

THE HIDDEN CHURCH OF THE HOLY GRAAL Its Legends
and Symbolism Considered in Their Affinity with Certain
Mysteries of Initiation and Other Traces of a Secret
Tradition in Christian Times

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[Podcast 9]

BOOK FOUR THE LESSER CHRONICLES OF THE HOLY
GRAAL

CHAPTER ONE

THE METRICAL ROMANCE OF JOSEPH OF ARIMATHÆA

Robert De Borron was imbued, and even deeply, with the religious spirit of his period. I think also that in him there was a spiritual tincture which must have been a little rare at that epoch among courtly minstrels. He had seen, according to his story, some part at least of the Great Book of the Legend, and perhaps it had changed his life. After the manner of his time, he was attached to a patron, and he wrote his poem for the preux and noble chevalier Walter Montbéliard—a crusader when the Temple was at its glory. The poem opens with an account of the circumstances which led ultimately to the incarnation of Christ and is based on the fact that prior to this event, and prior indeed to the descent of Christ into Hades, good and bad were alike in Hell and less or more in the power of the evil hierarchy. The root-matter of the story can be expressed in a few words, and may be so offered to simplify the issues

which are important to our purpose and must be dealt with therefore more fully. The vessel in which Christ prepared His sacrament, according to those words of the text with which we are already acquainted, was taken from the house of Simon by a Jew and delivered into the hands of Pontius Pilate. Joseph of Arimathæa, with the assistance of Nicodemus and by permission of Pontius Pilate, took down the body of Jesus after the Crucifixion. The permission was a reward asked by Joseph in return for years of military service, and Pilate gave him in addition the vessel which the Jew had brought him. In that vessel Joseph received the Blood, which was still flowing from the wounds of Christ when the body was being prepared for burial. He laid the body in a sepulchre prepared for himself, and he concealed the vessel in his house. After the Resurrection the Jews sought Nicodemus, who eluded them by flight, and Joseph, whom they seized and imprisoned in a dark tower; the only issue therefrom was at the summit, and this was sealed effectually by a heavy stone. Christ came to Joseph in the tower, brought him the Sacred Vessel and communicated to him certain secret words which were the grace and power thereof. Joseph remained for forty years in his prison and was sustained by the Blessed Vessel, as if in a condition of ecstasy and apart from any normal consciousness concerning the flight of time. Towards the end of that period, Vespasian, the son of Titus, being afflicted with leprosy—and a pilgrim who reached Rome having recounted the wonderful miracles of Jesus of which he had heard in Palestine—a commission was sent to Jerusalem to bring back some relic of the Master, if the report of His death were true. The commission in due time returned with Saint Veronica, who carried the Volto Santo, or Sacred Face-cloth, and this effected the desired cure immediately. Titus and Vespasian proceeded with an army to Palestine to avenge the death of Jesus. It was in this manner that Vespasian found Joseph still alive in the tower; the stone

was removed from his sepulchre, and he who had been entombed, like Christ, like Christ also arose; after this rescue was effected, the Emperor's son was converted by Joseph.

The vengeance on the Jews being in fine accomplished, Joseph collected his relatives and many companions who had embraced Christianity at his instance, and by the will of God the party started westward, carrying the Holy Graal. For a considerable period they took possession of a certain district and placed it under cultivation. At length a part of the company fell away from grace, with the result that a scarcity followed in the land, and the vessel was used to separate the good from the evil within the ranks of the people. For this purpose a table was dight after the manner of that which served for the Lord's Supper, and the vessel was set thereon. Before it there was placed a single fish, which the Divine voice of the Graal had directed Brons, who was the brother-in-law of Joseph, to catch in a neighbouring water. Between Joseph and Brons there was left a vacant seat corresponding to that which had been made void by the defection of Judas Iscariot. Under circumstances which remain vague in the story, a certain part of the company, being those who had kept in a state of grace, sat down at the table, and the rest who gathered about were of those who had lapsed into sin. The good people experienced all spiritual delight and inward refreshment, but the evil were not filled, and they beheld nothing. When a question, put to them by one who was named Petrus, had elicited this fact, they were denounced as those who were guilty, and they departed in shame. It is indeed quite clear that they seem to have separated from the company once and for all. The exception was a certain Moses, who manifested great sorrow, though he was really an unbeliever at heart. His prayers in fine obtained him permission to take a place at the table, but the void seat

was the one which alone was available, and when he sat down thereon, the Siege and its occupants were both swallowed by an abyss which opened beneath them. Meanwhile the office of the table had become a daily, as it were, a divine service, and so continued till the company was divided further to continue the journey westward in successive parties. Alain, the son of Brons, and his eleven brothers under his guidance were the first to start, he carrying a certain proportion of what must be termed the revealed knowledge of the Holy Graal, but it did not include apparently the Secret Words. The communication which had been made to Alain was because when the time came for Brons and his wife to seek for their twelve boys some kind of settlement in life, the eleven had elected to marry and were therefore provided with wives, but he who was the youngest of all chose a life of celibacy; he was therefore put over his brethren, and was taken by Joseph into his heart after a special manner. This party was followed by that of Petrus, whose connection with the family of Joseph, if any, is not stated; but he was favoured in another manner which would seem to be more distinctive, since he carried a brief or warrant sent down from heaven itself, but of its contents or their purport there is no account given. His destination was the Vaux d'Avaron. The last to depart was Brons, apparently with the remnant of the people, and to him Joseph, by the divine ordination, delivered the Sacred Vessel and communicated the Secret Words. Joseph of Arimathæa seems to have remained behind—though the text is corrupt at this point—his mission being accomplished, and it would follow in this case that shortly after he was taken into la joie perdurable of the Paradise which is above.

