



The Quest of the Sangreal

adapted from

Thomas Malory's *Morte D'arthur*

by

Owen Barfield

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Headnote

Shelfmark Dep. c. 1101 of the Bodleian Barfield archive consists of a white envelope labeled 'Quest of Sangreal' and containing with the text a letter granting copyright to the London School of Eurythmy for whom it had been written as a base text for performance. Dated July 6th, 1968, the letter is addressed to Cecil Harwood. In it Owen Barfield expresses his pleasure at the thought of this text's continuing performance 'as eurythmy here and elsewhere.' The letter then expresses concern for 'certain notable defects' of the writing if seen solely 'as a literary composition.' The narrative's derivation from Malory is confirmed, but as *Morte Darthur* is many centuries old, Barfield lays assured legal claim to this eurythmic text, yet adding that 'morally it may well be as much or more Marguerite's,' undoubtedly referring to Harwood's second wife and noted eurythmist Marguerite Lundgren. He then expresses the desire to assign copyright of the text to the London School of Eurythmy with the intent 'that it be solely used for the purposes of Eurythmy,' and never published 'as reading matter.' The requested countersigned duplicate was duly supplied, signed 'A. C. Harwood, July 11th 1968, for and on behalf of the London School of Eurythmy.'

Fifty years on from this document, the text exists mainly in the archive, and perhaps the eurythmy inscribed by it might best live on if made freely available, leaving readers to follow in their own rights Owen Barfield's injunction that the text not be taken "exclusively as a literary composition."

THE QUEST OF THE SANGREAL

I

Sir Launcelot

In the days when King Arthur was Pendragon, or overlord of the island of Britain, with Guinevere his Queen, I, Merlin, made the Round Table, in tokening of the roundness of the world.

Merlin foretold that, by them which should be fellows of the Round Table, the truth of the Sangreal should be well known.

And the book telleth that men asked Merlin how men might know them that should best do and achieve the Sangreal? Then he said, there should be three knights that should achieve it, and that one of the three should pass his father as much as the lion passeth the leopard, both of strength and hardiness.

They that heard Merlin say so, said thus unto Merlin: "Sithen there shall be such a knight, thou shouldest ordain by thy crafts a siege, that no man should sit in it, but he all only that shall pass all other knights." Then Merlin answered that he would do so. And then he made the Siege Perilous.

Anon the book telleth of Sir Launcelot du Lake, that he was never matched of earthly knight's hand. He was the goodliest person that ever came among the press of knights; the meekest man and the gentlest that ever ate in hall among ladies, and the sternest knight to his mortal foe that ever put spear to rest. Not for then did Sir Launcelot love Queen Guinevere unmeasurably and out of measure long. And all his deeds of arms he did for the most part for the Queen's sake, were it right or wrong.

So it befell, that riding once upon an adventure, Sir Launcelot rescued from great dole the daughter of a king, and when he came into the presence of that king either required of other his name. "Sir," said Launcelot, "Wit you well, my name is Launcelot du Lake". "And my name"

said the king, “is Pelles, King of the foreign country, and cousin nigh unto Joseph of Arimathie.” And then either of them made much of the other, and so they went into the castle to take their repast. So the king and Sir Launcelot led their life the most part of that day.

And fain would King Pelles have found the mean to have had Sir Launcelot to have lain by his daughter, fair Elaine. And for this intent: the king knew well that Sir Launcelot should get a child upon his daughter the which should be named Sir Galahad, the good knight, by whom all the foreign country should be brought out of danger, and by him the Holy Grail should be achieved.

Now two of the ladies that waited upon Elaine and were enchantresses, by the mean of a cupful of wine wrought it upon Sir Launcelot that he weened that maiden had been Queen Guinevere, and brought him to her bed.

Wit you well that Sir Launcelot was glad, and so was that lady Elaine, that she had gotten Sir Launcelot in her arms. For well she knew that same night should be gotten upon her Galahad, for whom Merlin made the Siege Perilous and he should prove the best knight of the world. And so they lay together until underne of the morning, and all the windows and holes of that chamber were stopped that no manner of day might be seen.

