

'Then are both mine oaths fulfilled,' he cried. 'I have punished Sir Kay for the evil blow he gave the damsel on the day when I came first to Caerleon; and I come before King Arthur wearing the armour of the Red Knight whom I have slain and carrying in my wallet the golden goblet which was stolen from his board!'

Percivale rode forward, dismounted from his horse, and knelt before King Arthur.

'Lord King,' he said, 'make me a knight, I pray you. And here I swear to spend all my days in your service, striving to bring glory to the realm of Logres.'

'Arise, Sir Percivale of Wales,' said King Arthur. 'Your place awaits you at the Round Table – between Sir Gawain and the Siege Perilous. In the days long past Merlin the good enchanter told me that you would come when the highest moment of the realm of Logres drew near.'

Then Sir Percivale rode to Caerleon between King Arthur and Sir Gawain, while Sir Ywain followed after them, leading Sir Kay's horse while Sir Kay lay groaning across its saddle.

Many deeds did Sir Percivale after this, but there is no space to tell of his adventures with Rosette the Loathly Damsel, how he fought with the Knight of the Tomb who lived in a great cromlech on a mountain in Wales, how he overcame Partiniaus and Arides, King Margon and the Witch of the Waste City. But always he sought for the Lady Blanchefleur, always he was true to her alone: but he could not find her – until the years were accomplished, and he found his way once more to the Castle of Carbonek not long after the Holy Grail came to Camelot.

THE STORY OF LAUNCELOT AND ELAINE

For many years King Arthur and his knights fought against the Saxons at different places all over the land of Britain, but when the great Battle of Mount Badon had been fought – one of the greatest battles ever fought on British soil – there followed long years of peace when the realm of Logres seemed to smile in a long divine summer between the clouds that were gathering thickly over all the rest of the world.

At first there were many robbers and evil men, giants too and wizards, against whom the knights must be ready to fight at any moment; and it was not only at the great feasts of Easter and Pentecost, Michaelmas and Christmas that damsels came riding to King Arthur's court to seek redress for the wrongs that had been done them. But as the years rolled by fewer and fewer needed help, the peace of a true and holy state settled more and more surely upon Logres, and King Arthur's knights spent more and more of their time holding great tournaments at Camelot or Caerleon – growing more and more skilled in arms, it is true, but finding less and less cause to prove their prowess.

Most of the younger knights rode about all over the country in quest of adventures; but the older ones

waited more and more for some great thing to befall: and foremost amongst these was Launcelot.

For long years he had been supreme, no knight equalling him in strength and valour, in courtesy and nobleness of mind – not even Tristram or Gareth, Geraint or the young knight Percivale: only Gawain might compare with him, and they were friends so true that no rivalry ever sprang up between them.

Now from the very first day when he came to court Launcelot had loved Queen Guinevere and her alone of all ladies in the world. Faithfully and truly he served her for many years as a knight should, and King Arthur felt no jealousy, for he trusted the high honour of both Launcelot and the Queen. And for a long time Launcelot served Guinevere as a true knight and a true subject, seeking only to bring her honour by his mighty deeds. But in the long years of peace when he was so seldom called away from Camelot on a quest, and when King Arthur needed no longer to lead his hosts forth to battle, both Launcelot and Guinevere began to spend more and more of their time together – more and more often without King Arthur's knowledge.

In this way the first shadow of a great evil crept into Logres, so silently and so innocent in seeming that no one observed it, nor did either Launcelot or Guinevere dream whither it would lead. But the powers of evil, seeking now more and more desperately to find some tiny loophole through which to climb into the stronghold of good, saw it, and set a cunning snare for Launcelot.

One blithe spring day at the Feast of Easter which King Arthur held at Camelot there came a hermit into the great hall and greeted those who sat there at meat.

'May God's blessing fall upon all this company!' he cried. 'Surely a fairer gathering of knights the world shall never see! But there is yet one place empty: tell me of that seat, I pray you, my lord King.' And he pointed with his staff to the empty place between Sir Launcelot and Sir Percivale.