The theology is in part of the popular legendary character and may seem a little fantastic even within these limits. For the early church and the writers thereto belonging in

places remote from the centre, the world of Christian doctrine was a world not realised, and Rome might well have been astonished at certain things which were said and sometimes taught with all innocence of intention on the verges of the horizon westward. It would be easy to furnish examples of elements in De Borron which are not less than heretical from the doctrinal standpoint, but there are indications also of curious learning and traces of strange sympathies. Among the latter may be mentioned a certain tenderness towards Pontius Pilate, the difficulty of whose position as the Procurator of Judæa, when acting almost under the compulsion of a Jewish faction, was from any point of view undeniable. The important point, however, is that the sympathy reflects at a far distance the apocryphal legends which represent Pilate as one who was converted ultimately, who became a bishop of the Church and sealed his testimony with martyrdom. More noticeable than this, perhaps, for the ordinary reader is the writer's seeming ignorance concerning the Jewish doctrine of rest in the bosom of Abraham for those at least of the faithful departed who died in the peace of Israel.

In the kind of research with which we are concerned here, we must be careful not to mistake the unintended blunder for the express statement. As a rule, it is easy to distinguish the simple errors, but occasionally a specific point may puzzle the most careful reader. While De Borron seems wholly unconscious of opposition to the claims of Rome, there is, of course, very full indication of a secret which inheres in the Graal and some ground for thinking that the rumour of this secret had gone forth abroad in the world prior to his poem. It is, however, a verbal formula, not apparently a doctrine. "Those who can learn and retain these words," says Christ to Joseph, "shall be virtuous among people and pleasant unto God; they shall not be forejudged in court, nor conquered in battle, so only that

their cause is just." There is, however, a particular point which is a little opposed to my general view herein. Speaking of the common hell into which all souls went prior to the coming of Christ, De Borron says: "It was necessary that the ransom of our first fathers should be provided by the Three Divine Persons who are one only and the same substance." Now, the identity of the Three Persons in Christ is unquestionably a heresy, but, as it so happens, this is the express teaching of Swedenborg, for whom Christ was the manifested Trinity. It is curious to recall the analogy, but such a notion could at no time have formed part of any secret doctrine, supposing that this were otherwise to be found or expected in De Borron. So also we must not interpret as a trace of any secret doctrine the implicit of his comparison between the conception of Eve and the most Holy Virgin. He says in effect that Eve conceived in suffering, that the posterity of our first parents were, like them, doomed to die, and that the possession of their souls was claimed by the demon as his right. To purchase them from hell our Saviour was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and in this manner the sin of generation according to the common course of Nature was annulled by a virginal conception. But in the analogy there is no ulterior motive, no *arrière pensée*.

The apostolic priority of Peter seems to underlie the following statement, which is put into the mouth of our Saviour: "I leave this example to Peter and to the ministers of the Church." Comparatively early criticism looked upon this as equivalent to an acknowledgment of Saint Peter as the official chief of the Catholic Holy Assembly, and remarked that no such admission is found in the Book of the Holy Graal, which, it should be said, is however untrue. If we pass now to the consideration of the Sacred Vessel and to the question what De. Borron designed to signify

thereby, we may note in the first place that, by the hypothesis of the poem, it is not visible to evil-livers, though it is evident that they encircled the table at which they could not sit on the occasion when it was first manifested to the elect. The correspondence of this will be found much later on in the Parsifal of Wolfram, wherein the object which corresponds to the Graal was invisible to a pagan, though he was a man of noble life and a kinsman of the Secret House. De Borron speaks (a) of a vessel, not otherwise named, in which Jesus washed the feet of His disciples; (b) of that passing fair vessel, already described, in which Christ made His sacrament, but the institution of the Eucharist is not mentioned more specifically; (c) of the use by Pilate either of this vessel or another—for the text seems doubtful—when he washed his hands to signify that he was not responsible for the judgment which he had pronounced unwillingly. As regards (b) I have explained in the summary that a Jew carried it from the house of Simon, when Jesus had been led forth therefrom, and brought it to Pilate. At a later stage Pilate took the vessel, and remembering thereof that it was beautiful, he gave it to Joseph, saying: “Much hast thou loved this man.” Joseph answered: “Thou hast said truly.” But the gift was less an instance of generosity than of the procurator’s desire to retain nothing which had belonged to Jesus, whereby it was possible that he might be accused. Either the present state of the text or the poet’s method of expression leaves things so much in confusion that a further question has arisen whether the piscina used for the washing of the feet was identical with that vessel which became ultimately the Graal. It has been suggested that for the last word in the line

“Où Criz feisoit son sacrement,”

[“Where Christ was performing his sacrament,”]

what was written and intended originally was the word lavement, but this is extremely unlikely in view of the general content and is not countenanced certainly by the Lesser Holy Graal. It has been suggested further that (1) Saint John does not mention the Institution of the Eucharist and is the only Evangelist who does describe the washing of the Apostle's feet; (2) Robert de Borron knew only the Fourth Gospel, possibly through that of Nicodemus in the Christian Apocrypha. But all these questions are settled by the text itself in the discourse of Christ to Joseph at the beginning of his imprisonment in the tower. It is there said (1) that at the Last Supper on the Thursday Christ blessed the bread and the wine and told His disciples that they partook in those elements of His flesh and blood; (2) that the table of that Supper should be represented in many countries; (3) that the sacrament should never be consecrated without commemoration of Joseph, who had taken down the Divine Body from the Cross and laid it in the Sepulchre; (4) that this tomb should be signified by the Altar; (5) that the winding-sheet in which the Body was wrapped should be called the corporal; (6) that the Holy Vessel in which Joseph received the Blood should be called the chalice; (7) that the stone with which the sepulchre was sealed should be signified by the paten. Nothing can be more express, both as to the Mass and the Eucharist. Unfortunately, nothing can be clearer also in the mind of the poet than the content of the Palladium of his legend—being the blood of Three Persons in one God. And this, I think, is all that need be said in this place concerning the Cup of the Holy Graal in Robert de Borron.

