

THE GRAIL LEGEND

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OUT of the crucible of the Middle Ages there has emerged a store of legends and historical myths, interveined with that spirit peculiar to all distinctively medieval creations, the spirit of chivalry. This code of romantic knighthood was, after all, nothing more or less than the blossoming of the flower of Christianity in the barbarian hosts which mantled Europe from the Baltic to the Mediterranean and from the Dardanelles to the Frankish coast. They were inherently a violent, warring people, these invaders, and when the Church undertook to bridle and civilize them, she prudently forbore any attempt to remove from their savage, Northern hearts the love of battle and buffeting. Rather she sought to blend with their martial blood some of the pacific virtues of the Prince of Peace, sublimating their native ruggedness with elements of Christian charity and self-repression. How completely she executed her work is evidenced in the enthusiasm with which the Crusaders responded to her call to arms, and in the phenomenal growth and diffusion of the Military Orders. Tilting and tournaments went hand in hand with a high religious idealism, and frequently under the warrior's mail there beat the heart of a docile saint.

The literature which was created during these heroic times mirrors the temper and humor of the age. The songs of the troubadours and trouvères, the lays of the minnesingers and the minstrels, the romantic tales of Charlemagne, of Huon of Bordeaux or of Ogier the Dane, are built upon themes which pulse with the lifeblood of chivalry; and with the natural process of refinement which marks the development of such productions, these narratives were in time purified both in subject matter and in technique until they crystallized in the legends of the Holy Grail. At this advanced date, it is futile to seek a perfect reconstruction of the evolution and formation of that legend. So shadowy and indefinite are its earliest sources, so inextricably interwoven are the various versions which constitute the cycle of Grail narratives, that all efforts to unravel this tradition, strand by strand, are foredoomed to fall short of success. But a consideration of the

Grail legend as a creation typical of the men and the times which produced it, is not so unsatisfactory. Nor is it a re-treading of ground already minutely examined. As folklore, as literary masterpieces, as aesthetic creations and as a racial contribution, these works have been examined and analyzed time and again, but as a fabrication characteristic of the medieval times they have never been fully investigated.*

Perhaps the legend is sufficiently well known to render any detailed exposition of it superfluous, but to obviate a misunderstanding of future references in these pages, it may be permitted to summarize it briefly. The cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper came into the possession of Joseph of Arimathea, who caught in it some of the Blood which dripped from the wounds of the dying Savior. Some versions identify this vessel with the Chalice of the Eucharist while others fancy it the bowl from which Christ and His disciples ate the Paschal Supper in the Cenaculum. The distinction does not interest us here. When imprisoned by the Jews for his part in the burial of Christ, Joseph was miraculously sustained by the sacred vessel, and when he was liberated by Vespasian after forty-odd years of confinement, he carried it with him to England. Here it was an object of pilgrimage and veneration and was entrusted to the descendants of Joseph after his death, with an injunction to guard it faithfully. One of these guardians was wanting in purity and the holy vessel disappeared. It became a favorite object of quest by various knights, the most famous of whom are those of King Arthur's Round Table. Three of these, Galahad, Perceval and Bors, are supposed to have pursued the search successfully, while other famous figures, among whom Launcelot is the best known, are denied this good fortune because their lives were wanting in virtue. These details are common to most versions of the legend, but there are many variations in other points and even in some of those mentioned above, such as the absence of the character of Galahad, the confusion of Perceval with the Siegfried of early German and Celtic mythology, and others.

If we could reestablish the personality and environment of the men who inaugurated the Grail legend with the same certainty and detail with which we can realise the purposes and points of view of its three most recent sponsors, Wagner, Tennyson and Lowell, the veil of obscurity which surrounds the work might be dispelled. Wagner, for example, conceived his musical version of the legend while living at

* Mr. J. S. Tunison, in his volume, *The Graal Problem* (Cincinnati, 1904), suggests this aspect of the work and we are indebted to him for many of the facts found in this paper.