'Reverend father,' answered King Arthur, 'that is the Siege Perilous, and therein one knight only shall sit, for so Merlin foretold on the day of the making of this table. But if another man sit there he shall die swiftly by the magic of that siege.'

'Know you who shall sit therein?' asked the hermit.

'Nay,' said King Arthur and all his knights, 'we know not who it is that shall sit there.'

'He is not yet born,' said the hermit. 'But this same year he shall see the light. And he it is who shall win the Quest of the Holy Grail . . . But of that I came not hither to speak, rather of another quest and the saving of a lady who is the victim of wicked enchantments in the Dolorous Tower. Only the best knight amongst you can win her freedom, and that is Sir Launcelot of the Lake: therefore I beg you to send him with all speed . . .'

Far and far Sir Launcelot rode with the hermit until on a day he came to a city upon a dark hillside with narrow streets and a great black tower at the top. Then all the people cried out as he rode amongst them:

'Welcome, Sir Launcelot, the flower of knighthood! By your aid shall our lady be saved!'

Up to the tower went Launcelot, the hermit still guiding him; into the tower and up a great staircase until they came to a mighty door of iron.

'Within this place,' said the hermit, 'has lain the

fairest lady in the land for five long years. By enchantment Queen Morgana le Fay has imprisoned her, out of evil jealousy, and none may free her save the best of knights.'

Then Launcelot set his hand to the door and at once the great bolts and bars fell into pieces, the hinges screamed shrilly, and pressing into the room he found the Dolorous Lady lying in a bath of scalding hot water where she had been bound by her wicked enemy. But the enchantment ended when Launcelot broke through the door, and the Dolorous Lady came back to her people.

'Sir knight,' said the hermit, 'since you have delivered this lady you must deliver us also from a serpent which dwells near by in an ancient tomb.'

Then Sir Launcelot took up his shield and said:

'What I may do to save you from evil that will I attempt with the help of God. Therefore bring me thither.'

When he came up to the mountain top there stood a great stone cromlech of three upright stones and a fourth laid over them. And out of this dark abode came a mighty wingless dragon, breathing fire and hissing horribly. All through the long day the battle lasted and in the evening Launcelot smote off the dragon's head. Then he mounted his horse once more and rode down beyond the hill and deep into the lonely passes of Wales until he came through the Waste Lands to where a mighty castle stood, half ruined and half whole, the great keep rising high above rent walls and fallen towers. Round the castle rode Launcelot, marvelling to see the desolation of it, and how no weeds nor creepers grew even over the

fallen stones; and he came in time to a part of the building which still stood unharmed.

Here two squires met him and led him into the great hall where Pelles the Maimed King, whom Balyn had smitten long years before when he struck the Dolorous Stroke, sat amongst his knights and ladies at the high table on its dais above the body of the hall.

'Welcome, fair knight,' said King Pelles, raising one wasted arm where he lay unable to move on a golden couch. 'Sit you down at my table! It is long since any knight came to this haunted Castle of Carbonek, and I fear that many years still must pass before one comes who may heal me of my grievous wound . . . But tell me your name: I require you, by your knightly honour, tell me truly.'

'Sir,' said Launcelot, bowing gravely, 'I hold it a great honour that you should welcome me thus. And as for my name, it is Launcelot of the Lake.'

'And I,' answered his host, 'am Pelles, King of the Waste Lands and of Haunted Carbonek. But I hold a sacred trust, for Joseph of Arimathea was my ancestor — and anon you shall see a wonder . . .'

Launcelot seated himself at the table, and he noticed that there was no food nor wine set before anyone there, and that a great silence had fallen upon them all.