That Christ had in nowise forgotten one who had at need befriended Him was shown by Him bringing it into the prison, holding it in the hands of Him, while the whole tower was illuminated by its great light, for it was all full of the Holy Spirit.

The Divine Discourse which occurs in this tower between the visionary Christ and Joseph is remarkable from several points of view, and especially by the categorical assurance that the Risen Saviour brought none of His disciples to the conference, because none were acquainted with the great love which subsisted between Himself and His auditor. It seems, however, to have been a prototype of that love which is the immanence of Christ in the believing soul, and the palladium in Joseph's case was the symbol of the Redeemer's death, as it is the Eucharist in the external church. The specific and material explanation is that Joseph took down the body of Jesus from the Cross, and for this reason he was to be a partaker in all glory. Of the colloquy there were, in any case, no witnesses, and the Gospel narratives could offer no contradiction. I suppose that I should add an implicit which seems almost evidently to have been in the poet's mind—that Joseph had made the Resurrection more, humanly speaking, possible by preserving the body as nearly intact as the circumstances of the Crucifixion would permit. The difficulty which seems to have been present to the subsurface mind of De Borron was perhaps not unknown to one Gospel narrative, which is careful to indicate that the bones of Christ were not broken on the Cross.

The especial direction to Joseph was that he should guard well the Sacred Vessel, committing it only to those persons who were designed thereto, and by these it should be taken as given in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The possessors were to be three and no more, because of the Trinity; they were: (a) Joseph; (b) Brons and (c) the grandson of Brons, who was to be born in the fulness of time. It must be said that this enumeration appears to omit one person who, according to the text itself, was intended for some high office. When Joseph prayed before the Cup for guidance over the future of his

company, recalling an ordinance which had told him that at what time soever he desired secret knowledge, he should come into the presence of the Reliquary wherein was the glorious blood, he was answered by the Voice of the Graal that the celibate son of Brons was to be shown the Sacred Vessel so that he could see the content thereof. Now this son was Alain, and it might be supposed that the venerable charge would pass to him from his father, more especially as, in spite of his choice, he was to beget the keeper in fine, and was not dedicated therefore to permanent celibacy, but held rather in maidenhood for a marriage which was predestined already. The instruction to Petrus announced that he was to await the arrival of Alain's son, who would reveal to him the virtues of the Holy Vessel—being something omitted apparently in his undeclared brief or charter—and would make known to him what had become of Moses.

As to this ill-starred personage, who had suffered so strangely for parading a spurious election with intent to deceive those who were chosen in truth and faith, it is decreed that he shall be heard of no more in song or fable till the knight comes who will fill the void seat. In this dubious manner it seems to be indicated that the wrath of the Graal would not be visited to everlasting.

After the departure of the several bands of pilgrims, the poem comes to its conclusion for want of written materials. The author had carried it so far on the evidence of the sacred book to which I have cited already the chief reference. He leaves it in the expectation that he will recount later on as follows:

- a. What became of Alain, whither he went, whom he married, and what heir was born to him.

- b. Whither Petrus proceeded.
- c. The fate of Moses, so long lost.
- d. The destination of Brons, who, outside all inferences of the logical understanding, had received the title of the Rich Fisher, on account of that single occasion when he angled in a certain water and caught one fish.

Meanwhile, De Borron had apparently the records of the Fifth Branch, and to that he passed on, so producing a-metrical romance concerning the prophet Merlin. Let us therefore on our part conclude also as follows: (1) The formulary which incorporated the Great Secret of the Graal was, without evasion apparently, recorded in the prototypical chronicle by which the poet was guided. (2) The Secret was itself denominated the Graal, as if by a general title, the name not being applied exclusively to the Sacred Vessel. (3) The last directions to Joseph regarding Brons, the second keeper, are these: Tell him how God did communicate unto thee the Holy Words, which are sweet and precious and gracious and piteous, which are properly called and named the Secret of the Graal.

Hereto, therefore, as the obiter dicta at this still preliminary stage, the English Syr Percyvelle may be the nearest reflection of the quest-element in folk-lore, but the Metrical Romance of Joseph is the nearest and earliest reflection of all that which could have been imputed as historical in any lost book. It is unalloyed by folk-lore admixtures, for no two things can be well less alike than the pre-Graal Feeding-dish and the Hallow of De Borron's Christian legend. The distance between the old myths and this devotional poem is too great for us to say that the latter is the archetypal state of this mythos after assumption by Christianity. There is no kinship. It is that

from which the Lesser Chronicles and the Greater Chronicles draw at their respective distances, though from elsewhere they gathered many elements. Here at least there are no adventitious Hallows; it is the Graal as the one thing only. And the Holy Graal is a symbol of the Angel of Great Counsel made visible.

CHAPTER TWO THE LESSER HOLY GRAAL

The first and only editor of this text put it forward as the original prose romance from which the poem was produced subsequently by some unknown hand, not so much writing ostensibly under the name of Robert de Borron as reflecting in rhymes and measures the actual words of the original. This view did not obtain at its period any special acceptance and has been long abandoned. The codex as it stands is an accurate rendering of the poem, plus certain variations and expansions, of which some are important to our purpose and must be recited briefly. But any literary or other distinction between the metrical story and its disposition in another vesture leaves the narrative untouched, both versions working from the same beginning to the same term, so that any general description of the Lesser Holy Graal would be superfluous in this place.

