurred his horse on, determined to slaughter the enemy, and the three brothers were right behind him; but the fourth was helpless, and watched the combat motionless. Perceval charged in to hew his enemies with his steel

sword; but they, who had little fear of death and little love for Perceval, rained a storm of blows upon him – and not with the flats but with the edges of their blades; they injured and hurt him fearfully. And the three brothers gained nothing: such were their wounds that the enemy knights cast them to the ground with their entrails spilling out; and then they turned on Perceval in a terrible assault, though now there were only four of them. They were sure they would bring him down, but he returned to attack them furiously with his sword, and beheaded one and split another's head down to the chin. With that the remaining two cried out loud:

'Oh, Perceval! It's useless! Tomorrow the attack will begin again; your exhaustion's all for nothing! Tomorrow, before you wake, we'll be back at the castle to join battle again: of that you may be sure!'

'May you all be damned!' cried Perceval. 'But come what may, before I leave here the battle will end for you as it has for your companions.'

'We don't fear you in the slightest – nor do we fear death.'

At that Perceval spurred his horse and clutched his sword, and beheaded one and hacked an arm from the other and sent him toppling from his horse: all were now dead and slain. Then Perceval went to his companions and did enough to enable them to mount, bandaging their wounds which were giving them grave pain, for they kept splitting open and bleeding. Then they began to say:

'Good sir, we can go home now and give you and your horse rest and comfort for the night; and tomorrow, if you wish, you can be on your way again. I don't think any of us will see beyond midday. And even if we recovered we'd face a terrible plight once more. Those last two knights told you how it is: tomorrow the battle will begin again. This sport is neither good nor pleasant. We won't have the strength to return, and we don't know what will become of us, for they'll take us by force. They say they'll destroy us and burn our castle to ashes. That's the fate, the torment, we can expect in the morning.'

Perceval replied sweetly, saying: 'God save you all from that! It's high time you all returned to the castle for the night. But tell me, please, how it is that they return to life.'

'God help me, sir, we've no idea. And we fear the danger too much to stay: anyone who stayed here to find out would die without question.'

But Perceval said: 'God help me, however terrible the danger, I'm not leaving here until I know the secret of how they return to life.'

'Oh, sir, do you want to die?' cried the brothers. 'Truly, neither we nor our father have ever dared do such a bold deed.'

'I shan't leave for anything,' he replied. 'Go now.'

They saw that their words and warnings were vain, and rode away,

silent and grieving for Perceval. He dismounted and sat down on a rock, while the wounded brothers spurred on towards the castle, not drawing rein at all. They crossed the bridge and passed through the gate, each carrying a grievous wound for which they expected no cure by any medicine or potion. They dismounted, and when they had disarmed they told their father of Perceval's great deeds of prowess, and of the jousts and charges he had made during the battle.

'And we promise you, we would all have been killed on the spot: our strength would not have been worth a candle to save us from beheading; but Perceval, truly, drove them to defeat. But now he's stayed behind to find out how they return to life. It's a grievous pity and a terrible loss that a man so full of noble qualities should stay to receive certain death! But no words of ours could coax or cajole him into coming back to lodge with us. As for us, we're finished: in the morning our end will come, for we've no power to defend ourselves. And our hearts should break and burst with grief for the death of the bravest man who ever lived or rode a horse.'

'Oh, Perceval!' cried Gorneman, 'What a loss it will be if you die! Truly, if you stay there, no-one can save you!'

And tears began to stream from his eyes and down his face. They never ceased all night, it seems, to lament for Perceval. But I shall say no more for now of their great sadness; instead I'll return to Perceval, who was holding his horse by the bridle and sitting on a marble stone beside a tree, overlooking the dead. He had no wish to sleep, but his body began to tremble a little because of the cold, and he said that if he carried on like that it could certainly do him harm. So he began to move about and jump up and down, and so stayed wide awake until midnight had passed. He surely cannot have enjoyed it much, for he was not used to spending the night like that; but he was soon to witness a marvel.

**T**he moon was shining brightly, which certainly did not displease Perceval: he was only too glad of it. Finally he sat on the stone again; and as he peered ahead towards the foot of a hill, he saw a light appear, accompanied by such a tremendous groan that the ground all shook and trembled. Perceval was filled with wonder at the din, and he raised his hand before him and made the sign of the cross in the name of the heavenly Father: that is the sign that the Devil fears most, you may be sure. The groan was the sound of an opening door, and coming through the door, the source of the brilliance that was lighting up the land, Perceval saw a woman, old and tall. She was carrying two small casks of handsome ivory, bound by hoops not of silver but of gold, pure, bright and brilliant. Their

like was never seen: they were embedded with many precious stones, and without question, all King Arthur's wealth could not have met the value of those casks. You'll hear perfect proof of that before the story ends, which has yet to be fully told. And I can tell you this most certainly: never has such a hideous creature been described as the old woman who brought the casks. Her eyes were fouler than any beast's: one was buried in her head, and it was tiny and bright red; the other seemed stuck out on a stalk, and it was huge and dark as dregs. She had no veil or head-dress, and her neck was thin and scraggy, her face all hairy and her head small and pointed; and she was twisted and hunch-backed, and limped back and forth so that her knees knocked. No man could create so ugly a woman in a portrait or a statue. Her tresses resembled, I promise you, the tails of two skinned rats. Her nostrils were so wide that you could have thrust your fists up them. Never was iron or steel blacker than her neck and face and hands. Her chest was angular and dry: she'd have burned like tinder if you'd set her alight. An uglier creature has never lived: her mouth was an amazing size, splitting open from ear to ear, and they were long and dangling. Her teeth were long and wide and yellow, her lips as vast as a Calabrian saddle. Her body was twisted, her back bent. She was an ugly lass indeed. And I'll tell you, finally, that one of her loins jutted out behind her, the other was up around her armpit; and both her cheeks were all puffed up. All swollen up and bloated, she came hobbling furiously along, and at each step, I promise you, she seemed to limp on both legs. Perceval watched her for a long while, hot and panting from her run.

'God,' he said, 'what foul demon spawned such a loathsome creature? Is it by charm or magic that she's so hideously formed? She seems to have hung in the smoke of hell-pit, for she's blacker than any iron.'

That was what Perceval thought of her, but his courage was unimpaired. He saw the casks hanging at her neck, and wanted to know more about the old woman; so he stayed where he was for now, deciding to wait and see what she would do. So he sat there silently; and the old woman, thinking to go about her business in peace, limped up the path and in among the dead, and put down the casks that were hung about her neck. The ugly, twisted hag now picked up the head of one of the dead lying there in the field, beheaded by Perceval that night, and placed it on the torso; then she took one of the casks: it would be a lord or a noble man indeed who had such a cask in his possession. Perceval watched the old woman with rapt attention. She took the stopper from one of the casks, and poured into her palm a drop of liquid clearer than any rose water. Then she dabbed her finger in the drop, and rubbed it on the lips of the knight whose head she had replaced. In an instant his veins and joints all surged with life and his

wounds were healed, every one, as though he had never been hurt at all; and he was up on his feet again before you could count to three. The potion had the power to restore the dead to life; for God, who delivers those He loves from Hell, was anointed and embalmed with it when He was laid in the sepulchre. The old hag replaced the heads of four and brought them back to life, exactly as she meant to do. She rubbed the potion on another's lips, and up he leapt. Perceval was dismayed by what he saw, and said to himself that he would soon be in a sorry plight if he dallied any longer. So he leapt upon his horse, took up his shield and drew his sword, thrust in his spurs and rode towards the hag crying:

‘The potions you’ve used to restore them to life will do you little good!’

The old woman was astounded – and disconcerted. ‘What foul devil,’ she cried, ‘has brought you riding here at this hour? Your name is Perceval; I know you well, and I’ve always known I’d no need to fear anyone but you, for by my life, no-one but you could ever succeed; but, sir knight, no battle or assault can stop you from succeeding in the quest you’ve undertaken for the Grail: you don’t yet know who is served from it or what is done with it, but it will all be revealed to you, as will the reason why the lance bleeds – all those things that have caused you so much toil and trial and hardship. You are rightly called Perceval, for you have pierced the vale and plundered the place where the balm is kept, which will be entirely yours if you can defend it from these knights who are about to attack you. Guard the casks as well and as nobly as you can, for no man of your lineage has ever possessed so rich a relic. And I tell you this: never, as long as I live, will you learn one jot about the Grail, I swear it.’

‘May you be damned!’ cried Perceval, ‘and for eternity! I’ve endured so much toil in the quest. Now answer me this: why has Gorneman been attacked and assailed so many times?’

‘God save me,’ she replied, ‘that’s a fine question! I was so commanded by the King of the Waste City, who cannot and will not believe in God. By demons and devils, he sent these strange and terrible men to my door, which you heard groan so loudly now, and made me set them on this mountain because he wanted to destroy Gorneman. He wanted to finish him utterly because he made you a knight, and because through his guidance you will do such a deed as will undo the Devil’s work: for by you God’s friends, whom the Devil has been striving to destroy, will be restored to joy and well-being. And truly, with the potion in the casks I’m restoring to life all those who lie here, until Gorneman is finished. Now I’ve told you the true reason why the sodomite tyrant sent me here – he wanted to stop you learning anything about the Grail. You could toil for an age before you’d ever see it.’

‘Oh God!’ cried Perceval. ‘I’ve sought it for so many Aprils and Mays and achieved precious little – I’ve not been able to learn a thing.’

‘Nor will you, truly,’ said the hag, ‘as long as I live.’

‘Glorious God,’ thought Perceval, ‘what an evil old woman this is. I don’t know if she’s saying this through boastfulness or trickery – or even if it’s true.’

While he was thinking this, the hag bent down to one of the dead and anointed him, and up he leapt. Then Perceval spurred towards them, clutching his whetted sword; and he struck off the old woman’s head and sent her body crashing to the ground. Thereupon the six who had been restored to life came charging at Perceval in mortal fury, and they and he began to rain blows upon each other’s helmets with their furbished swords. Perceval set his dark grey shield against their sword-blows; he beheaded three, but the other three came to the attack. They did not have to chase him far – they found him very near! And over and over they cursed him for having killed their lady. Perceval did not spare his blows, and cut one of them clean in two; but the other two fought back so well that they wounded Perceval and killed his horse beneath him and brought him to the ground. They struck out at him mightily, but Perceval leapt to his feet and attacked them in a fury. He wasn’t making idle threats: with his keen sword he sliced through the head of one and dealt a death-blow to the last.

He sat down and rested for a long while beside his horse, who lay dead before him on the battle-ground. His sword, which shone as clear as ice, was smeared and stained with blood. He picked up the worthy, precious casks, and said:

‘Oh God, dear and glorious Father, how beautiful and richly wrought these vessels are! I don’t think there have ever been any like them. I’m sure they’re worth the castle of the rich king of Cornwall. But I don’t care a jot for the gold and the precious stones, though they’re worth all King Arthur’s land and treasure; I’m going to see if I can do as she did with the potion, and restore them to life and health. That’s what I’ve a mind to do; and if I could revive them as she did I wouldn’t exchange the casks for all the wealth that any man, however mighty, could gather. Before I leave here I’m going to see if I can revive one of these dead.’

With that he picked up one of the rich casks, poured a drop of the balm into the palm of his hand, and gently moistened his finger in the drop. Then he said:

‘By the faith I owe God, I’ll try it on this one, who did best of all in the battle yesterday, and hurt and wounded me the most – because he’s nearest to me, not because I’m any fonder of him.’

Perceval did not delay: he came up to the knight and dabbed the



potion on his lips. Up he jumped at once, feeling no ill. He saw Perceval before him and stepped towards him. He was still holding his drawn sword, and he struck Perceval so mightily that he cut through his helmet and the hood of his hauberk and drew blood from his forehead.

‘God blind the man,’ cried Perceval, ‘who would ever heal you, or try again, once you were dead! I should be rebuked indeed, for as the proverb says: who seeks folly finds it! Men often do well-meaning deeds that bring only harm. And that’s what I’ve done here: for if he’d called for mercy I would gladly have helped him; but now I see all too clearly that he doesn’t care about my forgiveness – he’s repaid me wretchedly.’

At that the knight returned to the attack, and harried Perceval so fearsomely that he inflicted heavy wounds. Then Perceval recovered heart and courage and vigour and power, and drove himself so hard that he robbed the knight of strength and breath and led him wherever he wished. The knight gave ground as he defended himself, but refused to cry for mercy; it would certainly have been granted, but he was quite sure that he had done so much to Perceval that he would never have mercy on him; and he was so full of despair that he had neither the heart nor the power to beg for mercy. Now you can clearly see that a despondent sinner, who cares not a farthing for confession and does no good deeds, but thinks he has committed so many sins that he cannot have forgiveness, is a fool to give way to despair; for God is full of pity and mercy to any man who wants to make peace with Him and begs His forgiveness with a true heart and seeks His peace and His love. The knight did not dare to cry for mercy, and the one who was so highly praised for his courage and his prowess bore down on the knight, and dealt him such a blow with his keen sword that he cut off his head and his body crashed to the ground. Then Perceval delayed no longer: the young knight sat down and took the casks once again; he gently and carefully poured out a little of the balm, and said:

‘A man who does good to others and not to himself is neither wise nor sensible! If I can, and God willing, I’m going to heal myself of my wounds.’

He had a drop of the balm in his hand, and he softly and gently touched it to his lips; and at once he felt healthier than any fish, and said:

‘I wouldn’t give up this potion for all the world: it has healed and cleansed me of my wounds.’

Perceval longed to see the dawn, for he was eager to go and heal the knights, Gorneman and his four sons. Then he stopped the casks – and not with hemp or oakum, but with two rich rubies, most finely cut; and the bung-holes of the rich and handsome casks were both of finest sardonyx. Emeralds and chalcedony, sapphires, diamonds and topaz were thickly

inlaid in the golden hoops and collar-bands. But what of that? It would be tiresome to listen to how rich they were, but I can assure you that no-one could have wished for finer, and Perceval rejoiced till daybreak at having won these precious casks.

Meanwhile Gorneman, who was deeply fond of him, was fearful and dismayed. He arose when he saw the dawn, and had a palfrey saddled, and told his sons there was no time to lose.

'Come on, get up, get up! Hurry now and stir yourselves and mount and let's be off!'

'Truly, sir, we can't, for we're sorely wounded. We're about to be condemned to torment: we can't escape it, for we'll soon be assailed by the wild devils who've doubtless killed our dear friend Perceval. Oh, we're going to see a grievous battle, that's certain! It'll be the last, and there'll be no deliverance for us, for we've little strength or power left.'

Gorneman fainted twice when he saw his sons so broken, and he was pale and white with grief. His heart almost broke when he thought of Perceval, and he shook in every limb with rage and sorrow; he would gladly have died – and they all thought he would indeed. There was great and mighty lamentation: every last man was grieving terribly.

But suddenly, at the foot of the bridge, there was Perceval, calling out. His voice was heard by a girl as she wept, and she was most dismayed. 'Oh, Holy Mary!' she said. 'Who was that calling?' She came to the battlements and cried: 'Who's there, in God's name?'

And the noble Perceval replied: 'Young lady, I am Perceval. I've put an end to the great torment that your people have been suffering. But open the gate for me.'

When the girl heard this she ran straight back to the hall and told them the news that Perceval was below at the gate. When Gorneman heard he had returned he was so elated that he forgot about his wounds. He came running to the gate and opened it with all speed, and as Perceval came in they welcomed him with overwhelming joy. Gorneman was filled with wonder when he saw him carrying the casks; and Perceval was greeted with joy unparalleled in so small a company. They led Sir Perceval up to the hall with the utmost honour and ceremony. Then Gorneman said:

'Tell me what's happened to your horse. Why have you returned on foot?'

'He was killed,' replied Perceval, 'but I promise you that, thanks be to God, I've gained more than I've lost.'

And Perceval recounted the whole story from beginning to end. He told him how the old woman had come and what had happened then: how she had revived the dead, and how he had taken the casks from her and

killed the knights who had returned to life. He told him everything, and what the old woman was like: that such an ugly creature had never been seen or found before. And he told him about the balm he had brought, and Gorneman was most reassured by what he heard of it. Perceval longed for their cure most earnestly, and said:

‘Please, dear sir, send for your sons.’

The gentle and pious Gorneman had his sons brought down to the hall and laid before Perceval on two large couches, side by side. The knights were overjoyed when they saw their guest, but their wounds were so terrible that they were fainting with pain. Perceval took the balm, and pouring a little into his hand he set about healing the wounded knights, placing a little in the mouth of each. And I tell you, as soon as the potion touched their lips, they were all healthier than a river fish swimming in the Oise or Seine. Every wound was healed and they felt neither pain nor sadness: now the rejoicing began. If God had descended from Heaven and appeared in person He would not have been embraced more eagerly than Perceval was then by Gorneman and his sons. Then Perceval took his casks and kept them at his side, looking at them repeatedly. And Gorneman gazed at Perceval with gladness and great fondness, and he and his four sons addressed him most kindly, saying:

‘Sir, stay with us here awhile and enjoy yourself.’

But Perceval replied: ‘No, it’s no use; I’m not going to stay. I want to go to my sweetheart Blancheflor, your kinswoman. And by my soul, I shall be most grateful if your father will take me to her, for I want to marry her. I shall live more chastely then; and the man who lives a holy life and keeps himself pure and preserves his chastity and virginity will find it to his advantage: for, as any priest will testify, he is loved and cherished in this life and his soul will be secure in the next. That’s why, my lords, I want to live chastely, to be of greater worth. And that’s why I wish to take a wife, you see, to escape the mortal sins that torment and confound the soul. All the same, there are some things that clerics and priests forbid us to do – because they see that, were it not for their prohibition, one would frequently do what one dares not do – which they do themselves! They’re supposed to be deeply religious men, yet they’re deeply debauched; but I don’t want to reproach them. But that’s why I wish to take a wife, to lead a clean and wholesome life and to guard and keep myself from sinning. So you may be sure I shall leave tomorrow morning.’

‘I’ll go with you,’ said Gorneman, ‘and keep you company and honour you in every way I can. Meanwhile there’s no-one here who’ll fail to serve you willingly with whatever you may need.’

Perceval thanked him deeply. Then the table was set up and they sat down to dinner; but I can’t describe all the dishes they had. When they

had eaten and drunk the cloths were cleared; then there was a great deal of rejoicing and singing in honour of Perceval, and all day long they joked and talked of joyful things. And when evening came they sat down to supper: they had five or six dishes of meat and as many of fish. And when it was time to sleep and rest, the boys did not dally but swiftly made the beds most finely and handsomely. In a panelled room, painted gold, magnificent and rich, they made a bed with a gorgeous grey coverlet and a rich silken quilt: I don't think I'll ever find a place housing a finer one. And as soon as the beds were made they attended to the knights as they took to their beds. Perceval had never seen anyone better served than he was that night, and to make him feel more comfortable the four brothers slept before him beside their father. A minstrel performed the lay of Gorron\* for him most sweetly, accompanying it with a Cornish pipe. Perceval was soon asleep, for he was very tired and weary and had been awake for a long while. Everyone in the castle fell asleep, feeling no alarm or terror now, but sleeping quite securely: their fear and dread had gone.

And the ivory casks that Perceval had won shed such a brilliant light in the hall that it was as bright, I promise you, as if it had been noon. Suddenly Perceval awoke and was astonished by the light, but knew that there was no danger, for the light was coming from the casks: he knew that it was holy. So he fell asleep again after a while, and slept until day broke and the watch sounded the dawn. Then he awoke, but was still tired and weary, for it was a long time since he had had pleasant lodging; and he lay in bed all the early morning, until the bell was rung for mass to be sung in a chapel. Then Perceval summoned the servants, who came running to him and dressed him. And Gorneman and his sons dressed, and they all went to hear mass, which filled their hearts with joy – for truly, the man who loves God and hears mass knows great joy indeed.

**A**s soon as mass was over, Perceval, eager to go and fulfil his promise, said to Gorneman:

‘Sir, please keep your word and come with me to Beaurepaire, to Blancheflor who seems to me the flower of all womanhood.’

‘I swear to you,’ replied Gorneman, ‘I shall be only too happy. But if you wish we'll have a little breakfast, and then leave when that is done.’

‘Quickly, then,’ said Perceval.

So Gorneman ordered plovers and pheasants and pies to be brought at once, and had the table-cloth spread. Then they washed their hands and ate. They did not take long about it but ate quickly indeed, and then ordered

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\* The lost medieval lay of *Gorum*, or *Guiron*.

the table to be cleared, which it was at once. Then they set off hurriedly and mounted. And I tell you, Perceval had a strong, swift and agile horse which Gorneman presented to him. And Gorneman wisely took both the casks, for it would not do to forget them. Then off they rode at rather more than a walk, and a great crowd gathered to see them go.

I can't describe every detail to you, but they journeyed on without delay until they caught sight of Beaurepaire. It was quite the richest and most handsome place that anyone has ever seen, and excellently fortified. I don't see how there could ever be a more splendid house or a finer town. A river bearing a fleet of boats flowed along one side, and on another side were great, thick forests full of game; and then there were meadows and open ground, and farmland, fishing lakes and pasture, gardens and fine arable, and orchards, rich and large. And on another side it was bounded by the sea, crashing at the foot of its walls. Beside the river lay the vineyard, vast and splendid and rich and noble: we described it once before.\* When Perceval beheld the land he recognised it at once. But Gorneman was bewildered, for he had not been there since Clamadeus had laid waste the land and the country all around;† but now it was as splendid a sight as you have heard from my description. The great richness and nobility of the town have also been described to you before,‡ and it would be tiresome to repeat it, so I shall say no more. I shall talk instead of Perceval, who sent two boys on horseback to tell Blancheflor that he was coming, and that he would keep his promise forthwith to take her for his wife. They set off at great speed, much faster than a canter, and rode on until they passed through the gate; and there they found so many people gathered in the street that, truly, it seemed to be the height of a fair. The boys rode on as fast as they could until they found the girl sitting at the door of the hall: she was dressed in samite, glittering with gold, most beautiful and handsome, and sitting amongst a great crowd of her people. The two boys sent by Perceval drew rein and dismounted and went towards the girl; but they were so stunned by her beauty that they were incapable of speech. They said nothing to her: not a word could they utter. Had they been bequeathed all Lombardy they still could not have made a sound; you could have walked right out of shouting range, I think, before they would have spoken or a word had passed their lips. The girl bowed her head a little towards the ground, and went on thinking of Perceval like the lovesick girl she was.

'Oh God!' she said, 'my love has been away so long. If he had set his heart on me as I have mine on him, he'd be back this instant! I've been

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\* There is a long description of Beaurepaire in the Second Continuation: above, pp. 156 - 157; but there is no mention of the vineyard.

† In Chrétien, above, pp. 21 et seq.

‡ Above, p. 156 - 157.

waiting for an age, but I'll continue to wait, whatever anyone says, for his every wish is my wish, too. The hope I have in him comforts me in my pain. And they always say that great reward will come to one who waits in hope.'

The two messengers now regained the heart and power to speak, and they stepped forward without more delay and swept back their hoods. They stood side by side and then knelt down and said:

'Lady, your friend the worthy Perceval sends you greetings.'

The lady was amazed. And when she heard them say that he was coming with her uncle Gorneman, she was so lost in joy that if her fingernails had been pulled out I don't think she'd have felt a thing! She jumped up at once, like a startled beast, and was about to run off through the streets to meet him when her maids caught hold of her.

'Oh, lady!' they said, 'all your dignity's lost when you're so carried away!'

But the girl replied: 'I can't help it, leave me be! If you were in love you wouldn't reproach me for this. But I'll take your advice.'

Then she had the richest clothes prepared, quite the richest ever made in this world for any king or prince. And her people were not idle, but richly adorned and draped the streets with silk and samite. So much richness was hung at every window that it seemed like an earthly paradise, and they spread carpets on the ground, not caring that they might be harmed. Knights and clerics and burgesses all dressed themselves in gowns of gold-embroidered cloth; and the sons of these burgesses equipped themselves splendidly and set about a festive joust; and I tell you, elsewhere bears and lions, boars and leopards went fighting through the streets. The ladies and knights were all rejoicing; and more than ten thousand mounted and rode out of the town to meet my lord Perceval. Those who were jousting had draped their horses with silken cloths of many kinds, and there were great scaffolds for spectators on every side. And I promise you, the drummers were not dressed in cheap stuff but in samite embroidered with golden cloth, and they had great palfreys with brand-new harnesses, rich and handsome. The jousting was noble indeed, and created such a mighty din that the whole town shook and rumbled. The girl was mounted on a mule harnessed more richly than any has ever been, I promise you; and her adornments, the gold and the jewels alone, were worth more than all the treasure of the king of Friesland. And when she was seated upon the mule, everyone gazed at her in wonder: she was dressed in the deep red silken gown that had belonged to Blanchepart the queen, lined with new ermine. And what should I say about her beauty? You've heard it described in this story before, but I can say this much with certainty: that never has any man – cleric, layman or monk – ever beheld such a beautiful girl: so Gerbert testifies. In her rich attire her knights led her through the gate with great splendour, her mule bearing

her most elegantly. She had many ladies escorting her, and as she came to the open country her company was beautiful indeed. Gorneman called to Perceval, saying:

‘My niece, your sweetheart, certainly can’t be ill-disposed towards you, when she welcomes you so magnificently!’

And when Perceval caught sight of Blanchefflor, who longed for him so much, he said to Gorneman: ‘Let’s head that way, please, dear sir.’

And with that Perceval turned his horse towards Blanchefflor. And when she saw him she felt embarrassed and turned pale and stayed motionless. But that is usual: when a girl fired with love sees the object of her love right there before her, she will always pale and be confused and at a loss for words. Perceval was rather worried when he saw her so subdued; he spurred his horse towards her and greeted her ten times, rapidly; and she, sighing, returned his greetings sweetly more than thirty times over, and then gazed at him adoringly like the lovesick girl she was. Then she greeted her uncle and her cousins at once. And Perceval took her by the hands, and then embraced her, for he loved her deeply; and he called her his very sweet love, and she called him her dear sweetheart; and then he began to embrace her at the waist, for Love was spurring him. Thereupon the crowds on horseback arrived and all greeted Perceval, crying:

‘Welcome to the one who delivered us from destruction and misery and poverty! You have brought us to great wealth, great comfort and great honour!’

