



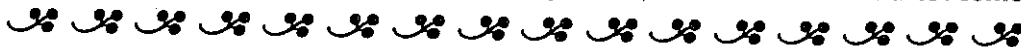
❧ LANCELOT ❧

No knight was ever born of woman and no knight ever sat in a saddle who was the equal of this man." So the chroniclers wrote of Lancelot du Lac, the flower of chivalry. He was the brightest star in Arthur's crown and the glory of the age. Yet Lancelot's fate was to suffer a soul always in conflict: The paragon of honor, he lived a life shadowed by dishonor; the champion of the High King, he became the enemy who broke the King's great heart.

Almost from the beginning, clouds of ambiguity surrounded Lancelot. He was the son of the ally of Arthur's youth, Ban of Benwic, and the name he was given at his christening was not Lancelot but Galahad. Through treacheries too convoluted to describe, Ban lost his kingdom to a usurper; he died on a hillside, watching fire devour the buildings of his fortress and weeping for the fate of his infant son. But the child was safe. As if they knew his destiny and were determined to preserve him for it, the old ones had taken him into their care. They sheltered him throughout his childhood and youth in a palace set in a densely forested country, all of it hidden from human view by illusion. The country appeared to the eyes of men and women as nothing more than a vast, deep lake. It was ruled by a fairy woman.

The old ones took the infant's given name away when they carried him into their world, he was called the Fair Foundling. But in preparation for the day when he would return to his own kind, the Lady of the Lake, as the chroniclers called his protector, accorded him the education due any prince. He had a master to teach him. When he was very small, he was given miniature bows and light arrows and taught to shoot, first at a target, then, as his skill increased, at birds and other small game. As soon as he was large enough to sit a horse, more serious training began, for he had to learn the skills of the chevalier. He learned to throw the javelin and to wield the broadsword, the techniques of the battle charge became second nature to him, so that, standing in the stirrups, he could guide his horse against an adversary, controlling a lance that was twice as long as he was tall.

It was a life of constant practice: Without practice, the arts of war would not come



naturally when needed. The hours and days thus spent produced a formidable warrior. But Lancelot was something more than that. His grace of character was unmatched, the chroniclers said; his nature was generous and gentle, he was swift of understanding and sharp of wit; his gray eyes were full of laughter, except when he was angered. Among the company of squires the Lady chose for him, he shone – even beside Lionel and Bors, his cousins whom she brought to grow with him.

Arthur's first sight of the man who was to be his joy and sorrow came on a June evening, eighteen years after Ban of Benwic's death. The High King had hunted small game all that afternoon in a forest not far from the fortress at Camelot. At day's end, when the light slanted through the trees and the birds' late song echoed among the leaves, he turned his horse for home. Gawain rode beside him in companionable silence. The two men had fought side by side in so many battles, had hunted together for so many years, that they had little need for speech. When the sounds of horses' hoofs and bridle bells came to their ears, therefore, neither said a word. They pulled up their horses and waited together.

"The Queen, I think," said Gawain after a moment. But Arthur shook his head, some intimation of the pattern of his life struck him, perhaps, or perhaps the peculiarly clear notes of the bridle bells warned him that old ones were near.

In a moment, the strangers appeared, a company winding through the green shadows, in and out of patches of sunlight. A boy on foot led two white pack mules, heavily burdened with body armor of white and silver-gilded greaves. Behind them, on pale horses, rode squires, one bearing a white shield and one a helmet, one a white lance and one a sword, and the last of these squires led a white battle charger, riderless. Other servants followed, clearing the way for a woman and a man, who commanded the company.

The woman wore a tunic as white as moonlight, and her face was covered by a linen veil finer than cloud. The palfrey she rode was bridled in silver and saddled with ivory, and the horse's white housings fell in folds almost to the ground. The man at her side sat in his saddle with the ease and grace of long training; he was tall and clothed in white and silver, and his gaze was grave and steady.

"I greet you," said Arthur. "It is not often that the folk of Faerie come among us."