The circumstances under which certain secret words were communicated originally, their transit westward, and the scheme designed for their perpetuation, constitute the mystery-in-chief of the metrical romance, and we have brought away from it an irresistible inference that these words were a formula of Eucharistic consecration. The negative proof is that they were not used by Joseph when he had occasion to appeal for guidance to the Divine Voice which spoke from within or about the Sacred Vessel, or when he separated the grain from the tares in his band of pilgrims. The proof which assumes some aspect of a

positive kind is that wonderful analogy which the text indicates between the Sacrament of the Altar and the Vessel, with its antecedents and environments. But the Eucharistic character of the Secret Words is made much more explicit in the Lesser Holy Graal, for it is said, speaking of the Discourse in the tower: "Thereupon did Christ Jesus teach him those words which cannot be spoken or written, should any one wish to do so, except he have read the great book wherein they are recorded, and this is the secret which is uttered at the great sacrament performed over the Graal, that is to say, over the chalice, and I—Robert de Borron—do, for God's love, pray all those who shall hear this present book in the reading thereof that they ask no further herein concerning the said matter, for he who should try to say more might well lie concerning it, since more he could in nowise tell, and such falsehood would profit him nothing." That the Secret Words were therefore committed to writing follows from both versions, and the suggestion of the Lesser Holy Graal is that the Great Book was written by Joseph himself. The additional light which is gained concerning the Holy Vessel is (1) that it was the blessed and very object wherein Christ sacrificed; but this is less express than the words *feisoit son sacrement*, which I have quoted more than once from the poem; (2) on the other hand, the prose version makes it plainer than the poem that the Vessel brought by the Jew was given to Pilate after the death of Christ, or coincidentally therewith, for which reason it could not have been used by the procurator to wash his hands before he pronounced sentence; (3) the Vessel is described by Christ as *la sénéfance de ma mort*.

Among points left dubious in the poem we have seen that there is the question whether Joseph of Arimathæa remained where he was, not proceeding further westward than the point of separation determined for the whole

company. It would follow in this case either that one legend concerning the evangelisation of Britain was unknown to Robert de Borron or that it was by him ignored. Now that which is left doubtful in the poem is carried into triple confusion by the prose version. One of its codices says that Joseph went into that country wherein he was born; another says that he departed and came to his term in the land whither he was sent by Jesus Christ, yet it seems to follow from this second text that the whole company was already in la bloie Bretagne and that Joseph had converted it newly to the belief in Jesus Christ.

It will serve no purpose of mine to enlarge upon minor debatable points which occur in the prose version, as, for example, on the doubt which it creates whether (a) the third keeper of the Graal will be the son of Brons, by which we should understand Alain; (b) whether he shall be the son of his son, as in the metrical romance; and (c) whether the triple guardianship, corresponding to the Holy Trinity, should be enumerated after Joseph has surrendered the symbol of his mission, which is the r fading of one codex and follows also from the metrical romance. It is sufficient to state in conclusion that as regards the second table, and the reason why it was established, the texts in verse and prose are both in agreement that whatever the needs of the company there was (a) no miracle in the multiplication of food; (b) only a spiritual refectation; (c) the essence of which was to fill the participants with grace; (d) one proof being that the fish of Brons becomes wholly symbolical and figures continually at the service.

CHAPTER THREE THE EARLY HISTORY OF MERLIN

The Mystery of the Holy Graal was a mystery of grace behind Arthurian literature till the time came for it to be manifested at the period of the Quests, and among the texts

in which it is exhibited as if working from afar and vaguely there is that which I have termed for convenience the Early History of Merlin, being the transcript in prose of another metrical romance by which Robert de Borron proceeded, for want of intermediate materials, from the history of Joseph to the period which just antedated the birth and life of King Arthur. The tradition of the one romance is carried over by the other, and as such it is at once interesting extremely and important for our purpose. With the story itself we are concerned only in the least possible degree. It narrates, in the first place, a conference of demons that seems to have been summoned immediately after the Descent of Christ into hell to consider the best means of reducing to a minimum the opportunity of human redemption which had been inaugurated by the sudden translation of all the just of old from the supposed power of Infernus into the joy of Paradise. The conclusion attained was that if only some emissary of theirs could be born on earth, having for his father one of the evil personæ and for his mother a woman in the flesh, they would recover some part at least of the patrimony which they claimed in souls. There was one in the council, belonging to that averse hierarchy which is termed the Powers of the Air, who had the gift under certain conditions to make earthly women conceive, and he went forth upon this mission. What he did, however, was to surprise a pure maiden, apart from all knowledge of hers, at an unwary moment. After this manner was Merlin born into the world, in the accomplishment of which plot we are translated, with no suggestion or manifest sense of the intervening centuries, from the days which preceded the Ascension to the reign of Vortigern in Britain. The device of perdition had gone, as usual, astray, and that utterly; for the mother was saved spiritually by her innocence and, on the discovery of her predicament, by recourse immediately to the offices of holy religion. She was accused indeed before the judges of the

country, but the child himself saved her, for, being a babe, he yet spoke—now with the cunning which might be ascribed to his father in Sheol, and now with the subtlety and foresight which suggested the intervention of another and higher power, as if this had taken him for its own purpose into its safe custody.

