

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY.

THE QUEST AND ACHIEVEMENT OF THE HOLY GRAIL.

Wall paintings in the Boston Public Library
installed in 1895

By

EDWIN AUSTIN ABBEY, R.A.

AN OUTLINE
OF THIS VERSION OF THE LEGEND
BY HENRY JAMES.

The Holy Grail was fabled to be the sacred vessel from which our Lord had eaten at the Last Supper, and into which (having purchased it from Pontius Pilate), Joseph of Arimathea had gathered the divine blood of His wounds. Its existence, its preservation, its miraculous virtues and properties were a cherished popular belief in the early ages of European Christianity; and in the folk-lore from which the twelfth-century narrators, Walter Mapes in England, Chrétien de Troyes in France, and Wolfram von Eschenbach in Germany, drew their material, it was represented as guarded for ages in the Castle of the Grail by the descendants of the "rich man," to whom the body of Jesus had been surrendered, where it awaited the coming of the perfect knight, who alone should be worthy to have knowledge of it. This perfect knight is introduced to us in the romances of the Arthurian cycle, so largely devoted to the adventures of the various candidates for this most exalted of rewards. Incomparable were the properties of the Grail, the enjoyment of a revelation of which conveyed, among many privileges, the ability to live, and to cause others to live, indefinitely without food, as well as the achievement of universal knowledge, and of invulnerability in battle.

This revelation was the proof and recompense of the highest knightly purity, the perfection constituting its possessor the type of the knightly character; so that the highest conceivable emprise for the Companions of the Round Table was to attain to such a consecration — to cause the transcendent vessel to be made manifest to them. The incarnation of the ideal knighthood in the group here exhibited is that stainless Sir Galahad, with whom — on different lines — Tennyson has touched the imagination of all readers.

No 1.

The child Galahad, the descendant, by his mother, of Joseph of Arimathea, is visited, among the nuns who bring him up, by a dove bearing a golden censer and an angel carrying the Grail, the presence of which operates as sustenance to the infant. From the hands of the holy women the predestined boy passes into those of the subtle Gurnemanz, who instructs him in the knowledge of the things of the world, and in the duties and functions of the ideal knight. But before leaving the nuns he has performed his nightly vigil — has watched alone, till dawn, in the church.

No. 2.

This ordeal of the vigil terminates in his departure. Clothed in red, he is girt for going forth, while the nuns bring to him Sir Lancelot, who fastens on one of his spurs, and Sir Bors, who attaches the other.

No. 3.

The Arthurian Round Table and the curious fable of the Seat Perilous are here dealt with: the Seat Perilous — "perilous for good and ill" — in which no man has yet sat with safety, not even the fashioner himself, but into which, standing vacant while it awaits only a blameless occupant, the young Sir Galahad, knighted by Arthur, has sworn a vow to be worthy to take his place. The Companions of the Order are seated in Arthur's hall, and every chair, save one, is filled. Suddenly the doors and windows close of themselves, the place becomes suffused with light, and Sir Galahad, robed in red (the color emblematic of purity), is led in by an old man clothed in white, Joseph of Arimathea, who, according to one of the most artless features of the romance, has subsisted for centuries by the possession of the supreme relic. The young knight is thus installed in safety in the Seat Perilous, above which becomes visible the legend, "This is the seat of Galahad."

No. 4.

The knights are about to go forth on their search for the Holy Grail, now formally instituted by King Arthur. They have heard Mass and are receiving the episcopal benediction, Sir Galahad always in red. Throughout this series he is the "bright boy-knight" of Tennyson, though not, as that poet represents him, "white-armored."

No. 5.

Amfortas, the Fisher King, King of the Grail, as the legend has it, having been wounded several centuries before for taking up arms in the cause of unlawful love, lies under a spell, with all the inmates of the Castle of the Grail, into which the artist here introduces us. They are spiritually dead, and although the Grail often appears in their very midst, they cannot see it. From this strange perpetuation of ineffectual life they can none of them, women or men, priests, or soldiers, or courtiers, be liberated by death until the most blameless knight shall at last arrive. It will not be sufficient, however, that he simply penetrate into the castle: to the operation of the remedy is attached that condition which recurs so often in primitive romance, the asking of a question on which everything depends. Sir Galahad has reached his goal, but at the very goal his single slight taint of imperfection, begotten of the too worldly teaching of Gurnemanz, defeats his beneficent action. Before him passes the procession of the Grail, moving between the great fires and the trance-smitten king, and gazing at it he tries to arrive, in his mind, at an interpretation of what it means. He sees the bearer of the Grail, the damsel with the Golden Dish (the prototype of whom was Herodias bearing the head of John the Baptist on a charger), the two knights with the Seven-branched Candle-stick, and the knight holding aloft the Bleeding Spear. The duty resting upon him is to ask what these things denote, but, with the presumption of one who supposes himself to have imbibed all knowledge, he forbears, considering that he is competent to guess. But he pays for his silence, inasmuch as it forfeits for him the glory of redeeming from this paralysis of centuries the old monarch and his hollow-eyed Court, forever dying and never dead, whom he leaves folded in their dreadful doom. On his second visit, many years later, he is better inspired.