The Lady raised her veil so that the High King might see her face. "I greet you, High King," she replied. "We are not all old ones. I bring you, as I am required, this King's son, whom I have fostered. His place is at your side. He is a peerless warrior, and I charge that you knight him at Midsummer. His name is Lancelot."

The High King glanced at Gawain, who nodded. This man was fairer than any of Arthur's company, and he had been trained by the old ones, who knew more of battle than any mortal. He was worthy to take the place of the son that Arthur lacked. "Lady, I will have him, and gladly," said the High King.



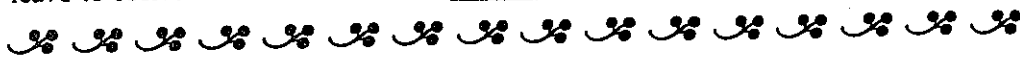
The Lady turned to her foster child, tears glistening in her eyes. "Farewell, son of a King," she said. "I cannot tell you your father's name; it will be shown you before long. When they are ready, I will send your cousins to join you and fight beside you. Do not tarry at the High King's court; the hall is not the place for a warrior. Ride out on the open road and prove your valor in the eyes of men."

So Lancelot rode with Arthur and Gawain to the fortress of Camelot. The last he saw of the woman who had reared him was a shimmer of white in the dusky wood.

As he had promised, the High King knighted the warrior; the Queen herself buckled on his sword. Lancelot trembled at her touch, but he was a young man unused to women, and those who saw the movement smiled, charmed by the shyness.

Shyness was indeed his feeling at first, but something more happened. Lancelot knelt before the High King and Queen to make his oath of fealty. He asked, as was the custom, if he might serve as the Queen's own knight and liege man, to defend her and take his prizes in her honor. As he made the request, he raised his head to receive the Queen's blessing. The most infinitesimal of pauses followed: Queen and knight gazed upon each other, eye drinking eye as if the souls shone out unmasked. In such an instant had Uther Pendragon seen Igraine of Cornwall, in such an instant had Arthur been caught by Morgause his sister. Yet the look promised more than passion, more than a recognition of desire. A tremor of surprise, a *frisson* of sorrow swiftly disciplined, crossed the Queen's face. She nodded her assent to the formal request and gave Lancelot leave to seek adventure. He went

Wise in enchantment was the fairy named the Lady of the Lake, who hid the French prince Lancelot in his youth and shaped him to be the finest warrior in the world.





Lancelot was the most beloved of Arthur's knights for his defense of his fellows. Again and again in the course of his adventures he was their champion in adversity.

In every kingdom, no matter how small, tournaments were regularly held, and these tournaments were not the orderly displays of later eras. Except that the dates and places were publicly announced, that areas were set aside where exhausted and wounded knights might withdraw from the lists to rest, and that prizes were awarded to the best fighters, tournaments were indistinguishable from actual battle. Groups of knights, riding in closed formation, charged each other across an open field. When the warriors were unhorsed by the force of the charge, they fought on foot with broadswords. Defeated knights forfeited to their captors all the accouterments they possessed—armor, arms, horse. This was a serious loss indeed, for the arming and mounting of a knight cost as much as a herd of oxen, an enormous sum. Some poorer chevaliers made their fortunes by their prowess, traveling from tournament to tournament, collecting arms that had to be redeemed with



from court at once, with only a squire to serve him.

Such journeying was the business of knights in those days: Fighting was the existence they were trained for, and they seemed fully themselves only in combat. They had to test themselves in battle, and test themselves repeatedly, to prove their skills and courage. And there was no lack of fighting. The High King's peace kept Britain whole, but Britain was a different island then, clothed in trackless forests, pocketed with isolated, little-known kingdoms and peoples, laced with the last hidden territories of the old ones. In Britain—as in Flanders, in Brittany, in the French kingdoms—private wars and feuds, some of them savageries lasting for decades, were common. No traveler could tell when he would cross a boundary onto a battlefield and find himself caught in some brutal combat with strangers at his side.

Even sport was training for war.

gold. Others, like Lancelot and Gawain, fought for the glory and the sheer joy of it.