Munich under the aegis of Ludwig II, King of Bavaria. Previously, he had contemplated two other religious dramas, one on the life of Christ, the other dealing with Buddha. The first of these pieces was directly attributable to the influence of the strong rationalistic movement in Germany which followed the publication of Strauss' *Life of Jesus*. The drama of Buddha, on the other hand, was undoubtedly inspired by Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*, which, after a disastrous first edition, most of which was sold as waste paper, was reedited in 1844 and reached the zenith of its success in the next dozen years. But while living in Munich, still warm with medieval memories, and under the patronage of Ludwig, a Catholic sovereign, Wagner turned to the subject of the Grail and produced *Parsifal*. No such obvious relation of circumstance and environs can be offered with respect to the compositions of the pioneers in this legend. Their personal history is tantalizingly obscure. Indeed, in some instances even the date of their birth and death is a matter of hazard. But they were children of their century, and in the light of what we know of the times in which they lived, we can interpret their work.

The earliest known writer of this early Grail cycle is Chrestien of Troyes, who began his work in 1189 but left it unfinished when cut off by death two years later. Before his time French romancers had begun to develop the Grail idea, but Chrestien was the first to attempt a fusion of this Christian concept with the Perceval legend of knight-errantry already widely known in German and Celtic folklore. After his death, Chrestien's poem, *The Percival*, was continued by several French authors, who shaped an introduction to it and accomplished the commingling of the heathen and Christian elements more fully, albeit more clumsily. Sometime between the year of Chrestien's death, 1191, and the end of the century, Robert de Borron wrote a trilogy on the same subject, entitling the three parts, *Joseph d' Arimathie*, *Merlin and Perceval*. In this opus, of which less than the first two-thirds remains, the reconciliation of the Christian and pagan features was carried to greater perfection. Almost at the same time Walter Map or Mapes (1140-1208) composed his French prose romance, *Queste del Saint Graal*, which is marked by a subordination of the role of Perceval and a corresponding heightening of the Grail element. This version, and an anonymous prose interpretation entitled *Grand Saint Graal* which was produced at the same time, was followed shortly by Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Arthure*, a work which parallels Map's so closely that some have declared it merely a free translation of the *Queste*. It remained for Wolfram von Eschenbach, a German,

writing fifty years after the first of the cycle appeared, and removed from his fellow legendists in race and allegiance, to create the greatest of these early Grail narratives, *Parzival*, and with his contribution the first cycle of the legend of the Grail was complete.

Historians of the Middle Ages and students of the literature of this epoch can establish no direct literary movement of which this cycle is the natural outcropping. The various works enumerated above are as unrelated to the *chansons de geste* which preceded them as they are to later publications such as the *Romance of Reynard the Fox* and the *Romance of the Rose*. They are explicable only as the impulsive creations of a period in which two stampeding ideas burgeoned and burst riotously into flower, *viz.*, a feeling of nationalism and a realization of religious values. A century of crusading, bringing the people of France into contact with the other races of Europe and the Orient, had afforded them a knowledge of the distinguishing characteristics and capacities of their nation. After the first spell of astonishment at the splendor and culture of the East had passed, the ambition to emulate and outshine was awakened in them. Add to this the broadening effect which the growth of educational institutions brought. In these budding universities, scholars from every section of Europe met and mingled, and from this interchange of history, of traditions and of literatures, these future French *littérateurs* learned the secrets of literary craft. Their own vernacular, when they came to examine it, they found sufficiently supple and ranging for any literary utility, and in the folklore of the Bretons, particularly in the Arthurian legends, with which they had long been familiar, they possessed the cadre and background for creations of the most ambitious cast.

Tracking down the religious element of their work, we find that the leaven of ecclesiasticism was permeating Europe with a vigor and thoroughness never before known. The prestige of the Papacy, which had been so notably advanced by Gregory VII in his conflict with Henry IV of Canossa fame, was given added splendor under Lotario de' Conti, who, as Innocent III, brought the papal power to a new level of honor and efficiency. A wholesome and wholesale asceticism, with signal stress on purity of life, was abroad in Europe, and its reflection is found in the chastity of mind and heart demanded in the successful questers of the Grail. Moreover, the Continent was constantly agitated by disputes, not necessarily confined to theologians, over the doctrines of the Real Presence and Transubstantiation. Almost every heretical sect which flourished at this time, Neo-Manichaeans, Bogomils, Tanchelinians, Cathari, Waldenses, Albigenses,