Thus all the people, of every rank, greeted and addressed him. The girls and ladies danced in celebration, richly dressed in ermine and silk from Otrante.\* In thirty or forty places their dancing could be seen. But I want to pass on from these affairs, for I’ve a good deal to say about another! They crossed the bridges to the town and passed through the magnificent gates. I don’t believe any emperor or king or prince was ever received by any people so finely and so handsomely and with such splendour as was Perceval. No, no-one could hope to be better served: everyone, princes and lords alike, honoured Perceval. The cooks prepared supper when the time came. And Blanchefflor did not delay, but arranged everything perfectly like the wise and able girl she was. And when night fell she sent messages to all her vassals to come to her as soon as they saw day break, without delay or dallying.

When supper was ready the main horn was sounded, and the knights and ladies and lords washed their hands and went to dine. The dishes were not scanty: there were carts and waggons of wine and meat. Everyone had all he wished, along with sea and river fish. I can’t specify their dishes, for it would be tiresome to describe them all, so I’ll leave the description.

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\* Otranto?

That night there was no doorman or guard: anyone who so wished entered and carried off as much wine and meat, and candles, too, as he liked. The town and the castle shone with the lights from the feasting: the light was so brilliant, indeed, that it seemed as if all the houses were on fire.

When they had eaten their fill they had the tables cleared away; then Perceval stood up at once and spoke, addressing the knights who held land as Blanchefflor's vassals.

'My lords,' he said, 'I've come to ask to take your lady as my wife in good faith, as I should: I want to do so, with your agreement and with hers, because it seems to me that more good should befall me if we are joined in the sacrament of marriage than if I put my body, and she her beauty, to foolish use.'

When the barons heard this they replied: 'Noble sir, if you do so, you'll have brought us joy forever. If she is your lady and you are her lord, we shall never know sorrow or pain again.'

'I shall do so,' said Perceval, 'tomorrow, I swear it by this hand.'

The girl heard this and sighed with joy, for she would not have exchanged Perceval for all the empire of Greece or Rome and all the most handsome men who ever rode a horse. Then rejoicing began in earnest; but I don't want to say any more about their joy and celebration.

They had the beds prepared. In a richly made room, hung with tapestries and wonderfully painted with gold, they made six soft and beautiful beds with fine and costly sheets. Perceval went to sleep in one, and in the others lay Gorneman, according to the romance, and each of his four sons; but they did not sleep too close to Perceval, nor very far away. And I tell you, over his bed was spread a rich coverlet more speckled than a goshawk's feather shed at the fifth moulting. The fairy Blanchemal had made it in the isle of Gernemue; and no-one who slept beneath it would suffer madness, gout or any ill, nor could his heart be smitten with such evil as to think of harming anyone.

Meanwhile the girl Blanchefflor lay down in a rich and beautiful chamber with her maids around her. Much to her delight her maids fell into a happy sleep, but she did not: for Love was calling and goading her, not letting her rest at all; and she began to think such sweet thoughts about Perceval that she decided to go and talk with him, and nothing was going to stop her.

'But no, I daren't go.'

'Why not?'

'Because he'd love me less for doing so, and reproach me for it and think me loose and forward.'

'If I don't go he'll think me cold and stubborn, since I usually have



gone to him, and that I'm leaving him out of excessive pride, and that I'm feeling very sure of myself now that he's promised to marry me.'

'However he may reproach me, I'm going.'

Then she sat up in bed and put on her shirt and donned a mantle, and slipped away from her maids, passed into the hall and headed on. She no longer cared who saw her or who might whisper about her; Love had emboldened her so much that she thought whatever she did was for the best. She came to Perceval's bed, naked beneath her shirt and mantle, and leaned on the edge. Perceval, who had heard her coming, took her in his arms and hugged her tightly beneath the sheets and kissed her sweetly. They took great pleasure in each other; and they could indeed feel at ease with their kissing and embracing, for it went no further. They preferred to wait until they could be together without sinning.

And that was how they spent the night. The girl was greatly comforted by their kissing and their talking; and then, when they saw the dawn, she crept back to her bed and lay happily until the day was bright and fair.

Then the tournament, the jousting and commotion began again. Every lady and high townsman's wife dressed in a brand-new gown; and the chief seneschal bade them all start celebrating in earnest. The town was already full of the knights that Blanche-flor had summoned from all over the land, who began the celebration once again, rejoicing whole-heartedly. Perceval, hearing the festive sounds, rose at once and donned a beautifully tailored gown that had been prepared for him, of deep red silken cloth. He was an astonishingly handsome knight: with blonde and curly hair, I think, and shining eyes and a bright face, and brown and arched eyebrows, and a straight nose and a forked chin; and he had a small scar on his forehead that suited him so well that it was a delight to see; his body was straight and slim, and his shoulders were so well-built that nothing could be said against them; his arms were long and stout and strong, powerful in nerve and bone; his hands were white, the fingers and sides well made and straight; and his legs were straight and his feet well arched.

'God,' they all said, 'what a handsome, tall and gracious knight is Perceval.'

So said everyone. The girl had now risen, the worse for having been awake so long: she had slept very little, having been with her love and awake all night. Her maids dressed her richly and with care, and I tell you, her garments were resplendent with gold and jewels. Her clothes were not those of a beggar or a bumpkin: her gown was of blood-red silken cloth all covered in stars, and fringed with such bright and dazzling gems that they seemed to the eye to be all aflame. Yes, the border of her gown was ablaze with jewels,

redder than a tongue of fire; and her mantle was lined with white ermine right to the very edge.

The common people did not delay but came and assembled before the hall with a great noise and rejoicing. They gathered before the panelled hall and moved on to the church, where the Archbishop of Landemeure dressed without delay to begin the divine service. He was well rewarded at the offering. His two ministers were the bishops of Lumor and Lumeri. God! there were so many croziers and mitres of abbots and bishops: this was before any mass had been said. Bishops, prelates, abbots, monks, all were eagerly awaiting a glimpse of Perceval, who was now riding through the street with Blanchefflor behind him and a great crowd of people following close after. Everyone who saw them was amazed by their beauty, and hurried on to the church to be on the spot for a better view. Perceval dismounted right at the door of the church and came running to the girl with outstretched arms and set her down; and Gorneman hastened to accompany his niece at her right hand. Just as they entered the church they each made the sign of the cross on their head and body; and be sure of this: the cross is the sign greatly feared by the Devil, for God was placed upon the cross and by His death He redeemed us all. The archbishop made haste to conduct the service smoothly; he took them both by the hand and joined them swiftly in lawful marriage. And so Perceval took his wife, who was always a most holy woman – and Perceval was a most worthy man; and he was very well rewarded for it, for, as we find in written testimony, he completed the adventures which no-one but he alone could ever achieve, and no-one but he alone was worthy to learn the truth about the Grail. But he was to suffer much pain and torment before he could learn it and complete the quest.

The people were filled with joy when Perceval took his wife, and back they came to the palace. Jongleurs played lays and tunes and songs and *conducti* on the hurdy-gurdy: the merry-making was great indeed. Then the tables were set up without delay, and the people all sat down to feast. They were all served together in great silver bowls – I've never seen richer ware. I shan't go on about the dishes: everyone had so many at his table that it would be boring and tiresome to describe them all, so I shall say no more about them now.

After they had eaten they went to dance; and the jongleurs sang and played their hurdy-gurdies, harps and pipes; each according to his special skill came forward to do his turn. And story-tellers told splendid tales to the ladies and the counts. And when they had played for a good while, the minstrels were well rewarded, for all the pages and all the knights went out of their way to take off clothes and garments to give them – tunics, surcoats and fur-lined gowns; there were some minstrels who were given five pairs

of gifts, or six or seven or nine or ten, who arrived as paupers and left rich men! But as we all know, such practice is a thing of the past, for we have seen a good many celebrations for a knight – either at his marriage or his dubbing – where lords have, not for the first time, promised the minstrels their gowns on a certain day, but when they came for them they left empty-handed, for the lords had used them as payment to their boys, their tailors, their waggoners and their barbers. Damn lords who make such a promise! May he never share in prayers or in the mass who parts with his garments in such a way, or promises to reward a minstrel well and does no such thing, but rather stuffs him full of lies; such promises are merely dreams. The world is becoming very stingy now, because no-one's respected if he isn't rich. But I value wealth very little indeed, for it can bring no-one any good: a curse on worldly wealth! But since I'm supposed to be telling of Perceval I'll leave this matter and say no more: I'll keep quiet about it, and tell you about Perceval.

The rejoicing was great at Beaurepaire. Day waned and night returned, and the knights and ladies and lords sat down again to supper, with dukes and counts and archbishops, princes, clergymen and bishops, clerics, burgesses and other folk. The supper was fine and excellent, with many splendid candles lit, lighting up the whole town and the halls and the palace. But I'll leave the description now, for I don't want to recount everything; I'll take you right on to their going to bed.

In the girl's chamber, shining and ablaze with gold, they had had a glorious bed prepared: it would be a delight and a pleasure indeed to hear the bed described, but I don't want to spend my time on that! The archbishops of Rodas and of Dinas Clamadas, and of Saint Andrews in Scotland, each took a cross, not a crozier, and went to bless the bed. There was no need to teach them how to do the benediction! And those who made the responses were no common clergymen; I'll name them: one was the Bishop of Carduel, another the Bishop of Caradigan; also the bishops of Cardif and of Morguan, of Saint Pol de Lion, of Carlion, of Lumeri and of Lumor, the last two being the brothers of Saigremor, and the Bishop of Saint Aaron in Wales: the dioceses of all these men were under Blanchefflor's suzerainty at that time. In all Britain no queen or king, however powerful, with the single exception of King Arthur, had so beautiful a land as Blanchefflor had then; and she had made Perceval her lord and the lord of all her land. And when the bed had been blessed on every side, and the sign of the cross had been made over it – both with crosses and with fire – Perceval and the lady lay down together, while the people departed and went their separate ways. And the chambermaids left, too, feeling no fear for their lady, for they knew for certain that she would come out the winner from this engagement! They lay

together arm in arm, skin against skin, beneath the sheets. Then Blancheflor shook and trembled, and so did he, like a leaf, for they felt unsure: they were both afraid that through bodily pleasure they might lose what the elect have in the great joy of Heaven, and they wanted to save themselves from the perils and the great torment of Hell. Perceval sighed and lamented as he held Blancheflor in his embrace. She, brought up to be mindful of all good and honour, spoke like a lady of good repute and wisdom, for she was afire with love for God, saying:

‘Perceval, my sweetheart, let’s beware of the Devil having force and power over us. Chastity is a holy thing, that’s plain; but just as the rose surpasses other flowers in beauty, so virginity surpasses chastity, I tell you truly. And the person who possesses both will be surrounded by all honour, and will have a double crown before God in holy Paradise.’

When Perceval heard her words he agreed entirely, and said: ‘My dear heart, for the love of God let’s not cast our lives away in wicked use, for I believe that virginity surpasses all, just as topaz is worth more than crystal, and fine gold more than metal; so it is with virginity; and chastity, too, is of very great worth; and whoever possesses both together will surely win, it seems to me, the joy and delight of Paradise.’

With that they rose from their bed and went down on their knees with clasped hands, and turned at once towards the east. They both had their hearts turned to God, without the slightest doubt, inspired by abstinence and goodness and loyalty and faith, which instructed and commanded them not to sully virginity but to be full of charity and humility, without pride, and to remember God; for then they would win everything.\* And they both begged Jesus to keep them in such a state that they might come to a good end, and to preserve them in chastity without sullyng their virginity. Then they both lay down, but did not touch each other in such a way as to have carnal love; they fell asleep without delay.

They had been asleep for a long while, and then, as day began to break, Perceval awoke drowsily and stretched a little. Then he listened, and heard a voice and saw a brilliant light. The voice said:

‘Perceval, dear brother, think truly upon God. You have married your wife who is full of goodness. Now know in truth that I have come from God to declare to you that no man should touch his wife except in a holy way and for two things alone: firstly to beget children, and secondly to avoid sin. That is right and proper. But it frequently happens that when young people are together they think that whatever carnal pleasure they enjoy is

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\* Unresolved rhymes indicate an accidental omission in MS 12576. The sentence ‘They both had their hearts ... would win everything’ is missing in this manuscript, and is taken from the only other extant version.

for the best. But truly they are sinning and living wrongfully. So help me God, they would do better to plunge in cold water to purge the poison from them. Now preserve your virginity and fill your heart with charity, and all honour will come to you. And I tell you this: from your line will come a girl who will be most beautiful and lovely. She will be married to a mighty king, but sinfully and criminally and without desert she will be threatened with being burned or cast into terrible exile. But she will bear a son who will free her from this peril. And other sons will be born from her who will conquer many lands. She will have one who will first have the shape of a man and will be most fine and handsome, but he will later turn into a bird, which will distress his father and mother deeply. And know this, too: the eldest brother will encounter a fine adventure, for he will marry a girl whose land he will win back by force in battle. And he will beget a daughter who will bear excellent fruit, most pleasing to everyone, for she will have three sons who will conquer Jerusalem, the sepulchre and the true cross. Perceval, if you now shrink from seeking the bleeding lance and the Grail, for which you have toiled so hard, then I promise you this: you will have lost your valour and your strength and all the rewards which are to fall to you and your line. I can tell you no more: I commend you to God.'

Then the voice departed, leaving Perceval deep in thought for a long while. He waited for day to break until it was time to rise. Then boys came – I don't know how many – who dressed and clothed him; then they returned to the hall. And the ladies had risen, and they dressed their lady as they should most graciously. And truly, she lay down as a maiden and arose as a maiden.

Perceval and all the lords went to the church to hear mass; and after mass he summoned all the knights and lords to him, and received the fealty and homage of those who were to be his vassals, and they accepted him as their lord most gladly and with goodwill.

'Lords,' he said, 'I command you always to do for Gorneman as you would for me, and I ask him to be my bailiff and to guard my wife and my land, for I have to go in search of the Grail, which I've already been seeking for a long while. I don't wish to dally longer: bring me my arms and my horse!'

When Blancheflor heard Perceval's words she almost died of grief: he was leaving her so soon, and she had thought he would be staying with her in peace from now on, as a worthy man does with his wife. But the lady loved him so deeply that she did not dare to contradict his wishes: she would agree to whatever he said. Chrétien de Troyes, who began the romance of Perceval until death overtook him and prevented him completing it, told us that Blancheflor loved him with such a pure heart when she first saw him

and realised his courage, that her love never failed however far he might be from her, nor did his absence ever make her less enamoured: she was so in love with him. And now he had married her, as Gerbert has explained, who has continued the work where all the other *trouvères* left it; now Gerbert has contributed his part according to the true source: and may God grant him strength and victory in quashing all wickedness, and that he may complete the romance of Perceval that he has undertaken following the instructions of the book in which the matter is set down. Gerbert has composed and written it for us from the point where Perceval, who suffered so much toil and hardship, repaired the good sword and asked about the Grail and the bleeding lance.

(SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 7015–8331)

*Perceval leaves Beaulieu, and in such a hurry that he forgets to take the healing balm that he had taken from the old hag. Gerbert predicts that he would be sorry he had left it behind, for before he saw the Grail again he would be in need of the balm's treatment.*

*On the first night out he lodges with a hermit, without much food or comfort, and in the morning a knight arrives at the hermitage, splendidly armed. He is beating a girl terribly, who is crying that she would rather die than lie with him, for he has killed the one she loved. The knight calls upon the hermit to marry them, and threatens him with ill treatment if he refuses; but the hermit says he will do so only if the girl consents. Perceval tells the knight that he is foolish to try to take her as his wife by force, and that it is wicked for a man to dishonour a woman, because it was through a woman that the world was redeemed: 'woman was the first bridge', he says, 'by which God passed into Hell to rescue all His friends'. But the knight challenges Perceval and they do battle. Perceval defeats him in a bloody fight, but remembers Gorneman's early advice and has mercy on the knight, whose name is Dragonial the Cruel, and sends him as a prisoner to King Arthur.*

*The hermit gives Perceval and the girl a humble breakfast of barley-bread, water and cress, and when the girl complains at the coarseness of the bread Perceval reminds her that it is all the body needs to sustain life, and that the hermit would yield a better soul to God than they probably would.*

*Then Perceval and the girl ride on and find her lover, wounded by Dragonial, lying beneath a tree. Perceval now realises that he has forgotten the healing balm, and sends the knight, whose name is Arguisial de Carhais, and the girl, named Rohais, to Beaulieu to be healed with it.*

*Perceval journeys on and comes to a splendid castle. He meets a girl outside who tells him that the lord of the castle robs knights of all their clothes, arms and harness unless they joust with four knights and with him; her lover had met that fate and had been defeated, and she had not dared to stay there to see what humiliation they would make him suffer next. Perceval refuses to turn back, and rides into the castle. He finds five knights about to make the girl's defeated lover, stripped to his shirt, get into the traces of a cart and pull it through the streets. Perceval tells them to stop, saying they do not deserve to be called knights at all, and they challenge him to joust and threaten him with the same humiliation. He defeats the first and the second of them, and brings down the third in a huge pool of mud, splattering the watching lords and ladies; then he defeats the fourth, and calls upon the lord of the castle, whose name is Parsaman, to come and fight. They unhorse each other and do battle with their swords, and Perceval finally forces him to cry for mercy, which he grants on condition that free passage is never again denied any knight at the castle.*

*They dine splendidly at the castle that night, and the next morning Perceval sets out with the girl and her lover, and they ride on until they come to a fork in the road. There on a cross is fastened a sheet of parchment which tells them that the safe, broad road to the right is the way to Durecestre, while the other way is called the Adventurous Path, which is very hazardous. Perceval takes the latter, while the knight and the girl, whose names are Semiramin and Roseamonde de Nobles Vals, set off on the road to Durecestre.*

*Perceval spends a hungry week riding through a deserted land, until he finally meets two girls, weeping bitterly, carrying a knight in a litter whose legs are burnt. They will not speak to Perceval, so he rides on. Then he meets a knight with his face and neck all burnt, but again Perceval can get no reply from the knight's weeping squire.*

Perceval was greatly puzzled by these people he had met. He set out now along the path which no knight took and returned alive or without a grievous wound. The path was not, I think, very trodden or beaten. Then Perceval found himself in a beautiful stretch of land and there, at the edge of a dell, he saw a magnificent wooden cross: I don't think a finer one was ever made. He could see two hermits at the cross; one was making a great commotion, and was clutching a fistful of twigs with which he kept beating the cross, as heavily and furiously as if he meant to knock it down; and he went on beating it as long as his breath lasted. But the other hermit was on his knees with clasped hands, worshipping the cross at least a hundred times over without stopping. Perceval gazed at the hermits for a good while, baffled at seeing one beating it so earnestly and the other so intent on worshipping it and praying to God. Then he rode forward, deciding that he would ask with

what reason and intention the hermit was beating the cross: that the other should be worshipping it did not surprise him at all. So he came swiftly down towards them, and told them that he wanted to know if it was folly or wisdom that drove him to beat the cross. The hermit was about to tell him at once, but Perceval's attention was suddenly seized by something else: for out of a bush he saw a beast of amazing size appear. Perceval was astounded and forgot about his question, for the beast, which was heavily pregnant, went fleeing past him with her offspring baying inside her like a pack of barking dogs. Nor were they soft with their cries: they could be heard as clearly as if they were out of her belly and chasing her! The beast fled as fast as she could, and Perceval rode after as fast as *he* could, at a gallop, forgetting his question to the hermits he had found. He chased after the beast all day until finally he caught up with her. She was exhausted from running, and her brood had so torn at her that she was split in two, and out they leapt and attacked and devoured her, gnawing her flesh right down to the bones. And thereupon they turned raving mad and went so wild that they massacred each other. Perceval beheld this amazing sight and was filled with wonder: he had never seen anything like it. He set off on his way again, having no desire to stay.

Night was setting in, and he hurried on in search of a house where he could stay and find lodging for the night and have something to eat, for he was certainly in need of it. Night fell and it turned pitch dark. Then Perceval, who had seen and endured much suffering, suddenly saw a brilliant light, and headed towards it, thinking it a promising sign. He rode on towards the beckoning light and found an open door covered with broom, and the courtyard beyond was enclosed by a fence. He found thirteen hermits, of very pale complexion, inside a house. They had not a great abundance of food for their supper: they had cut a loaf of bread into thirteen pieces, and each of them was breaking his piece before him. A servant was standing before the foremost hermit, holding a burning candle; and he began to serve him, while another cut his bread, which was coarse, not made of wheat. They were all taken aback when they saw Perceval sitting armed upon his horse. And Perceval greeted them, and after his greeting he asked them for lodging out of charity.

‘I’ve been searching for lodging for a good while, but without success.’

‘You’ll have very little to eat,’ said a servant, ‘and so will your horse.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ said Perceval.

And the one who was lord and master of the hermits – and deservedly so – asked Perceval to dismount. Then the servants took his horse and led him to the stable and cut some new hay. And when Perceval was disarmed



they bade him sit by the fire, and he was well served with what they had; but Perceval ate little, I think, for he had nothing to his liking – he did not relish the bread.

Just as they were about to remove the table-cloths, a girl entered, carrying an astonishingly handsome shield: all white, with a red cross; and in the cross was such a relic as should certainly not go unmentioned: for in it was embedded a piece of the holy wood on which the flesh of Jesus Christ, the son of God, suffered torment. The shield was made by two Chaldeans who had been converted to God, and they had made it in such a way that no-one could find the Grail or the lance with the head that bled ceaselessly, except the first to be able to remove the shield from the neck of the beautiful girl. But it was at his peril that any man touched it or tried to remove it unless he was the boldest man in the world, both in word and deed, and confessed of all his sins; for otherwise he would be destroyed and killed by a thousand stones, and nothing could protect him. There was an inscription upon it to that effect for the benefit of all who saw the shield and were able to read. The girl stepped into the house at once. She had been scouring many lands, both day and night, but no-one who read the inscription would lay a hand upon the shield: they did not dare to try, for it was a fearsome test indeed. Perceval ran without delay to help the lady dismount, but first he went and took the shield from her neck: it weighed very little, but it was made of such fine stuff that it feared no blow from any lance. The girl threw herself to the ground when she saw he had taken the shield: she knew now that he was the worthiest knight in the world, for confession, which washes away sin, had greatly increased his worth. The girl, without any bidding, went and sat down with Perceval, and had two casks full of wine and two rabbit pies, which she had wrapped up in a table-cloth, unloaded from her horse. The hermit bade them sit and eat upon a cloak by themselves. The pies and the two casks were placed before Perceval.

‘Good friend,’ he said to a boy, ‘take these pies and casks and give them to the monks to share.’

‘Sir,’ he replied, ‘I’ve no wish to lie to you, and please don’t take it as a joke: they don’t eat meat and they don’t drink wine. And I promise you, by Saint Livin, that they don’t talk while they’re eating, except for the king – whenever people come here he’ll talk, both when they come and when they go. But eat now with good cheer, and you too, dear lady, and then you can talk to the king without it being base or impolite; and if you’ve anything to ask him he’ll give you excellent advice; and if you’ve seen anything that you haven’t understood, ask him, and he’ll explain its meaning faithfully. And in case you want to know his name, he was baptised with the name of Elyas Anaïs; and he’s now called the Hermit King.’

Perceval heard this and was overjoyed, most eager to ask about the strange things he had seen and not understood: about the hermits at the cross, and about the beast who was split open by the storming brood who then devoured her, and how it was that they then went raving mad, and why they all killed one another. Perceval waited until he and the girl had eaten before he asked; but then he addressed the king as soon as he could, saying:

‘Sir, you’ve lodged me in your house tonight. Now in the name of God, sir, I hope my questions will not displease you. I’ll tell you about the adventures I’ve encountered today, for they are wonders indeed.’