The chronicles of Lancelot's adventures consist of scattered accounts of battles and of tournaments, vague as to place and time and even as to sequence. Of his earliest journey—before he learned his true name and parentage—it is known that he rode into Northumberland, to find the castle called Dolorous Garde and certain of Arthur's knights who had vanished there.

The journey took him into harsh country, hardly inhabited except for scattered, crumbling villages where wretched folk fell silent at the sight of him; they cringed away from his questions, and if they gave answer at all, it was in frightened mumbles. When at last folk told him that he neared his destination, he left his squire to make camp in a small wood and rode alone across rolling, scrub-covered moors to the place where the castle stood.

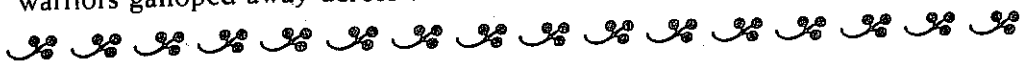
At first sight, it seemed a fortress of the dead. Its toothed battlements reared high on an outcropping of rock, sea gulls screamed around the windowless walls, and their harsh cries and the moaning of the wind were the only sounds to be heard. Lancelot paused in a stand of trees to survey the terrain. There seemed to be no way to approach the place unseen.

"It is not for you to approach by stealth," said a voice among the trees. The horse started and sidled nervously, Lancelot held it with an iron hand and looked down. Something moved among the tree trunks, appearing and disappearing, something as silver as birches and brown as the oak. He waited.

"I serve her who guards the Lake and fostered you in your youth," said the fairy woman, settling at last. She was hardly distinguishable from the trees, except for her moving eyes. "She bids me tell you this: Ten knights guard the castle's outer gate and ten knights the inner. Their lord is a copper man. When you have breached the outer gate, the copper lord will fall and the defenders will be at your mercy. I can offer you this: shields to give you magic strength as lasting as your enemies'."

I will fight only with my own strength," said Lancelot. He rode up the rocky road to the castle gate and shouted his challenge. No voice answered, but when he retreated to the plain beneath the road to give himself fighting room, the gate swung open. Swift as the wind, a knight charged, gathering speed from the decline of the road. Lancelot sat unmoving on his white horse. He held his lance steady, braced on his saddle. Its point took the adversary through the slit of his visor, lifting him from his horse. The man's neck cracked as his head struck the ground, and he lay broken at Lancelot's feet. Strangely, there was no sign of blood. But Lancelot had only a moment to register this, for a second knight left the gate and thundered down the stone road toward him.

This knight, too, he slew—or at least vanquished: The body lay motionless beside that of its brother, and no more than its brother did it bleed. The horses of both warriors galloped away across the moors as Lancelot faced his third adversary.