Throughout the story Merlin, in virtue of his dual origin, is in part true steel and in part clay. Robert de Borron borrowed from antecedent materials which we can trace in their larger proportion, but the high spirit of his religious disposition worked upon that which he assumed, and wrought a great change therein. His Merlin has come really as if in the power of a mission which had been imprinted with a Divine seal, and though he is at best an admixture, and though the character of some of his actions is stained enough, he who has created him in literature more even than he has derived, does not weary of saying that God, who spared Merlin's mother in the body of her was able to save him in the soul, or at least contribute thereto, because of her perfect reconciliation with Holy Church. She had indeed sinned not at all, but had once, under great stress, forgotten to pray, and the visitation which came upon her was the hand of a providence rather than a hand which chastised. According to one text, with which we shall deal later, she became at length a nun, and so passed in sanctity. To pass thus also was evidently De Borron's intention as to the son's destiny, and at the end of the Lesser Chronicles we shall see how it was fulfilled. Meanwhile, the expressed mission of Merlin was after an unwonted manner to teach the love of Jesus Christ and the life everlasting. The note of this intention occurs early in the story, when it is said that God took the fiend-born child to His own use, though the mystery is the manner of that use; his double nature was such and so granted that he might yield to God His part and to the fiend also his own.

There are other stories which tell how Merlin dwelt amidst illusion, and how at the end he passed therein, but these are not of Robert de Borron.

The exigencies of intention rather than of the story itself take Merlin to Britain at a period which, according to his years, would be early out of reason for his work, but he who was never a child was more already than a man. There is no need to recite under what circumstances, initial and successive, he became the high councillor and worker of many miracles to four kings, each after the other: Vortigern, Pendragon, Uther Pendragon and Arthur. What remains to be said of his history will best fall under the considerations which now follow.

It is perhaps the Merlin cycle which offers the most curious among what I have termed the Lesser Implicits of the Graal literature. I must put them at a certain length because of their apparent importance, and will say in the first place that on Robert de Borron's part, as on that of certain other and unknown writers, there were two tangible purposes in full view: (1) To connect Merlin with all that Graal Mystery which was antecedent to the ascribed times of the prophet; (2) to identify his function with the termination of the Graal marvels under the pretext of times of enchantment or times adventurous. We are drawn through far tracts of speculation in seeking to understand what sub-surface disposition of mind could have actuated these purposes, but at the moment we are concerned in ascertaining how they are carried out in the story.

There was a hermit named Blaise, to whom the mother of Merlin had recourse in her unexpected difficulties, who had been also her spiritual adviser previously. The text says that this hermit was an exceeding good clerk and subtle, for which reason Merlin prayed that he would become his

recorder-in-chief, not only of all his deeds, but of things heard and seen which he might well think that no creature could express. A consent was obtained only after the holy man had conjured the querent in the Name of the Divine Trinity that he should deceive him in nowise; but Merlin answered that the records would rather keep him from sin than dispose thereto. It is in this way that Blaise is one of its characters even from the beginning of the romance, but his chronicle itself began long prior to the birth of Merlin, for at the instance of him who was to prove himself a prophet in Britain, he wrote first of the great love between Christ and Joseph of Arimathæa, of the lineage of Joseph, the names of those who were to be the guardians of the Graal, of Alain and his companions and whither they journeyed, of the departure of Peter westward, of the transmission of the Holy Vessel from Joseph to Brons, and of the death of Joseph. The history of these things was to be joined with that of Merlin, and the two recitals were to form a single book, complete in respect of everything, save only the Secret Words revealed to Joseph by Christ, whereof Merlin could say nothing—the reason of which is to be inferred from the Quest-matter of the Lesser Chronicles, namely, that he had not received them.

In accordance with the general trend of the earlier history and of the personages concerned therein, Merlin announced his intention to go west—that is, apparently out of Brittany into the land of Vortigern, or Greater Britain, and Blaise was also to follow, betaking himself to Northumbria, where it is said that the guardians of the Graal were then dwelling, though they are not specified by name. The first recompense of Blaise in this life was to be united with these Wardens, but thereafter it was to be joie perdurable. The Graal is the talisman of the whole story, and hereof is the repose of the Graal—that they who have achieved the search shall have rest in the term thereof. And

the book made by Blaise was to be called while the world endured the Book of the Seynt Graal. In this manner did Merlin, though he was not in any sense a custodian of the Hallows, make a certain claim upon them in the dispensation of their graces and rewards. It was not, in the symbolical sense, of an idle I nature, not the artifice of an impostor; rather it was of set purpose and as if the external sign of some secret warrant, in virtue of which the highest branch of the Graal history is connected indissolubly with Merlin. He laid the scheme, and the Hallows conformed thereto, the end being the termination of those dubious times, the dereliction of which we have heard of so often and can as yet understand so little.

Of such is the Graal in the Early History of Merlin. But this is also the first romance which, in the chronological succession of texts, apart from priority in time of literary production, introduces the Third Table and the mystery of the Siege Perilous. It may be held to constitute another side of its particular claim concerning the British prophet. Those who have followed so far the history of the Second Table will perhaps have recalled already that a vacant seat was left of old at the Passover for the unexpected guest, and it is still left by the Jews. There is also that custom, beautiful and piteous, of leaving a vacant seat for the Angel of Peace. I do not know what memories of this kind were present to the mind of De Borron when he borrowed from those who had preceded him the idea of the Round Table and attributed its foundation to Uther Pendragon, not to King Arthur, Merlin, however, being in either case the instigator of its institution. With his reflex of the spirit of sanctity, as conceived by the British prophet, the knightly table was something more than a substitute, and assuredly, in some later aspects, it reflected on earth that I which belongs to heaven.