Then he told him first about the behaviour of the two hermits: how one had worshipped the cross and the other had beaten it furiously; and then he told him all about the beast, from beginning to end. The Hermit King listened to everything Perceval said; then he lowered his head and thought awhile, and then looked up and said to Perceval:

‘Dear friend, you’ve set me thinking deeply with your question. Be sure to listen closely now; for a man who hears but takes in nothing is like a man who spreads his net to catch the wind: if he hears good words and doesn’t retain them, he’s the worse for it. It’s negligent and disrespectful to the one who has tried to inculcate good; but it would take forever to train a buzzard to catch a lark, and trying to instruct the bad to do good is futile. You’re certainly throwing your pearls away if you scatter them before swine! Good-for-nothings have more regard for those that skip and dance. Why? Because demanding good of them makes them bitter, for good-for-nothings will always go more readily to dance about than to hear good words spoken which guide us to courtesy and worth and honour. My good, dear friend,’ said the Hermit King, ‘measured speech is better than banter, for the former wins over many men. There’s a great deal to say and hear about what you’ve asked me. But if you pay attention I’ll tell you the truth as well as I can. Now listen, dear friend, and I’ll tell you about the two hermits. They both have good intentions: the hermit who was beating the cross was weeping bitterly, I assure you, for he was beating the wood because of the pain and agony that Jesus Christ suffered on the cross when He submitted His body to death, that’s the certain truth; because of Christ’s torment and martyrdom on the cross, the hermit kept beating it over and over. That’s what it was. Now I’ve explained why he was beating the cross. The other hermit was worshipping it because the glorious flesh, so sweet and precious, was tortured upon the cross and pinned fast with three great iron nails, and thereby rescued from Hell the souls who’d served Him. God didn’t deserve to be crucified, and that’s why the wood of the cross on which God was nailed is sanctified. And know this, my good, dear friend: the Devil fears the cross more than anything, that’s certain, because thanks to the cross he lost his prey. And

anyone who worships God and prays that the cross may be his shield will never be vanquished by any demon: if he makes the sign of the cross over him, all malign spirits will flee, for they fear the cross so much, believe me, friend; and that's why the hermit was worshipping it. Now I've revealed to you the hermits' thoughts. I'll tell you now about the beasts who bayed inside their mother and then killed her and destroyed her and ate her flesh, and because of it went mad and killed each other instantly. Be patient, dear friend, if it takes me a while to reply. And if anyone wants to disagree with me, I'll prove here and now that what I say is right, by God I will. My friend, the beast signifies Holy Church, and I'll explain how. You know very well that people should behave in a holy manner in church; but as soon as the priest begins to sing mass, they start chattering about buying corn and oats, and paying what they owe in crops, and such a hubbub, such a din arises in the church that the priest cannot conduct the holy office or his service; and if the clerk asks them to be quiet they cry: "Sing on, sing on, sir priest! Hurry up and finish your service. We want to go and stuff ourselves with food!" Such people are not on God's side; they have no fear of their wicked deeds, and believe less in God than in their great fat bellies, yet they have no special right to live any better than a mendicant friar! Such people don't care two farthings about sermons and preaching. They are symbolised by the brood who bayed inside their mother and then killed her and devoured her, for any man who talks through the service is indeed devouring Holy Church. And when it comes to the Sabbath and the priest begins prayers and announces the feast-days, and pronounces the commandments on pain of excommunication, such people wouldn't give twopence for his commandments, but transgress them straight away. They don't care about excommunication and disdain the commandments; no matter what they're told they won't mend their ways. Instead they say to each other: "This priest's always going on! Damn anyone who follows what he preaches and stops seeking his own profit!" They turn their hearts from doing good: they are the brood who turn wild and kill each other in ignorance. I say that a man is truly dead if he doesn't believe the commandments of Holy Church and isn't afraid of doing evil. Dear friend, hear this: when God made Adam in the beginning, He forbade him the fruit of an apple tree, telling him not to eat it; and because he transgressed this rule he was cast out of Paradise, naked and poor, reduced to beggary; and he now had to die because of the bite of that apple, and was condemned to Hell because of the commandment he had broken. But God passed through death Himself to rescue him from torment. And so I say, to anyone who asks, that whoever ignores a commandment made in Holy Church and lives excommunicate is truly killing himself: for as long as he remains excommunicate he is as dead as Adam who bit the apple in

disobedience. I say they resemble the beast's offspring; so it seems to me. Now you've heard, dear friend, the truth and our sermon, and I command you to remember it well: if you abstain from sin you may win Paradise, and learn the truth about the Grail for which you're searching, and why the lance bleeds. I'm well aware that you're my nephew; and you had a little sister who lived, after your mother's death, without a brother's help or guidance, among strange people in a land where her friends could never find her; and she's of royal lineage, but the finest and wisest of her line have been lost in wars; many worthy men have been dishonoured and abased and brought low, having fallen into poverty.'

'That's true,' said Perceval, 'but I can tell you that my sister is now at the Castle of the Maidens, living with the girls and my lady holy Ysabel.'

Perceval's news delighted the Hermit King, who was very glad to hear about that good and holy lady, and gave thanks to the supreme King that she was still alive. His heart was stirred with joy and he was greatly comforted, for she was very old indeed: according to the king she was without doubt three hundred, and a good deal more, he thought; he was very glad that she was still alive, for he had never met a finer lady or such a religious soul. She often saw many legions of angels winging softly towards the house of the Fisher King, holding the Holy Grail, which contained the host with which they sustained the life of the father of that king whom Perceval had chanced to find fishing in the little boat.†

The servants made a couch of fresh grass and new hay, and the Hermit King lay down upon it fully dressed, for he had no quilt. And each of the hermits lay propped against this couch to rest. Then the servants went to attend to Perceval, and made him a bed which offered little comfort. They made another for the girl, but I can assure you she did not rest or sleep: she dearly longed to have Perceval for a lover, and to have a son by him, for then she could boast and spread it abroad that she had had pleasure with the boldest knight ever born of a woman. She lay awake all night thinking about it.

When night had passed and they saw day break, the hermits did not delay but went straight to a little chapel, most beautiful and neat, where they said their hours. Then the Hermit King donned his vestments again and sang the holy mass. And Perceval listened attentively, with all his heart, as did the girl who had brought his shield. And when the hermit, who had once been king of a great land, had sung the mass, Perceval asked for his equipment and armed, a boy kneeling down to help him. The girl held before him the shield with its handsome straps, for no-one in the court would go

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\* Above, page 236.

† Above, page 35.

near the shield while they remembered the inscription upon it, which told of the shield's powers and the relic it contained. Perceval had never had such a shield or one so fine as that: now he feared neither weapon nor fire, for they could never harm him. He did not delay but mounted and hung it at his neck; then he took his leave of the hermits and departed at once. And the girl rode off another way, commending him to God. Perceval did not ask her where she had got the shield, and this was a grave mistake, for he could never afterwards find out and it was to cause him a great deal of toil. When Perceval had ridden the length of a pebble's throw he suddenly thought:

'By Saint Peter, I'm a fool! I didn't ask where the shield I've won came from, or who sent it to me.'

And he looked along the path that the girl had taken, wanting to ask her about the shield, but saw no sign of her: he spurred back along the path, but could not find her. He thought it a true marvel that she was not to be found; he hunted for her for a long while, but he could find neither scent nor track. He decided she had been whisked off by a fairy or a phantom, and he swore by the noble Saint Cosmo that he would keep going and see if he could find some news of her sooner or later. But he could hunt for a long while without catching her, for he had lost this quarry. And then he remembered the knights he had seen who were burnt,\* and said:

'What a simpleton I am, not mentioning it to the Hermit King. He would have explained that to me just as he did about the beasts. But I'm so thick and uncouth that I can't take in anything: my heart isn't soft enough to learn any good advice! Anyone who tries to shake good sense into a fool is mad.'

Then he began to cross himself at this wonder: he had seen the girl sure enough, but now there was no sign of her, yet he could see for three and a half leagues in all directions.

**D**eep in thought, he descended a valley and passed into a wasteland, where he met a lady lamenting bitterly. She was driving a cart covered with a cloth of gold, and was wearing her shirt and clothes inside-out. She was furiously scolding and goading the horses that pulled the cart, for she was seeking vengeance for her sweetheart. She had spent two and a half months travelling like this. It seemed as if her love, who had been placed in the cart, had been burnt at the stake, for his feet, legs, thighs and belly were all burnt; and the fire had attacked and burnt him above the waist, as well: he was black and charred all over. The lady had taken the knight to every relative he had, but her grief continued, for none of them dared try to avenge him, knowing they would not succeed. The girl was riding backwards,

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\* Above, page 262.

facing the cart, and had sworn that she would eat no meat anywhere, nor wear her clothes properly, nor drink any wine until she had revenge upon the one who feared and dreaded nobody and had killed her love, who was now blacker than a Moor, for everywhere the fire had reached it had charred and blackened him. The girl was on the shafts of the cart, lashing the horses with a whip. Perceval rode up to her and greeted her most courteously in the name of God who was crucified. The girl jumped in surprise, for she had not seen him coming, and turned round when she heard his voice. But when she saw the shield, all the suffering she had endured troubled her no longer.

‘Oh, Holy Mary!’ she cried. ‘I’ve found what I’ve been seeking so long, for this man will conquer the devil, the demon, who killed my love. Yes, he will vanquish him! The shield I see hanging at his neck is proof of it, for any man who dared to take it as he has done instantly lost his head; but this knight is worthy of owning it.’

Perceval, eager to know what the girl was up to, quickly asked her why she was dressed like that. She turned towards him and kindly told him the whole story from beginning to end: how the Knight of the Dragon, brother of King Maragon, had had a city built in the isles of the sea, splendidly fortified with towers and walls, and had filled it with people who would not believe in God and had no fear of doing evil. And the lord devoted himself to wickedness and to the Devil, who endowed him in return with such power that no-one could withstand him in battle or combat.

‘The Devil brought him a terrible and ghastly shield, blacker than a berry; and a dragon’s head is fixed in the shield by such devilish art that it burns and engulfs in flame anyone who fights him. Any man who challenges him is heading for a terrible death, for the dragon’s head burns him and sets him ablaze by the Devil’s power. He killed my dear sweetheart with his burning, blazing shield. He’s been laying siege for some time now to the peak of Montesclaire.\* No-one dares go out to meet him; there are three hundred and ten knights at the castle, but none of them is brave enough to challenge him. The evil tyrant, with a huge army, is besieging the lady within because he wants to have her for his wife. But she – the Lady of the Circle of Gold, the daughter of King Esclador – swears she would sooner kill herself: she’ll never spend a night with him. My love went to fight him for her sake, but the tyrant killed him. Love and pity for my sweetheart torment me, and I’ve vowed that for as long as my suffering lasts I’ll not wear my clothes properly or other than they are now; instead I shall be as I am, and stay facing the cart, and go from court to court to show my love’s body until I can find the one who’ll avenge him, killed horribly as he was by that wild

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\* Gawain vowed to raise the siege of the girl at Montesclaire in Chrétien – above, page 55 – and repeated the vow earlier in Gerbert – above, page 237.

demon. But you give me great comfort with the shield that hangs at your neck. You don't know, do you, who brought it or where it's from?

'I never thought,' he replied, 'to ask or enquire; but truly, I'd have gone in search of her at once, if I hadn't had another goal for which I must toil. But I'm amazed by your story about the knight who's so full of cruelty and carries the shield with the dragon. By the soul of Uterpandragon, the father of King Arthur, I shall go and try my strength against him, whatever may befall me. God grant that I may return in joy, that I may avenge your love and make the knight raise his siege of the lady! No-one who believes in God should fear a man who is full of malice and neither loves God nor believes in Him and is not afraid of doing evil. I won't stop until I've found him and tested my strength against him.'

'And I'll go with you, sir,' she said, 'and see which of you is victorious, and may God's aid be with you! Let's go, for I know the way, and it's only right that I should guide you along the best path. We'll reach the nunnery of Saint Domin today, though I think it'll be mid-afternoon before we get there. The people there are deeply alarmed, and I'll tell you why. They used to get their revenue and food from the mountain of Montesclaire, but the knight whom the Devil has intoxicated, who wants no-one to live in happiness, now lets them take nothing for the abbess to eat and is driving them mad with hunger: it's a grave and grievous pity. They eat roots and crab-apples, and they've precious few of those.'

'It's some time,' said Perceval, 'since I've found anywhere to lodge in comfort. Let's go now, and may God guide us. I'll make the nuns' lot better than it has been of late, if I can; and the mountain of Montesclaire will be delivered, if it please God.'

With that Perceval fell silent – not that he was ever very talkative; and indeed, no knight should ever speak too much or be full of banter. The girl turned her cart about to guide Perceval on his way; but she had ridden with rather greater pleasure on many occasions.

They pressed on with their journey until they reached the nunnery, and when the blessed abbess saw them coming she rose and went happily to meet them. She found the cross a great reassurance, certain that good fortune had come her way when she saw it upon his shield; her heart, which had been so beset by worry, was filled with happiness, and her hunger and distress were all forgotten as soon as she beheld the cross. She hurried up to meet them and welcomed them sweetly and offered them lodging with the greatest kindness. Perceval was not slow in returning greetings to the abbess, whose face was haggard with hunger and poverty; but truly, if she had had the things she needed, she would have been beautiful and lovely. Perceval felt very sorry for her.

They rode into the courtyard without more ado, and all the nuns came running when they heard the news of their arrival. They welcomed the lady joyfully, for she had brought them instant hope of aid. They honoured Perceval highly; they had his horse stabled, and then disarmed him at once and dressed him as finely and as handsomely as they could. They were all shedding tears of pity at having no good supper to offer Perceval and the girl with the cart, but they had no bread or wine or meat and no way of getting any.

Perceval hung his shield on a beautiful pillar, and the girl took her cart, with her sweetheart inside it, to the chapel. Neither she nor Perceval had a bite to eat that night; and the horses made do with grass, for there were no oats to be had; and that was how they stayed till morning. And meanwhile the nuns all stayed awake in worship and in desperate prayer to God, that He might defend Perceval and the girl from harm.

First thing next morning Perceval saddled his horse, and the ladies, weeping, armed and equipped him splendidly; and the girl went running to her cart and made ready and turned the shafts towards the gate; then she prepared her horses, and covered her sweetheart with a cloth because he was blackened by the fire, and placed him in the handsome cart and then mounted one of the horses. Then she and Perceval took their leave of the abbess and the nuns and set off with all speed straight for the mountain of Montesclaire.

But thunder and rain and lightning fell all morning until six: it seemed as if the earth would surely crumble into an abyss with all the rain and lightning and thunderbolts. But the storm abated; and when he saw the weather clear Perceval looked to his right, and down in a valley, beneath a poplar, he saw four packhorses laden with provisions, that had been driven loose by the storm and tempest. And the men who were pursuing the horses said:

‘God be praised that we’ve escaped that perilous storm, so huge and mighty. And grant, God, that this summer we may be avenged upon the evil tyrant who abuses us and forces us to serve him. No matter what we do he never gives us cloaks or gowns; instead he strips and robs us of everything: corn, oats, meat, wine. May God, the truly divine, send us speedy revenge, for there’s no sense of measure or pity or humility in the tyrant: he’s so full of cruelty that he kills those who call upon God. Everyone is appealing to God for justice against him, that He may destroy his body, and that the tyrant may yet meet his master who’ll deliver the world from him; for no book could contain the evil vices of that man. Oh God, send him punishment for his shameful deeds!’

But before any of them mounted they sat down to eat breakfast, for



they knew they would have no dinner if they returned to the tyrant's army. A man should certainly not be praised if he is provided with food and fails to offer it to the one who has toiled to supply and to serve it. Perceval, who had spent the week travelling with little comfort, turned that way and rode swiftly towards them. They all stood up when they saw he was a knight, and Perceval asked them if they had any food they would like to sell.

'Sir,' they said, 'you're welcome to come and eat with us and have whatever you wish, provided that you then turn back. If you'll take our advice, dear sir, you won't go on; for if you do, and go beyond this mountain, you'll be killed by the one we would gladly see defeated; for the demon, the tyrant, who's intent on doing evil, burns every knight he attacks with a shield brought to him by the Devil. The Devil set a dragon's head in it, which flings out fire to burn and consume all who try to fight him. Its engulfing flame sears and burns them instantly. Such a man is to be loathed indeed.'

'True enough,' said Perceval, 'but nothing will stop me trying my strength against him. But I didn't eat yesterday or this morning or last night.'

'Here: dinner is ready at your command,' they replied, 'whatever the one it's intended for may say! It's wrong that we should have to pay him such revenue – but he forces us to do so.'

The girl with the cart came hurrying down, and Perceval went to meet her and took her in his outstretched arms and set her down from the cart. The men gave them bread and wine and fish and meat in abundance, and they sat down beneath the young poplar and ate and quelled their hunger. The lady, for certain, had nothing but bread and water, though there was a good deal more spread before them. And Perceval, too, ate and drank little, for a knight should not weigh himself down by over-eating when he's about to do combat, for it can greatly diminish his power. That's why Sir Perceval ate little; but his horse had a good amount of oats, and the horses that pulled the cart had plenty.

When they had eaten they made ready again and set off on their way, straight towards the mountain of Montesclaire. The girl, whose name was Claire, who was carrying her love in the cart, worried and feared and lamented for Perceval; and she instructed him to make the sign of the cross when he saw the Knight of the Dragon, for as soon as he approached him he would see fire and flame burst forth, the most scorching ever seen.

'But the cross will aid you against the searing fire, as your shield clearly testifies.'

'I know of no monk,' said Perceval, 'whom I would trust more than you. But enough, let's hurry, for I can't wait to see this man.'

So they hurried on and made their way to a mountain-top. There are

a good many uglier ones in the world, in Esture and in Ricordane.\* A great, wide river called the Gordane ran in the valley below, and on the other side of the river stood the castle of the Mountain of Montesclaïre, of which so many people spoke – and rightly so, for it was rich and beautiful indeed. It was no stingy miser who had that castle built! Anyone who has seen Coucy† could say that it was modelled on this one with its walls and its rich and mighty towers.

The Knight of the Dragon was lodged outside the main gate, so that no provisions could be carried in. He had besieged and hemmed them in for so long that they were all white and pale with hunger; but no-one could get rid of him: there were some three hundred vassals within who had suffered the siege for a long time and with great discomfort, but none of them dared arm and go and do battle with him, for he feared nobody, having such faith in the Devil that he had sworn and vowed that he would burn them all with the dragon unless the girl surrendered her body, her land and her people. He would not leave for any amount of gold or silver, but would capture them and burn them all with the fire that burst from the dragon's mouth.

The people of the castle had endured his siege for so long that they were dying of hunger, and they said that if they stayed there any longer they would starve to death. They had decided to surrender the castle the next day if no help arrived. This seemed a very short time to the girl, who was sure that help would come, for she was constantly expecting Gawain to come and keep the vow he had made long before.‡

'He would be a fine champion if he came,' she said. 'And if the one called Perceval, who has been seeking the Grail and the bleeding lance for so long, chanced to come this way, perhaps I would find help.'

But with that she suddenly ran to the windows of the hall, determined to fling herself to her death, not wanting to live longer, for then she would be free of the pain and torment she was suffering. She was about to hurl herself to the ground when her men, who loved her dearly, pulled her back. Then she turned her head and saw Perceval riding down the mountain, and the white shield with the red cross hanging at his neck, and she was amazed and said:

'God, dear heavenly Father, who can that knight be, coming down the mountain? And I can see a cart before him, most richly covered. It's driven by the girl who wears her clothes inside-out! Oh, Holy Mary!' she cried. 'Send me help soon! I can see that good Arthur of Britain's court has failed me: he has no knights powerful enough, not one, two, three or four,

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\* Possibly Asturias in North-West Spain, and the country between Clermont-Ferrand and Le Puy.

† Coucy-le-Château, near Compiègne.

‡ Above pages 55 and 237.

to dare to come and do battle with my besieger; but truly, I'd rather be killed than let him lay a hand on me. But I'm greatly heartened at seeing that knight riding down the mountain – the most handsome knight in arms in all the world, it seems to me.'

Perceval and the lady halted for a moment; and it was not long before Perceval looked ahead and saw, in a plain at the foot of the mountain-side, the army encamped all along the meadow, besieging the town, the castle and the great tower. They had launched many fierce attacks and assaults upon the people within, but had done little damage to the walls and towers and ditches. But there was no-one in the castle brave enough to pass through the gate and challenge the knight with the dragon's head on his shield, for all who did were burnt and vanquished instantly. Perceval gazed at the army in the plain, which was full of tents and lodges and huts made of branches gathered in the forest. And beyond the army he noticed a tree, fairer than any from here to Calabria, planted in the middle of the meadow and thick with branches. A huge bell was hanging on the tree: there are not four men in all of Scotland strong enough, if they tried to ring it, to move its tongue more than an inch. And as soon as the bell rang, the people in the castle knew for certain that there would be a battle outside their walls. The beautiful girl who drove the cart called Perceval to her and told him to go to the tree, and not to shrink from ringing the bell at once.

'Then you'll see the army rush to the alert and the Knight of the Dragon will come. The army will let the two of you join battle, and will do you no harm, I promise you, for he's made them all swear that any man who can defeat him will have nothing to fear from any of them.'

'By god, he's no traitor – in that respect at least. I commend you to God: I shall go at once.'

And with that he turned and left her, and galloped straight towards the tree; the girl raised her right hand and blessed him with the sign of the cross in the name of the heavenly King, and was left there in floods of tears.

Perceval rode swiftly down to the tree where the bell hung, and swore by everything most holy that he would try his strength and ring it if he could. So he prepared to ring the bell, and grasped the rope and pulled; and the bell rang so loudly that the whole castle resounded and the entire army leapt to the alert. He had rung the bell so fiercely that its pealing reached every plain and mountain and valley for more than three leagues all around. The girls and knights of the town heard the sound and climbed up to the walls without delay, as soon as they heard the bell; even the limping and the lame came and leaned along the walls, all finding a place to prop themselves; and the lady climbed the tower with her girls all around her. And the Knight

of the Dragon made ready, wondering indeed who the man could be with the courage and the strength to ring the bell so loudly and with such force.

‘It’ll be one of King Arthur’s knights, come here to prove his strength. But he’s about to die a foul death.’

He had a cloth spread inside his tent, and was armed without delay. They ran and laced on his shoes, of which the mail-rings were fine and costly; and then his strong, triple-ply mail breeches with fine belts of iron; and a boy fastened golden spurs above his shoes. He donned a hauberk over his padded tunic, badged with emblems of gold and cobalt. His hauberk was light and strong and tightly meshed, forged of iron that was purified more than five times over. Then he girded on his sword at once: it was sharper than a sickle and had harvested many heads. He kept swearing that the man must be mad to want to do battle with him, and that he would soon teach him what power lay in his shield. Burning with rage, his heart filled with fury, he mounted his horse and kept shouting threats at Perceval. He had a helmet, strong and tough and costly, quickly set upon his head: it was laced on over his mail hood and bascinet by four boys who feared him more than they loved him, and they whispered prayers to God that the faithless, evil tyrant who had abjured God might be defeated.

He was impatient at having delayed so long, and he slung his shield round his neck at once, black as any berry; and once he had done so, convinced that the devilish head would consume all foes in fire, he feared no-one any more than a cabbage-leaf! He did not care about the women or children left deserted by his killings; but he would soon have his just deserts if he did not utterly mend his ways, for he would have measureless, indescribable torment. A man who serves the Devil should indeed feel grief and fear, for in the end he gets what he deserves: everlasting Hell.

This knight took his lance with its piercing head, thick and stout and strong, and rode from the camp. The men of his army came after him, but did not follow closely; they drew up around the plain. With his heart full of rage he thrust in his spurs and cried terrible threats to Perceval. He was so cruel and full of witchery that he aimed to burn him instantly. But there is a great gap between thought and deed, and he might soon regret having ever met this adversary! He came charging at a gallop, and when Perceval saw him, and his shield blacker than the crudest ink, and the fire that scorched the meadow leaping from the dragon’s mouth, he sat firmly on his Aragonese charger and set his shield before him; and the demon in the dragon’s head, that hurled the fire and flame, saw the cross. The cross fills the Devil with fear, because Jesus Christ the King won the battle on the cross by which He broke into Hell and freed His friends who were suffering such great torments; and the demon in the shield, fearing the cross on which

Christ was placed, cried and bellowed like a bull. The people of the castle wrung their hands and tore their hair and wailed with fear for Perceval. But Perceval spurred his horse and charged at the Knight of the Dragon as fast as his mount could go – and it ran with the speed of a buck or stag. They could both be sure of a hard battle. The Knight of the Dragon blazed with eagerness when he saw Perceval, who had little fear of him, charging so furiously and at such speed. And as they closed together they both lowered and levelled their lances, aiming to strike each other with all their might with the sharp steel heads; but the foul and ghastly fire that leapt from the dragon's mouth burned the whole of Perceval's lance, even the iron head, for it was the fire of Hell which burns whatever it touches. And the knight with the dragon on his dark shield struck Perceval so furiously that his lance shattered into a dozen pieces; but it did not a farthing's worth of damage to Perceval's shield; and truly, the horses ran so straight and were charging at such a pace that they collided head to head. Now hear what great good fortune God bestowed upon Perceval. The horses crashed together head on and, so the book informs me, the dragon's fire burned and consumed their necks and heads, and they had both been handsome beasts; and the knights met with such force that they, too, almost clashed head to head, and their shields smashed together. Both the besieging army and the men of the castle were terrified; and when they saw the fire burst forth they were sure that Perceval and his horse had both been burnt. But he had not; and now listen to this marvel: the wood in the red cross, which came from the true cross on which God was crucified, protected him from the searing fire and he suffered no harm at all; and when the cross clashed with the demon it sparked a mighty tumult, for the cross's power made the demon leap out of the dragon – it had no strength against the cross and dared abide no longer. It went flying away in the form of a black crow, accompanied by such a thunderous din that Perceval was struck dumb, and the Knight of the Dragon likewise, and they lay like that for some while. The people of the castle were overjoyed at seeing the demon fly off in a crow's form; and the men of the Dragon Knight's army began to talk and said:

‘It's no fable that a man who serves the Devil is finally damned. Alas! what a wretched man it is who forgets the good of his soul for the sake of earthly pleasure. The man who covets earthly gain, and fails to cleanse himself by confession, and will not do penance and repent to God, has surely lost his body and his soul. But God is merciful when He sees a sinner abandon evil and run with all speed to embrace good for fear of losing God's honour; and when he goes to confession and joins his hands in prayer, then, if he does the penance required of him, he is remade. In all the world there is no heavier burden than sin is to bear; and anyone who fails to shed it will

perish from it in the end, unless the Holy Spirit takes care of him. Misdeeds will always be revealed. My lord, who has committed so much evil, can now clearly see, if he will, that the Devil has betrayed him: now the Devil's ways are plain.'

Then the Knight of the Dragon recovered his strength, and Perceval jumped up sooner still. They saw that their horses were both burnt and scorched, but the demon who had flung the fire so fiercely from the dragon's mouth was gone now, and there was no more fire or flame: Perceval rejoiced at this, but the Knight of the Dragon grieved. Neither of the two was slow to attack his adversary. You should have seen them clutch and draw their swords of steel! They struck each other so fearsomely that, when they found an opening, they drew blood and stained the grass which soon turned red. The Knight of the Dragon was astonished at failing to vanquish Perceval, but however much he struck at his shield he could not smash it through. He began to froth with rage, and such was his fury that he charged to seize Perceval with his bare hands. But Perceval was able to forestall him, for he had stout bones and strong nerves, and he seized him in a mighty grip; and they both grappled and tore at each other, so that no-one knew which of them was suffering less. Neither of them would relent or yield an inch; instead they fought one against the other, equal against equal, in such a way that neither could escape his foe: they were both so wary and in awe of the other's might that when one had a hold of his adversary he would not let him out of his grasp. They both stood firm and upright, and dealt each other such mighty blows that both of them were stunned. The people of the castle watched it all, and some were flat on the ground, praying to the King of Glory to grant strength and victory to their champion. The girl of the Circle of Gold was wringing her hands in dismay, and appealing to Holy Mary to beg Her dear son to save the knight who had joined battle for her:

'For truly, my mind is set: if he's killed in the combat, I shall throw myself from the tower!'