II

The Widow's Son

Now leaveth the book from telling of Sir Launcelot, and speaketh of the coming of Perceval. In those days Earl Evroc held an Earldom of large dominion in the North under King Uriens. He was a valiant and a hardy knight, ever abroad in jousts and encounters and wars. And it befell by a sudden adventure, he was slain and six of his sons with him. Now the name of the seventh son was Perceval and he was the youngest.

And after that, Lord Evroc's widow was passing heavy and held all manner of war in despite, wherefore she resolved to fly with the child her son, and make a home for him in some far place, where never sounds or sights of war or death would come, and none would accost him touching arms and battles. And thus did she do, and she left the hall where she had lived, and removed to the deserts and wastes and the woody wilderness, and took with her only her son and his companion, a dwarf whose name was Tod.

There she reared Perceval, and taught him all manner of nobleness of thought and action and learning, but not for then did she suffer him to see weapon, nor hear tale of war or of aught that belongs to knighthood.

He grew up loving all honourable things, gentle of speech and bearing, but quick to anger at evil or any villainy, merciful of weak things, and full of pity and tenderness.

Yet was he passing strong of body, fleet of foot, quick of eye and hand.

She laid it on Perceval never to slay anything that lives, and the youth promised. But hard was it to keep his word, when he was in the forest and saw the wild things passing through the brakes.

Once as he strayed deep in the wood, he lit upon a wide laund, with two green hillocks in the midst thereof. And feeding upon the grass a great stag, and it had a silver ring round its neck. Whereat greatly marvelling, Perceval went up to the beast to stroke it.

But the stag was fierce, and would have gored him with its horns, but Perceval seized them, and after a great struggle he overthrew the beast and held it down, and in his wrath he would have slain it with a sharp stick.

With that, a swarm of elves poured from the hollow hillocks with great cries, and seizing Perceval would have evilly entreated him.

Now Tod the dwarf was with Perceval. And Tod ran among the elves and commanded them to release him. And in the end, Tod, who came himself of the elf folk, made those elves pass the words of peace and friendship with Perceval, and ever after that the boy went with the elves, and contended with them in wrestling, running and other games; and he learned many matters from them concerning the secrets of the earth and air and wind, and the spirits that haunt the waste places and standing stones, and how to put to naught the power of witches and warlocks.

And ever Tod bade them treat the young lord with reverence. "For here is one" he said, "who shall do great deeds. He shall be a stainless knight, who shall gain from evil the greatest strength, and if God wills, he shall beat down the evil powers in this land."

But the youth wist not what he meant, though he was right glad to have the elves for friends.

It fell out that Perceval was in the forest with the widow lady, his mother. They saw three knights coming along the horse-road on the borders of the forest.

"Mother" said Perceval, "What are those yonder?"

"They are angels, my son", said she.

"By my faith, I will go and become an angel with them." And Perceval went to the road and met them.

So the foremost checked his horse beside Perceval, and said, "Tell me good soul, sawest thou a knight pass this way either this day or yesterday?"

"I know not what a knight is" answered Perceval.

"Such a one as I am", said the horseman smiling: and he was Sir Owen, one of King Arthur's knights."

"If ye will tell me what I ask, I will tell you" said Perceval.

"Gladly will I do so."

"What is this?" asked Perceval, pointing to the saddle.

"It is a saddle" said Sir Owen.

"And what is this?" asked Perceval, and pulled the skirt of the hauberk.

“It is a dress made of rings of steel which I put on to turn the swords of those I fight withal.”

Many other questions the youth asked eagerly, as to the arms they bore and the accoutrements and their uses. And in the end he said: “Sirs, I thank you for your courtesy. Go forward swiftly, for I saw such a one as ye go by here but two hours since, and I will follow you.”

Then Perceval returned to his mother and he said to her: “Mother, those are not angels, but honourable knights.”

Then his mother wept bitterly.

And when she recovered a little, “Dear son” she said, “art thou fain to ride forth into the world?”