Then suddenly there was a peal of thunder, the door flew open and into the hall came three women dressed all in white and veiled, moving so silently that he thought they must be spirits and not women. The first bore in her hand a spear with a point of light from which dripped blood that vanished ere it touched the floor; the second held a golden platter covered with a cloth, and the third a golden cup covered also, but

seeming to be filled with a light so pure and bright that no man might look at it: but it was with a deeper awe and reverence that Launcelot hid his face in prayer as the procession passed round the table and out of the hall once more. When it was gone a great peace and well-being fell upon all present, and it seemed to Launcelot that he had eaten and drunk of more than mortal food.

'My lord,' he said in a hushed voice, 'what may this mean?'

'Sir,' answered King Pelles, 'you have seen the most precious tokens in the world, and I, the descendant of Joseph of Arimathea, am their guardian. From that Cup and Platter Our Lord Jesus Christ ate and drank at the Last Supper; with that Spear Longinus the Roman centurion pierced His side as He hung upon the Cross, and in that same Cup, which is called the Holy Grail, Joseph of Arimathea caught His most precious blood as it ran from the wound . . . Know, I say, that the Holy Grail has passed by you beneath that cloth: when it passes amongst you all as you sit at Camelot, the Round Table shall be broken for a season as you all ride forth in quest of it . . .'

When the wonder of what he had seen had passed from Launcelot a little, he spoke to his host of other matters, and many days he remained at Castle Carbonek – but never again did he see the Procession of the Holy Grail.

But King Pelles had a daughter called Elaine, one of the fairest damsels in the world, and she loved Launcelot the moment that she saw him. All the time he was at Castle Carbonek Elaine tended on him, served him in all things, and tried her hardest to win his love; but though Launcelot treated her with all cour-

tesy, rode hunting with her, listened to her singing, played at chess with her, yet still his heart was unstirred and he remained faithful to Queen Guinevere – though unfaithful in thought at least to his honour as a Knight of Logres and to his king.

Then Elaine spoke with her father, King Pelles, and he who could see a little of the future as through a glass darkly, made answer:

'Do not weep and lament, my daughter, Launcelot shall indeed be your lord, and you shall bear him a son, which shall be called Galahad, who shall bring the Waste Lands from under the shadow of the curse, and heal me of my wound . . . I know not how this may come to pass, but that it will be so, have no fear.'

The days went by while Launcelot dwelt in peace at Carbonek, but Elaine prospered not at all in her love. At length, in despair, she turned aside to seek the aid of enchantments, and there came to her a damsel named Brysen who was skilled in all the arts of which Morgana le Fay was queen.

'Ah lady,' said the damsel, 'know well that Sir Launcelot loves only Queen Guinevere and no other woman in all the world. Therefore we must work by guile if you would have him.'

After this they spoke together for a long time, and the end of it was that Elaine went secretly from Carbonek. Then there came a man to Launcelot bearing a ring, which seemed to him one that he knew well which Queen Guinevere always wore.

'Where is your lady the queen?' asked Launcelot.

'Sir,' answered the man, 'she is at Case Castle not many miles from here, and she bids you come to her as soon as may be.'

Then Launcelot bade a hasty farewell to King Pelles, mounted his horse, and rode swiftly through the Waste Lands until Carbonek was lost behind him, and he came at sundown to the little Castle of Case on the skirts of the great forest. And there he found Queen Guinevere, or so it seemed to him, waiting for him with her eyes full of love: but really it was Elaine who, by the arts of Brysen, had taken the form of Guinevere for a little while in the dim glow of evening.

When Launcelot saw her alone thus he quite forgot his honour and his oath, the glory of Logres and his faith to King Arthur: all his thoughts were on Guinevere – and when she spoke to him of marriage he forgot even that she was King Arthur's wife: indeed Brysen the enchantress had made all things ready at the Castle of Case...

The morning dawned grey and ominous, and Launcelot awoke to find the Lady Elaine sleeping by his side. Then he remembered all, and how he was shamed for ever, even though Elaine and not Guinevere was beside him.

'Alas!' he cried, 'I have lived too long, for now I



am dishonoured!' Then Elaine woke and knelt before him, confessing all and praying for his forgiveness.