Such was the lady's inner turmoil. And the battling Perceval and the Knight of the Dragon struggled and strove and drove themselves and struck with their fists and swords alike to such a degree that they hewed the straps from their mail collars and slashed the laces from their helms, and were finally so exhausted that they collapsed on the ground. And ill luck befell Perceval, for as he fell his sword slipped from his hand, and the knight who was bent upon evil, and had done so much before, snatched it up and leapt back to his feet, clutching the naked swords, and advanced on Perceval. Perceval clambered up at once, but almost died of anguish when he saw his sword in the knight's grasp. He came at him boldly, raising his shield to cover himself, but the knight had little fear of him now, and began to show

it: he knew how to wield a sword, and dealt him such a blow in the side that he cut away a great chunk of flesh and the blood began to stream. But before he drew back Perceval grabbed hold of him, and in the winking of an eye he prised the steel sword from his grip and cried:

‘Hang on to yours, knight – I’ve got mine!’

The Knight of the Dragon, with his fierce, bold heart, replied: ‘True, but it’s cost you – take a look at your side: I can see blood pouring from it! I tell you, neither your white shield nor the cross will save you now!’

‘We’ll see who’ll come out on top today,’ said Perceval, and he leapt to the attack. The Knight of the Dragon did not shrink from him, but assailed him with his sword: they boldly threw themselves into battle and dealt each other cruel and mighty blows. They split open helmets, smashed rings from their hauberks, beat and pounded, struck and hammered. The Knight of the Dragon was amazed that he could do no damage to the shield with the red cross, while Perceval felt even stronger and more agile than at the start. Then the Dragon Knight spoke out fiercely, saying:

‘Knight, if it weren’t for your shield you’d have been beaten long ago! You don’t work by chivalry but by enchantment: you must do, to have vanquished the one who threw fire from my shield – and if you weren’t enchanted you’d never have survived against me! But listen: if you’re brave enough to lay down your shield, I promise you in all truthfulness that I’ll lay down mine. And I tell you this: if you dare to do so, you’ll be praised a hundred times more if you can vanquish me. Since I made the challenge, I’ll lay mine down first.’

‘I’ll gladly do so, right away,’ said Perceval. And they both took their shields and laid them down in the middle of the field. Each clutched his sword of tempered steel, bright and sharp, and advanced upon the other; and they aimed and dealt the most awesome blows: I don’t believe the wounds they exchanged would ever heal. Each knight was almost prostrate with despair at failing to vanquish his opponent: they had made it very clear that there was no love between them! Their sword-fight went on so long that even the stronger weakened, and the flesh of each was black and blue from the blows they had exchanged. But Perceval, naked sword in hand, launched himself at his foe once more, and with a backward cut he caught the knight in the side so hard that he slashed the mail rings from his hauberk – it wasn’t worth a farthing against that sword – and sliced so deeply into his flesh that his bowels spilled out. But the Knight of the Dragon was hard and strong, and when he felt the blow he summoned all his strength: before Perceval killed him he would sell his life very dearly if he could! He flung down his sword of steel, determined to win or lose all, and ran and seized Perceval round the waist in an agonising hold. Perceval likewise gripped the knight as he

drew him tight into his grasp; but the knight did not weaken his hold – his strength was mighty indeed. They both strove desperately for the honour of victory. Then suddenly a girl came galloping up on a piebald palfrey, spurring forward with all speed; but she would not address the knights as they fought and struck each other with their fists; she dismounted, took Perceval's shield, and then mounted again at once. And when Perceval, intent upon his battle, saw that she had hung his shield at her neck and was carrying it off, he was deeply distressed. The Knight of the Dragon was in such a state that his back was bent double, and he could not help it, for his wound was giving him terrible pain, splitting open and bleeding constantly. And Perceval kept pounding him with his fists until he battered him to the ground and laid him flat. Then Perceval reached out and took up his sword of steel again; he was burning with rage and anguish at the theft of his shield, not knowing who the girl was who had taken it: he was beside himself with fury. He said to the knight:

'Beg for mercy.'

But the knight replied: 'Not from you. I know you've wounded me mortally. Even if you have mercy on me I'll die. What a fool I was to do homage to the Devil, who has sent me to my downfall here; I can see now that the Devil betrayed me: now I must submit to death.'

'But if you could be healed,' said Perceval, 'would you believe in God and His great power?'

'Yes,' said the knight, 'but it's impossible. There's no doctor in all the world good enough to heal my wound.'

'What reward would you give,' asked Perceval, 'to the man who cured you and healed your ill?'

And he replied: 'All my kingdom.'

Then Perceval said to him: 'By my soul, if you'll trust in my advice, before you see the sun go down you'll be restored to happiness and health and healed of all infirmity.'

'Go on, then, sir,' said the knight, 'for I desire nothing so much as to have my health again.'

'You'll have it indeed,' said Perceval, 'if you do as I say.'

'I will, without contradiction.'

'Listen, friend,' said Perceval. 'Don't delay, but call for the priest, and confess and cleanse yourself of the wrongs you've done in this world, and be repentant; for your soul is a hundred thousand times more wounded than your body! If your body had died now without repentance, all penitence thereafter would have been in vain. But trust to holy confession, and let your heart be repentant and contrite; and I tell you, in all truthfulness, that your soul will then be saved, which will otherwise be damned and will perish with



your body at the judgement, and will suffer the agonising torment of Hell – and may God defend us all from that. My good, dear friend, make amends now and beg God for mercy and forgiveness, and vow never to sin again. Do you know what you'll have in return? Joy and health in Paradise and everlasting happiness; nothing will ever do you harm. There is no joy in this world, however great, which does not fade and fail. This world is a battle; no-one living in it is at rest. Covetousness and violence strive constantly to take hold of clerks and knights. The clerks go to Paris to learn books of law and ordinances until they're wise and judicious; then they become lawyers and uphold cases for money: then they truly sell their souls, which will send them all to Hell. Such men are ill-fated indeed! And the magistrates, the men of power, plunder and pillage the people till they've no gold or silver left. Knights are becoming lawyers, too, coming and going to law-suits every day. When a worthy man, with wealth worth grabbing, is involved in a case, everyone in the court seduces him, happily offering their support for money. Then, if he defends himself well in court and wins the case, they promptly expose him, making him repeat his promises to them, thus putting him in transgression of the law. So he's charged on his own testimony, and fined heavily. A knight does himself little good by involving himself in a law-suit against another.\* Now I've told you the tribulations men cause each other; and such men are in danger of boiling in the great fire of Hell. And no man will be a litigant there! There they'll have justice for their wrongs! But you can have health in soul and body now, for God who is merciful will heal you of the great wound which gravely troubles your soul, so grievously hurt by sin: you'll be saved from it completely if you're truly repentant and confess sincerely. Confession is right and holy when it's not concealed or feigned. Think upon your sins for God's sake; true confession is a doctor that saves you, without cauterizing fire or iron, from the eternally burning wounds of Hell. Cling firmly now to good, and heal your soul of the wound in your side.'

The Knight of the Dragon clearly saw that Perceval was not deceiving him but advising him for the best.

'Come then!' he cried to Perceval. 'Summon the priest to me at once, for he must come and help me as you've said. I'm going to die of the wound in my side – it's inevitable.'

Perceval sent a knight from the army to fetch a priest from the castle, and he came at once. The Knight of the Dragon, pondering deeply on his sins, was sitting with the priest beside him, and began at once to make

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\* This sudden digression about legal wrangling, with its rather dubious relevance here, smacks of a matter of personal significance to Gerbert (or the redactor) or his patron or certain members of a known audience.

confession, and he wept and lamented; he feared for his soul most terribly, and wept bitterly for his sins. He sighed from the heart and wrung his hands and gazed towards heaven. There is no-one in the world so hard-hearted that he would not have felt pity at seeing him. The priest did not delay; when the knight had confessed every sin he could think of, he absolved him and gave him good instruction; and this new Knight of God crossed himself over and over and lay down facing the East, and died praying to God; the soul departed, the body stretched out.

Perceval delayed no longer but summoned the men of the knight's army, who came and quickly disarmed him and wrapped him in a shroud. They were overjoyed that he had confessed his misdeeds. And all the people of the castle came down together to meet Perceval, and they brought him a horse, handsome and great and strong and swift, which had cost more than a hundred pounds; and it had a rich bridle and a fine saddle. Every lady and girl in the castle came to meet him and gave him a most noble welcome. The Girl of the Circle of Gold displayed such joy as has never since been seen. She wiped her eyes with her tunic, for she was weeping with joy and pity; more than a hundred times she blessed the hour that Perceval had come to her land, for he had restored her to happiness.

'You have saved me from danger, for the Knight of the Dragon, now dead, would have cast me into torment. I can never reward you or thank you enough, but if you wish you can take my body, my land and my wealth; everything is freely yours for you have well deserved it. But by God and Saint David, send us something to eat!'

Perceval heard her and sent for the lords of the army at once. They let him demand whatever he wished and would deny him nothing, for their lord had made them swear and vow faithfully that any man who could vanquish him would have their instant obedience to his bidding and command. Perceval had a proclamation cried throughout the army that all the food they had in their possession was to be taken to the castle. No loaf or cake or cask or barrel or cow or sheep or pig remained; everything was carried to the castle, so that the great and common folk alike had enough and to spare: now they were rich and opulent! The men of the army took their lord, who had wronged so many people, and made him a strong and sturdy litter from two poles, and laid him in it, wrapped in a costly woven cloth. And because he had confessed they honoured him and covered his body richly in a sumptuous cloth, most rich and rare. Then he was lifted on to two horses, and Perceval commanded them to take him back to their country and to bury him with honour. They departed, carrying their lord with them, while the people of the castle celebrated and rejoiced for Perceval.

Perceval mounted the horse they had given him, and without

more ado he went to take his leave of the lady, who thought she would be consumed by grief when she heard that he meant to go; she began to address him, saying:

‘Stay, dear sir, for I’ll have you honoured here as highly as I can.’

‘No, truly, young lady, I’m not going to enter your castle: I’m going straight after the girl who carried off my shield. I shan’t stay anywhere for two days together until I’ve recovered it or found news of why she took it – if God keeps me from harm and sickness and captivity.’

Then he took his leave and set off; but he had not gone far, I think, before he met a beautiful and most lovely girl. She left her horse standing quietly and knelt before Perceval in the middle of the path, and said:

‘Gentle sir, may God go with you. You have taken revenge for me upon the sworn enemy who killed my love who lies in the cart blackened by fire and covered with the cloth of gold. I had my clothes on inside-out, but now I’m wearing them properly, for thanks to you my vow is fulfilled. I shall have my love buried at the beautiful abbey of Saint Souplis in the castle of the Girl of the Circle of Gold. Wherever I retreat to then – be it to some wood or to some other wild place – I’ll build a hermitage and pray for my love, and for myself at the same time; but especially for you, that God by His commandment may grant you honour and joy, and guide you to where you may find what you desire.’

‘May He grant me that indeed, by His pleasure,’ said Perceval. ‘Stand up now, girl, by the faith you owe God, for no knight should let a girl kneel for long like that. May God guide you to such prayer as may bring salvation for your soul. But tell me now, in God’s name, if you saw a lady pass this way with a shield: it’s caused me a lot of annoyance, for I don’t know which way she went.’

‘She’s heading that way, sir,’ she replied, ‘towards that great forest.’

At that Perceval set off without delay, commending her to God. He asked her nothing more, but rode straight on, his mind set on following the girl who had carried off his shield.

#### (SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 10154–14078)

*The girl with the cart buries her sweetheart at the abbey, and then retires to a hermitage in a wild wood to live a life of penitence for his sake.*

*Perceval rides on for a week without finding the girl who had taken his shield. Then he takes lodging at an abbey deep in a valley in the great forest. In the morning he goes to the chapel to hear mass, but he finds no door open and*

*has to peer through a grille. Inside the chapel he can see a bed covered with a white silken cloth, and in it a man is lying. But when the priest, who is wearing a mitre and is attended by an angel, comes to the consecration of the host, the man in the bed rises, with a crown on his head but naked down to the waist and wounded all over his head and body. The priest gives the man the host and takes his crown and sets it upon the altar; the man lies down in the bed again and the priest disappears.*

*Perceval returns to the hall of the abbey and asks a monk the significance of what he has seen. The monk tells him how forty years after Christ's death, the land of the heathen king Evalac of Sarras had been ravaged by Tholomé, a king of Syria. Joseph of Barismachie [Arimathea] had then come to Evalac and told him that if he would accept the Christian faith he could defeat Tholomé. Evalac agreed, and promptly vanquished his enemy, and changed his name to Mordrain when he was baptised. Not long after, Joseph had come to Britain with about sixty holy people, including two ladies, one of whom was named Philosophine,\* who had brought 'a trencher brighter than the moon, and a lance that bled constantly'. And Joseph himself had brought 'the most beautiful vessel ever seen'. He had set about converting all the people of the land, until a wicked king named Crudel heard of it and arrested Joseph and imprisoned him and his followers for forty days without food or drink. But they had come to no harm at all, because Joseph had in his possession the Holy Grail, which provided them with everything they needed. After forty days King Mordrain heard of their imprisonment, and he sailed with a great fleet and ravaged King Crudel's land; then the two kings met in battle, and Mordrain killed Crudel and rescued Joseph, but was badly wounded in doing so, though he felt no pain from his wounds at all and his armour was quite untouched. The next morning Joseph had shown King Mordrain the Grail, and the king had tried to go up and gaze into it to see the great wonders; but an angel with a fiery sword had descended from the skies and a voice had cried out, telling him that he had done wrong, and that his wounds would never heal all the days of his life, and he would never die, until 'the one comes who will be called a true knight and will be so loved by Jesus Christ that he will be free of all sin and truly confessed; then you will be relieved of your burden and will die in his arms. Until then you will lie in this bed beneath these sheets'. The monk tells Perceval that King Mordrain had been there in the chapel, lying in the bed with his wounds still fresh, for three hundred years. Perceval is desperate to enter the chapel and heal the king, but he can find no window or door that will let him through. So he sets off once more to seek his shield, the lance and the Grail, and prays that he might find a way to heal King Mordrain.*

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\* Perceval's mother, according to the lady of the Castle of the Maidens: above, page 235.

*He comes out of the forest and sees a great, rich city, and there is a castle at its entrance with shields hung at every window and battlement. The lady of the castle gives him lodging, and just after he has been handsomely dressed in the hall, Perceval notices a magnificent ivory box, bound with gold and silver bands and surrounded by four golden candlesticks. Perceval assumes there must be some holy relics inside, but the lady tells him that no-one has ever been able to open it to discover what it contains. It had been brought to the castle ten years before in a barge pulled by a swan, and there was a letter on the box saying that it could be unlocked only by the finest knight alive, and that the lady's husband and his three brothers would be both happy and sad when they knew what it contained. She also tells Perceval that Sir Gawain had been imprisoned at the castle the day before, after his failure to open the box.*

*The lady's husband, Leander, and his three brothers – Evander, Enardus and Meliadas – now arrive, and without any greeting or word of welcome Leander orders Perceval to try and open the box. Perceval promptly succeeds, and they all rush forward and look inside. In the box lies a dead knight, holding a letter in his right hand which says that the one who opened the box was the knight's killer. They lift the shroud, and to their horror they recognise the dead knight as their father: and he has a javelin wound right through his eye. The brothers faint, and when they come round they are determined to kill Perceval. He explains to them how he had killed him in a misunderstanding\* after the knight had refused to give him his arms, and assures him that the knight had struck him first. And Perceval grabs an axe from the wall and seizes Leander's little son to use him as a shield, holding him in front of him with his left arm. So Leander has to agree to return Perceval's arms and allow him to do battle with him and his three brothers one by one; and he says that if Perceval can defeat all four of them, he will release all the prisoners held at the castle.*

*The battle with Leander is long and arduous, lasting until nightfall; then Perceval brings Leander down right at the feet of his wife, and at her request a truce is declared until the next day. And during the night the brothers agree that if Perceval can defeat Leander, then they will all be beaten, for Perceval is such a fine knight that they could never endure against him.*

*But there are four other brothers at the castle, hated by Leander because it was they who had originally sent his father on the rash and fatal mission to claim all King Arthur's land;† and they are treacherous, 'worse than Guenelon',‡ and plan to murder Perceval in his sleep that night. But a minstrel who has sung for Perceval as he went to bed alerts him to the danger, and Perceval is armed*

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\* He had thought that the knight's arms had been granted to him by King Arthur: above, page 14.

† See above, page 12.

‡ Ganelon, the traitor in *The Song of Roland*.

*and ready when the traitors break into his chamber. The minstrel fights along with Perceval, but his weapon breaks and one of the attackers cuts off his arm. Perceval kills that attacker, but four retainers arrive to support the remaining three. The noise of the battle wakes the lady of the castle, and she runs to tell Leander what has happened; Leander and his brothers are horrified, knowing it would be a great dishonour if their guest were murdered, and they rush to Perceval's defence. When he first sees them burst in, Perceval is sure they have come to help kill him, but to his surprise they turn on the traitors and catch and bind them.*

*Early in the morning the dead minstrel who had saved Perceval's life is buried with great honour,\* and then, in spite of the lady's plea that they now pardon Perceval for their father's death, Leander challenges him to do battle again. Perceval finally defeats him, and Leander is willing to grant Perceval forgiveness; and the other brothers, rather than have Perceval kill Leander, agree to forego their battles and to forgive Perceval.*

*Sir Gawain and the other prisoners at the castle are now released, and Gawain greets Perceval with joy. While they all dine together, Gawain says he is going to raise the siege of the girl of Montesclaire, and Leander tells him that the girl has already been saved and the Knight of the Dragon killed. Perceval blushes, but for fear of appearing boastful he does not reveal that it was he who had rescued the girl. After they have eaten, Perceval and Gawain set off together, and at the edge of a forest, where three paths separate, Gawain takes the road to Montesclaire, but Perceval takes the path to the right, which Leander tells him is most perilous: no man has ever taken it and returned safely.*

*The story now follows Gawain, who rides on and comes to a pavilion by a ford. He is welcomed by a lady whose beauty he promptly flatters, and she, equally promptly, offers him her love provided he will sleep naked beside her all night and wait until the morning before having his way with her. Gawain is filled with desire. And when he tells her his name she says that she had never wanted anyone so much; but, says Gerbert, 'she thought quite the opposite, for she would bring Gawain to his death if she could; that was her only desire'. He had killed one of her brothers, and as she leads the much-roused Gawain to her bed, she has a knife concealed there. 'She had killed', says Gerbert, 'fully twenty knights in this way ... but once she had killed Gawain the pavilion would be taken down forever'. Just as the lady is about to join him in the bed, Gawain suddenly remembers to cross himself; and as he does so he feels the knife hidden in the bed; he conceals it, and as the lady lies beside him she gropes for her weapon in vain. Then Gawain forces her beneath him and 'like it or not, she had to endure Sir Gawain's sport'. She is beside herself with grief, but suddenly her two*

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\* Much to Gerbert's approval! 'God who made the earth and sea', he adds, 'grant honour to those who honour minstrels!'

*young cousins burst into the tent, armed and ready to kill Gawain to avenge the lady's brother, but Gawain kills one with the knife and snatches up his sword and wounds the other, who flees. The lady now wants Gawain's love, and he lies down beside her again, all ill-will forgotten.*

*Meanwhile the wounded cousin races into the forest to summon the help of the lady's two brothers, and they set out to kill him. And Gawain, now asleep with the girl, dreams of being attacked by two lions, and wakes up with a start. He arms at once and mounts his horse Gringalet, just as the brothers ride up. The lady begs them not to kill Gawain, for he has promised to marry her, and Gawain says he will serve three years 'outré mer' for the soul of their brother; but they charge, and Gawain kills one and cuts off the arm of the other, who flees in horror; and as he flees he meets twenty knights sent by their father to take revenge on Gawain. Gawain sees them coming, and kills the first and fells a second, then a third; and outriding his pursuers he makes off towards the forest, leaving the lady distraught at having lost him.*

*He rides on until he comes to a mighty castle. He is welcomed there, but it is the custom of the castle that any knight who takes lodging has to tell what adventures have befallen him that day. And when Gawain relates this, the lord of the castle, Urpin, is filled with rage: it was his daughter, his sons and his nephews who had been involved in the events at the pavilion. At that moment the dead bodies of the cousins and brothers are brought to the castle, and Urpin is determined to kill Gawain. But the lady at the tent, who has arrived at the same time, tells her father it would be shameful to kill him on the spot, while he is an unarmed guest, and that he should be handed over to her as a prisoner; and she cleverly feigns hatred and ill-treatment of Gawain, pulling at his hair, pretending she will give him a terrible time.*

*So she takes him to her apartments while her father buries the dead, and she and Gawain lie together once more and pass the night in pleasure.*

*Next morning Urpin and his sons prepare to kill Gawain. But the lady invents a plan: she tells Gawain to seize her and to threaten to kill her when her father and brothers attack him. Her maids join in with the act, and Gawain's attackers are convinced. So Urpin lets him leave the castle, on condition that he waits in the forest to do combat with him to the death. Battle accordingly begins, and Urpin wounds Gawain in the side; but Gawain returns a terrible sword-blow to Urpin's head, covering his face with blood, and finally overcomes him. But Urpin refuses to ask for mercy, and Gawain is about to kill him, most reluctantly, when the lady, whose name is Bloiesine, intervenes, begging him to have mercy on her father. Gawain is only too glad to do so. Then he gives Bloiesine one last kiss and takes his leave of her at once; and he tells her to go to*

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\* 'Across the sea' – i.e. on crusade. Gawain observes that 'a man is well avenged upon his enemy if he sends him "outré mer": it is a most perilous journey'.



*the court of his uncle King Arthur, where he would see that she was honoured and served, and he would be her sweetheart all his life.*

*Gawain rides on, and lodges that night with little comfort at the hermitage of the girl who had pulled the cart and worn her clothes inside-out. She tells him of Perceval's conquest of the Knight of the Dragon, and Gawain is delighted by the news. He realises that there is no longer any point in going to Montesclaire now that the great knight Perceval has accomplished the rescue of the girl.*

*He sets off once again, and meets his uncle King Arthur with a huge company of knights and ladies all out in search of him, alarmed by the news of his imprisonment. They are reunited joyfully, and Gawain tells how he was released from prison by Perceval, and how Perceval had been reconciled with Leander, the son of the red knight whom he had killed with his javelin such a long time before. The story now returns to Perceval.*

Now the story briefly says that, from the day when Perceval had left Gawain, after inviting him to choose between the paths, he had never rested in his search for the Grail, to ask and enquire where it came from and what was done with it, and to find out about the lance he had seen which constantly shed drops of blood from its white head. He had already seen it twice, but had still not learned the truth about it or found out its significance; but he was assured that if he could find it once again he would know the truth.

He journeyed on all that week, and encountered and survived many fearsome adventures, until he came to a hermitage at the edge of the forest. The hermit saw him coming immediately and rose, and Perceval rode up to him and greeted him with kindly words, and the hermit returned his greeting pleasantly at once.

'If it's no trouble, good sir,' said Perceval, 'tell me, for the love of God, where I may find lodging.'

'By God the spirit, sir, I know of no house or castle ahead where anyone could live: they're all ruined and all the people have fled: they would rather have been buried than have stayed in these parts, for they couldn't bear the great afflictions that befell all who took this path. I've never seen or heard of anyone who took it and returned, and I've been in this retreat for a hundred years and more. But please, be so kind as to stay and take lodging here, good sir; and in the morning I'd strongly advise you to turn back: it's the best thing you could do.'

'I wouldn't turn back for anything,' said Perceval.

When the hermit heard this he wept for pity. He led Perceval into his house and helped him to dismount and disarm, and dressed him in a



surcoat of white cloth lined with the fleece of black lambs. Then he made the fire, and unbridled Perceval's horse and gave him some hay, and some barley that he had been about to boil and eat for his own meal. That day the hermit had hunted a young goat that lived in the wood, and had shot it with an arrow, and tracked it down until he caught it and skinned it; now he cooked it by boiling and roasting. They sat down as soon as it was ready; they had plenty of meat but little bread. The hermit said:

'Dear sir, eat what you have and drink the water, for I've no ale or wine. I tell you, it's more than a year since I had any meat in my possession, and there's no pepper or garlic sauce! But at least you've the meat, so eat your fill, and take what you like from the flanks and the ribs and the loin and the side. And then, if my prayer has power and your heart will agree, I'd beg you to turn back.'

But Perceval replied: 'I won't hear of turning back – not from you or anyone else.'

'Then may God grant you a joyful outcome!' said the hermit. 'Since I see you're determined to carry on, I'll say no more.'

After supper the hermit made him a bed at once, bedding him as comfortably as he could on ferns and fresh grass: he had no hay to put on it, and no blanket or pillow to offer the knight as he would have liked to do. Perceval went straight to sleep, having toiled hard that day.

In the morning he made ready while the hermit, without delay, prepared to sing the mass of the Holy Spirit, praying to God to aid his guest that day and to keep him from dishonour. But before Perceval mounted or armed, he decided he would like to make confession. So when the hermit had sung, and Perceval had heard, the sincere and complete service of God, he politely called the hermit; he sat down at his feet, dejected and sorrowful and pensive, and sighed from the depths of his heart; then he burst into a stream of tears as he remembered his sins which kept him from accord with God. Great joy sprang in the hermit's heart when he saw him so repentant.