“Yes, mother, of a truth,” said Perceval. “I may not be happy more but if I go.”

“Go forward, then”, she said, still weeping, “and God be with thee, my dear son. And as I have no man who is strong of his hands, thou must journey alone, yet will I give thee gold for thy proper garnishing and lodging. But make all the haste ye may to the court of King Arthur at Caerleon-upon-Usk, for there are the best and the boldest and the most worshipful of knights. And the king will give thee knighthood.”

Therewith his mother swooned away. But Perceval took little keep of it, such joy had he in his heart, and he rode away without looking back.

III

Galahad

And of Sir Launcelot the book sayeth that upon a day he came into a forest and into a great valley, where he saw an abbey of nuns, and was brought into the Abbess's chamber.

Anon came in twelve nuns that brought with them Galahad, that was passing fair and well made, that unnethe in the world men might not find his match, and all those ladies wept.

“Sir” said they all, “We bring here this child which we have nourished, and we pray you to make him a knight, for of a more worthier man's hand may he not receive the order of knighthood.”

Sir Launcelot beheld the young squire and saw him seemly and demure as a dove, with all manner of good features, that he weened of his age never to have seen so fair a man of form. Then said Sir Launcelot: “Cometh this desire of himself?” He and they all said “Yeah”. “Then shall he receive the high order of knighthood as tomorn.”

And on the morn at the hour of prime at Galahad's desire, he made him knight and said: “God make him a good man, for of beauty faileth you not, as any man liveth.” Then Sir Launcelot beheld his son, and had great joy of him.

IV

Carbonek

Now it befell that Perceval was dubbed knight by King Arthur at Caerleon and was of the fellowship of the Round Table. That was the time when the most part of the fellowship set forth upon the quest of the Sangreal. Wherefrom Launcelot and all other of the knights who set forth upon that quest were turned back save only Sir Perceval and Sir Bors de Ganis and Sir Galahad, the haut prince.

And thereto Perceval set forth alone. And it befell that on the quest he came to a hermitage in the depths of a forest. And beside the hermitage he saw a venerable, hoary-headed man sitting alone. And the man asked Perceval to sit beside him; and they conversed together.

“I am thy uncle”, said the hoary-headed man, “thy mother’s brother. And with me shalt thou remain a space, in order to learn the manners of different countries, and courtesy, and gentleness and noble-bearing. Leave then the habits and the discourse of thy mother, and I will be thy teacher. And thus do thou. If thou seest aught to cause thee to wonder, ask not the meaning of it; if no one has the courtesy to inform thee, the reproach will not fall upon thee, but upon me that I am thy teacher.”

Perceval lodged many days with his uncle in the hermitage, until it befell one morning that, at break of day, he arose and took his horse and bade farewell to his uncle, and rode forth.

Right so he came to a vast and desert wood, and on the border thereof was a lake and on the other side a fair castle. And on the margin of the lake he saw a venerable, hoary-headed man sitting upon a velvet cushion, and having a garment of velvet upon him. And his attendants were fishing in the lake. When the hoary-headed man beheld Perceval approaching, he arose and went towards the castle. And the old man was lame.

Perceval rode to the palace and the door was open, and he entered the hall.

(music)

And there was the hoary-headed man sitting on a cushion and a great fire blazing before him, and many knights around him.

And the household and company arose to meet Perceval and disarrayed him. And the man asked him to sit on the cushion; and they sat down and conversed together. And anon he said to Perceval:

“I am thy uncle, thy mother’s brother, and I am brother to the man in whose house thou wast last night. And the name of this castle is Carbonek; and it lies the most farthest westward save only the city that hight Sarras.” Neither told he to Perceval the name of him who owned the castle, and Perceval forebore to ask it.