'Ah, noble Sir Launcelot!' she cried. 'I did all these things only for love of you!'

But Launcelot cried aloud in his agony of mind, and the world seemed to spin round him. Flinging open the window, he leapt out of it, clad only in his shirt, fell into a bed of roses, sprang to his feet all scratched and bleeding from the thorns and rushed away still crying aloud, until he was lost in the forest. And there he wandered, and upon the desolate hills of Wales, his wits quite gone from him.

The months sped by, and at Camelot men began to ask what had become of Sir Launcelot that no one had seen him for so long. Christmas came, and still he did not return – nor had he graced the feast at Pentecost or Michaelmas.

When the new year was in, Launcelot's cousin, Sir Bors de Gannis, went quietly away from Camelot in search of him. In time he came to the Waste Lands and then to the mysterious Castle of Carbonek which so few men could ever find. Here he found King Pelles and the Lady Elaine – and Elaine carried in her arms a new-born babe.

'Lo! Sir knight,' said Elaine, 'this is my son, and his father is Sir Launcelot of the Lake. To-day shall this boy be christened, and his name is Galahad.'

Then Elaine told Sir Bors all the story of Launcelot's visit to Carbonek and Case, and of how he had run mad with shame and sorrow, and had wandered away into the hills of Wales.

At supper that night the Grail Procession passed once more through the hall: but in place of the

Bleeding Lance the second ghostly maiden carried a golden candlestick with seven branches.

'You have seen a great wonder,' said King Pelles, 'nor has this procession passed before the eyes of any save Sir Percivale and Sir Launcelot. High up in a room above the keep those candles burn ever upon an altar in a little chapel, and the Grail rests there, and the Bleeding Lance wherewith Longinus pierced Our Lord. I, the Grail-Keeper, have entered that room, and my father before me, and his father, and so back to Joseph of Arimathea who built this castle. But no other man has entered that room, save only the good knight Sir Gawain: once another knight came there and laid impious hands upon the Lance – that was Sir Balyn who smote the Dolorous Stroke, and perished sadly for his sin . . . Go now in search of Sir Launcelot: you will come here once more, but he, by reason of his sin, is not worthy to touch the Grail – though in earthly matters he is the best knight in the world.'

Sir Bors rode away next morning, and when he had come out of the Waste Lands he met Sir Gawain and Sir Percivale, Sir Ywain and Sir Segramour, and many other knights who were also seeking for Sir Launcelot. East and west and south and north they went, but never a trace of Launcelot did they find: many adventures befell them on their quest, and many strange things did they see, but no one whom they met had seen a mad knight running through the land without armour or weapons.

On a day, however, Sir Percivale and Sir Bors drew near to the Castle of Case, and there Elaine met them and greeted them joyfully, for she had come away with Galahad from Carbonek, and now not even she could find it again.

She entertained them well in her castle, but grieved sorely when she heard that Launcelot was still lost. For many days they remained at Case, hoping that Launcelot might come there in his wanderings – and at last he came . . .

Elaine walked in the garden one day, and her little son Galahad came running to her suddenly, crying:

'Mother, come and look! I've found a goodly man who lies sleeping by the well!'

And when Elaine beheld him she knew that it was Launcelot, and weeping sorely she hastened to Percivale and Bors and told them.

'Do not wake him,' they said, 'for perchance he is still mad and will slay you in his fury, or run wild once more.'

Then there came a hermit who dwelt in a little chapel near by, and he counselled that Launcelot should be carried from the castle while still sleeping and laid therein.

'All night I will pray before the altar,' said the hermit. 'It cannot be that the good knight Sir Launcelot shall pass all his days as a madman wandering naked in the wilderness . . .'

Early next morning Percivale and Bors stood bareheaded in the doorway of the little chapel and saw the hermit kneeling before the altar, while Launcelot lay like a dead man on a black bier in the little chapel. For long they stood there in the quiet shadow, with bowed heads, praying also for Launcelot: and then quite suddenly the Holy Grail was in the place, hanging in a great halo of light above the altar, shining so brightly that both the watchers sank on their knees and buried their faces in their hands. When they looked up again

Launcelot was kneeling too – but of the Holy Grail there was no sign, only the light of the rising sun shining down upon him through the little round rose-window above the altar.