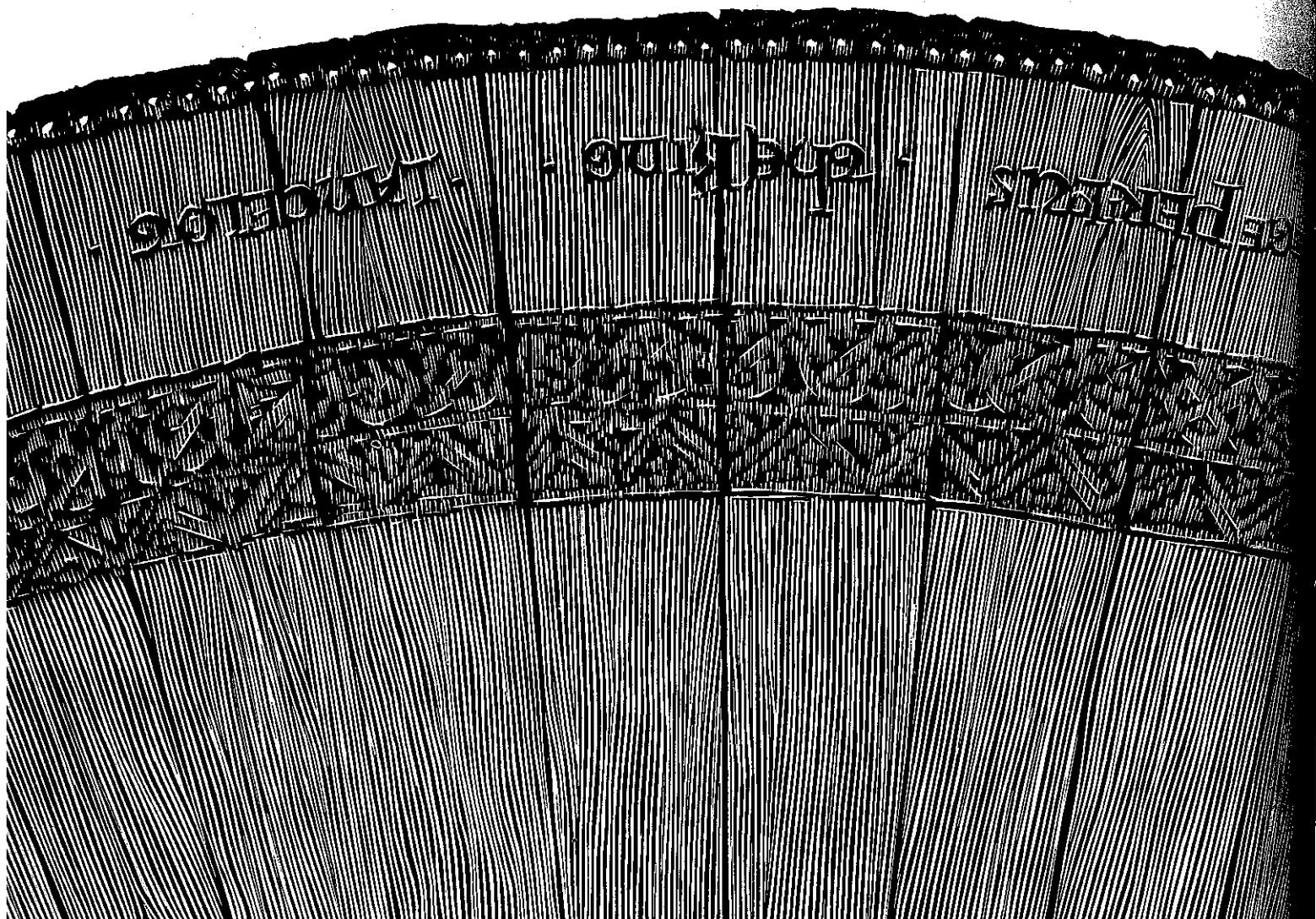
In the years of Arthur's prime, the Round Table of his company was the sign of unity and perfection. And Lancelot du Lac, his premier knight, sat at the High King's right hand.

"They have more than human strength. It is fair that you take my aid," said the voice, and Lancelot leaned from the saddle to accept the silver shield the fairy woman offered. She vanished into a shadow among the bracken, but his attention was elsewhere. At the instant he touched the shield, power had flowed into his arm and the battle fury into his mind. He fought with cold rage, blind to everything except the lances and swords of his enemies, unaware of the passing of the hours or the waning of the light.

The battle ended as suddenly as it had begun. Silence fell again, except for the raucously crying gulls. Around him on the field, ten bodies lay, melting into the earth even as he watched. Above him, the outer gate of the castle stood open, revealing only blackness.

"At first light you will fight at the inner gate," said the voice of the fairy woman. "You will bear a second shield. Rest now, and I will keep watch."

And in the gray dawn, bearing the shield the fairy gave him, Lancelot rode up the hill and through the open portal. In the wide space between the outer and the inner walls of Dolorous Garde ten knights were ranged, faceless men hooded in steel.



Above them, on the archway of the gate, stood a great warrior cast in copper, staring down with sightless copper eyes. The statue leaned as Lancelot watched, it fell, carrying one of his enemies to the ground. Sword in hand, silver shield high, Lancelot charged the others. Those who did not flee he slaughtered.