'Friend, in the name of penitence, I bid you tell of your sins and conceal none, and you will then be free of your debt to God, have no fear. You'll unload yourself of a great burden if you make true confession. And you may be sure of this: you can hide nothing from God. If by chance you came to receive seven mortal wounds, dear friend, and were healed of six but left the seventh untended and unhealed, you would surely die. Likewise, dear friend, a mortal sin concealed at confession and stored away in your heart will drag you to the death of Hell, and no amount of charitable deeds done for your soul would rescue you thereafter. For the love of God, don't, out of shame, shrink from confessing your sins. When our Lord God sees a soul in distress and in sorrow for his sins, and sweating with shame at the moment of

confessing, God, our Lord, wipes his heart clean and removes the sins with which he's been soiled and erases all his misdeeds. Shame is the penitence that greatly helps to lighten the soul; that is plain to see. But don't be like the fox with his cunning heart, deceitful and seductive. Without a word of a lie, he's red, but has a white throat, and I'll show you the resemblance between the fox and the flatterer: as soon as a man begins to flatter, one should cease to trust him, for he'll bite and stab you in the back while his oily words flatter from the front: but words are all they are. Flatterers, with their pretty speech, often make people think their words are true; but when it comes to acting upon them, they're quite empty. The words in their mouths are white enough, but the goodness doesn't go as deep as their hearts – they're empty, full only of treachery. Such people indeed resemble the fox with his white throat. Such is the nature of flatterers that they lie to deceive people, but they can't be recognised by their words, which are white. Yes, they deceive men; and I tell you, they often give false promises, and with ease. Truly, you should have little trust in a man who breaks a pledge. I promise you this: a man who won't keep his word, and lies quite freely and never stops, will never be faithful to anyone; a man who won't keep faith or stop lying will show men little fidelity. Don't you stoop to such ways, for they ill become a knight: in the order of chivalry there should be no deceit either in promises or for reward. But one often sees a knight, under solemn vow, going against justice through covetousness, acting unjustly for some reward. The truth is, he should never wear a sword again. No knight should ever fail to do all in his power to act justly; and where he knows the right to lie, he should advance it and not let it be swept aside, for that would be a very great wrong: a knight is made to do right, and may God the true Father grant that all knights live correctly; and may you do so, my good dear friend, so that you may see God face to face in His great glory at the judgement.'

Then he gave him sweet absolution, and bade him do good, and blessed him with his right hand.

When Perceval had confessed all the sins he could think of, the hermit quickly brought him some of the goat-meat, for he had cooked plenty the evening before and there was still some left – but no wine or mead – and Perceval sat down at once and began to eat. He ate as much as he liked, and drank cold water from a mug. When he had eaten he rose and went to harness his horse, having no fear of hunger that day, and saddled and bridled him and then called for his arms, and the hermit helped him to put them on. When he was armed he took his leave and set off; and the hermit was left there weeping and sighing deeply for him, and praying to God to keep him, by His power, from harm and loss. Unless God worked an outright miracle for Perceval he would never return, or see the Grail or the lance with the

bleeding head for which he had suffered so much toil and pain and hardship. But it was useless waiting for him to turn back: only the true God could send him back – He has the power to guide men's steps. Perceval would not turn back, whatever he might hear or see.

He rode on along a narrow path, thick with thorns and brambles that hurt him terribly; but he endured it all, and pressed on all day until it was nearly three o'clock, when he passed across a great mountain. Then he heard a foul and hideous cry, and afterwards two more, as ghastly as the first. The one who had uttered them was always bent on evil, and I tell you truly, that was his one thought now. Perceval rode straight towards the cries he had heard; but when he reached the foot of the mountain he sat quietly on his horse and looked up and down, but could not hear a thing.

'Christ help me,' he said, 'I've never heard of such a strange affair: this is where the cries came from, but I can't see anything. I don't understand it at all.'

He noticed a block of red marble before him, in the shadow of a tree; he rode up to it and dismounted, very puzzled, and sat down on the stone and invoked God and Saint Peter. And thereupon he heard a creature inside the stone crying:

'Oh, good sir! Save me from my pain and torment! I tell you, my dear, kind friend, I'm suffering the most terrible torture, but you can rescue me!'

Perceval, hearing the voice, jumped up instantly; then he leaned over the stone and said: 'I can't free you – this block's too massive. I'm baffled at how you ever got in there; you'll never get out, by my faith, unless you tell me how I can free you. And when I do, I bid you, by all the power of God, to tell me truly who you are and what your business is.'

'Oh, I will,' said the creature, 'but free me from this torture! Come forward and stand firm, and pull out the spike that's skewering me right through my body so that I can't move; you'll see what'll happen then.'

Perceval went up to the stone and found an iron spike as fine as a stiletto: that's no lie – it was finer even than that. Perceval went ahead and pulled the spike from the stone; and then, very slowly, from the little hole he saw a worm emerge; and these verses assure us that it was fully six feet long. Then suddenly it shot off faster than a crossbow-bolt, and Perceval was dumbfounded, not knowing what had become of it; and the air was so full of fire that he was sure the worm must be burning alive; and he heard thunder and a roaring wind: it seemed that the sky was about to plummet into an abyss. He was afraid, and not a little; he knew for certain and could clearly see that the demon had deceived him, and he was distraught and fearful. But this terrible weather did not last long enough to boil an egg; and when

Perceval saw the weather clear he sat down on the marble beneath the tree, and pondered on the worm. And then he saw a beast approaching, with the head of a man but the body of a snake. It immediately said to Perceval:

‘I’ve come to do what I said. Ask what you like, for you bade me answer by the power of Him who created me. But we were undone by Lucifer’s great pride at being created so beautiful: his self-regard cost him dear. It angered God the Father, and He cast us down to torment from His holy and glorious heavens where the proud will never enter. Since you freed me from that stone I’ve destroyed a city and laid waste the land; within a day’s ride all around there’s not a town or castle or tower where I’ve left a building standing: I’ve ruined and destroyed them all! You’ll see it for yourself on your journey, for you’ll die crazed with hunger if you carry on along this path!’

‘God save me,’ said Perceval, ‘you’re lying, I swear you are. The thing that uttered those loud cries and came out of the hole was tiny and thin, and your serpent’s body is huge. And you’ve the head of a man, it seems! When I look into your face you seem from your looks to have a gentle manner, but your body is hideous and foul. So I don’t believe you: you’re not the one I freed from the stone.’

But the demon said: ‘Listen to me. I tell you this: in such a shape as I’m in now the Devil tricked Eve. But he’d have toiled in vain if she’d seen his body: he’d never have deceived her then. He covered his body in such a way that Eve didn’t notice it. That’s why I’ve assumed this shape, for I’ve tricked people more quickly in my present form! I’ll do a great deal more evil now that I’m out of that stone; Merlin put me there by magic power so that I wouldn’t be able to use my cunning to stop the one who’s in search of the Grail. He’ll never be able to find it now that I’m out of the stone! His efforts will be wasted, for he’ll never achieve his goal.’

‘By my life,’ cried Perceval, ‘now you’re plainly lying! I’ll never believe what you say unless I see you go back in that stone in the same form as the thing I freed just now. If you’re that creature, turn into it again and return to the hole; then I’ll believe you, and I’ll ask you something else. But you can’t do it – you’re no shape-changer!’

‘I’ll prove it, right away!’ cried the demon, and he turned back into the shape of the worm, and was back inside the stone before you could count to four. Perceval dashed forward and thrust the spike back in the narrow hole, and the demon was so distraught at this that he screamed and wailed and cried:

‘Mercy, gentle sir! Get me out of here! I’ll never do anyone any harm or shame or wickedness again!’

‘You can wail all you like,’ said Perceval, ‘for I’ll never set you free!’

A fool let you out, enemy of God, but a wise man put you in again! You tricked me at the beginning, and I tricked you at the end. Your ruses are in vain! You're always on the look-out for God-loving people to deceive, hoping to snare them in sin. Now tell me, why do you work so hard to trick them and cast them into torment? The more intent a person is on doing good, the more you work against him.'

'It's true,' said the demon, 'and I tell you, I'm bent on deceiving the good because the wicked will all be mine. The usurers and hypocrites, the traitors and the sodomites, I leave them all in peace, for if they won't mend their ways God delivers them to me at the end; but I can't claim the good from Him. I've failed with you, and my comrades have attacked you many times; but I promise you this: they'll attack you often, in many ways and in many guises, before you've achieved the adventure you're pursuing. But if you can accomplish it, you'll be a king of great riches of which pride has deprived me. Be off; I can't speak any more now; go where you will.'

At that Perceval turned away and mounted and set off. He began to climb a mountain, and when he reached the top he sat quietly on his horse and gazed up and down, and saw that the country was scorched and burned. Perceval could not believe his eyes, for in all the land there was not a town or house or castle left. He was amazed; and then, as he pondered, he began to realise that the demon had told him the truth: he had indeed destroyed the country.

(SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 14572–16539)

*Perceval rides on and passes through a forest burned by the demon, and lies down to sleep beside a marble cross and a beautiful statue of a girl. As the moon rises he hears a voice crying for revenge upon the knight who killed his love, and suddenly a knight appears and challenges Perceval on the spot, swearing that he will die. They fight a long and mighty battle, and Perceval finally defeats him; but he refuses to ask for mercy. Just then a girl appears and asks Perceval to have mercy on the knight; Perceval agrees, and the girl rides off on her palfrey. The knight, whose name is Lugarel, does not know who the girl was any more than Perceval.*

*Lugarel now tells Perceval how, nearly a year before, he had pitched a tent in that place for himself and his sweetheart, and for eight days had jostled with any knight who passed that way, and had defeated more than twenty. On the ninth day he had gone in pursuit of a wounded stag, and while he was away from the tent a knight had arrived there and threatened Lugarel's sweetheart with death if she did not yield to his will. She had refused, and he had run her*

*through with his sword and made off. Lugarel returned just in time for her to tell him what had happened before she died. Grief-stricken, Lugarel had buried her there, with the cross and her statue to mark the spot. Since then he had killed every knight who passed that way, in the hope of having revenge on the girl's murderer. Lugarel says that, now that Perceval has defeated him, he will become a hermit to expiate his sins in having killed so many knights. But just as he is about to tell Perceval his sweetheart's name, he dies. Perceval, not knowing how to bury the body, decides to watch over it but falls asleep; and when he wakes next morning he is astonished to find that the body has gone, and in its place is a beautiful marble tomb with an inscription asking for prayers for the soul of Lugarel.*

*Perceval rides on and comes to a pool where a girl has been forced to stand naked in the water up to her neck, and she tells him that her lover had inflicted this cruel torture on her out of jealousy for her high regard for 'the one named Perceval, who has been seeking the Grail so long'. Just as Perceval reveals who he is, the girl's lover, Brandin Hard-Heart, rides up. They do battle, but it is very short, for at the first blow Perceval beheads him 'and commends his soul to Beelzebub, for he had done much evil in that country'. Perceval takes the girl from the pool and finds clothes for her to wear, and then, after she has told him that her name is Dyonise de Galoe, he asks her to excuse him if he sleeps for a while, for he had slept very little the night before. While he slumbers a boy rides by and Dyonise tells him that Perceval is the most cruel and treacherous knight alive, that he has killed Brandin and will doubtless dishonour her when he wakes, and she asks the boy to kill him. But the boy shrewdly suspects her, and says: 'You'd doubtless do the same to me if you found somebody else'. Perceval, who has overheard their words, rises and blesses the boy, but says that the girl's beauty was wasted on her when goodness was so absent, and he rides off, leaving Dyonise alone.*

*After meeting a pilgrim who kindly gives him food and wine, Perceval comes to a high mountain. He suddenly hears a loud voice crying terribly; and he sees a beautiful girl, all alone, who begs him to help her from that place, for she had gone three days without food or sleep or rest. She tells him that her name is Felisse de la Blanclose, the daughter of Arguise of Scotland, and that she had been abducted by two knights and carried to that wood, and just as one of them was about to force her to do his will two other knights had appeared and fought her kidnappers, and she had run off while they did battle and now found herself there on the mountain. But this girl, too, is deceiving Perceval: for while she engages him in talk five robbers surround him and demand his arms and harness. A bloody fight follows: Perceval kills three and the other two take to flight; and Perceval pursues them, too, and kills them both. Then he turns back to try and find Felisse and destroy her; but she is nowhere to be seen.*

*Towards evening he comes to a house where all the walls are black: it is there that Felisse has taken refuge. A shepherd warns him not to enter, for it is the den of two hundred murdering brigands and of a madwoman who tricks and traps knights of King Arthur's court. But Perceval will not turn back and rides up to the gate, where he kills a dwarf who tries to stop him entering. Luckily for Perceval, there are only three brigands at the castle that night, and when they charge at him he manages to kill all three, as well as Felisse, who attacks him with an axe: as she aims a blow at him he cuts off both her hands, and when she tries to flee he seizes her by the hair and flings her into a foul bog. Then he sets fire to the castle and destroys the brigands' den.*

*Perceval sets off once more and soon comes to a fortress where he is joyfully received: the people there are delighted at the destruction of the robbers' house and he is very well lodged that night. Next morning the lord of the castle begs him to stay longer, but Perceval sets off at once.*

*He arrives that night at the house of two hermits where, in contrast to the night before, he eats a humble meal and sleeps in a hard bed. In the morning, after mass, one of the hermits gives Perceval a short sermon, telling him that 'God did not make knights to kill and to make war on people, but to uphold justice and to defend Holy Church'. Then Perceval makes confession, and the hermit gives him absolution and commends him to God.*

*Perceval sets off once more and rides on at random, praying to God to guide him to the house of the Fisher King. In a forest glade a knight with an indigo pennon and a blue shield threatens him, and they fight a long and violent battle; Perceval finally defeats him, and the knight begs for mercy, and says: 'I'd have done better amusing myself with a game of chess than coming here to fight you'. The knight, whose name is Madiex of the Ill-Cut Coat, ceases to feel dishonoured at all when he realises that he has been defeated by such a worthy knight as Perceval; and Perceval sends him as a prisoner to King Arthur.*

*Perceval rides on until nightfall, and is despairing of finding anywhere to take lodging when he comes to a handsome little castle, the lord of which is deeply honoured when he realises who his guest is.*

*As he rides on next morning, Perceval recalls all the hardships he has suffered in his quest for the Grail. Then suddenly he sees a black giant leading by the bridle the horse of a knight he has killed. The giant is seeking Perceval, 'who is in search of the Grail and won the balm\*', because he killed his brother; and when Perceval reveals his name the giant instantly threatens him with death and advises him to say his psalms. They join battle, and the giant kills Perceval's horse; the fight is long and arduous, and Perceval cannot find a way to kill the giant. Then he suddenly remembers how good he had been with his javelins as a boy; he throws his lance like a javelin straight through the giant's brain, killing*

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\* i.e. the balm he won from the old hag; above, page 247.

*him instantly. Perceval takes the horse that the giant had been leading, and sets off once again.*

*A nobleman offers Perceval lodging that night, and the next morning he equips him with a new shield, painted red, and a new, white hauberk. Then Perceval sets out once more.*

*Meanwhile Madiex of the Ill-Cut Coat surrenders to Arthur at Duveline, where Arthur is an honoured guest at the King of Ireland's court. King Arthur is overjoyed to receive news of Perceval, and the knights of the Round Table vow to seek him without delay; the following day they all split up and ride off in search of Perceval.*

*Perceval has set out with his new arms from the nobleman's house, and as he crosses a plain he sees two knights riding towards him: Goullain the Bald and Kay the seneschal. They are very ill-mannered towards Perceval, and Kay seizes his horse's reins, trying to lead him off as a prisoner; and Perceval, unrecognised by them, challenges them to fight him one at a time. They rashly agree, and Perceval unhorses each in turn. They ask him his name, but he refuses to tell them, and rides away at once. They struggle back, wounded, on to their horses, and ride off in dejected silence.*

And Perceval set off, rejoicing, and prayed to the Creator to guide him by the true and straightest path to the house of the Fisher King; and he said that, if he could find that court, he would press the king to tell him who was served from the Grail, which he had seen so clearly, and about the trencher, and the lance, and the joining of the sword which he had repaired with his own hands except for the notch.

‘God grant that I find that house and manor, for which I’ve suffered so much toil and pounded so many paths and roads.’

And so he journeyed on all day, following a well surfaced road, but did not meet a boy or youth or man or woman; so he turned into the forest, for that was his fortress. Day drew in, and he headed towards a great, round tree: it would have measured the length of two lances around the trunk. And beside it was a beautiful stretch of meadow where the grass was green and lush and thick. The tree was of such a kind that it was always in leaf. Perceval dismounted from his fine charger and tethered him to the tree; then he drew his sword and cut some grass and said:

‘Field and forest are mine when I can have no other lodging.’

He cut so much grass that the good horse had enough and to spare that night; Perceval removed his bridle, and the horse began to eat. Perceval lay straight down beside his horse. He slept on after cock-crow; into the early morning he lay with his head propped on his shield, until he finally woke



up. He was amazed at having slept so long, and he leapt to his feet, bridled his horse and laced on his helmet; then he jumped into the saddle, set his shield on his arm and snatched up his lance which was propped against a branch. He spurred his horse and set off, heading for the great road that he had left the evening before, and rode on through the leafy wood, praying to God with a true heart to guide him along the right path. Then he came upon a crossroads where the paths split into three, and there was a cross in the middle, thirteen and a half feet high; and on the cross was a wooden hand, which pointed as soon as a knight came by, telling him directly the way that he should go. It had set many back on the right path: such was this strange marvel. Perceval rode swiftly up to the cross, cantering up under rein. He bowed to the cross, and saw the hand. And he saw the three paths and did not know what to do or which way to turn, but he had great faith in the hand, which directed him to take the middle path of the three. Perceval said that, come what may, he would take the middle path.

‘And if it please God it will lead me to the court where the gentle and kindly king resides; I’m longing to go there! I commend myself to the King of Glory, and may He keep me from losing my way today.’

Then he began to follow the path that the hand had indicated; he made a cross upon his face with his right hand, and then journeyed on all day. He rode right on through the wood, following that path, until night approached, and his head began to bow over his horse. Then, down in a valley, he caught sight of a great, wide river running through the vale, and beside it stood a mighty castle: I don’t think there’d have been one more finely built from there to Popaillart.\* Perceval, who had expected to see the fortress, headed towards it at once; he recognised the tower and the house, and knew in his heart that it was where the king lived. He pressed on with all speed, and passed through the gate and into the courtyard; a boy came running to his stirrup, and retainers appeared from all directions – they weren’t in short supply there! – and welcomed him with the greatest joy and led him into the hall. They took good care of the horse, and disarmed the knight and dressed him in a costly mantle, showing how much they cared for him, for they feared he might catch cold; then they led him straight to the king in a painted chamber adorned with mosaic. It would take a long time to describe the decoration, I promise you: no-one has ever seen its like, and Perceval was filled with wonder.

He greeted the king nobly in the name of God who never fails or lies; and the king, like the noble soul he was, said: ‘Welcome, friend!’ – for he had a generous and kindly heart.

But I don’t want to ramble on: the king, who was sitting on a bed

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Portpaillart, a Spanish city of epic legend.

most wonderfully adorned, seated Perceval beside him. He was longing to see the Grail for which he had laboured, and he would also be most glad to see the lance with the bleeding head; his heart was set on it, but he saw nothing yet. The king politely asked him to tell him, if he would, where he had slept the night before.

‘I tell you, sire,’ he replied, ‘I slept last night beside a holly tree at the edge of the forest.’

Then he told him straight away about the chapel he had found, and how he had entered and seen the knight lying on the splendid cloth; and how he had seen the serpent with the body of a little worm who had made the strange storms of rocks and lightning and wind.

‘Then he came back faster than the wind and returned to his hole and I saw no more of him. I long to know more about it, sire, if you’re willing to tell; and also about the child I saw in the tree, who turned my heart to ice because he wouldn’t say a word to me. It grieves and pains my heart, and baffles me utterly, for I’ve never seen such a thing. Before God, sire, I’d be very glad to hear more about it – whatever anyone can tell me.’

The king thought for a while, and then said to him: ‘You shall indeed. But eat a little first and you’ll be more at ease.’

The tables were set up swiftly, and the knights washed. The king had Perceval eat from his bowl, sitting at his side, most generously and freely. They had not been sitting long where they were seated in fives and sixes, when a lovely girl, whiter than a flower on a sapling’s branch, appeared from a chamber; in her hands she was holding the Holy Grail. She passed before the table. And a moment later another girl came, fairer than any ever seen, dressed in a white silken cloth; she was carrying the lance that dripped blood from its tip. And a boy followed after, carrying in his hands an unrepaired sword; gently and carefully he laid it on a corner of the table by the king. Perceval was very much on edge, and began to say to the king:

‘Sire, I’ve been at your house twice before – may God and my good faith help me – but however much I asked you about the affairs of this land, you wouldn’t tell me anything; that was wrong of you, I have to say. I asked you about many things, and repaired a sword that was broken across the middle, and it was so fine and excellent a sword that you were overjoyed.’

The king said this: ‘Before God, that’s true, my good, dear friend. You’ve suffered a great deal to accomplish this affair. But don’t be upset or aggrieved. Just take hold of this sword, and it will be joined and mended.’

Perceval said he would do so, and came straight up to the sword and grasped it without hesitation. Then he cast his eyes upon it, and saw the notch in the blade and was filled with anguish. He rubbed his hand up and down the sword – no-one intervened or bade him stop – and then brandished

it four times so violently that he almost shattered it. And thereupon the notch was repaired: he had joined it finely, perfectly. He took it by the point and handed it to the king in full view of everyone. The king beheld it and displayed such joy as I could never describe to you.

‘Friend,’ he said, ‘your toil is well rewarded, now that God has granted you the honour of being worthy to know the truth about all these things.’

And Perceval was overjoyed. Now he felt no grief or sorrow, instead his heart was filled with joy; I could not possibly describe the happiness he felt: he almost burst out singing.\* The king looked at him and was deeply happy. He threw his arms around his neck like the courteous and noble man he was, and said:

‘My good, dear friend, be lord of my house. I willingly bestow upon you everything I have, and henceforth will hold you dearer than any man alive.’

At that the boy who had brought the sword hurriedly returned, and took it and wrapped it again in a silken cloth and carried it away; and Perceval was greatly comforted

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\* Here the manuscript repeats the last lines of the Second Continuation almost exactly, to lead into the final continuation.

## THE THIRD CONTINUATION

by the great joy and honour that God had bestowed upon him that day, and I don't believe I've ever heard tell of such happiness as he showed then. The king looked up at him and said:

'Eat, my friend, and may God who was crucified for our sins grant you honour and pardon all your sins.'

Perceval sat down to eat beside the king who loved him dearly. I shan't describe the meal precisely, but no kings or dukes or counts were ever so finely served. Perceval, who had deserved the rejoicing and celebration that were heaped upon him, stayed with his head bowed. What should I say? At complete leisure they had all the food and wine they could have wished for; no prophet or divine ever drank the like.

Just as they were about to rise from dinner, there passed before the royal table the lance and the Grail, and a beautiful silver trencher, most splendid and handsome, which was carried by a girl most elegantly. When they had passed the tables, so sumptuously laden, they carried straight on into the chamber from which they had come. Perceval, observing this, sighed, and looked at the king and said at once:

'My good, dear lord, tell me freely now what you promised me before dinner.'

'Listen, friend,' the king replied, 'and come close to me, and I'll tell you, word for word and without omission, whatever you wish to ask me, exactly as you command.'

'Good, dear sir,' said Perceval, 'let me not be deceived about the lance and the Holy Grail and the trencher that I've seen: if you will, tell me first who is served from them, and where they come from; and as for the girls who carry them, who passed by just now, I don't think they're poor women of low birth! I'm sure they're of high lineage.'

'Dear friend,' replied the king, 'you'll not be angry on my account, have no fear. I'll tell you first about the lance. I promise you, without a word of a lie, and I know it to be true, that it is the holy lance of which the Scriptures tell, with which Longinus struck Jesus Christ when He was stretched on the cross where the Jews had hung Him. And the precious, holy blood that flows from the head of the lance is the holy, precious blood that ran from God's side when Longinus struck Him to the heart. Yes, it is the

very lance and head with which the one who invaded foul Hell was struck and wounded on the cross. The blow that God received on the cross was well struck indeed; through death He outwitted the Devil and delivered us from the torment of Hell and brought us joy. That death saved us, you understand, from the evils brought upon us by Adam and Eve when they bit into the fruit.'

Perceval leaned on his elbow and listened to what the king told him; and he wept and sighed at the great agony and shame that God had suffered: if he had been given the Roman Empire I don't think he would have stopped. And he quickly said to the king:

'Sire, you've told me about the lance. Now I want to know about the Grail and the trencher, if it's right to ask.'

And the king, governed always by gentleness, granted his every wish, and said: 'I shall not break my word.' And weeping, he said to him without more ado: 'Good sir, dear son, when God hung on the holy, glorious, supremely precious cross, and His side was pierced, and they withdrew the spear-head, blood ran from the wound right down to his foot. Joseph of Arimathea turned black with grief at seeing Jesus tortured, and he decided to take care of Him, and took this holy vessel and held it out and caught the blood in it. And so this vessel into which the blood fell belonged to Joseph. And the silver trencher that passed through here, carried by the girl, was used to cover the holy vessel so that the blood should not be left exposed. Such, truly, is the Grail, which passed through here with the lance. I've told you the truth about all this: not a word I've said has been untrue. And if there's anything more you want to know, I'll tell you the whole truth.'

And Perceval, most eager to hear these things, sighed and said: 'Sire, I'd love you to tell me, if you will, how the Holy Grail came to this country: I long to know that more than anything.'

'I'll tell you, friend,' the king replied, 'since I gave you my word. When God was hung upon the cross as you've heard, Joseph took Him from the cross with the help of Nichodemus, a smith, the finest that there was. Joseph was imprisoned for having taken Jesus down, cast into a dark, black dungeon where he suffered terribly; they wanted him to die of hunger and to rot there. He stayed there for forty days with nothing to eat or drink; but the Lord God sent the Holy Grail to him, which he saw two or three times a day as it came and stayed in the dungeon with him, and through the sweet power of the Holy Grail he never felt any pain or ill. But Titus and Vespasian, although they were certainly not Christians, freed him from the dungeon and had him brought to Rome; and Joseph took the lance with him, I promise you, and the Grail followed after him. God willed it: it had to be so. Then Joseph, who had faith in God, settled in this country and built

this house, and I am descended from him. He lived here at this very house; and when he was dying and departed this life the Grail did not leave here – nor will it ever, if it please God the Father, as long as I am here.’