Lollards and others, posited among its errors a denial of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, while the dangerous tenets of Berengarius of Tours, all his life on the borderline of heresy, in their spread over Normandy, Anjou, Provence and Western Germany, made the doctrine of Transubstantiation almost as burning a question as the quarrels between the Emperors and the Papacy. Small wonder then that when these romancers set out to create a literature they instinctively included in their works the religious elements which we find incorporated in the Grail legend. Whether we consider their insertion of religious material in their productions as a gesture of loyalty to the Church or as a wish to enshrine current unorthodoxy, we cannot escape the conclusion that their mention of these controverted points was a result of the pressure of the times.

It is not to be supposed that this legend, saturated though it be with religious ideas and ideals, possesses any Catholic imprimatur. On the contrary, the tradition has, for very potent reasons, not merely continued to want ecclesiastical approbation, but has merited something of disapproval. There are three features, contained in almost all versions of the Grail legend, upon which the Church has frowned. In the first place, the tradition which recounts the existence of the Grail is based fundamentally upon the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, sometimes called the *Acts of Pontius Pilate*, which more than seven centuries before had been stigmatized spurious by Pope Gelasius I. In the fragmentary ninth chapter of this book, Joseph of Arimathea's imprisonment by the Jew is related, and in the twelfth chapter a miraculous liberation is described. The popular beliefs which sprang up around the name of the nocturnal disciple were probably a filling-out of the defective ninth chapter. Whether the miraculous vessel which sustained Joseph be regarded as the Eucharistic cup or as a dish used in celebrating the Paschal Supper, the unorthodox feature remained unchanged. Similarly, the reference which some versions make to the lance with which Longinus pierced the side of Christ merely multiplies apocryphal material.

The second obnoxious element is the ridiculous character of many of the miracles and wonders attributed to the sacred vessel. At times, powers are ascribed to it which resemble more the tricks of heathen necromancers than divine favors. It is represented as choosing its knightly guardians, as providing rich and abundant food for those in whose keeping it was placed, and as performing other grotesqueries which so patently smack of superstition that the ecclesiastical *beneplacitum* is impossible. Finally, the legend credited the Briton Church

with a dignity and an authority scarcely less exalted than that of the Church of Rome. Some scholars have found this idea so pregnant with possibilities that they have constructed an hypothesis to show that Henry II, the first of the Plantagenets to reign in England, was the instigator of at least one of the Grail narratives, probably that of Walter Map. Henry, they point out, was ambitious. He had visions of an empire which only the present British crown holdings eclipse in extent and glory. The parallels which these students find between the roles of Launcelot and his son, Galahad, and those of Henry and his son, coupled with the strange similarity between the name of Galahad's mother, Elaine, and that of Henry's wife, Eleanor, are held up as evidence of this theory. Never too respectful of the Roman Church's authority, Henry would have been only too eager to make use of the weapon offered in the high rank attributed to the Church in Britain by this legend. Accordingly he endeavored to throw an historical glamor over his title and his family by identifying their history with the tales of King Arthur, whose tomb he conveniently discovered at Glastonbury. All this may or may not be true, but it is certain that Henry's dreams were shattered in the death of his son, and when the Papacy bore down upon him for the murder of Thomas à Becket, he submitted.

Perhaps if the Saracenic origin which some claim for this legend could be verified, the attitude of the Church would have further justification. Such a source is, however, highly improbable. Wolfran von Eschenbach is the prime patron of this notion, and although it is not now possible to refute directly his statement that he obtained the material for his *Parzival* from one Kyot, a Provençal jongleur, who, in turn said he found the story in an Arabian manuscript at Toledo, the whole sequence lacks corroboration and is open to question. The legend has such obvious connections with Celtic folklore that the Oriental phase is unnecessary. It appears, therefore, either that Kyot is a myth, invented by von Eschenbach, or, supposing Kyot an historical figure, that the manuscript in Toledo is a simon-pure fiction. In either event, the evidence is so unsatisfactory that the Eastern genesis has few supporters and cannot be considered as a serious factor in determining the adverse mind of the Church.