And when he had finished, the inner gate of Dolorous Garde swung slowly open. The brown and silver fairy woman appeared, hardly more substantial than a shadow. She beckoned him in. Stiffly, limping from a leg wound, he followed, and she showed him how each crenelation of the inner wall bore a helmeted skull. At the base of the wall beneath each skull, a gravestone lay, marked with each dead knight's name. One grave only bore no name, a long marble slab lying flat on the grass. On the stone these words appeared: *This slab will never be raised by hand or strength of man, save only by him that will conquer this dolorous castle, and his name is written beneath.*

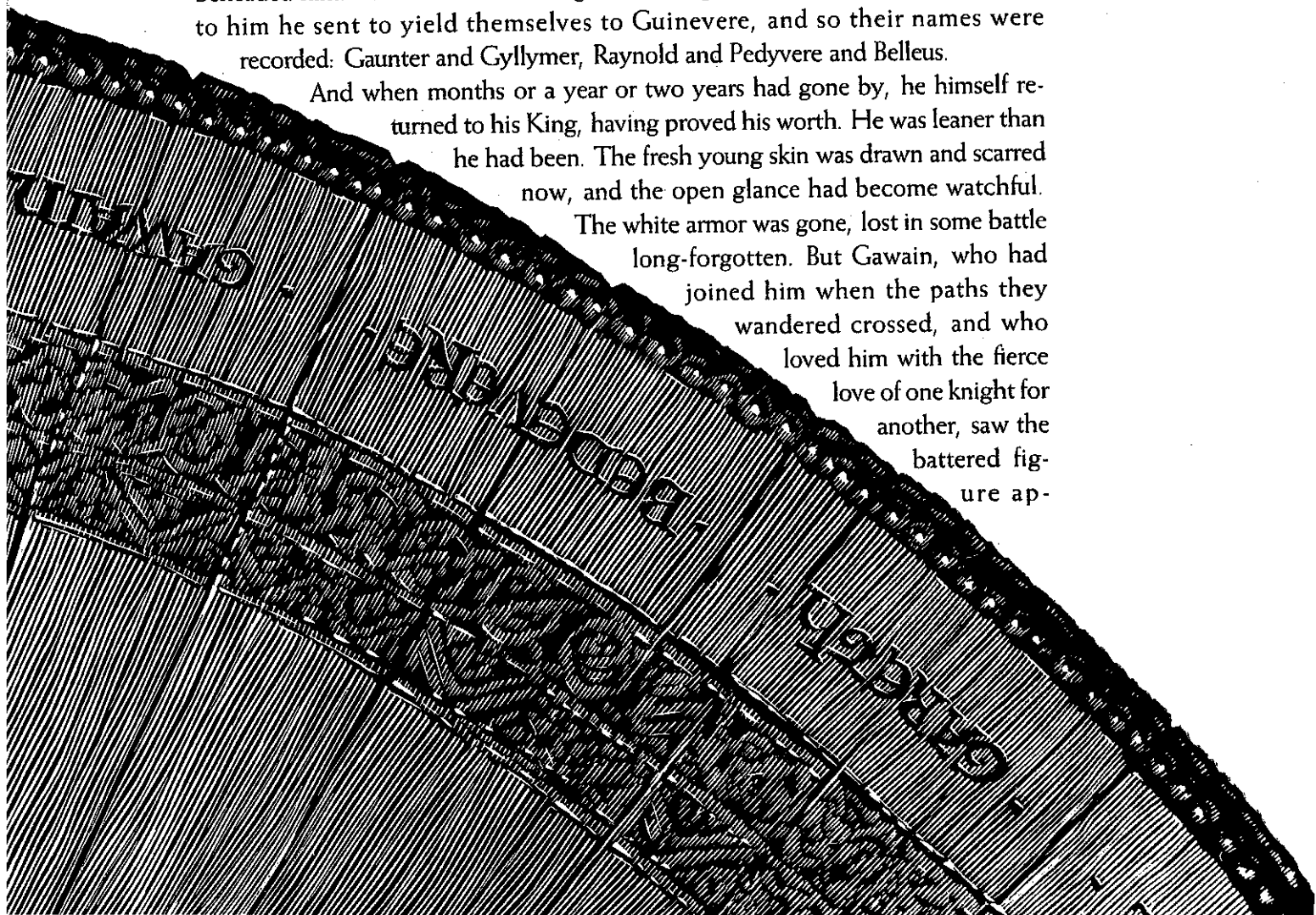
"Is this where I will lie?" he said. His companion nodded.