Perceval listened with gladness to the story of the Grail, and praised Our Lord for the miracle. He sighed again – but not with displeasure at hearing these wonderful things – and said to the king once more:

‘Dear sir, tell me if you will about the two beautiful girls; and please don’t be annoyed with me if I’m tiring you tonight, for all the riches in the world wouldn’t give me such joy as this.’

‘Good sir,’ replied the king, ‘I’d tell you everything if I could and if I didn’t think it would bore you, but it’s past the time for bed; yet I love you so dearly that I’ll tell you whatever you care to ask, for that’s only right. The girl who carries the Grail is of royal lineage, and a maiden and a virgin – for otherwise, God save me, she would never have held it in her hands. And the girl who carries the trencher with such delight and pleasure is also of high lineage, and wise and courteous and well educated. She is the daughter of King Gon of Sert, and the girl with the Grail is my daughter, and is certainly no disgrace to me. Now you’ve heard, I think, the stories of the Grail and the lance. Now it’s time to sleep: let’s take to our beds now, if you will.’

‘Oh, kind sir!’ cried Perceval, ‘please don’t object: I want to know how the sword I’ve twice repaired was broken.’

‘God grant that the story please you,’ said the king. ‘I’ll tell you: listen, and I’ll explain. The sword that you’ve repaired – for which you should be deeply happy – is the one with which the Mortal Blow was struck. Never will such a grievous and evil blow be dealt, and we are still suffering for it – I and all this kingdom. The blow was so wicked and so terrible that you’ve never heard of its like. King Gon of Sert, my brother, the peer of any emperor, was besieged in the castle of Quingragrant by Espinogre, who was camped outside; he was a man of great strength, and had a mighty force of knights and foot soldiers with him. My brother rode out to do battle with him, and fought so well that he routed his whole army: they were all killed and vanquished. But Espinogre, who had lived many a day, had a nephew of great boldness, who had promised and sworn that he would kill my brother that day, and he promptly did so; and he did it treacherously, by trickery and wickedness and a foul misdeed. When he saw his side being routed he was far from happy; he cast aside his arms and so worked his evil trick upon the men of the castle; for he saw a dead opponent and, being well practised in wickedness, [he stripped him of his arms and donned them himself]’ and then joined the battle, clutching the splendid sword that you’ve repaired. He

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\* A couplet is clearly missing in the manuscript, but the context makes the content obvious.

made two charges into the battle, and then headed for my brother, holding in his hand the sword of steel. And my brother, sure that he was one of his own men, had no fear of him; and without a helmet, and his mail hood unlaced, he rode back towards his household who had fought brilliantly that day. And the one who wouldn't rest until he'd done what he intended struck my unsuspecting brother on the head with his drawn sword and cut clean through him right down to the saddle. At this grievous blow the good sword broke in two; and the one who held the hilt rode off with all speed, throwing aside the half he held. He returned to his army who greeted him with the greatest honour, while the men of the castle carried back King Gon of Sert, cloven and cold and dead and stiff. And with my lord's body, with great sorrow, they also took the sword, broken across the middle, that the knight had thrown down in the press. They dressed the body most handsomely after carrying him to the castle laid out on his shield, with no blanket or serge to cover him. When they had washed and dressed him as finely as they could they laid him in a bier and brought him here to me, along with the sword with which my brother had been killed. I gathered the pieces, which were brought to me by one of my nieces; she told me how it had wrought the death of her father, whom I loved so much, and assured me that if I kept the pieces until a knight came here and held the sword and made the pieces join again, then my brother, whom I loved so dearly, would be avenged by the one who repaired the sword. But I was so stricken with grief that I took the pieces she had given me, and immediately scythed through my thighs and severed every nerve, so that, without a lie, I've been helpless ever since, and always will be until I'm avenged upon the false wretch who treacherously killed the finest knight who ever lived since God was crucified.'

Perceval, hearing the worthy man's words, quickly replied with a sincere and humble heart: 'Truly, sire, he did an evil deed. Please tell me, since you've told me so much already, if you know the knight's name; for without knowing his name and the land where he lives, any would-be avenger would have his work cut out. Since the task of vengeance falls to me, I'm desperate to know his name, and his arms and emblems, too. And as a loyal knight I swear to you that, health and strength permitting, if I can track him down we'll fight till one or other of us wins. I promise you faithfully: I'll bring him back dead or captive or defeated – unless he kills me: that will be his only escape.'

'My good dear friend,' said the worthy man, 'may the one who forgave Longinus give you the strength and power to do it. Since you want to know his name it will not be kept from you: his name was Partinial the Wild. He's the Lord of the Red Tower and the land thereabouts. He has wonderfully handsome arms – of silver, with two ladies painted on them in

blue. My sufferings would be ended if revenge were taken on him, but he has no respect for any knight alive. And in God's name, please don't undertake anything unless you think you can achieve revenge.'

'Dear sir,' replied Perceval, 'we who ride through these vales and over the mountains and across the land in search of praise and renown are used to suffering all kinds of ills, and with Our Lord's support I'm sure I'll accomplish it.'

'May the Lord God guard you from misfortune,' said the king, who loved him dearly. 'If you like we'll go and sleep now, for it's well past time, and I think you're tired and in need of rest.'

'Truly, sire, I won't sleep until you've told me the truth about the candles that I saw attached to the tree; and about the marble altar I saw in the chapel, and the name of the knight I saw laid out upon it. I've got to know! And I remember the candles – tell me truly, who snuffed them out? And before I leave here I'd love to know about the terrible din and lightning.'

The worthy man, sincerely eager to fulfil his wishes, said that he would tell him everything he wished to know.

'Hear the truth, then, about the tree,' the king said kindly. 'It's the tree of enchantment; the fairies assemble there. The lights which look like candles to anyone who sees them from afar are the fairies, I promise you, who lead astray all who've put their faith in God. And the fact that you went to the tree and then saw nothing was a sign that you were to accomplish the strange adventures of this land. The truth is that no-one had ever found or seen that tree. Nor will they ever hear tell of it – or of the candles, for you chased away the fairy ladies as you rode up to the tree. That's the last that will ever be heard of them. Now it's time to go to our beds and rest awhile.'

'Oh, sire,' said Perceval, 'by the faith I owe you, if it's no trouble I'd like to hear first about the chapel and the body.'

'I'll tell you whatever else you wish,' said the king. 'That's what I promised, so it's only right. Since you'd have me tell you about the chapel, believe me when I say that it was made at the command of Brangemor of Cornwall, the mother of King Pinogres who was so cruel and violent. She became a nun at the chapel, but only from the first hour to the ninth\*; that was all, for then she died: her son Pinogres killed her and beheaded her, thus burdening himself with a terrible sin. As soon as he had killed her she was buried beneath the altar. Such was the end of her life. And not a day has since passed without a knight being killed there. More than a thousand have been killed by the hand that ambushes them: no-one knows who their killer is, except that they were certainly killed by the hand which you saw as far as the elbow, with its black and swarthy skin. And it's that hand that snuffs

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\* Literally 'from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m.'



out the candle. That hand, and the thunderous din that descends, kills them: that's how they meet their death – no-one else is involved in it.'

'May I see tomorrow's dawn, sire,' said Perceval, 'that's an astonishing story. But by God and His virtues and by the holy true cross, tell me, if you don't mind, whether anyone can rid the chapel of this curse – of that strange horror and the din; for anyone who could cast it out would have done an excellent deed.'

'Dear friend,' replied the king, 'if someone willing to fight the black hand were to take from a cupboard a white veil which is placed there, and which is guarded by that damned creature the demon, and plunge it at once in holy water and sprinkle it all over the altar and the body and the chapel, then, by that God who summons our souls, no evil would thereafter transpire. But any man wishing to fight the black hand would need to be brave indeed. No-one would dare to try his luck unless he possessed all knightly qualities.'

And with that he rose to his feet and said: 'Go to your bed, my friend, and sleep, for I can see you're very tired from staying awake so long; I fear all the talking I've done tonight has exhausted you, but you seem to have listened with delight. The beds are ready: go and sleep now, if you will.'

Then Perceval rose at once and said: 'I'll do as you say, sire, without fail.'

(SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 33094 – 37189)

*After sleeping in a luxurious bed that night, the tireless Perceval refuses to stay another day with the Fisher King. He returns to the forest, and encounters a knight who is splendidly armed but mounted on a skinny packhorse. The knight proves to be Saigremor, who had set out from Arthur's court some time before to search for Perceval (with Gawain, Yvain and the others: above, p. 195). He is delighted to find him, but Perceval disappoints him by saying he cannot return to court until his quest is done. Suddenly there appear ten knights, the very ones who had stolen Saigremor's proper horse and abducted a young lady. As they charge, Perceval kills one and gives his mount to Saigremor. Then he kills two more and Saigremor kills a fourth; but as one of the survivors tries to flee Saigremor pursues him, leaving Perceval to face the remaining five alone. In the bloody battle that follows Perceval finally disposes of them all, but his horse is killed in the process and his sword broken. Perceval and the girl he has rescued are welcomed joyfully at her castle, and Perceval has to rest there for a month because of a wound received in the combat.*

*Meanwhile Saigremor, still in pursuit of the knight from the battle, follows him to a tower at the bottom of a valley. The knight rides in and Saigremor rides after; and a villein drops the gate as Saigremor rides through, narrowly missing Saigremor and cutting off the tail of his horse. Saigremor finds the knight already dismounted, but he will not fight an uneven battle so he dismounts, too, and battle is joined with the sword. The villein who had tried to drop the gate on Saigremor blows a horn and another knight appears, fully armed, and tries to kill Saigremor with an axe; but Saigremor dodges aside and kills him with a tremendous blow to the head. Then he returns to his combat with the first knight and cuts off his arm; the villein now sounds the horn again and four more villeins appear to attack Saigremor, while the mortally wounded knight throws himself down a deep well where the weight of his armour quickly drowns him. Saigremor defends himself against the four villeins and kills two with mighty blows; the other two flee, but Saigremor pursues them into the hall, cuts one in half, and the other flings himself through a window to his death. Saigremor now seeks out the first villein, the one who had dropped the gate and sounded the horn; spread-eagled on the ground he begs for mercy and offers Saigremor the lordship of the castle. Saigremor does grant him mercy, but he bestows the lordship on the villein, on condition that he will never refuse lodging to any passing knight. Saigremor decides to lodge there himself that night, and is served enthusiastically by the villein.*

*Next morning he calls for his arms and his horse and sets off on his way. He is upset at having lost Perceval, but as he rides through the forest he finds the dead knights on the battleground and realises that Perceval has obviously done well. He comes to a castle so heavily fortified that he decides to go and find out why. The gate is firmly locked, so he calls out loudly, and a beautiful girl appears above and asks him where he is from and what he wants. He says he wants to know what is going on at the castle, and she opens the gate and he rides in and is given a handsome welcome by a group of ladies. They tell him that it is the Castle of the Maidens, and that they have fortified it so heavily because they are being besieged by a knight who is trying to force one of them to marry him. There are only women there, and they cannot defend themselves with arms against their attacker, Calides de le Marche, who assails the castle every day. Saigremor offers to fight him next day as their champion, and the lady of the castle is overjoyed.*

*As soon as Calides arrives next morning, Saigremor sends his challenge to single combat: if Calides wins he will have the girl he desires; if Saigremor wins Calides must return to his land and never threaten the castle again. Calides accepts, proudly declaring that there is no knight at Arthur's court, nor in France nor in England, who could ever defeat him in combat. Battle is joined, and after a terrible and bloody fight Calides is forced to surrender. Saigremor sends him as a prisoner to the Castle of the Maidens in spite of his pleas to the contrary – for*

*he is sure they will kill him – and Saigremor rides off into the forest.*

*Calides surrenders to the lady of the castle and begs her forgiveness; she decides to pardon him his imprisonment, and then, when she realizes how true his love for the girl is, she gives her to him and they are married the next day with great celebration.*

*Saigremor meanwhile continues on his way, and suddenly sees two knights about to violate a girl. He rides to her rescue and kills both her attackers, but is wounded in the process. The girl takes him to lodge at her father's house, desperately upset that he has been wounded for her sake. But her father excels at healing wounds and treats Saigremor's skilfully. Even so, it is six weeks before Saigremor recovers.*

*Gawain, meanwhile, has been with his uncle King Arthur, and is still very distressed about the knight who had been killed at the queen's pavilion while under his escort (in the First Continuation, above, page 138), and at having failed to learn the truth about the wonders he had seen. He feels he ought to set out in search of the Fisher King's court once more. Then one night he is dining with the queen when a girl appears, magnificently dressed, riding on a mule with an ivory saddle. She asks to speak to Gawain, and passionately hurls reproach at him for having let her brother die while under his escort. Then she collapses from her mule to the ground. When she comes to she rebukes Gawain again, this time for having failed to complete the task entrusted to him by her brother: he fell asleep and failed to hear the truth about the mysteries because, she says, of the sins with which he is tainted. She tells him to take her brother's arms and follow her.*

*They ride on together for several days and come upon two boys about to throw a girl on to a fire in front of a great crowd of people. A knight in the crowd explains that the girl had treacherously murdered her own brother; but other people tell Gawain that it is a lie, and that Dodinial the Wild, who is held prisoner by the girl, had killed him. Hearing this, Gawain tells the boys to stand back and to release the girl, but the knight intervenes and challenges Gawain to battle. They charge; and with a mighty blow of his lance Gawain casts the knight into the fire, where he dies before he can be pulled out. Gawain asks no other reward for having rescued the girl than the release from prison of Dodinial the Wild. In spite of his having killed her brother, she agrees, and Dodinial is set free.*

*Gawain sets off once more with the girl on the mule, but they have not gone far before they are attacked by three nephews of the knight who had been killed on the fire, determined to avenge his death. Gawain does battle with them, and kills two and forces the third to surrender, and sends him as a prisoner to the girl he had rescued from the fire.*

*Gawain and the girl on the mule ride on until they come to her castle by the sea. She now reveals that she has brought him there to defend her against*

*King Margon who is threatening her and her land, and has taken her sweetheart prisoner and hanged him before her eyes.*

*Next morning Gawain rides out to do battle with Margon, and defeats him and forces him to cry for mercy. Margon begs him not to send him to the girl, for she is sure to kill him, so Gawain sends him to Arthur. The girl is overjoyed by Gawain's victory, and says she has only one more request of him: to take vengeance on Kay, who she is sure murdered her brother at the queen's pavilion. Gawain promises to do so, and she gives him a sleeve of red silk to dip in Kay's blood. Then he sets off at once.*

*King Margon meanwhile sets out with his knights to surrender to Arthur. On the way he stops and pitches his pavilion, and a dwarf appears with a plea for help from Margon's sister, the queen of Malohaut, who has been abducted by one Gorhan and a company of seven score knights. Margon rides to her rescue and defeats Gorhan, who is imprisoned in a cage by the queen of Malohaut for two years. Then Margon surrenders to King Arthur and is taken into his household.*

*Gawain rides on and comes to a house in the forest and sees a beautiful girl at a window of the tower. She tells her seneschal that she hopes it is a knight of Arthur's court, for then they can take revenge on him for the death of her uncle, who was killed while under the escort of Sir Gawain. The seneschal rides out to meet him and asks if he is a knight of Arthur's court. Gawain says he is, so the seneschal demands battle. Gawain defeats him, but suddenly the girl he had defended against King Margon rides up and begs him to have mercy on the seneschal, for he is her cousin.*

*Gawain sets off with the girl and arrives, fully armed, at Arthur's court, and in the presence of everyone, without revealing who he is, he arraigns Kay for the treacherous murder of the knight outside the queen's pavilion; he demands that Kay either do battle with him or put himself entirely at the girl's mercy. Arthur asks him to wait till the next day, but Kay says he wants no respite. Battle begins, and Gawain unhorses Kay, opens the hood of his hauberk and threatens to behead him when he refuses to surrender to the girl. All those watching are in despair at the sight. And Gawain is distressed, too – he has no desire to kill Kay. The king and queen, weeping, beg the girl to have mercy on Kay, and not to let him be killed; and the girl cries out to Gawain to do no more. He has done enough, for Kay is sorely wounded.*

*Gawain rides away in search of adventure, and one evening, deep in a valley, he meets his brother Engrevain, who tells him of Kay's disgrace. Gawain is worried that Kay may be mortally wounded, but Engrevain says he is not, and that he had deserved his punishment at the hands of his unknown vanquisher. Just then they see five knights riding towards them, whom Engrevain knows are in pursuit of him and planning to kill him. They do battle, and Gawain*

*and Engrevain defeat two and send them prisoner to King Arthur, while the other three flee into the forest. After several days of riding together, Gawain and Engrevain return to Arthur's court.*

*Now the story returns to Perceval, who had spent a long while recovering from the wounds he had received in the battle with the ten knights. He finally sets out once more with new arms of gold and silver, forged in Egypt, presented to him by the girl who had been caring for him. He is still carrying the sword that had been broken in the battle, and is very anxious to find a smith who can repair it.*

With his sword at his belt and his lance in hand, he rode on that morning until the third hour was almost past, but met no-one at all. Then he passed into a forest and roamed on until late in the afternoon; and still he spurred and rode on until he came to the forest's edge. As he passed from the woods the sky turned dark and the air was black, though the day was not yet done; and a wind arose, whipping up the air and sky, and it thundered and lightened terribly and dusty whirlwinds swirled. Rocks and thunderbolts fell from the sky, so great, and so thick and fast, that it was like the end of the world; and Sir Perceval and his horse alike received some mighty blows. He did not dare keep his eyes open, and he covered his head with his shield; and the rocks that fell upon it made such a crashing din that it was wondrous to hear. It was awesome weather indeed! Thunderbolts and lightning flew until the air and sky seemed ablaze on every side. Where can God have found such things to fling down with such force, destroying everything they hit? The forest was toppling and crashing all around. Perceval could see neither fortress nor tower, nor any house or town, and his horse was going wild at the storming din; nor did Perceval know which way he was going with his shield over his head. He opened his eyes just a little, and as the weather cleared he saw a chapel. He turned his horse towards it and spurred on urgently and entered; he was soaking wet and weather-beaten, but greatly relieved to be inside, and he dismounted at once, without delay. He swore before God that he had never seen such weather.

Just then he glanced towards the altar and saw a dead knight lying upon it, with a candle burning beside him; and a moment later he saw, coming through a window, a hand, black right up to the elbow: it was dark and hideous indeed, and it snuffed out the candle. And as soon as the candle was out the sky turned dark and terrible, and Perceval could see no more in there than if he had been down a well. He thought he was in dire straits; and then he suddenly realised that he had been in that chapel before, no more than one summer previously; and he realised, too, that he had to fight

the hand. He refused to be dismayed, and prepared to do battle, though the place was truly dark indeed, and he could not see a thing. But by the light of the lightning bolts he spotted the hand and darted towards it. He thrust his lance at it, but the hand seized it in a mighty grip and smashed it utterly. Perceval stepped back and drew his sword from its scabbard and leapt towards the hand; but just as he was about to strike he saw a head coming straight through a window, and its body loomed in as far as the waist; and as it burst in it flung a huge and blazing brand, fully twelve feet wide, which scorched Perceval's moustache and eyebrows. Then Perceval invoked God by His several names, for he knew very well that it was the Devil he had seen, and he feared him terribly. He raised his hand and made the sign of the true cross upon his face and forehead; and at once he heard a mighty din descending from the sky: it was a bolt of lightning, which rent asunder all the walls and the window through which the hand and head had come. Then Perceval looked up and saw a huge demon, blazing with fire, with arms as black as coal: it was clearly this demon's hand that had come through the window. Then he saw the veil, he was sure, lying in the cupboard\* as the Fisher King had said.† He moved towards it, and was just about to take it when the hand snatched it away and a terrible voice cried:

'Knight, it was a rash and insolent deed to enter here – and you made a great mistake in staying, for I will kill you with my hand and you'll lie upon the altar tomorrow!'

Perceval uttered not a word in reply; but as God had instructed him he raised his hand and made the sign of the cross, and the devil leapt back through the wall; at that instant a thunderbolt crashed down, and the devil leapt right on top of the chapel in dire fear of the sign of the cross, which he deeply despised and dreaded. And the lightning bolt was so grim and awesome that no man standing near could have escaped death: it struck a wooden beam and sent it bursting into flames, and the whole chapel caught fire – nothing could prevent it. But Perceval was still undaunted by anything he had seen, and he came straight up to the cupboard to take the veil; but again the hand stopped him, and the voice returned, crying:

'Perceval, stop this foolishness! Don't believe the Fisher King: you'll be crazy if you do! Be off with you or you'll die here. I've struck down many who've fought against me – I've killed many knights: there's one left dead here every day! Make sure you're not left with them!'

Perceval made no reply at all, but set about his business there: he advanced towards the cupboard to take the veil that was his goal. The hand moved to stop him, seizing him by the left fist; but Perceval clutched his sword

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\* MS 12576 accidentally says 'window'.

† i.e. above, p. 304.

in the right and strove and struggled to strike the hand; but to no avail – every blow he dealt failed and he laboured and toiled in vain. He was locked in a terrible battle now, and it would be hard indeed to win, for the demon was striving with all his might to harm him and stop him taking the veil, eager to inflict pain if he could once gain the advantage. He seized Perceval by the hand and pulled and wrenched and grasped at him, sure that he would overpower and overwhelm him. But the one who had faith in God made the sign of the cross over his face with his sword, to prevent the demon harming him; and as soon as he made that sign the demon drew back, and thunder and lightning burst from the sky – a bolt so terrible and fearsome that none so huge was ever seen; and when Perceval beheld it he collapsed and fainted in the chapel. Nor should he be blamed for that – for no man born ever saw such a perilous day in all his earthly life. There was not a rafter, plank or batten in the chapel left unburnt – the fire was spreading everywhere; and the demon fled away in terror of the thunder and lightning and the miracle that God had wrought when the sign of the cross was made. Beside the altar in the chapel Perceval lay prostrate and unconscious for a long while, stunned by the mighty lightning bolt that had crashed down and dumbfounded him. When he finally returned to his senses he came straight to the cupboard and threw it open. Inside he found a vessel of gold, and he removed its lid and, without hindrance or obstruction, drew forth the white veil as the Fisher King had instructed. And he did not treat it with contempt, but worshipped it most highly and held it with great respect. He set to work most ably: he unfolded the veil at once and laid it on the altar. He gazed at it and caressed it; then he took a vase, brim-full of holy water, and plunged the veil right in it. He went out through the door, carrying the veil, and like a good and accomplished knight he processed all round the chapel, sprinkling the walls, as though it were Ascension Day, Christmas, Easter or Pentecost, and spared no effort in doing so.

When he had sprinkled all around he entered the chapel again, and knelt in devotion before the altar. He dipped the white veil in the holy water and begged ever-truthful God that he might find salvation, and to keep him from demons and devils who are so full of trickery. He prayed and appealed earnestly to the Lord God, and then began to sprinkle the chapel inside, including the crucifix, with all sincerity and respect; and as he sprinkled the fire was extinguished and the storm, which had done so much damage that night, abated. But all around and throughout the country all was burnt and consumed by fire.

When Perceval saw that the storm was over he finished his sprinkling with the veil and placed it back in the rich golden vessel, and returned it to the cupboard and shut it away. Having done his duty he hurried back to the body that lay upon the altar, and examined it closely to see if he had seen



the man anywhere before; but he could not really tell, for it was so hideously blackened from being hacked and battered by the demon that it was as black as pitch: he did not recognise the body at all. He said to himself that he had never seen such a hideous corpse, and he would have dearly loved to find a priest to bury it, and would willingly have lent a hand.

Perceval lay there until morning, for there was no light at all until day began to break; and just as it did, the candle began to burn, and it did not go out: nor will it ever until the world's end. The good Perceval lay asleep in the chapel until day came and the sun appeared, brilliant and red; then he awoke, and was startled at seeing the light from the burning candle. He stared long at it, wondering how it could have been lit; and he clearly saw and realised that God had lit it, and it pleased him deeply. Then he noticed a bell hanging in a little belfry: it was a pleasant sight to him indeed, and he thought that when it was rung someone would come, so he decided to go and pull the bell-rope himself. He pulled and heaved at it until it pealed loudly; and it was not long before a little old man in a grey cloak appeared: he was a good hundred years old or more. When Perceval saw him he came to meet him. The worthy man was old and grey indeed, and his beard had grown right down to his waist, and his hair was so long that it touched his heels, and his flesh was withered and hairy. Perceval greeted him at once, and the old man returned his greeting, saying:

'I wish you good fortune, sir, for you are the finest knight of more than three thousand who have come here and fought to destroy the terrible marvel as you have now done.'

'Dear sir,' said Perceval, 'if you know where I might find a priest who could bury this body, do tell me. I wouldn't leave him for anything before he's interred.'

And the worthy man said: 'My friend, I'm a priest, have no doubt; and I've counted three thousand that I've buried with my own hands, so help me God, all strangled to death by the hand of the black arm. But now you have brought this adventure to an end: no more evil will befall this place and nothing more will need to be done, for you have put an end to it all. But please, take hold of this body with me, and we'll carry him out and sing a service for him.'

Perceval did as the worthy man said, and they laid the body down and set about the burial. They placed it in a wooden bedstead, the finest in the world, I think, and covered it in a rich sheet of silk, checkered with green and indigo – I couldn't describe one so beautiful. And the worthy man placed a gold cross at the body's head, and then took two candles from a coffer and lit them, and fixed them on two elegant candlesticks of gold – and they were certainly not small – and set them most pleasingly beside



the cross.