Then as they discoursed together, it chanced that Perceval looked upward and behold, a spear of mighty size, with three streams of blood flowing from the point to the ground, entereth into the hall, hoving between the rafters and the floor, and passeth out by the further door into an inner chamber. For all that the man did not break off his discourse with Perceval. Neither did he tell Perceval the meaning of what he saw, and he forbore to ask him concerning it. And when all the company saw this, they began wailing and lamenting. And when the clamour had a little subsided, behold two maidens entered with a large salver between them, in the which was a man’s head surrounded with a profusion of blood, and so out at the other door. And again Perceval asked not the name thereof, nor who lay in the inner chamber. It beseemed him more fit to enquire of one of the seneschals upon the next morning. And thereupon the company of the court made so great an outcry, that it was pain to be in the same hall with them. But at last they were silent. And when the time was that they should sleep, Perceval was brought into a fair chamber.

Now in the morning, when Perceval arose from sleep and looked about him, there was neither man nor maid to be seen. Then he dressed him in his armour, which he found ready to his hand, and, leaving his chamber, passed through the castle, seeking entrance now into this room and now into that. And behold, every door was locked and barred, and when he called aloud, there was none answered his summons, but only the silence that was there. Whereat he marvelled greatly.

And the gate of the castle was open, and he passed through it and descended the steps without and found there his horse tied and his spear and his shield leaning against the castle wall, and the drawbridge down.

Perceval mounted his steed and rode out across the drawbridge. Yet ere he was well over it, a great marvel befell, for the bridge began to rise under him and his horse reared and snorted and unnethe leaped rampant across the crack.

Therewith Perceval turned him about and stared at the raised bridge and the castle, and again he called aloud and no voice answered him. Whereupon he turned his horse's head, and, full of musing, rode deep into the forest.

(music)

Ere he had ridden far, he beheld a damsel sitting underneath a tree upon the ground and on her knees the body of a knight which was slain. And, when Perceval spoke to her, she told him that her lover was slain that morning in battle. Then did the damsel, upon her beholding him so well bisene and his horse glistening, ask of him where he had lodged that night, seeing there was no castle for many leagues around. And he told her all the adventure. "Ah", said the damsel, "I see thou was with the rich King Fisherman." "By my faith," said Perceval, "I know not whether he be king or fisherman, but he is truly wise and courteous."

"And didst thou ask", said she, "of the lance and wherefore it was bleeding?" "Not I", said Perceval. Many more questions the damsel enquired of him and at the end, when he told her his name was Perceval le Gallois, she reviled him bitterly. "Henceforth thou shalt be called 'Perceval the Recreant', forasmuch as thou hast brought great woe upon thyself and others by thy craven silence at Carbonek."

Then did the damsel say that she was his cousin German, nurtured in his mother's house, and she made known to him that his mother was dead. For she had died of grief after his departing from her.

"Ah, damsel, this is a cruel tale you tell." "And therefore it was" she said, "that thou didst fail in Carbonek."

And Perceval was passing heavy of his heart.

V
The Quest

Perceval rode ever forward. He came one day towards nightfall to a desert road in the fenlands, where was neither track nor trace of man or beast or bird. Right soon he saw a great castle rise before him, and as he made towards the gate, he found the way so overgrown with weeds that unnethe could he push his horse between them. And on the threshold the grass grew thick and high, as if the door had not been swung for an hundred winters.

He smote on the door with the butt of his spear; and long he waited without in cold and wind and rain.

Anon a maiden came and opened the door for him, and his horse she led into the stable for feeding, and Perceval she brought into the hall.

And there was a tall and stately lady, old of years and reverent of aspect, and very sorrowful. Her attendant sat beside her, mournful of face and tattered of garb. They welcomed him gladly; then sat at meat, and gave him the best cheer that they had.

When season was they went to their chambers, the lady said, "Fair sir, it were well for you, that you lie not in this castle."

"Wherefore", said Perceval, "seeing that the storm beats wildly without and there is room here for many?"

"Because of the witch, Domna, and her evil sisters, of whom it is foretold that they will this night make onslaught upon this castle for the hatred they bear unto King Arthur. Against them none can help us. Therefore tarry not."

But Perceval gainsaid her, and promised her all the help that he might. So either took leave of other and went to their couches.