He bent, thrust his hands under the slab and lifted. The marble swung up to show the words carved in its underside: *Here will lie Lancelot du Lac, the son of King Ban of Benwic.*

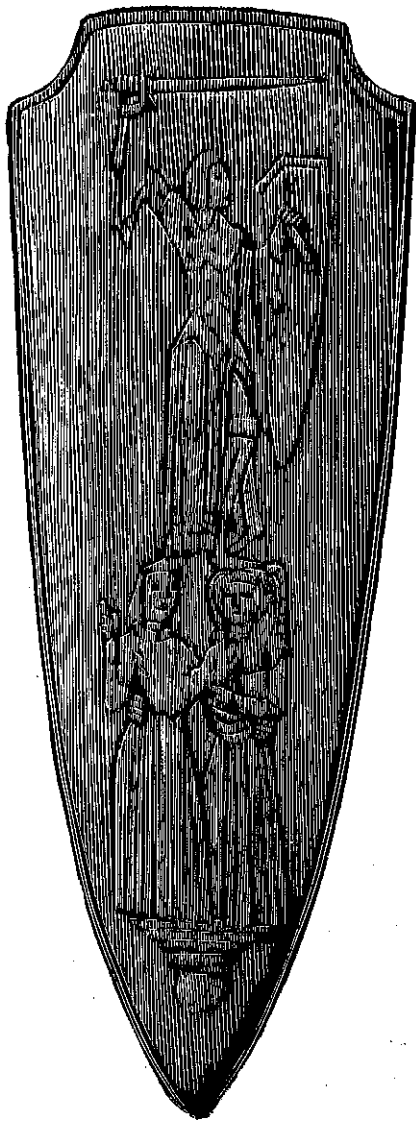
Thus Lancelot learned of his beginning and his end. It gave him grief or fear, he did not say so. He went on with his wandering, and Camelot heard many tales of his battles—of giants he had slain, of fellow warriors he had delivered. It was said, for instance, that a knight named Turquin had imprisoned Gaheris, Gawain's brother, as well as Kay, Ector and Lionel, Lancelot fought Turquin alone and beheaded him. Lancelot was a fair fighter and a generous one, those who yielded to him he sent to yield themselves to Guinevere, and so their names were recorded: Gaunter and Gyllymer, Raynold and Pedyvere and Belleus.

And when months or a year or two years had gone by, he himself returned to his King, having proved his worth. He was leaner than he had been. The fresh young skin was drawn and scarred now, and the open glance had become watchful.

The white armor was gone, lost in some battle long-forgotten. But Gawain, who had joined him when the paths they wandered crossed, and who loved him with the fierce love of one knight for another, saw the battered figure ap-



Among the enchantments of Morgan le Fay was a shield emblazoned with the figures of king, queen and knight. It revealed the tale of Guinevere and Lancelot, but it was many years before the High King understood its meaning.



proaching on the high road that led to the fortress and called his name. Even from the distance, he knew Lancelot by his riding.

And when he was brought into the hall and met the Queen again, she recognized the same soul she had seen before; one glance alone told that there was no change. Except for that one glance, Lancelot made no move: He had been bred to honor. The High King was his liege lord, and the bond between them the deepest a knight could have. Nor did Guinevere act. She was a King's daughter and wife to a King; the sacredness of royalty clung to her person. She loved her husband, and his honor was hers.

Sometime in the years that followed, however, their vigilance weakened. The stories are so varied and so conflicting that the truth is difficult to determine—and in any case does not matter. Guinevere and Lancelot became lovers and steadfastly and secretly remained lovers for many years. That their liaison went undiscovered for so long was surprising, considering the public nature of life in royal palaces. But it began to come to light eventually. Other eyes than mortal ones watched Arthur's court, eyes that spied for beings eager to destroy Arthur's power. Morgan le Fay, weaving her enchantments in her own spell-misted lands, brooded raven-like, devouring scraps and hints and whispers. When she thought the time was right, she acted.