After these arrangements with the body they returned to the altar, which the worthy man humbly and handsomely adorned to the best of his powers, and Perceval helped him do so. He was quite calm and untroubled now, and did exactly as bidden, perfectly. After adorning and arranging the altar they rang the bell and two brothers, who dwelt nearby as monks, heard it and rejoiced at the sound; and they came straight to the chapel without delay, bringing a vestment which the priest donned at the altar; and one of them brought him a chalice of engraved silver. The two brothers did not delay but went straight in and dressed the old man; and he who devoted himself to good began the service of God; and Perceval listened gently and humbly, filled with deep devotion, his mind intent upon God. And when they had said the service the priest came straight up to the body in the bedstead and commended the soul to God. Then the brothers took the body and carried it from the chapel, and entered a cemetery surrounded by a row of trees; there are many cemeteries in the world, but I don't think there is one as beautiful as this; and all the trees were heavily laden, for on them hung the arms, lances and shields of all those defeated and killed there by the demon. When Perceval saw the arms he was astonished, and was about to ask about them, eager to find out what it could mean; but then he decided to let the priest bury the body before he asked him questions. And the priest walked softly ahead of the bier, and the two who bore it behind him halted beneath a tree planted outside the row, with no armour hanging on it; there they laid the bier down. There was a marble tomb right next to the tree, and they sprinkled holy water inside and placed the body within; and over the tomb they laid a broad slab of marble, richly inlaid with enamel, great, heavy and massive.

Having arranged the burial they made their way back, and Perceval, eager to find out about the cemetery and the trees and the arms that hung upon them – what they were and what they signified – began to question the old priest. And the old man did as he bade, telling him the true story from beginning to end; and he began at once, saying:

'Kind sir, dear friend, since I see you're eager to hear, I'll tell you that in this great cemetery, beneath those trees you see, I've buried all who died fighting the hand whose awesome deeds and assaults you've cast out like the worthy and noble knight you are. They all lie in marble tombs, and on each tree hang the arms and shield of the one who lies beneath. And Queen Brangemore, who was neither ugly nor Moorish – may God have pity and mercy on her soul – and who established this cemetery, lies beneath that tree yonder. She began the graveyard, and by my life, it was an accursed beginning, for never since then has a day gone by without a knight being

killed here by the hand that you fought and defeated by the will of God. The first to be buried was Queen Brangemore, and the knight we've just buried will be the last, for no man will ever again be a victim of the hand.'

'By the faith I owe Saint Peter of Rome,' said Perceval, 'that's a remarkable story. But please tell me, if you will, where did all these beautiful and handsome tombs come from?'

'So help me God,' the hermit replied, 'I'll tell you straight away. Since the queen was killed not a day has gone by without a tomb, made to measure for the knight who had died, being found beneath the tree where he was to lie. This has happened every day. And by the faith I owe Jesus Christ, the name of the dead knight was written on each one.'

At that moment the brothers arrived who brought the arms and placed them on the trees, hanging up the hauberks by the sleeves; and on the branches they also hung the white leggings, and the knight's shield and helmet and lance. Before he left there Perceval said he would go and look at all the inscriptions on the marble slabs.

'So help me God,' said the hermit, 'it'll be noon before you've finished.'

With that he left him and went to the chapel to disrobe. And Perceval spent all day until evening reading the inscriptions; and I can assure you he found a good number there that caused him sorrow; he went all round and saw nothing to please him in the least. Had he recognised anyone from King Arthur's court, that would have been the greatest sorrow of all. But finding no knight of Arthur's he returned to the chapel. And as he entered he saw the three brothers coming to meet him; and the eldest, who looked the worthiest, said:

'If you will, sir, come with us and accept our lodging and our charity tonight in the name of the Holy Trinity, for night is near.'

'I will stay with you,' said Perceval, 'but I must fetch my horse and bring him here.'

'May God grant that we see the dawn,' they said, 'your horse is already in the house, and his food has been provided: two basins full of barley; and he has good hay, and a litter of straw that's belly-deep!'

Perceval entered the house, and the worthy man, leading him by the hand, swiftly disarmed him, and gave him a grey garment that one of the brothers brought – one just like the ewe wears, without any dye or colouring. And Perceval happily donned it, hanging it round his neck at once. When the brothers had set up the table – crude though it was – and spread the cloth upon it, they set about laying it as best they could with barley bread and water. One of the brothers presented water to Perceval with all honour; then they sat down to dine, and they were far from miserable or troubled. They

supped on the bread and water, and on cabbages they had cut in the garden; that was all they had to eat, and with that they quelled their hunger.

When they had leisurely eaten as much as they wished one of the brothers cleared the table, while the old man, the eldest priest, drew close to Perceval and asked him about himself: who he was, and from what land, and what he was seeking in that country; and he asked him for the love of God to tell him his name. And Perceval began to tell him, saying:

‘I am a knight, sir, a companion of the Round Table, by the faith I owe God the Spirit; and I go wandering throughout the country seeking chivalry and honour.’

‘Honour?’

‘Yes indeed, sir.’

‘How do you do that?’

‘I’ll tell you, sir,’ replied Perceval. ‘Before God, when I go riding in search of adventures – and I sometimes encounter some fearful ones – I do battle with many knights, and kill and defeat and capture many, and thus I strive to enhance my reputation.’

‘My good dear friend,’ said the hermit, ‘that’s an astonishing thing to say: you think you win honour and esteem by vanquishing a knight? God help me, rather do you win the plainest damnation for your soul! And it seems to me that a man who loses his soul has lost everything.’

Perceval was dumbfounded by the worthy man’s words. ‘By Saint Peter of Rome, sir,’ he said, ‘how then can I save my soul?’

‘I’ll tell you,’ the priest replied at once. ‘If you want to save yourself you must abandon the paths you’ve followed for so long and pacify your heart; for unless you have pity on yourself it will lead you to damnation soon, truly it will. A man without gentleness and kindness in his heart cannot last long – he is sure to die sooner or later; a man who has lived without them will pay dearly for it, for if he is taken in his sinful ways, the honour and esteem he has been seeking throughout the land by killing good people will be of little worth. A man who kills and murders people and devotes himself to doing ill wins, it’s plain, only his own grief and harm and downfall, for he will be in Hell everlastingly, as long as God is in Paradise; and a man who dies without confession has no remission for his sins.’

Perceval was truly shocked by what the worthy man said, and he took it deeply to heart.

When it was time to sleep the brothers prepared a bed for him and sent him to lie down; and he slept until the morning. He got up early, and immediately heard the bell ringing in the chapel, summoning the brothers. They all went to the chapel without delay, and the worthy man sang the service and everything pertaining to his office. And after mass he called to

Perceval, and he went to him and confessed all his misdeeds to the worthy man; and as penance the priest emphatically charged him to beware of ever committing such a sin as to kill a man except in self-defence; and Perceval swore he would not. Then he took up his arms and departed, commending the worthy man to God.

He rode out into open land but met no-one; then he passed into the wood and rode on, his head bowed in thought. Suddenly a knight came thundering through the forest, lance in rest, as fast as his horse could go; and he struck Perceval as he passed and sent him crashing from his horse and his lance smashed to pieces; but the knight, still securely in his saddle, did not attack or assail him further, but seized Perceval's horse by the reins; and Perceval leapt up swiftly and drew his sword at once, and began to race after the knight to recover his mount, distraught and furious at being felled. He chased after his horse right along the bottom of a valley, not slowing for one moment; but he could not catch it, for the knight was riding off so fast that a thunderbolt would not have caught up with him. He was bitterly angry when he lost sight of him; and he sat down beneath an oak, irate, downcast and troubled, and began to say to himself, furious, dismayed and filled with wrath:

'This morning I unburdened myself of all my sins to those priests, because I wanted to mend my wrongful ways, and now I've lost my horse: I'm in a mess without a mount – I look a proper fool! It pains my heart most bitterly. Truly, it's no good my trying to follow the words of the God-devoted priest: that I shouldn't do anything against that knight. I don't care what he says; to take revenge for the theft that's left me without horse or pony – I don't know where to look for him now – I'd head at once for the most distant land to seek that knight. But I'd have to find out his name first – I don't know who he is or what he's called.'

Such was Perceval's lament in the forest, leaning beneath the oak, sad, dejected and frustrated. While he sat there, downcast and grieving, not knowing what to do, he saw a horse coming straight and swiftly towards him, as black as any berry. It lacked neither saddle nor stirrups nor harness; it was a handsome horse indeed, and it raced down to Perceval like lightning, whinnying and pounding with its hooves. Perceval was roused from his troubled thoughts, and leapt up to catch him as soon as he saw him; and the horse saw him coming and knew that he aimed to seize him, and baulked and reared up; but Perceval leapt quickly forward, grabbed the reins and jumped into the saddle without a moment's delay, and took up his lance and shield. He was jubilant, and delighted with his fine mount, and said he had had a great stroke of luck, and that God had sent him a splendid horse. He set himself firmly in the stirrups; and when the horse, who was out to

trick him and bent on doing evil, felt his weight upon his back, he charged off with tremendous speed and noise, destroying everything in his path, uprooting trees and smashing branches, until he came to a cliff that was fully six hundred feet in height. He galloped straight to the very top, and Perceval was astounded – he had never experienced the like – and he thought of God whom he dearly loved; and when he came to the top of the rock he saw a river below, so deep that no stone could plumb its depths, and the horse was about to fling itself down to bring Perceval to his death. Seeing himself at the very brink with the river far below, Perceval realised he had been deceived, and in fear of the Devil he did as God had instructed him and raised his hand and made the sign of the cross. The demon abhorred the sign he had made and reared up on two legs to hurl Perceval into the river and drown him; but he flung him only flat on the ground, and launched himself from the cliff and plummeted, tumbling, into the river. If a tower had been demolished and cast down in a heap it would not have made such a thunderous din as the horse hitting the water. Perceval was deeply shocked, realising it was a demon that had borne him there; and he blessed himself with the sign of the true cross more than a hundred times. He was dismayed and alarmed indeed, and he saw he was now in a tighter spot than he had been in the forest, for before him he could see the awesome, foul and perilous river which no-one could cross without a boat: he had not seen a grimmer ford since the day he was born. And on the other side he could see a rock so high that the whole world could be surveyed from the top. He did not know what to do or which way to turn. He did not dare jump into the river, nor did he dare try his luck on the rock, for he could see it was sheer indeed. So he stayed where he was until night came, which brought him no pleasure or comfort.

Rain fell, thick and fast and torrential; and from a cloud he saw a whirlwind with three heads appear, and they were far from pretty but huge and hideous, all hurling scorching fire; and each head's mouth had a demon's tongue and the teeth and face of a leopard. Perceval looked away and made the sign of the cross over his face, and the demon swept away, burning all the forest and mountain; Perceval was filled with fear and again blessed himself with God's sign. Then suddenly he saw a boat covered in black samite; and there was just one open window in the craft, and a girl was leaning at it, by all appearances deeply vexed at having been at sea so long. The boat sped swiftly to where Perceval was sitting on the bank, downcast and perturbed, and sailed joyfully to shore. Then the rain ceased and the whirlwind disappeared, and the girl stepped elegantly and gently from the boat.

When Perceval saw her approach he went eagerly to greet her. And the girl, adept at every evil, said: 'Perceval, my dear, I've come here from

a distant land to find you. By my faith, I know you much better than you know me; I've seen you elsewhere and know you very well – and although you don't realise it you've seen me before, too, but you don't recognise me.'

'By the faith I owe God, dear friend,' replied Perceval, 'I don't remember meeting you.'

Then the girl came and took him by the hand and said: 'You've never seen me before, Perceval? Look closely.'

And Perceval looked at her body, shape and face, and was sure that it was his sweetheart Blanchefflor; and he said: 'Well met indeed, lady! How did you get here? I've never been so pleased to see anyone!'

Then he took hold of her at once and embraced her – it wasn't just a courteous kiss! And she, like the cunning creature she was, bade her retinue pitch a rich and splendid pavilion over them; and they spread a sumptuous quilt in the middle of the tent and made a bed at once: none so rich was ever seen. It was high time for supper, and those whose job it was went to set up the table, and on it they laid dishes so rich that you'll never hear of any so delectable. And when they had stripped him of his arms Perceval sat down at the table. But there was no grace said by any prior, no blessing or genuflection by any clerk. Perceval did not eat or drink, for he did not care to and he could not eat a thing – nor did he feel any need to do so, though he had not eaten or drunk all day because of all he had been through; but he had no thought of that.

When the others had eaten their fill, the lady, who was seated at his side, had the table cleared at once and called for hot water to be brought; and the lady's bidding was done by her servants without delay. They fetched the water immediately, and the lady and Perceval washed, and dried themselves with a towel presented to them by a young lady. Then the lady and Perceval spoke together, it seems; he said to her:

'My dear sweetheart, do tell me, please, in the name of love, what are you seeking in such a strange and distant land?'

'What am I seeking? I was seeking you! I needed your help most urgently, for a wicked knight named Arides d'Escavalon is striving with all his might to do me wrong: he's destroying and laying waste my land, and says that you're lost, or have become a monk or friar, and wants to take me as his wife. But I wouldn't marry him for all the money in the world, nor wrong you in any way; for my life shall be devoted to being your wife.'

'My love,' said Perceval, 'mountains, rocks and valleys will not save him from death if I can find him! I'll never fail you all the days of my life – I promise and I swear it.'

The lady thanked him, feigning deep affection. And when it was time to sleep she said: 'My love, you may go to bed whenever you like, and

lie with me in this bed if you wish – I dearly desire it: you'll lie here tonight at great leisure.'

Perceval said he would do just as she wished. The young lady lay down on the rich bed, and Perceval lay beside her; and it pleased him greatly, for he had not seen her for a long time. He felt her naked. She wanted him to lie with her and to do all his pleasure: she was far from coy or reticent. Then Perceval looked up and saw his cruciform sword – for he had brought it with him – and seeing the shape of the cross he crossed himself, and thus thwarted the demon with whom he had been about to have his way in the bed – for it was the Devil indeed, you may be sure, who in the semblance of his sweetheart wanted to make him sin while saying she loved him dearly. When Perceval made the sign of the cross as he should – and as God had inspired him to do in His miraculous way – the Devil saw it and leapt straight up and swept away the pavilion and the bed. Perceval was left all alone, downcast and anguished; and he stretched his hands heavenward and cried:

'Dear spiritual lord who became a mortal man, I worship you and thank you for what you've done for me here. It was the devil, I can't deny it, who tried to drown me last evening.'

Then he put on his clothes and shoes and hurriedly armed and equipped himself. And he looked towards the sea where the boat had been, but could see no sign of it: he could see nothing at all in any direction. Then the moon began to shine, which comforted and cheered him, and he spotted the boat sailing away from the shore and back the way it had come; and a storm blew up, the greatest you could ever see, with thunder, rain and lightning, and rocks fell from the clouds, both great and small, in an endless hail around the boat. For as long as he could see the boat the thunder, rain and lightning fell, but as soon as it was lost to view the storm abated. Perceval rejoiced at this, and sat down at last. But he was still disturbed by what he had seen: he knew for certain that the horse that had carried him had been the Devil in a horse's shape; and likewise there was no doubt in his mind that the girl at the pavilion who had arrived with the whirlwind had been the Devil bent on luring him into sin so as to drag him into Hell with him. He thought deeply on this, and kept stretching his clasped hands towards heaven, worshipping and thanking God in whom he placed his faith; and he said:

'Lord God, please have mercy and deliver me from this place with my body and my soul secure, and I promise that I'll strive henceforth to earn your love.'

Such was Perceval's lament; and he continued to sigh and grieve all night until daybreak was near. And there on the shore of the sea he begged

and implored the sovereign father God to cast His divine power over him.

While he was thus praying and entreating God to send him help and to steer him from sin, he saw a boat coming with a white sail unfurled, and it had no rudder or oars; and such great joy surrounded it that I don't believe any greater could be wished for. The boat that Perceval saw approaching that morning was richly adorned with drapes; but there was no-one aboard except one old worthy man who seemed indeed a good Christian. The boat sailed up to Perceval, and he went to see what was on board. And the worthy man, who was well aware of Perceval's plight and straits, stepped out and greeted him most kindly in the name of the high master; and Perceval returned his greeting most courteously and said:

'God help me, sir, while we're alone here please tell me who you are: I'd be very glad to hear. Do tell me the truth, sir, for I dearly wish to know.'

'Dear friend,' the worthy man replied, 'I'll tell you the truth about myself quite freely. The master of the Trinity, who guides sinners back to the right path, has sent me here to comfort and console you: I've no desire to cause you pain, for you've suffered much already. I bring you comfort from Him. You need have no fear or doubt, for Jesus Christ the Saviour, who created Heaven and Earth, has sent me here to find you. Come aboard with me, and have no fear or worry about anything you've seen.'

'Wait a moment, please, dear sir,' said Perceval, 'and tell me first about the black horse that bore me here; and then about the young lady who made me lie beside her naked, skin to skin.'

The white-haired worthy man replied: 'I'll tell you no lie. I promise you, the horse that brought you here last night was the Devil, who longed to plunge you into Hell where his fellows dwell. And when you were at the chapel and vanquished the demon and the black hand, and confessed your sins to the priest and assumed penance and repentance, I tell you, friend, the Devil was deeply vexed and dismayed at having lost you; and he returned to get you, and saw to it that you were toppled from your horse in the valley in the forest, to make you despair. The one who made you mount him would have made you pay dearly, for he would have drowned you here in great shame and distress if God had not taken pity on you by having you make the sign of the cross to work your deliverance. Thus were you rescued from the one who would have cast you to your death in this swift river if God had not come to your aid. And when he failed to drown you, the horse leapt into the water, vanquished, baffled and defeated, for he had no force or power left over you: he nearly went mad with grief. But he sent another demon here in a boat in the shape of a girl, and the demon told you she was your sweetheart Blancheflor whom you left at Beaurepaire. She lied, by Saint Peter; she was the Devil, who wanted to deceive



you, to drag you down to the shadows of Hell.'

'Truly,' said Perceval, 'I know his ruse would have worked if I hadn't blessed myself with the sign of the cross to which Jesus submitted His body. That saved me from the Devil, for I saw him whirling away amid the thunder across the sea, back to where he came from; I don't know what else became of him, nor do I wish to. I was left here; and now I'll go with you wherever you like: it's only right that I should when you say you're sent from God.'

'Don't dally, friend,' said the worthy man, 'for you'll be under God's protection as long as I'm your escort. I'll guide you happily, I promise you, to the road you'll want to take.'

With that they boarded the boat, and the wind filled the sail and bore them swiftly away at once. The boat sailed safely and joyfully into port. At the harbour where it landed they saw a castle standing on a rock beside the shore, finely situated and strong and handsome. It was so positioned that the sea beat on one side, meadows and vineyards and cornfields lay on another, and on another lay the forests, where tigers and leopards roamed among great mountains and valleys.

'Good friend,' said Perceval, 'tell me, if you don't mind, what's the name of that castle, so finely placed? Please let me know.'

'Dear friend,' the messenger of God replied, 'it's the castle of Lindesore, and the one who is now lord of it is named Saturs de la Loe.'

'I suggest we go there, if you've no objection, for I'm sure we won't fail to have good horses from him.'

'We'll not go there for horses, truly,' said the worthy man, 'for you'll have any horse you care to ask for: I've some beautiful and handsome ones, as many as a rich count.'

While they were talking they saw two boys running from the castle, and urgently: one was leading a palfrey, well equipped with saddle and stirrups, and the other was leading a charger. Both these mounts were white.

'My good friend Perceval,' said the worthy man, 'choose which of these you wish: whichever you like best; both are very good to ride, and finely harnessed and white as snow. You've found a mount: just choose and take which you like.'

Perceval stepped from the boat without delay and took the charger, which was swift and powerful indeed. He would not have exchanged it for a hundred pounds. It was most richly harnessed, and he mounted quickly and took his leave of the worthy man; and the one who had brought him in the boat commended him to the Lord God. Then the wind swelled the sail and the boat sailed from the port.

## (SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 38410 – 41530)

*Perceval sets out on his new horse and almost immediately meets a knight who asks him to pay a toll for passing into his lord's domain. When Perceval refuses they join battle. Perceval unhorses the knight, who threatens to kill his horse unless he dismounts to continue the fight. Perceval does so rather than have his innocent horse killed – and in any case he would not fight an uneven battle; and he defeats the knight and sends him to Arthur.*

*Perceval continues on his way and comes to a rich tent of red silk pitched in a meadow near a spring. There he is greeted by a girl who tells him that she is the sweetheart of Dodinial the Wild, a knight of the Round Table\*. Perceval says he knows him to be a worthy knight. No sooner has Perceval disarmed than a knight bursts in and seizes the girl and carries her off. Perceval, unarmed though he is, leaps on to his horse and pursues her abductor and fells him, knocking him senseless. When the knight comes to, Perceval threatens to behead him unless he surrenders. He does so, and Perceval sends him to Arthur. Then he carries the girl back to her pavilion, where Dodinial, now returned, thanks him deeply for having rescued her.*

*They sit down to dine together at the pavilion, and suddenly a girl rides up on a mule with a plea for help from Blancheflor, who is being attacked by Arides d'Escavalon, to whom she will have to surrender unless aid arrives immediately. Perceval sets out at once, telling Dodinial to go to Arthur with the message that he will join the court at Pentecost. But Perceval has not gone far before his horse begins to limp with a nail stuck in his hoof, and he heads for a nearby forge. The smith removes the nail at once, and then tells Perceval that his name is Triboet† and that it was he who made the sword that hangs at Perceval's side. He repairs it with ease, and tells Perceval to guard it well and to draw it only when necessary, for he will never have one so fine. Perceval thanks Triboet deeply and sets off.*

*He rides on to Beaurepaire where he is joyfully received by Blancheflor, and vows that he will take revenge on her attacker Arides. He sleeps in a splendid bed that night, and Blancheflor does not sleep with him. The next morning Arides arrives outside the gate and threatens that 'since your dear love Perceval has been dead for a year and a half' he will take Beaurepaire unless Blancheflor sends out a champion. Out rides Perceval, and after a mighty combat he forces Arides to cry for mercy and sends him as a prisoner to Arthur. Perceval refuses to stay with Blancheflor despite her pleas, because he has promised to be at Arthur's*

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\* The knight rescued from imprisonment by Gawain: above, pp. 306.

† A clear indication that the Third Continuation was written independently of Gerbert's, with no knowledge of it: the story of Triboet was taken up and completed by Gerbert – above, p. 223.

court at Pentecost. So after dining together in the great hall Perceval sets out once more.

Meanwhile Arides and the other knights recently sent as prisoners to King Arthur begin to arrive at court with Perceval's messages, and Arthur is delighted to hear news of him.

Perceval leaves Beaupaire and meets a handsome knight on a fine charger; but the knight's helmet is hanging from the horse's rump and his lance is tied along the horse's flank, because he is a coward, preferring peace to the risk of injury or death, and he is sure that no-one will attack him if he rides like that. Perceval tells him that he is dishonouring all knights by his shameful example. The Coward Knight agrees to ride with Perceval, but warns him that he certainly won't help him if he gets involved in any battle. They have not gone far together when they hear a cry for help, and see two girls about to be thrown on to a fire by a band of knights. The coward thinks Perceval is mad to ride to their aid, for 'there are ten of them and only two of us', but Perceval charges in and kills two of the girls' assailants. A third spots the coward leaning against a tree to watch the combat, and charges towards him; the coward can't understand it, and tries to point out that Perceval's intervention has nothing to do with him; but the knight doesn't listen and deals the coward a blow that draws blood; this provokes the coward to action at last, and he cuts through the knight's helmet, splitting his head right down to his shoulders. But he still won't go to help Perceval, and he sheathes his sword again and returns to lean against the tree. But then another knight attacks him, and this time he defends himself immediately, kills the knight and rides to Perceval's aid. Soon all the knights are dead and the girls are rescued, but Perceval has been wounded in the leg by a poisoned arrow. The girls and the Coward Knight take him to a nearby castle and summon a doctor to treat the wound. Perceval has to stay there for two months, in great pain.

The story now returns to Saigremor, who was swiftly and skilfully healed of his wounds and has left his hosts' castle. He returns to Arthur's court, for it is nearly Pentecost and he feels sure he will find Perceval there. Pentecost comes, and Saigremor, Arthur and all the others eagerly await Perceval's arrival. They see Dodinial the Wild riding towards them, bringing the news that Perceval has promised to be there that day. They go to church to hear the service, they eat a long and splendid dinner ... but still there is no sign of Perceval; and Arthur is worried that some ill has befallen him. All the knights of the court vow to leave next day and search for him, and they split up and go their several ways.