In the course of his proposal, Merlin told Uther Pendragon the story of Joseph of Arimathæa, and how in the desert places, the sowing of which had become void through the sin of some who went forth, the Second Table had been instituted to separate the good from the evil. The Third was to be established by Uther in the Name of the Trinity, and it was to be set up at Cardoil in Wales for a certain Feast of Pentecost—that is to say, of the Holy Spirit. As there was a place that was void at the Table of Joseph so there was to be one now, which should not be filled in the days of Uther Pendragon, but of the king who was to come after him. The knight who would then fill it was not as yet born, which is colourable enough as a pretence in respect of the Perceval who was to follow as questing knight according to the Lesser Chronicles. But the codices have been edited in variant interests and the English rendering, represented by an unique text and drawing from what source I know not, adds words as follows which could apply only to Galahad: “Ne he that shall hym engendere shall not know that he shall hym engendere.” On the other hand, the Huth Merlin says that he will be engendered by him who ought so to engender him, but as yet he has not taken a wife, nor does he know that he ought to engender him—a passage which, after much circumlocution, comes to nothing. The text suggests otherwise that before the predestined hero takes the void seat he must accomplish the adventures of the Graal, which is contrary to all the texts, historical and otherwise. The Vulgate Merlin says in effect that he who fills the one will fulfil the other. And the English version: “And he that shall a-complysshe that sete must also complysshe the voyde place at the table that Joseph made.” This seems to create on the surface an almost insoluble difficulty, but the meaning is probably that in the secret and holy place where the Graal abides, the service of the Second Table is held still, as it was in the days of Joseph, that he who enters into the House shall take the seat

reserved for him, and that the Table shall be in fine complete.

Of such was the second mission of the prophet Merlin; but the third was the conception of Arthur and the conduct of all those events which should lead to his high coronation as King of Britain. I need not reproduce in this place the familiar story of Ygerne, the faithful wife of the Duke of Tintagel, and of the sorcery by which she received Uther Pendragon in the likeness of her husband and so brought forth the great king who was to come. The circumstances of the imbedded sword which led to his ultimate recognition, though he had been reared as the reputed son of a simple knight, are or ought to be familiar. It was to achieve his prophetic purpose that Merlin assisted Uther over those things which led up to the conception of Arthur, since the latter was to consummate the great intent of the Round Table which was begun by his father. The conception was one of a triad—of Merlin, of Arthur, of Galahad—which all took place under false pretences. Merlin was conscious that he had sinned in respect of this business, and apparently he sought to make amends by assisting the subsequent marriage between Uther and Ygerne and by his arrangements in respect of the charge of Arthur in childhood.

It should be noted in fine (a) that no Keeper of the Graal is mentioned in the Early History of Merlin, though the locality of its abode is indicated; (b) that there is only a covert reference to Moses; (c) that certain sources are obvious for certain texts, but there are important respects in which all the early romances seem echoes from far away of a book that had never been seen by their writers, though it had been heard of by a general report; and (d) that this statement is intended to override all their reference, actual

or imaginary, to mysterious sources of information which are not—if they were ever—extant.

CHAPTER FOUR THE DIDOT PERCEVAL

Without instituting in the present stage of the question more than a parallel, the Quest of the Graal is the adventurous mission of those who go forth out of earthly houses, who depart from tables of wonder, from the enchantments and illusions of magicians after the manner of Merlin—when Merlin was not at his highest—and issue into strange lands, some unprepared enough, but some under spiritual guidance, observing the ordinances of instructors and looking for a mystical place. Few are destined for the perfect fulfilment of their object, but that which opens for these is the path of heaven. Though time and place are imputed, and this of necessity, it can be said scarcely that such limits are native to this manner of research. There is, according to the Hebrews, a palace at the centre which sustains all things, and in the terms of another symbolism it is the sanctuary of that which in later times was called the Holy Graal. The first consideration which must be kept present to the mind, as if here were also an implicit, in dealing with our whole subject, is that nothing on its surface differs in doctrine or in specific institutes from the beaten tracks of the faith delivered to the saints, and yet all undergoes a great transfiguration. There are many quests in folk-lore which, in their bare outlines, are analogous to this quest, with due allowance for the distinction of motive and all that belongs to the class of voided marvels. There is also the great debate concerning initiation and its purport, which seems to hold a middle place between that which is below—and is nothing—and that which is above—and is all, tending to the same term as the higher, and exhibiting after what manner that which is mortal puts on immortality in virtue of high

election. It is well to recall these things, because the text with which we are dealing, though it has its claims and intentions, is far from this term.

From the Merlin there follows directly the Didot Perceval as the Merlin Quest par excellence, but it gleams dimly through a vague species of cloud; and as there is much which preceded the romance of the prophet, and remains among the implicits of the literature, so there is much which might be supposed to come after the Quest, as, for example, the rewards which are somewhere held in reserve for those who practise holiness.

There is no doubt that up to a certain point the Didot Perceval connects logically with the two poems which, by the particular hypothesis, were designed to lead up thereto. Its ascription to Robert de Borron, by the secondary and reflective way of a prose version, has been rejected by certain students in the past, but the state of the case is doubtful and opinions vary. It is almost impossible to read the opening portion without feeling that here is the genuine third part of the trilogy; while the fact, so frequently exemplified, that Perceval remains throughout a *virgo intacta*, is in perfect harmony with the mind of the metrical romance. The Early History or first part of the Vulgate Merlin follows directly from the poem of Joseph of Arimathæa, and so far as we can ascertain it closed for Robert de Borron at that stage, when it could, without any violation, be merged in the Perceval legend, by which the tradition is continued without a break of any kind. One other favourable point, and assuredly these points are many, is that—unlike the Book of the Holy Graal, which makes an effort in this direction but fails manifestly—it does not seek to fill the gap left by De Borron's missing branches; it does not mention Petrus, his Brief notwithstanding; as to Brons, it says only that he is old and

full of infirmity; as to Alain, he is dying. All this tends to show that the intermediate promised branches were non-existent rather than lost, and I say this remembering that one of the unprinted Merlin codices speaks of a text which contains the marriage of Alain. To conclude as to this question, the early history of the prophet specifies at the term thereof that Arthur, after his coronation, held the kingdom of Logres long in peace, while it leaves Merlin as his councillor. The Perceval opens with an account of the prophet's instruction to the King concerning the Round Table and the Graal mysteries which went before its institution; it is only at the term of the Quest that Merlin passes into voluntary and, as one would think, ascetic retirement, free from personal enchantment and having delivered Britain from spell. The later Merlin texts, on the contrary, intern the prophet, and then, and not after, lead up to the Galahad Quest. It is difficult therefore to say that the Didot Perceval does not reflect, from at hand or afar, the lost romance which completed the trilogy of De Borron.