It happened one year that the High King held his autumn court at London, receiving there his knights returning from their summer forays. One by one, they rode into the city and sat in the King's hall and described their adventures. Ga-

wain was among the last to arrive. On a chill afternoon, the Orkney knight, weather-beaten and grizzled now, sat at Arthur's hearth fire and told his story to the High King and the Queen. It was a long and rambling narrative, full of tournaments and riding; it ended with a tale of how Gawain had been entrapped by a Prince named Carados, how he had been disarmed and imprisoned in a stone tower in the heart of a forest.



Lancelot had rescued him, killing Carados in his fury and setting Gawain free. It had been a grand battle, Gawain said with a rueful grin; he had watched it from his prison window. He described it in some detail for Arthur. The Queen listened quietly, oblivious to the rain that drummed on the paving stones outside, to the hounds that played in the rushes at her feet, to the pages who scurried to and fro, bearing wine and meat for the traveler. When Gawain finished his tale and paused to drink, she said, "And what of Lancelot?"

"He left me as soon as he saw that I was fit to ride. He told me he was going to a good place. I thought him with the King by now."

If the Queen's heart contracted with impatient longing, she gave no sign: She was used to the separations, and she was a woman of stern discipline. She said merely, "He is not here. We have had no word."

"Well, then it may be that he has ridden to his own lands," said Gawain, without concern. Lancelot, over the years, had regained his father's territories in France, and he had land in Britain, too, for Arthur had bestowed on him the northern fortress he had conquered in his first venture. Lancelot had changed its name to Joyous Garde.

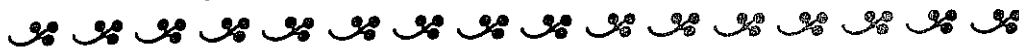
But Lancelot was not at Joyous Garde, nor was he in France. In the evening, as if timed to Gawain's arrival, a young woman was brought into the hall, a tall, swarthy woman, hooded and cloaked for travel. She stood between two men-at-arms, surveying the company with composure, and Arthur signaled for the men to release her. When they had done so, she said, "Sire, I come from distant lands and I bring strange tidings. Before I speak, I would be assured that I shall receive neither shame nor ill for what I say. There are some my news may offend." Her black eyes flickered toward the Queen.

"Speak," replied the High King. "Never in my court was a messenger harmed for the news he had brought."

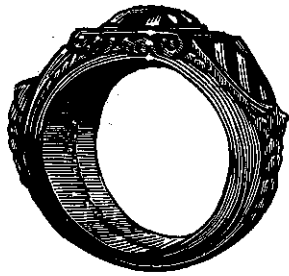
"High King, I bring you tidings of Lancelot du Lac. Know that you will nevermore see him in your dwelling, neither you nor any of your fellowship, for he is in a place where he will not easily be found. And even if he were found it would avail nothing, for he will not again carry his shield into battle."

Guinevere rose slowly to her feet and turned to leave. The messenger said, "Sire, if you suffer the Queen to leave, I shall tell no more," and Guinevere stayed as she was, her knuckles white on the arm of her high stool.

"Sir Lancelot was wounded when he left this knight," the woman continued, gesturing at Gawain, who nodded. "The wound festered, and he feared for his life, so he confessed to me the vile sin he had done against his lord. He told me he had betrayed the High King with this lady, the Queen. And he sent this token to the Queen that she might know these words for the truth. The token is one she gave him." She held out her hand, on the palm lay a heavy signet, ornamented with Lancelot's arms. The company stared at it.



Releasing her hold on the stool, Guinevere turned to the High King and, in a steady voice, denied the charge. "If I did nothing but recount the noble graces that were in Lancelot," she said, "my tongue would fail before I could finish. He was the fairest and best of all knights, he surpassed them all in valor. But may God have mercy on my soul if Lancelot would not let the eyes be drawn from his head before he would tell the lies this woman has recounted. God and the world know that I have never



A ring of gold adorned with his escutcheon was Lancelot's signet. It was given by the Queen.

loved Lancelot nor he me with a base love. But even if it were with us as this woman said, I would not deny the ring, and all who will may blame me for it. I care not, it is blame without support."

