

THE END OF THE QUEST

While these things were happening to Launcelot and Gawain, Percivale had overtaken Galahad and Bors, and was riding with them through the forest of dead trees towards Carbonek. At length they came out of the forest and after a month of wandering among the bare hills they came one evening through a narrow pass in the rocks and found themselves near to the castle.

Then they went forward swiftly, Percivale leading the way, for he remembered his visit to the mysterious castle when he had found and lost the lovely maiden Blanchefleur. Before it was dark they came in through the broken courtyard and, threading their way among the shattered walls, came to the great hall and left their horses outside.

Up the steps they went, and within found King Pelles still stretched upon his couch by the high table on the dais, while the silent company sat once more at the long tables in the lower part of the hall. But now Naciens, the divine Hermit of Carbonek, stood at King Pelles' side; and he welcomed the three knights, saying:

'Sirs, we greet you in the Name of God. Your wanderings are ended, for in this castle is the Holy Grail, and this night all things shall be accomplished.'

The three knights took their places at the table, and the feast began. But each of them declined the rich fare and the strong wine offered to them, eating only bread and drinking clear water.

Then, when the moment was due, the doors opened of themselves, and in a beam of clear light the procession of the Grail came in for the last time. There were the ghostly maidens carrying the Bleeding Spear, the Silver Dish and the candlestick, and then came the Grail Maiden herself carrying the Holy Grail covered in white samite: and Percivale trembled as he saw her, for he knew that she was Blanchefleur his lost love.

When the procession drew near, Galahad rose to his feet, and holding up the sword which so long ago Merlin had placed in the floating stone, he cried:

'In the name of God, stay a moment!'

The procession paused, and a great gasp of wonder went up from all those who were gathered in the hall. Very slowly Galahad went down from the dais and took his place in front of the procession, holding the sword before him by the blade so that the handle made a great shimmering cross above his



head. Then, walking like a man in a dream, he went by the high table, down the hall, and away through the dark passages of the castle; and behind him followed the Grail procession. Then, at a sign from Naciens the Hermit, Percivale and Bors took up the couch on which King Pelles lay and followed behind the Grail Maiden; and last of all came Naciens himself.

Through the castle they went, the light shining all about them, up the dark stairway, and so at last into the chapel. And there the candles and the dish were placed on the silver altar, and the Bleeding Spear hung once more in the air above it, the blood-drops falling and vanishing as before.

Percivale and Bors set down King Pelles below the steps of the altar and knelt one at either side of him; but Galahad knelt on the first step, and the Grail Maiden went up and placed the Holy Grail in the centre of the altar. Then Naciens the Divine Hermit came and took the Grail in his hands and after he had prayed, he brought it to Galahad and said:

'Holy Knight of God, I who have been the Priest of the Grail these many years give the Holy Grail into your hands that all things may be fulfilled. Now, Sir Galahad, my trust is ended, let me depart in peace. For I, many years ago, sinned deeply against the good Joseph of Arimathea who brought these wonders into Britain. And when he died this penance was laid on me: that I should live beyond the span of mortal men to be the Priest of the Grail until the coming of Sir Galahad the Good Knight.'

Then Galahad took the Holy Grail in his hands, drew away the cloth, and drank of the Holy Wine. After this he rose from his feet and set the Grail upon

the altar: and it seemed to all who saw him that his face shone with a great light. Next, he knelt down beside Naciens, took him in his arms and kissed him upon the forehead; and with a happy little sigh Naciens the Divine Hermit fell asleep and woke no more in this world.

Then Sir Galahad turned to King Pelles, and went towards him carrying the Bleeding Spear in his hand. And King Pelles raised himself on his elbow and said:

'Sir Galahad, good Knight of Logres and my grandson, you are right welcome and long have I desired your coming. For such pain and such anguish have I endured these many years as surely no man ever suffered. But now I trust to God that the end of my pain is at hand, and so I shall pass out of this world and be at peace.'

Then Galahad held the Spear so that the drops of blood fell into the wounds of the Maimed King: and at once Pelles was cured of his sufferings, and his flesh was as whole and unscarred as if Balyn had never struck the Dolorous Stroke.

While Pelles returned thanks to God, Galahad knelt once more beside the altar; and now the Grail Maiden came forward suddenly, carrying in her hands a sword which was broken into three pieces.

'Percivale,' she said gently, 'take from me this sword, and see if you can place the pieces together. Many knights have tried to do so, but only he who shall be the first king of freed Carbonek, and my husband, can mend it.'

Sir Percivale took the three pieces in his hands, and when he had prayed to God, he placed them together: and at once they were joined, with only one small crack.

'If you had spoken the words which would release the spell when you first came to Carbonek,' she said, 'there would be no crack in the sword.'

Percivale rose to his feet and taking her hand he said:

'Lady Blanchefleur, I have loved you these many years, and to you I have been true in thought and in deed – though I did not believe that I should ever see you again.'

Then he took her in his arms and kissed her; and there in the Chapel of the Holy Grail Sir Galahad, who now was the Priest of the Grail, blessed them and made them man and wife.

Sir Percivale and the Lady Blanchefleur knelt before the altar, and beside them Sir Bors, who had seen all these things. And Galahad took the Holy Grail once more and gave them the Holy Sacrament out of it; and they were filled with divine peace and joy.

Then Galahad set the Grail upon the altar and knelt once more in prayer. And as he knelt, his life was accomplished, and his soul was taken up to Heaven so that his body lay dead before the altar. Then the sunbeam descended from above, striking clean through the roof of the chapel, and the Bleeding Spear and the Holy Grail passed up and vanished from sight, nor were they ever again seen upon this earth.

When all these things were accomplished, Percivale and Blanchefleur became king and queen of Carbonek and of all the wide lands which surround the castle and which were never more waste or desolate. And the castle itself was no more a mystery, nor was it set apart any longer from the rest of the land of Britain. But when the last battle had been fought and the realm of

Logres was no more, Percivale's kingdom made still a little light in the darkness of a Britain conquered and laid waste by the barbarians. Long and happily Percivale and Blanchefleur lived at Carbonek, and when they died their son Loherangrin the Swan Knight became king.

But meanwhile Sir Bors de Gannis remained with them only long enough to see Galahad buried before the altar in the chapel where the Holy Grail had been, with Naciens on his right and Pelles on his left. Then he bade farewell to Percivale and Blanchefleur, and rode away towards Camelot.

He came there upon the Feast of Pentecost two years after the beginning of the Quest of the Holy Grail, and found King Arthur and his court gathered about the Round Table. But now many of the places were empty, for many knights had died on the Quest.

That day there was no need for King Arthur to wait until any other marvel or adventure was shown to him before the feast began for Sir Bors told the whole tale of the Holy Grail as he and Galahad and Percivale had seen it, and of how they had succeeded in the Quest. Gawain and Launcelot told of their adventure also, and presently Sir Bors said to Launcelot:

'Sir Galahad your son sent you greetings by me before he was taken from us, and to King Arthur and his whole court. And the good Sir Percivale greets you also, where he dwells with his lovely wife Blanchefleur, who was once the Grail Maiden. And for you, Launcelot, they pray, that you may escape from the sins of this world.'

'I trust to God that their prayers may help me,' sighed Sir Launcelot. But in a little while his eyes

travelled back to Queen Guinevere, and he forgot how he had failed when he came so near to achieving the Quest of the Holy Grail.

BOOK FOUR

THE DEPARTING OF ARTHUR