Boors is one of them, and as he rides on alone in search of Perceval he meets six armed knights in a forest, leading Boors' brother Lyonel a prisoner; he is naked except for a shirt, and they are beating him terribly. Boors is furious, and prepares to charge – but suddenly he hears a cry and sees a band of knights about to violate a girl. He begs God to tell him what to do: should he rescue his brother

*Lyonel or save the girl? He prays to God to save his brother while he charges to the girl's defence; and he kills all the girl's attackers with his lance and his sword, and carries her safely to a tower nearby. Then he rides swiftly off to save his brother; but he can find no trace of him. He sleeps that night in the forest, and sets out next day to continue his search. As he rides on he meets a girl cradling a headless knight in her arms. She tells him that he has been killed by six wicked knights who are leading a naked knight along and beating him; and she shows Boors the way they have gone. But he hunts for fifteen days in vain.*

*The story now turns to Gawain, who like Boors had set out in search of Perceval. One morning he, too, sees Lyonel being driven across a meadow and beaten by the band of knights; he charges at them in fury and kills some and puts the others to flight and rescues Lyonel, and takes him to a nearby house to be healed by a doctor.*

*When Lyonel has recovered he and Gawain set out together and then part at a fork in the road. Lyonel goes to the left; and he cannot forget that his brother Boors had not gone to his rescue when he saw him, and he is determined to kill him if he can.*

*Meanwhile Boors is still searching for Lyonel. He meets a religious man who tells him that there is a dead knight who has been lying bloated beneath a nearby tree for more than four days; he does not know who killed him, but his name was Lyonel. Boors rushes up to the knight and recognises him as his brother Lyonel and is grief-stricken. But when he makes the sign of the cross over the body, the devil who was lying there in his brother's shape to deceive Boors leaps up in horror, unable to endure the sign, and rushes away amid a terrible din. Boors thanks God that his brother is not dead and rides away to continue the search.*

*Finally the brothers meet, and Boors recognises Lyonel at once, for he is not wearing a helmet because of the heat. Boors cries a joyful welcome and stretches out his arms towards him; but Lyonel calls him a traitor and no brother, and Boors is dumbfounded. Boors explains why he could not go straight to Lyonel's aid – because of the girl that he had rescued – but Lyonel is unimpressed and threatens to kill his brother. Boors dismounts and begs for mercy, but Lyonel prepares to behead him. Suddenly Calogrenant appears, and is astonished to see Lyonel about to kill his brother. He cries out to him to stop; Lyonel attacks him in a rage and they fight a bloody combat and Calogrenant is killed. Boors, horrified, begs once more for mercy, and when it is refused he decides that he has no choice but to defend himself, and prays to God for forgiveness. Suddenly a cloud descends, so dense that they cannot see one another; and a voice cries out, warning Boors not to attack Lyonel, because he would kill him at the first blow; instead he should leave him and avoid his company. Then the voice and the cloud vanish, and Boors sees Lyonel lying as though dead. He calls out to him in alarm,*

*and suddenly Lyonel climbs to his feet and is full of remorse for what he has done and begs Boors' forgiveness. They embrace each other in joy, but are distressed by the death of Calogrenant. A hermit passes by and asks them who the knight is that they are lamenting so bitterly, and when they tell him the story he says it was the work of the Devil, who had been trying to kill them all; and he promises to bury Calogrenant and conduct a service for him, and Lyonel, weeping, carries the body to a nearby chapel where they bury him before the altar. Then Lyonel and Boors part at a fork in the road, agreeing to meet at Arthur's court at Pentecost, and the story returns to Perceval.*

*When Perceval recovers from the arrow-wound he sets off on his way again with the knight who had been a coward. One evening they come to a splendid castle with a great number of lodges pitched outside: a tournament is evidently about to take place. Perceval does not want to be recognised too soon, so he and his companion take lodging at a nearby abbey and next morning, after hearing mass, they return to the tourney. On one side are the knights of the Round Table, and they rapidly gain the upper hand over the King of the Hundred Knights; seeing this Perceval decides to join the underdogs, and the erstwhile Coward Knight does likewise and performs excellently – he has been well and truly converted by Perceval's example. He and Perceval unhorse and defeat many of Arthur's knights in the tournament, from which Perceval carries off the prize, and they return that night to lodge at the abbey.*

*Next morning they come to a fork in the road, and Perceval asks the knight his name. When he tells him that he was called the 'Bel Malvais' – the Handsome Bad Knight\* – Perceval says he has earned a new name: the 'Biax Hardis' – the Handsome Bold Knight. Then Perceval says that he will leave him and ride on alone, and the knight is distraught; but Perceval promises to see him at King Arthur's court at Pentecost.*

*That night Perceval lodges at a hermitage, and hears mass next morning and makes confession. Then he sets off once more, and on a heath 'between Scotland and Ireland' he meets a knight in battered, worn out armour. It is Ector, a knight of the Round Table, but Perceval does not recognise him in his wretched state after two years of wandering without shelter or lodging, pounded by storm and tempest. For no reason Ector instantly challenges Perceval to battle; Perceval tries to refuse, but Ector charges and a terrible combat begins, in which they inflict grievous wounds on each other until they both collapse and lie for a long while in silence on the ground. They finally summon enough breath to forgive each other for what they are sure are mortal wounds, and when they tell one another their names they are mortified, and faint once again and lie unconscious until midnight.*

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\* There is a 'Biau Mauvés' involved in a quite different episode in the Second Continuation: above, page 162.

It happened that about midnight a light appeared between them, the most brilliant they had ever seen. They opened their eyes when the light appeared, and in it they saw a royal angel, all alone, and in his hands he held the Grail. He circled them three times and then vanished in the light in which he had come: they did not know what had become of him, except that the holy angel had flown heavenward, still bearing in his hands the mighty Grail. It filled Perceval with joy, and pleased and comforted him greatly; and he sat up, and felt completely healed and well. And sighing gently, he gave humble and heartfelt thanks to ever-truthful God and His power and His beauty for this miraculous event. Then he asked Ector how he was, and he replied that his heart had been so restored by the grace of the Creator that he felt no ill or pain.

‘I’m completely healed and cured thanks to the holy angel’ that passed us here. But I wasn’t sure what it was that he was holding in his hands, and it grieves and troubles me and I would gladly know. A great deal of my wishes would be fulfilled if I knew the truth about the holy vessel which the spiritual angel was carrying in the light, for I’ve never seen one like it.’

‘Truly, dear friend,’ said Perceval, ‘it was the Holy Grail of which you’ve heard so much.’

When Ector heard this he was jubilant, filled with joy and happiness; and he stood up at once and asked Perceval how he was.

‘How am I?’ he said. ‘Before God, all the ills and wounds that pained me, so grave that I couldn’t move backward or forward, and had turned me pale with pain and anguish, are gone: never in my life, I swear, have I felt so well.’ And he jumped to his feet and said: ‘I greatly wished to see you well.’

‘May God grant that I see tomorrow,’ replied Ector, ‘I wished you the very same.’

And without a moment’s hesitation they kissed and embraced each other with joy, and there in the middle of the plain they forgave one another for their pain and grief. They stayed there happily until day had dawned. Then they found their horses, which had not strayed at all, and mounted by the stirrup. They kissed and commended each other to God without delay. Ector went to look for Lancelot, and searched for him until he found him. And Perceval set off across country, praying to God to guide him to where he might find Partinial and do battle with him.

He rode through woods and over mountains, on through valleys and over plains, until he saw five rich and handsome turrets in a castle. It was situated beside a river, surrounded by fields and woods and meadows: it lacked nothing at all. Nor did it need fear attack, for the most earnest assault could not have harmed it: it was so well-placed and strong that, God save

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\* The manuscript accidentally has ‘grail’ here.

me, it feared no siege-engines, mangonels or assaults. Nothing in the world could do it harm, unless it descended from heaven above. It was enclosed by walls and palisades. The people of the castle lived pleasantly indeed, for their lord kept and guarded them so well that they had no neighbours who could threaten them. Nor was there anyone who did not hate them, for their lord was so wicked, cruel and ruthless that there was no man so hard and aggressive alive. Four of the five turrets I mentioned were smaller than the middle one, which stood proudly and handsomely indeed, quite wondrously so; and it was redder than fine gold. No man has ever seen one so fair; and when Perceval beheld it he said at once:

‘That’s the Red Tower – by my faith, it must be, I’ve no doubt at all. It’s the home of the one who’s caused so much pain for the king who keeps the Holy Grail.’

Perceval gazed at the castle, quite wondrously rich, and at the Red Tower, imposing indeed. And he rode on until he reached the gate, which was handsome and mightily impressive. Two green and leafy pine trees were planted outside the gate, and he had never seen any so beautiful in all his life. On one of the pines there hung a rich and handsome shield, with two lovely, elegant girls painted upon it in fine, pure gold. Perceval gazed at it for a long while, and realised that it was the shield of the one who had caused the Fisher King such grief and anguish. Elated, he rode towards the shield, saying he would be glad to know why it had been hung there. Just as he was thinking this a boy came through the gate, and Perceval saw him and called to him at once, saying:

‘Don’t hide it from me, friend: what’s this castle called? Who is its lord?’

‘Before God, sir, you shall know its name. It’s called the Red Tower, and the lord, truly, is named Partinial. He’s so great in battle that no knight who comes this way and takes down his shield can survive against him. He’s killed one hundred and four worthy knights of renown since he received his arms – fully fifteen and a half years ago. All those who touch the shield are attacked most fearsomely – as soon as anyone lays a finger on it, his time is up! He hung the shield here so that all the knights wandering in search of adventure would see it clearly.’

‘So when a man takes it down, my friend,’ said Perceval, ‘what does he lose?’

‘By God who was crucified,’ the boy replied, ‘he loses his life, and no-one should be too keen on that!’

‘His life?’ said Perceval to himself. ‘By the faith I owe Saint Peter of Rome, he’s a cruel and treacherous knight indeed if he’ll kill a man for so little cause, and in doing so he wrongs God.’



Then he rode forward and took the shield, and holding it by the strap he beat it against the pine tree until he smashed it to pieces; and with all the breath he could summon the boy urgently blew a horn he had hanging at his neck. Partinial heard the horn and was filled with joy; he was sure it meant that someone had come and taken his shield, and he had himself armed immediately, leapt on to his charger without worrying about his stirrups, and with his helmet laced and a sword girded on with which he had cut off many a head, he took an oak-wood lance, gave his mount free rein and rode straight out through the gate – he was carrying no shield, for he expected to get the one that had been hung upon the pine. He nearly died of grief when he saw it smashed upon the ground: he was overwhelmed with anguish, but it did not stop him charging towards Perceval, crying:

‘Vassal! Vassal! You’ve got a shock in store for you today! You never saw such a precious shield as this, and you’ll be sorry you took it, for you’re going to lose your head in miserable defeat!’

When Perceval heard these threats he thrust his sharp steel spurs into his horse and set his lance in its rest, and they charged at each other as fast as their mounts could go and struck one another with all their might. Partinial struck Perceval upon his shield and smashed right through it; and Perceval, determined to joust well, thrust six feet of his lance’s shaft straight through Partinial’s shoulder. Like it or not they both crashed to the ground, and Partinial was in grave trouble with the deep wound he had been dealt; but he was undismayed, and leapt to his feet with his sword drawn; and Perceval likewise jumped up again, ready and eager to defend himself. Then you would have seen a bitter assault – the bitterest ever seen. They were both masterly and well-trying in battle, and with their slashing swords, drawing blood with every blow, they dealt each other many mighty cuts and wounds as they came to the attack. Partinial looked quite undaunted, for he clutched his sword with both hands and gave a fine account of himself; anyone who saw him would have surely said that no finer knight had ever lived. But such was Perceval’s response that all the people of the castle, great and small alike, declared that they had never seen his equal, and that no knight so accomplished could be found in all the land.

The battle between these two knights lasted from six till noon. They exchanged many great cuts and blows with their swords of steel, and neither of them had enough shield left to cover his hand or to set against a sword; nor did they have a helmet or a mail-hood left upon their heads. They were both in grave trouble, often forced to their knees or full-length on the ground. The people of the castle could see them clearly, for they had climbed to the windows of the highest rooms to watch the battle from which neither man would shrink at all. But why prolong the account? Victory went



to Perceval through the power of the King of glory. He brought Partinial to the ground beneath him, and said that the battle was over and that he must declare himself his prisoner. But the one who did not believe in God said that he would never descend to yielding himself captive to any knight, and that Perceval need not think he would ever cry for mercy.

‘In that case,’ said Perceval, ‘if I don’t kill you, may God never forgive me.’

And Perceval threatened him with instant death if he refused to submit to imprisonment. But Partinial replied: ‘I promise you I’ll never yield as long as I live. If you want to kill me, you can kill me here and now, for I’ll never cry for mercy or declare myself a prisoner.’

‘Then kill you I will, by my life!’ cried Perceval, ‘but it grieves me.’

And he struck him such a blow that he severed the head clean from the trunk. He left the body there in the grassy field; but he took the head and hung it behind his saddle-bow, saying that he would take it to the Fisher King who had done him so much honour. He mounted at once, and took the shield that he had smashed and broken on the pine-tree, and hung it at his neck. Then he set off without delay, leaving Partinial dead outside the gate, and carrying off his head.

He headed towards the house of the Fisher King, calmly and untroubled; but he did not know how he would find it or ever get there. A year and a summer had passed since he had been in that country, and he did not know which way to turn to look for the castle, for he did not know the surrounding land well – yet he was a native of it, having been born in the Waste Forest, though he had scarcely been very worldly-wise when he left his mother, and had never returned there since.\*

He rode on through the country searching, one hour back, another forward, until he saw the tip of a bell-tower peep above a rock. He headed that way until he could see it fully. It was the castle he was seeking; adventure had led him there. He rode on until he reached the gate, and the drawbridge was down and he rode right in, and dismounted in the courtyard beneath a pine. A boy ran straight to the king and reported that a knight had arrived, carrying the head of a dead knight on his saddle-bow. The king leapt to his feet at once in joy and jubilation, and felt sound and healthy, happy and joyful; and all by himself, without support, he came to the foot of the steps. Perceval came to meet the king, and as he did so he presented the head to him, and said, so that all could hear, that it was the head of the one who had caused him such distress.

‘This is his head, you may be sure; and as further recognition that I’ve killed and vanquished him, I bring you his shield.’

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\* This ignores episodes in the Second Continuation as well as in Gerbert.

The king looked at the shield and recognised it at once; and he took Perceval in his arms with the utmost joy and hugged and kissed him more than ten times and said:

‘Sir, you’ve brought me the greatest relief and comfort in taking revenge upon the one who was my enemy and had plunged me into misery. Now all my sorrow and pain are turned to happiness, as all can plainly see, and by God the Creator, all my grief is now forgotten. Up there on the main tower I shall fix this severed head upon a stake, in honour and remembrance of the one who took revenge upon the knight who wrongfully and treacherously killed my brother.’

He bade that a stake be fixed at the top of the tower and that the head be stuck upon it, and his bidding was done at once and perfectly. Then they disarmed Perceval jubilantly, and all the men and women rejoiced to a degree unprecedented.

And so Perceval stayed with the king, who loved him dearly and called him friend and son; and he showed Perceval great honour and service – as he had indeed deserved. He called for the tables to be set up, and the servant responsible did not delay, spreading the cloths immediately and setting the knives and salt-bowls. When they had washed they took their seats, Perceval sitting beside the king. And thereupon the lance and the Grail appeared, carried by the two girls most elegantly; and they passed before the tables, whereupon they were filled on every side with the most delectable dishes. Then the girls returned swiftly with the Grail and the lance to the chamber from which they had come. They stayed there for some while, and then returned to the hall exactly as they had done before. All those seated at the tables were sated and refreshed when they saw the Grail pass with the holy lance with the white head from which there hung a drop of blood. And behind them came a most handsome boy holding a silver trencher draped with two samite cloths, rich and beautiful, red and grey. They passed before the tables and then went straight back to the chamber. The Welshman gazed at them so intently that his eating was forgotten. Three times the Grail passed through the hall, and Perceval stared long at it, until finally it happened that the Grail came right up to him, quite freely and openly, and Perceval was filled with joy. He gazed at it once more, and then the bearers did not delay but carried it off at once with the silver trencher. Perceval was overjoyed: now his toil was ended. And all those present saw the trencher follow behind the Grail, and behind them both the holy lance, and saw them come to the head of the table at which the king and Perceval were sitting, and then return to the chamber just as they had come.

Everyone sitting there at dinner ate his fill most joyfully; and when the meal was over they all washed and rose from the table. And the king,

a man ablaze with prowess, took Perceval by the hand, and they went and leaned together at the windows of the hall. And the king addressed him at once, saying:

‘My good dear friend, you’ve endured great hardship to free me from the torment that I would have suffered endlessly, all the days of my life, never to be freed, had it not been for you. Yet I don’t know your name. But the great favour you have done me shall be related in many lands besides here, and so I beg you, if it’s right to ask, to tell me your name.’

And Perceval said: ‘My lord king, my name shall not be kept from you: I’m called Perceval the Welshman. Truly, I was born in Wales, but since I received my arms I’ve been to that land but rarely. I don’t know my father’s name, but certainly my mother was the Lady of the Waste Forest. But against her will, and with great haste and determination, I went to the court of good King Arthur to ask for arms. Since then I’ve been to many lands and searched and scoured many countries.’

‘And won great honour in the process!’ said the Fisher King. ‘But in God’s name tell me, wasn’t Dragonial the Welshman your brother?’

‘Yes, sire, by the faith I owe Saint Peter.’

‘Then I should rejoice indeed!’ cried the king. ‘You are my nephew, truly, and your mother was my sister, the most true-hearted, wise and noble lady who ever was in all your line; and she died of grief outside her gate because of you. I’m glad indeed to see you here safe and well – thanks be to God! All my land I bequeath to you – I renounce it forthwith. I shall make you king, whatever the cost. So help me God, it shall be done without fail at Pentecost, just as I have said.’

Perceval, sighing, calmly replied: ‘Sire, since you take me to be your nephew I promise and swear to God that as long as He keeps you alive I shall never wear a crown or be king. I’ve no desire for your land. But I shall never be too far away to return to you instantly if you ever need me, unless imprisonment or sickness or death prevent me. I don’t know what else to say, for by the faith I owe Saint Martin I must go in the morning to the court of the good King Arthur. But I shall see you soon, I think, if God who gives all good rewards grants me the power and strength to do so.’

All the men and women present rejoiced together at the avenging of Gon de Sert who had been lord and king of the desert; and they rejoiced likewise most sweetly at the healing of the king, who happily told them all that Perceval was his brother’s son. Then Perceval’s two cousins greeted him with joy, and the celebrations began once more and continued until midnight when it was time to go to bed. The king, who loved his nephew dearly, bade him lie down at his side, and since that was his wish the good-hearted Perceval willingly agreed, and slept there until morning.

As soon as he saw day break he rose and called for his arms from the one who had been keeping them. They were made ready for him, but they were battered and broken most shamefully, so the king had arms blacker than ink brought for Perceval – the arms he had borne himself before he had been crippled.

'Dear nephew,' he said, 'if you will be so good, please bear these arms for love of me, and have no fear, for they are my royal arms.'

'So help me God,' said Perceval, 'I shall bear them and keep them, dear uncle, for love of you.'

Then he armed without fuss and mounted the white charger and, like a courteous and worthy knight, he took his leave and rode out through the gate, fully armed, with arms blacker than a berry.

(SYNOPSIS OF VERSES 42102 – 42434)

*Perceval rides on towards Arthur's court and, one beautiful afternoon, finds two olive trees, two pines and two laurel trees together. Each has a lance propped against it and a shield hung upon it, and each lance and its accompanying shield is a different colour: one green, one white, one yellow, one violet, one red and one striped with all five colours. Six knights are sitting beneath the trees, eating, served by four girls. They leap up when they see Perceval, and the youngest knight challenges him for no reason; he takes the white shield and lance and charges towards him. Perceval has no choice but to fight, and he topples the young knight, breaking his right arm in the fall. A second charges, then a third; and one by one Perceval defeats them all and sends them to King Arthur as prisoners with the message that he will be at court at Pentecost.*

*Pentecost arrives ... but by the time King Arthur returns from church there is still no sign of Perceval. He is afraid he is not going to come, but at last a black knight on a white horse is spotted in the distance. Kay says it must be 'the devil riding an angel', a joke which does not amuse Arthur; and the knight, to the king's delight, is indeed Perceval, who is joyfully received by all the court.*

*The king asks his knights to recount their adventures since they last left him, and Lyonel and Boors tell of the unfortunate death of Calogrenant, which grieves Arthur and everyone. Then Perceval recounts all his adventures, telling them of the Grail, the lance, the trencher and the repairing of the sword, and of the black hand and the tree of candles; and of the theft of his horse and of the Devil's appearance in the shape of a horse and of a girl; and of his battle with Ector and the healing powers of the Grail; and of the Coward Knight; and of his victory over Partinial and the healing of the Fisher King and of his defeat of the*

*six knights with the coloured shields. Then they all sit down to a joyful meal.*

The feasting lasted for eight days, and throughout the eight days King Arthur wore his crown. It was a joyful time indeed. And during these festivities a young lady arrived at court, riding a swift hunting-horse. She dismounted at once beneath a pine and climbed up to the hall. She greeted King Arthur first out of respect for him as lord, and then she greeted Perceval, and all the rest of the assembled company together. Then she came up to Perceval and handed him a letter. He read it and learned that his uncle had died in his joy, and had wanted him not to stay at Cardueil but to return to be crowned and to rule his land and uphold his kingdom. He had entrusted it to him in the name of his soul and of God and of the lady who had borne God as her son. Perceval was deeply upset at this news, but the king and all the company were overjoyed for him, and Arthur happily declared that he would go and attend his coronation. They packed and prepared their baggage with all speed and set off, for Perceval summoned them, every one, by name; and they rode straight on until they reached Corbrie, where they were received most fittingly by the people of the land, who honoured Perceval unstintingly. And at the feast of All Saints the good Welshman was crowned. That day fourteen crowned kings were present in honour of him, and all were of high renown. The kings sat together around the high table, and all the worthy company were seated together, too; and it was not long before they saw the Holy Grail, completely uncovered, come through an open door, carried by a girl most elegantly. Behind it, straight afterwards, there came a boy who held a lance with a white head from which there sprang a drop of blood. And after that, in view of everyone, there came a silver trencher, carried by a girl most gracefully. They passed three times before the tables; and thereupon they were all laden with delectable dishes: the tables were filled so splendidly that there was no dish any man could name but it was there before his eyes, along with wines of every kind. Then the boy and the girls returned to the chamber, and the good King Arthur began to ask about what he had seen. Perceval the Welshman told him the truth at once, from start to finish, omitting nothing; the king quite forgot his eating, as did all the others who could hear, and what they heard delighted them.

This plenary court remained there for a month, and every day the Grail served them in its customary way. At the end of the month the court broke up and King Arthur departed with all his companions, riding on until he reached his land. Perceval remained in his own land, and for seven years he held it in peace, free of war, untroubled by any man. He rebuilt castles and fortresses, and all his neighbours held him in awe and honour. He arranged most noble marriages for his two cousins, whom he dearly loved: the daughter of King Gon de Sert, who had been lord of the

desert, he married to King Merien – there was not a more loyal knight in all the earthly world, and he was a king and had conquered Lanval; and the daughter of the good Fisher King, who was free of all pride and ill temper, he married to the king of Margone, which bordered Wales on every side. In the seven years that he reigned as king Perceval achieved all these things. And during this time Agloval lost his life, which caused Perceval much grief, for he had loved him dearly – as he should, for Agloval was his uncle. Then Perceval summoned the king of Margone and bequeathed his land to him, passing it entirely into his hands, and retired from this world. In a forest nearby a worthy man dwelt in a little hermitage, living a most solitary life. It was there that Perceval went to dwell, intent upon serving God. The Grail and the holy lance followed him without delay, and so did the holy silver trencher, and everybody knew it. The worthy hermit received him with great joy and honour as befitted such a man, regarding him as king and lord. He cherished and honoured him deeply, and gave him fine instruction in letters; and Perceval devoted such care and effort and attention to them, and found in them such pleasure and satisfaction, that the hermit made him a clerk and an acolyte, and subdeacon and deacon after that. What else should I tell you? He made him a priest after five years. And one Saint John's Day he sang mass and promised and vowed to God that he would serve him unfaithfully all the days of his life.

And so it was that Perceval served God faithfully for fully ten years, and he ate and drank nothing but what God sent him in the Holy Grail which he saw and which served him night and day. It stayed with him both day and night – which was certainly no discomfort to him, but a delight indeed. He lived there for a long while in prayer and in worship, in penance, fast and vigil. He served God at the hermitage for the rest of his days, and served and loved Him so well that God claimed him as His own on the day when Perceval left this world. He left it on the day God chose to take him by His grace. It was on the eve of Candlemas that Perceval painlessly left this world and ended his life, and God, who is always eager to take the good to His side, set him in the joy of Paradise at His right hand where the good long to be. On the day when, to his delight, God took his soul, he was carried off to heaven, most certainly. And the Holy Grail and the lance and the beautiful silver trencher went with him, in full view of everyone. After Perceval's death no man saw the Grail on Earth again, search as he might; nor will any man born ever see it so openly.

Perceval, the friend of God, was buried at the Palace of Adventures\* beside the good Fisher King, with great honour, joy and nobility. Those who undertook his burial laid him in a tomb of gold and silver, and on

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\* i.e. the castle of the Grail.

the lid they inscribed in tiny letters: 'Here lies Perceval the Welshman who brought to completion the adventures of the Holy Grail'. Anyone who goes to that land can still see the tomb sitting on four golden pillars: so Manessier testifies, who brought this work to an end in the name of the Countess Jehane, lady and mistress of Flanders,\* the worthy and wealthy lady whom God has endowed with such wisdom, valour, goodness, courtesy and beauty, nobility, generosity and worth; because I have come to know her good graces so well, I have finished my book in her name. It was begun in the name of her ancestor,† but no-one subsequently set his hand to completing it. Lady, it is for you that Manessier has laboured to finish it – and accurately, according to the source. He began at the mending of the sword, and told the story as he found it in the book, following the testimony of the written word, until King Arthur sat before the Grail. And all those who travel the road can still see the story there, sealed all in parchment.

*Explicit* the romance of Perceval.

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\* Jeanne, Countess of Flanders from 1205 to 1244.

† Count Philip of Flanders, to whom Chrétien dedicated his poem.



Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval* is the most important single Arthurian romance. Written in the final decade of the twelfth century, it contains the very first mention of the mysterious grail, later to become the Holy Grail and the focal point of the spiritual quest of the knights of Arthur's court.

Chrétien left the poem unfinished, but the extraordinary and intriguing theme of the Grail was too good to leave, and other poets continued and eventually completed it. This is the only English translation to include selections from the three continuations and from the work of Gerbert de Montreuil, making the romance a coherent whole, and following through Chrétien's essential theme of the making of a knight, in both worldly and spiritual terms.

It is thus the most complete account available in English of the essential Arthurian romance, the origin of the Grail legend.

NIGEL BRYANT's involvement with Arthurian matters is long-standing. As theatre director and BBC drama producer he has worked on Arthur-related plays and series by writers as diverse as C. S. Lewis, Rosemary Sutcliff, Lindsay Clarke and Kevin Crossley-Holland, and as a translator his other books include *The High Book of the Grail (Perlesvaus)*, Robert de Boron's trilogy *Merlin and the Grail*, and a new compilation of the medieval French romances, *The Legend of the Grail*.

*Cover illustration: Sir Galahad at the ruined chapel, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery).*

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