No. 6.

It is the morning after his visit to the Castle of the Grail. Awakening in the chamber to which he had been led the previous night, Sir Galahad finds the castle deserted. Issuing forth, he sees his horse saddled and the drawbridge down. Thinking to find in the forest the inmates of the castle, he rides forth, but the drawbridge closes suddenly behind him; a wail of despair follows him, and voices mock him for having failed to ask the effectual Question.

He fares forward and presently meets three damsels; the first, the Loathly Damsel, is riding upon a pale mule with a golden bridle. This lady, once beautiful in form and features, is now noble still in form, but hideous in feature, and she wears a red cloak, and a hood about her head, for she is bald; and in her arms is the head of a dead king, encircled with a gold crown. The second lady is riding in the manner of an esquire. The third is on her feet, dressed as a stripling, and in her hand is a scourge with which she drives the two riders. These damsels are under the spell of the Castle of the Grail. Against her will, a magic power is used by the Loathly Damsel to tempt and destroy knights and kings. She, with her two companions, must continue to wander, doing deeds of wickedness, until the sinless Virgin Knight shall come to the castle and ask concerning the wonders he sees there. They now assail Sir Galahad with reproaches, cursing him for having failed on the previous day to ask the Question, which not only would have delivered them and the inmates of the castle, but would have restored peace and plenty to the land. The earth now must remain barren, and Sir Galahad, wandering forth again, is followed by the curses of the peasantry, while war rages throughout the land. He must encounter many adventures, suffer many sorrows, and many years must pass before he returns once more to the Castle of the Grail, where, having through all ordeals remained sinless, he will finally ask the Question which shall redeem the sin-stricken land.

No. 7.

Sir Galahad is here seen arriving at the gate of the Castle of the Maidens, where the seven Knights of Darkness, the seven Deadly Sins, have imprisoned a great company of maidens, the Virtues, in order to keep them from all contact with man. It is Sir Galahad's mission to overcome Sin and redeem the world by setting free the Virtues, and he accordingly fights the seven knights till he overcomes them.

No. 8.

Having passed the outer gate of the castle, Sir Galahad encounters a monk who blesses him and delivers up to him the keys of the castle.

No. 9.

Sir Galahad's entry into the castle is here shown. The imprisoned maidens have long been expecting him, for it had been prophesied that the perfect knight would come to deliver them. They welcome him with shy delight, putting out their hands to be kissed. Having accomplished this mission, Sir Galahad passes on to other deeds.

No. 10.

Sir Galahad has become wedded to Blanchefleur, but, sacrificing his earthly love, he leaves her that he

may continue the Quest. The wounded and sin-stricken Amfortas can be healed only by a Virgin Knight, and only a Virgin Knight may achieve the Quest. A new-born knowledge has unsealed Sir Galahad's eyes, but with this knowledge is begotten the strength to overcome, and, renouncing finally every human desire, he resumes the Quest.

No. 11.

Having passed through many adventures, Sir Galahad has here returned to the Castle of the Grail. The procession of the Grail has once more passed before him, and this time, grown wise by knowledge and suffering, he asks the Question, and thereby heals Amfortas, cleanses him from sin, and allows the old king to die. The Angel bears away the Grail from the castle, and it is not seen again until the day when Sir Galahad achieves it at Sarras. Having now accomplished his great task, he is guided by the spirit of the Grail toward the goal which shall crown his labors — the achievement of the Grail. He is directed toward the sea, to Solomon's Ship, which will bear him to Sarras, where he will be crowned king, and where the Grail itself will finally appear to him.

No. 12.

Sir Galahad, borne upon a white charger, and followed by the blessings of the people, is seen passing from the land, where peace and plenty once more reign.

No. 13.

Sir Galahad is here in Solomon's Ship, which he found waiting to carry him across the seas to Sarras. The Grail, borne by an angel, guides the ship. Sir Bors and Sir Percival follow him. Having sinned once, they can never see the Grail themselves, yet, having persevered faithfully in the Quest, they have acquired the right to accompany Sir Galahad and witness his achievement. Resting upon a cushion in the stern of the ship are three spindles made from the "Tree of Life"—one snow-white, one green, one blood-red. When Eve was driven from the Garden of Eden, she carried with her the branch which she had plucked from the "Tree of Life." The branch, when planted, grew to be a tree, with branches and leaves white, in token that Eve was a virgin when she planted it. When Cain was begotten, the tree turned green; and afterward, when Cain slew Abel, the tree turned red.

No. 14.

THE CITY OF SARRAS.

No. 15.

Sir Galahad is now King of Sarras, and upon a hill he makes a Sacred Place and builds a Golden Tree. Morning and evening he repairs thither, and from day to day he beautifies the tree, and, finally when it is complete, Joseph of Arimathea (with a company of angels) appears with the Grail. As Sir Galahad gazes upon it, crown, sceptre, and robe fall from him. He no longer needs them. He thanks God for having let him see that which tongue may not describe, nor heart think. Having now beheld that which is the source of all life and knowledge and power, his spirit can no longer remain in the narrow confines of his body. The Grail itself is borne heavenward, and is never again seen on earth.