When they had thanked the hermit, Sir Bors and Sir Percivale led Launcelot back to Castle Case, he walking like a man asleep; and he was laid in a bed and tended well by Elaine and her maid Brysen. But Sir Bors and Sir Percivale rode back to Camelot and told King Arthur all that they had seen.

At length Sir Launcelot woke from his long sleep, his mind whole and untroubled once more, and found Elaine bending over him.

'Ah me!' he exclaimed, 'tell me, for God's sake, where I am and how I came hither!'

'Sir,' answered Elaine, 'into this country you came as a madman, wandering naked and without knowledge. In my garden were you found, and the madness was raised from you by the good offices of Naciens the Divine Hermit, and by the coming of the Holy Grail.'

For many days after this Launcelot remained at Case, and Elaine tended him until he was strong and well again. But then, in spite of her tears and entreaties, he bade farewell to her, mounted his horse, and rode on his way towards Camelot. For still his heart turned only towards Queen Guinevere, and he loved her now with a greater, fiercer passion, even though Elaine had tricked him, wearing her form, and had wedded him when he thought that she was Guinevere.

What became of Elaine after Launcelot had left her the old tales do not tell, or tell confusedly. When Launcelot came, again to Carbonek, Elaine was there no longer, and Galahad, almost from the day when



Launcelot rode away from Case Castle, was entrusted to the care of certain holy monks and nuns who dwelt not far from Camelot.

The old tales tell, however, of another Elaine who loved Launcelot and from whom he rode away, refusing her love by reason of the faith unfaithful that kept him falsely true to Guinevere, King Arthur's queen. This Elaine pined away when Launcelot left her, and died of a broken heart; and when she was dead her attendants laid her, richly clad, in a barge on the broad river that flows down to Camelot, and they placed a letter in her hand and let the barge drift with the stream – for such had been her dying wish.

'Sir,' said Kay coming into the hall where King Arthur sat with many of his knights some days later: 'Here is a great marvel! Out yonder upon the river floats a black barge, and dead within it lies a lovely damsel clad in rich robes and jewels.'

Then King Arthur, with Queen Guinevere and many of his knights, went down to the river side and beheld how the barge floated quietly down the stream, and lodged at length against the bank. And now all

might see the letter which the dead maiden held in her hand, and bending down King Arthur took it gently from her, broke the seals, and read:

'Most noble knight, my lord Sir Launcelot, now has death won me from your love. For I loved you truly, and my name was Elaine of Astolat. Therefore I beg all ladies to pity me, and for my soul that they shall pray, and for my body that they give it honourable burial . . . And pray you for my soul, most peerless Sir Launcelot.'

When Launcelot heard this he covered his face with his hands and wept. 'Ah, my lord Arthur,' he said, 'know that I am sad indeed, and filled with pity for the death of this lady. But I call God to witness that I was not willingly the cause of her death . . . Truly she loved me, and longed above all things to be my wife; but it might not be, for love cannot be commanded, and I would think it foul shame and dishonour to wed one whom I did not love.'

'That is truth indeed,' said King Arthur. 'Love comes as a gift divine, and must be treated with all honour and reverence: he is no true knight who would do aught to bring a stain upon it.'

Then each of them passed by the lady Elaine with bowed head, and thereafter she was buried solemnly in the great minster. But it was some while before the shadow passed wholly from the Court of Camelot where was the heart of the high realm of Logres. And it never quite passed from Sir Launcelot, for he knew that in one thing he was unworthy of his high place: yet for all that he ceased not to love Queen Guinevere, nor she him – and from their love came at length the passing of the glory of Logres.

BOOK THREE

THE QUEST OF THE HOLY GRAIL