Perceval was the son of Alain le Gros, the grandson of Brons, and the third of that earthly trinity which was destined to possess the Graal. While Arthur was holding high festival at London and was listening to the counsel of Merlin, the voice of the Holy Spirit spoke to Perceval's father—he being near his end—and informed him that Brons, the Rich Fisherman and the Warden of the Graal, was in the isles of Ireland, and that the Holy Vessel was with him. He was old, as I have said already, but he could not seek refuge in death till he was found by the son of Alain, had communicated to this son the grace of that vessel, and had taught him the secret words which he learned himself from Joseph. To express it more nearly in language of romance, the Quest, which is the intention of the story, must be fulfilled in all perfection. Thereafter his infirmity would be healed, apparently by the medicine of

eternity, or, as the text says, by his entrance into the great joy of that Father in Heaven whom he had served always in time. The youth, Perceval, was therefore directed to repair to the court of King Arthur, and it was promised him that in this place he should hear such tidings that he would be brought in due season to the house of the Rich Fisher. When Alain had received this direction, he bowed his head and entered himself, as one who arrives beforehand, into the Company of Christ.

Perceval, in his outward seeming, has little title to participate in the mysteries, except the title of his geniture. He is brave, savage and imperious; he is also chivalrous, but he is without the spiritual chivalry which we find in the great Quest. He was then living with his mother, who, as we can infer subsequently, sought to dissuade him from the journey; but obeying the Divine Voice, which had come also to him, he set out for the court of King Arthur; there he abode for a season; there he received the grade of chivalry. At the court he saw Aleine, the niece of Gawain, the niece also of the King, and the text says that she loved Perceval with all love that was possible, because in addition to his bravery he was also beautiful. It came about that she sent him red armour to wear on her behalf at a tournament; in this manner he was accounted her knight, and she shared in the glory of his achievements. But hereafter nothing follows concerning her. Perceval was proclaimed the best knight of the world after overcoming Lancelot and others of the high company at the joust, it being then the Feast of Pentecost. There was high feasting in the hall after the tournament, and Perceval, who was to some extent exalted, desired to occupy the seat left vacant at the Round Table for the predestined third custodian of the Holy Graal. King Arthur endeavoured to dissuade him, remembering the fate of Moses, but the prayers of Gawain and Lancelot prevailed with the monarch. A tremendous confusion ensued

notwithstanding, over which rose the voice of an invisible speaker, bearing once more the same witness which the Voice of the Spirit had borne recently to Alain, but revealing further that the healing of the Rich Fisher depended on a visit to his castle which must be paid by the best knight of the world, who must ask further concerning the secret service of the Graal. By the instructions which would follow, a period should be put to the enchantments of Britain. The voice also spoke of the dolorous death of Moses, who, according to the text otherwise, was to remain in the abyss until the days of Anti-Christ. The Quest was undertaken by Perceval, and there were others, Gawain included, who also ventured forth therein, but it is stated that of how they fared the book, which is the prototype, says nothing. Our text, however, shows on its own part that one of the knights was slain. King Arthur deplored the Quest, as he does in the romance of Galahad.

The course of Perceval's adventures covers many of those incidents with which we are acquainted already in the Welsh Peredur and the Conte del Graal. There is, for example, the visit to that strange castle wherein he plays chess with an invisible opponent, and is mated. From this follows some part of the episodes which concern the quest of the Stag's Head in company with a hound belonging to a maiden of the Castle. For our purpose it is more pertinent to mention that Perceval visited his sister, from whom he learned the story of their father, his own early history, and the prophecy concerning the Graal. He heard further that his mother was dead at grief for his departure, and though, under the direction received, he cannot be said to have deserted her, it is accounted to him somehow as a sin after the confused manner of materials drawn from many sources. He visited also his uncle, the hermit, who is the brother of Alain, and is seemingly one of the twelve brethren who were children of Brons. It is obvious

therefore that the note of time is again wanting entirely, as for any purpose of the story this perpetuation of ordinary life through the centuries has no meaning. Perceval confessed to his uncle and heard from him that at the table instituted by Joseph—he also assisting—the Voice of the Spirit commended them to journey far into the countries of the West, and ordained in particular that the Rich Fisher should go forth into those parts where the sun set. In fine, the hermit told him how the son of Alain le Gros would perform such feats of chivalry that he should be called the best knight of the world. It is obvious that this information does not correspond very closely with any extant text of Graal history. The uncle continued to speak of that peculiar and holy service to which the youth had been called, and counselled him to be pure in his life; but he did not, as in other quests, advise him to beware of idle speaking or of the curiosity which leads to questioning. After these things Perceval continued the Quest, and among other adventures he met with a knight who, owing to this encounter, had missed by seven days the crown of the world's knighthood, but who ultimately vanished from sight. He saw further the wonder of two children disporting themselves in a tree; they spoke to him of the Terrestrial Paradise and of the Holy Spirit; they also directed him on his Quest, so that he fared better according to this story than he did in the corresponding episode of the Conte del Graal. Perceval reached in fine the Castle of his grandfather, the Rich Fisher, where he was received after the mode of chivalry, and the Warden of the Graal was borne into his presence in the arms of sergeants. They sat down to table and the procession of the Hallows entered in the accustomed manner. Perceval was said, however, to remember one counsel of caution which he had received from his uncle in the matter of questioning, from which it is certain that the text follows some I prototype which it does not reproduce faithfully. He was also outwearied by vigils on two previous