The modern versions of the legend which have attained the widest fame are those of Wagner and Tennyson, and though they lack the spice of originality they possess an elegance and symmetry not found in the earlier productions. Wagner's *Parsifal* has something of the true medieval tone and in many details his opera-poem resembles the

masterpiece of Wolfram von Eschenbach. Both these authors favored the Orientalism of the legend, Wolfram by referring it to an Eastern source and by inserting many allusions to Oriental features and customs, such as the Arabic names for the seven planets, Wagner by employing the chorus of magical flower maidens, a distinctly Oriental idea and by declaring the title *Parsifal* to be a combination of two Arabic words meaning Pure Fool. Von Eschenbach had rejected the notion that the Grail was a cup or a dish and had called it a *lapis exillis*, which had been interpreted by some as *lapis herilis*, or stone of the Lord, by others as *lapis ex celis*, signifying stone from heaven. On this stone a dove is pictured depositing a Sacred Host annually on Good Friday. Wagner chose to return to the tradition which made the Grail a cup, but followed Wolfram in narrating the yearly visit of the dove. In versecraft, Wagner has indeed surpassed his model, for the musician was a splendid poet as well as a master of melodies, while Wolfram confessed himself no student of books, but a self-made scholar who garnered his knowledge in everything but the ordinary way. One of the greatest charms of Wagner's work is the acknowledged excellence of both his libretto and musical score, which harmonize to an unusual degree.

Just as Wagner followed the trail blazed by von Eschenbach, so Tennyson employed Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Arthure* as a foundation for his *Idylls of the King*. Malory's version contains prose of a higher order and Tennyson has transformed it into genuine poetry. It is said that Milton had considered the possibilities of the Grail legend as the subject of an epic, but on second thought chose the Fall of Man which forms the basis of *Paradise Lost*. Perhaps Tennyson's admiration for the great Puritan poet induced him to take up the subject of the Grail, and it is certain that he too intended the work to be epical. Because it has not the dignity and breadth which belong to that type of poetry, and also because it contains too much romance, it has not been so judged by students of literature. Unlike Wagner, Tennyson did not recapture the medieval spirit of the legend and as a result the *Idylls* are an anachronism. The character of Galahad, for example, is so altered that he appears a medieval knight with a Victorian soul, and Victorian souls were insufferably prudish and unnatural. This transformation John Erskine carries to the point of absurdity in his recent iconoclastic novel, *Galahad*, wherein the Lily-knight becomes a prig of the first water, with none of the virtues and all the vices of Tennyson's creature. But the English laureate has popularized the legend, with English readers at least, and for that,

as well as for the exquisite poetry in which he has unfolded the story, we are everlastingly grateful. For the same reasons, Lowell's *Vision of Sir Launfal* deserves mention and praise. It is not an attempt to reproduce the Grail narrative in its original form, for as Lowell remarks in his Foreword, he has "enlarged the circle of competition in search for the miraculous cup in such a manner as to include, not only other persons than the heroes of the Round Table, but also a period of time subsequent to the supposed date of Arthur's reign." Nevertheless, the name of the knight whom Lowell pictures on the quest is a combination of the names Launcelot and Perceval, and Sir Launfal's failure to achieve his goal because he was not truly charitable reëchoes the vain efforts of those knights who, in earlier versions, lacked purity. Lowell's position, that he who shares with another in need celebrates the mysteries of the Eucharist, is certainly not Catholic, but for that matter neither is Tennyson's portrait of the infant who "smote himself into the bread." However, it seems unnecessary precision to condemn these non-Catholic authors for unorthodoxy in dealing with a narrative which the Church regards as no child of her teaching in origin or content.

The legend of the Grail, for all its defects in doctrinal matter, is still vitally attractive. The age of romance and chivalry did not disappear with the passing of battlemented castles and heroes who stalked about in iron. "The knights are dust, and their swords are rust," no doubt, but the noble qualities of which they are symbols will always be esteemed. And as long as devotion to an ideal, and perseverance, and that higher heroism which is self-sacrifice, are admired and practiced, the quest of the Grail will be understood, and being understood, will be acclaimed.