(music)

And behold, at underne of the morning there came a great noise with groans and shrieks, as all evil were being wrought.

Up started Perceval from his couch, and ran with his sword in hand to the gate, and there was a poor serving man wrestling with a hag dressed all in armour, and behind her came others.

And their eyes from between the bars of their helms, shone with a horrible red fire. Sparks flashed from the points of their armour, and the swords in their grimly hands gleamed with a blue flame that scorched the eyes to look upon it.

But Perceval ran upon the foremost witch, and with his sword dealt her so great a buffet that she fell to the ground, and her helm was flattened down on her head.

When she fell, the light of her eyes and her sword were darkened and her armour withered away, and she was naught but an ugly old beldam in rags. And she cried out: “Thy mercy, good Perceval, son of Evroc, and the mercy of heaven.”

“How knowest thou, witch, that I am Perceval?” “By the wierd of Morgan le Fey, who foretold that I should suffer harm from thee. And now must thou come with us to learn the wisest use of arms. For there are none in Britain our peers in that matter.

Then Perceval remembered sayings of the elves —the earth-folk who serve Morgan le Fey— “The stainless knight shall win from evil greater strength, and with it he may confound all evil.”

“If it be thus foretold, I will go with thee. But not for then shalt thou swear that no evil shall happen to the lady of this castle nor to any that belong to her.”

“So shall it be if, at the end, thou hast might to prevail over me, but if not, wit ye well, the lady and the damsel are my thralls. Neither shall they be the last in the realm of Logres to be so.”

Then Perceval took leave of the ladies of the castle and went with the witches to their castle of Glaive. He stayed with them for a year and a day, learning skill in arms, and gaining strength, that it was a marvel to see the feats which he performed, the while they strove to bend him to their wills, tempting him each hour and every day with the promise of power and wealth and wide dominion, would he but swear fealty to the Witch and to be her man against King Arthur and his fellows.

Anon she came to him and said that he had now learned all that she could teach, and he must go forth to the test.

He rode overthwart and endlong till he came to a hollow. Up and down lay pieces of armour red and rusted as they had been in a fire; and there was the body of a knight lately slain, and it was charred and black. Then as Perceval looked about him, he saw a dark hole of a cave in a bank beside the hollow.

Suddenly there brast forth from the hole a horrible fire and smoke, and with a cry as of a fiend a knight in black armour came suddenly before him on a great horse as black as a bear, whose eyes flashed fire and whose nostrils jetted hot vapours.

“Ha, thou Recreant” cried the knight, “what dost thou here?”

Then Perceval saw how the boss of the Black Knight’s shield was the head of a dragon, its forked tongue writhing, its teeth gnashing, and its eyes so red and fiendish that no mortal, unless by God’s aid, could look on it and live. From its mouth came a blinding flash as of lightning and beat at him, but he held up his shield, and with angry shrieks the Black Knight saw that the lightning could not touch the shield of Perceval.

Then from his side the evil knight tore his sword, and it flamed red as it were heated in a furnace, and thrusting forward he came and dented at Perceval. But Perceval bore the brunt with his shield, which the flaming sword might not harm.

Then did the Black Knight marvel greatly, and he laughed at him in scorn. “Sir Perceval, thou knowest not whom it is thou fightest. Thou must overpass the skill thou didst learn of the witches of Glaive. For know ye that I am Domna’s man, and to me she has taught the more. Now therefore keep thee, for I assure thee nothing but death.”

So in great wrath they departed with their horses — and Perceval dressed his spear against the Black Knight and the twain hurtled together as it had been thunder. And in the onset either brake the spear of other. Then they dismounted and fell to fighting and foyning with their swords.

Anon Perceval cried aloud “Fair sweet Jesu, if thou wouldst have this land saved for thy glory, I pray thee grant me strength to slay this great felon paynim.” And forthwith might ran down into his arm, and lifting his sword he struck at the shield of the knight, and so hardy was that stroke that he clave through the shield even to the head of the dragon. And the dragon, being touched, belched forth a great flame, and Perceval marvelled to see how his own sword burned as if on fire.