Thus Guinevere the Queen forswore her soul before her husband and her people. Arthur believed her, and so he said. The messenger shrugged when she heard the High King's reply. She turned to leave the hall, but Gawain gave an order to the men-at-arms, and they pinned her hands to her sides.

"What master do you serve, woman?" the Orkney knight demanded. "Where have you hidden Lancelot?"

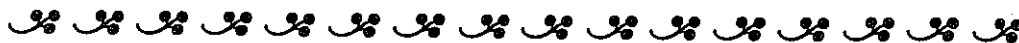
"As to the hiding place, I may not tell it. As to master, I serve my lady, the Queen of Gorre." The men-at-arms made the sign against evil.

"Let her go, she who serves the Queen of Lies," said the High King. He turned to Gawain, the most precious of his warriors after Lancelot. But Gawain—with Yvain and Lionel, Lancelot's cousin—was already striding from the hall, ready to ride in search of his fellow knight.

They searched for long months, but the messages they returned were unencouraging: Lancelot's shield had been found, he himself had been seen, weakened and injured and wandering in his mind, he had vanished again. It was a year before Lancelot returned to the High King, pale and wasted, with a tale of Morgan le Fay, who had imprisoned him with enchantment, drugged him so that she might take the ring from his finger, laid a spell of madness on him and then set him free to wander in the woods.

The Queen wept for his wounds and his struggle to fight free of the charm, and if any thought ill of her for it, none said so. Her people, the chroniclers wrote, loved and honored her for her defense of Lancelot's honor. But it was a false defense, and in the years that followed there were many eyes upon the pair, watching to see how they went on together.

Yet those years were serene and golden. The knights rode out in the summers as they always had done. Lancelot, as he always had, sent his prisoners to surrender in the Queen's name, making honor for her with his prowess. At court, he—with Gawain—was closest to the High King.



Together as a glorious company, the knights of the Round Table rode out on the venture of the Grail, and the Queen wept to see them go. That was the warriors' last time in unity.



And while people watched the lovers, there were greater matters coming to the fore, in the form of the last great quest of Arthur's company. Word reached the court—in the songs of minstrels, in the reports of wanderers—of a land to the far north that lay under a wasting enchantment because the talisman that protected it had been defiled and the King of the country wounded. Only the perfect knight, perfectly formed for the task, could break the enchantment and restore life to the land.

Different knights attempted the journey. At first word, Lancelot himself made it. He saw the King; he fathered a child on the King's daughter. But he did not see the talisman that was the Grail. His honor was flawed by his liaison with Guinevere, a disloyalty to the High King whom he served. His failure told him what no one knew, that he was not the chosen one, the best knight in the world.

This is the story of Arthur's fate, not of Lancelot's, and the matter of the Grail belongs to other chronicles. It is enough to remember that Lancelot's son, the spotless knight, the younger Lancelot who bore his father's given name—Galahad—came to court when he was old enough, that after his arrival, the Grail itself appeared,



floating in the air in Arthur's hall. It is enough to remember the final splendor of the company of Arthur—Lancelot and Lionel and Bors and Gawain and Percival and Galahad and all the rest—as they set out, banners flying, riding north to deliver a kingdom from a curse.

Those who came back were graver men than they had been. They had seen the wonder: how Galahad, the perfect knight, had said the words that freed the Waste Land; how Percival had stayed to rule it in the old King's place; how some knights had died and some gone mad; how Lancelot had failed and was denied the glory, although they could not tell why.

They came back to create a different court. The younger and the more restless of them began to gather in factions, not openly rebellious yet, but chafing under the High King's rule. There was covert feuding; blood was shed and shed again. The forces that sought King Arthur were gathering and growing as he aged. The weak chink in his armor was the dishonor that he did not know existed—the long love of Lancelot and Guinevere. The weapon the old ones used to pierce that armor was the High King's son by his sister, the child that Arthur and Merlin had sought—vainly and at an awful price in blood—many years before: Mordred of Lothian and Orkney.