nights, and his host, when he noticed this, directed the table to be removed and a bed to be prepared for the knight, who retired thinking deeply of the Lance and the Graal, promising himself that he would inquire of the pages tomorrow. The voice of the invisible speaker which had directed him and the others with such utter plainness at the court of King Arthur had lapsed apparently from his mind, and from that fatal inattention he passed into the forgetfulness of sleep. On the morrow he went down into the courtyard, to find his horse and arms awaiting him, but there was no one else to be seen. He was cursed by a maiden in a forest adjoining the Castle, and was told that, so only that he had asked the question, the prophecy of our Saviour to Joseph would have been accomplished; but of this prophecy we find no particulars in the antecedent texts. The Fisher King would have been restored to health, and there would have ceased those enchantments of Britain the nature and cause of which still fail to appear. Perceval sought in vain to rediscover the Castle, for over the whole land he could find its trace no longer. As in previous texts, he returned to the maiden of the chess-board, with the dog to her belonging and a stag's head. She desired him to remain in her company, but he left, with a promise to return, saying that otherwise he would be false to the vow which he had made. I infer that in this manner he preserved his desired purity, but he fell into other evils during a pilgrimage of seven years which followed thereafter. Through distress at being unable to find the Fisher King, he lost all memory of God until he met with the pilgrim company on Good Friday, who asked, as in previous texts, why he rode armed for purposes of destruction on such a sacred day. His better nature then returned to him, and before long he was knocking once more at the door of his uncle the hermit, to whom he confessed all. It was his intention to revisit his sister, but he was told that she was dead these two years past. After certain further episodes he

met with Merlin, who reproached him for neglecting the Quest, much as he was reproached by a certain hutsman in one of the additamenta to the poem of Gautier. Perceval heard also that the health of the Rich Fisher was still such that he remained at the point of death, though he could not pass away. But his prayers were going up for his grandson, and by the will of God he was to be the guardian of the Precious Blood. The authority throughout is the record of Blaise, to whom Merlin returned after this conversation and recounted that which had passed, as he does so continually in the course of his own romance.

Perceval at last reached the Castle of the Rich Fisher for the second time; again he beheld the Graal, and on this occasion asked concerning its service, at which the King was cured, and in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, all was changed about him. The relationship between them was declared, and Perceval being instructed in the history of the Hallows was led into the presence of the Holy Vessel, where the Voice of High Counsel told Brons to communicate the Secret Words. In the fulfilment of this command the ancient Warden might have been still speaking when the soul passed from his body, and Perceval saw how the angels bore it to the kingdom of Heaven, unto the Father whom he had served so long. Perceval remained in the Castle, practising wisdom, and there was an end to the enchantments of Britain. It was as if an interdict had been imposed and a legate had removed the interdict.

While things were so ordered in the secret sanctuary, there were events in the outer world which led up to the passing of Arthur, who was carried into Avalon to be healed of his grievous wounds by his sister Morgan le Fay. Merlin was still in evidence, passing to and fro between the king's court and the sanctuary of the Holy Vessel, where then, as subsequently, Perceval seems to have divided his office of

Warden with the scribe of the records thereof. After the death of Arthur, Merlin appeared for the last time, recounting the woes which had befallen, whereat the place of the Hallows became a house of mourning and a chapel for the office of the dead. The prophet took leave of the Wardens, because it was God's will no longer that he should go to and fro in the world, and he would therefore betake himself, as if for a last refuge, to a hermitage in the forest which encompassed the castle. It follows that the term of Merlin is revolutionised in this romance; he does not pass in enchantment, inhibition and the folly of morganatic ties, but seeking the peace of God, and choosing the life of contemplation. Thereafter he was seen no longer, and there was no further story concerning the Holy Graal.

The Didot Perceval and the Parsifal of Wolfram are the only texts which leave the last Warden alive and dwelling in the sanctuary. It should be noted further that the Quest in this instance does not involve the destruction of Logres or a fatality to the Round Table, though this fatality occurs. The point is important, because it is another note of the correspondences between the Didot Perceval and the Early Merlin. The secret conspiracy, planned, as one might say, in the sanctuary, against the great chivalry was undreamed of by Robert de Borron and is peculiar to the Greater Chronicles. The unanimity of the Lesser Chronicles resides, among other things, in the fact that they are all texts of the Secret Sanctuary, and they emanate by the hypothesis therefrom. They suggest no public office; there is no travelling of the Graal. Britain suffers during the Quest period from an enchantment, but it is not described, and it is to be doubted whether Britain knew of it. It is the most occult of all processes and the most withdrawn of all localised mysteries. Brons and Alain have done nothing in the land; they are aliens of sanctity, with the burden of the

years of the Juif errant upon them; and they abide in seclusion.

The Didot Perceval is scarcely at peace with itself over some of its elements, nor is it at peace with those texts antecedent from which it follows that the third keeper will (a) meet with Petrus, who carries the Sacred Brief, and with him compare their knowledge in common of the Graal Mystery; (b) find Moses, and this under circumstances which suggest some palliation at least of that which he has suffered through the ages. I do not think that these points make void its place in the trilogy, because there are several respects in which all the Graal books, like other romances of chivalry, are conventions of the cohorts of sleep, and there is sometimes a distracting spirit moving through the great dream.