Neither wist he any more till many days later, when he awoke and came to his senses, and behold, he lay on a pallet within a chamber, and Bors and Galahad stood beside him doing him tendance.

And when he was well recovered, they told him that after he had slain the Black Knight, they twain had found him lying like one dead and had borne him hither even to this castle.

And the people of the castle made great joy of their coming, but that they wist well that they had fulfilled the quest of the Sangreal.

Then Perceval saw that it was the same castle of Carbonek, and he asked who was the true lord of that castle, and they told him King Pelles, the Maimed King.

VI

Carbonek

Then they three entered into the hall of the castle where lay King Pelles at table with many knights. And King Pelles knew them and made great joy of them. Anon alit a voice among them all there and said: "There be knights among you that be not in quest of the Sangreal, and therefore they shall depart. They that ought not to sit at the table of Jesu Christ arise, for now shall very knights be fed." So they went thence, all save King Pelles, the which was a holy man.

And so those three fellows and that King were there, no more.

Anon they saw knights all armed come in at the hall doors, and did off their helms and their arms, and said unto Galahad: "Sir, we have hied right much for to be with you at this table whereto the hallows shall be brought and where the holy meat shall be departed." Then said he: "Ye be welcome, but of whence be ye?" So one of them said he was of Gaul, and other said he was of Ireland, and other said he was of Denmark. Then prayed Galahad to every each of them, that if they come to King Arthur's court that they should salute my lord Sir Launcelot, my father, and of them of the Round Table; and prayed them if that they came of that part they should not forget it.

(music)

And therewithal beseemed them that there came a man, and four angels from heaven, clothed in the likeness of a bishop, and had a cross in his hand; and these four angels bare him in a chair and set him down at the table of silver whereupon the Sangreal was; and it seemed that he had in the middle of his forehead letters, the which said: "See ye here Joseph the first Bishop of Christendom, the same which our lord succoured in the city of Sarras in the spiritual place."

Right so they felt a breath, that them thought it was intermeddled with fire which smote them so sore in the visage that them thought it brent their flesh. And they heard a voice which sang so sweetly it seemed none earthly thing.

With that they heard the chamber door open, and there they saw angels, and two bare candles of wax, and the third a towel, and the fourth a spear which bled marvellously that three drops fell into a box which he held within his other hand. And they set the candles upon the

table, and the third the towel upon the vessel, and the fourth the holy spear even upright upon the vessel.

Right so the man took an obley which was made in the likeness of bread. And at the lifting up there came a figure in likeness of a child and the visage was as red and as bright as any fire, and smote himself into the bread, so that they all saw it that the bread was formed of a fleshly man; and then he put it into the holy vessel again, and then he did that longed to a priest to do to a mass.

And then he went to Galahad and kissed him and bade him go and kiss his fellows; and so he did anon. "Now" said he, "servants of Jesu Christ, ye shall be fed afore this table with sweetmeats that never knights tasted." And when he had said, he vanished away.

And they set them at the table in great dread, and made their prayers. Then there entered into the hall the Holy Greal covered with red samite. And there was all the hall fulfilled with good odours, and every knight had such good meats and drinks as he best loved in this world. And when the Holy Greal had passed through the hall, then the Holy Vessel departed suddenly, that they wist not where it became; then had they all breath to speak.

And Galahad went anon to the spear which lay upon the table, and touched the blood with his fingers, and came after to the maimed King and anointed his legs. And therewith he clothed him anon, and start upon his feet out of his bed as an whole man, and thanked God that he had healed him.

Anon alit a voice which said to Galahad: "Go ye three tomorrow unto the sea, where ye shall find your ship ready, and with you take the Sword of the Strange Girdles, and no more with you but Sir Perceval and Sir Bors.

"I am Joseph of Arimathie the which our Lord sent here to thee to bear thee fellowship. And now have ye seen what ye most desired to see, but yet have yet not seen it so openly as ye shall see it in the city of Sarras in the spiritual place."