

The Legend of the Grail

by Reginald Machell, F.T.S.

Reprinted from "Theosophical Siftings" Volume 6

The Theosophical Publishing Society, England

[Page 3] THE Legend of the Grail is familiar to most people of this country in the three versions popularised by Malory in the *Morte D'Arthur*, by Wagner in *Parsifal*, and by Tennyson in his poem of "The Holy Grail". But these are all drawn from a mass of legend and romance which has been well analysed and examined in Nutt's book on the subject. There is to be found a varied choice of legends on the subject, the majority having many features in common and some differing in most important points. The difficulties of the commentators and students of these legends are enormous, when they are tied down by the ordinary limits imposed by Western science and history. But the student of Theosophy may see a possibility of finding clues that must remain hidden for one who does not recognise the existence of a central body of myth and allegory from which all the traditions have sprung, whether they be myth of Hercules, of Chrishna, of Christ, of Arthur, or of the Sleeping Beauty, or any other folk tale or sacred myth. All true myth is in its essence sacred, that is, secret.

The great mass of the legends, romances, poems, *etc.*, of the Grail and Arthurian cycle seems to have come into existence about the twelfth century; but this does not interest the student who seeks the meaning rather than the history of the stories, the jewel in the casket rather than the measurements and date of the casket itself.

The forms of the legend are many and varied, and it is useless to attempt an examination of the many variants in a paper of this kind; but we may well examine somewhat the main story, which is more or less to be found in all the versions. First there is the tradition of the existence of the mysterious court of the Rich Fisher, the fisher king who fishes for a mystic fish, and at his court are kept the Grail, the spear that drips blood, and the broken sword and the silver dish: and whoso finds the court, which is ever difficult to discover, and mostly is found by chance after long wanderings, if he ask concerning the Grail, the spear and the sword, shall be enlightened and great benefit shall accrue to all the land, and the maimed king shall be made whole who was wounded by a spear for his hardiness in essaying to draw the sword, and who may not be healed till the Grail Knight come. Also in some of the legends the King Brou knows certain secret words which he must impart before he can die to him [Page 4] who achieves the great adventure of the Grail quest, and who becomes in turn the guardian of the Grail and the successor to the throne. All these three kings are in some cases mixed up and become one, and the names are changed; in one case it is Gawain who finds the Grail Castle and in another it is Percival, and again Parcifal, and later it is Galahad. Then the monks had much to say in the matter, and the old Celtic myth became converted into a Christian poem, and an origin for the cup, the spear, *etc.*, was invented in accordance with the accepted version of the Christ myth, itself I believe a form of the same mystic initiation mystery.

The Grail is always a cup except in one version, which claims an independent origin, and in that the Grail is a stone, which of course at once suggests the philosopher's stone, as the mystic vessel containing the

blood suggests the Elixir of Life: those two strange symbols of that school of mystics who concealed their philosophy under the guise of alchemy.

In some of the legends the incidents which lead to the quest of the Grail are not alluded to, and in others the object of the quest seems vague and prominence is given to the various trials and difficulties met by the knight who essays the adventure. There are two versions which are extremely interesting, and which, though differing very widely on the surface, are brought into place at once by the application of one or other of the keys supplied by the teachings given out in Theosophical writings, and more particularly in *The Secret Doctrine* and in *The Voice of the Silence*, by H.P.B. The one is the version found in Sir Thomas Malory's "*Morte D'Arthur*" — printed by Caxton at Westminster in 1485 — and which has been to a great extent followed by Tennyson in his "*Morte D'Arthur*". This version is cast in a mould which shows that the old myth was applied to tell of a school of mystics or a body of occultists and cast in Christian terminology and made to fit the current Christian mysticism, but still the old myth shows through the outer garment in spite of the change of form. We have the Round Table all assisting at the feast of Pentecost, and with Galahad, the new knight, knighted by Lancelot, who is said to be his father. And the mystic character of these two great knights is shown when Queen Guinevere remarks that "Sir Launcelot is come but of the eighth degree from our Lord Jesu Christ, and Sir Galahad is of the ninth degree from our Lord Jesu Christ; therefore I daresay they be the greatest gentlemen of the world". Galahad shows himself the promised knight by the trial of the sword, for he alone can draw forth the sword which is found stuck in a great stone that is seen "hovering on the water", and then he accomplishes a similar trial with a shield, and proves himself the best knight in the tournament and sits in the *Seige Perillous*, wherein no man can sit and escape with his life except it be the promised knight who is to accomplish [Page 5] the adventure of the Sangreal. Then in presence of all the knights of the Table Round and the King, the mystic vessel passes veiled through the hall, and the hall was filled with strange odours and every man found the meat that he most desired spread before him — which sounds very prosaic if taken literally, but if we take the vessel as the symbol of Wisdom which contains the Truth, and which even when veiled is a mystery that is only seen for a moment by a few and face to face only by the successful candidate, who devotes his life to the pursuit and is strong to achieve, by virtue of strength, which he must have acquired in previous life and effort. For in all cases the chosen knight is shown powerful beyond all other men even before he begins his career — as in the *Lay of the Great Fool*, and in the Welsh *Mabinogi of Peredur*, and in *Parcival*; as also in the *Light of Asia* we read of the triumph of the young Prince Siddartha, who later becomes the Buddha when he too has found the Truth. This quest is not for all at this time, but for all who will, when they shall have brought themselves in harmony with the laws of their own nature and so become able to meet the enemies they have to encounter.

Then Gawain swears to seek the Grail for a year and a day, because he had not seen it except veiled, and so all the Knights of the Round Table swear to go on this quest, and are bitterly reproached by Arthur, who tells them they are not fit to attempt a spiritual quest, and by so doing they are abandoning the preservation of the kingdom which was in their hands to follow false lights, will-o'-the-wisps, and all deceptions, being not pure enough to distinguish the true from the false, and so his goodly fellowship of noble knights should be destroyed, yet, for that their vows must not be broken, they must go. And so they depart, each alone, though their ladies and wives would fain accompany them, but the hermit Nacien forbids that any knight shall be accompanied by his lady on that quest. Here we see the monkish influence coming in, and the woman looked upon as the evil side of man. And perhaps in nothing is it more difficult to distinguish the true myth from the overlying variants than in the question of the sex relations. For we find at the same time the aspirants bound to strict celibacy and absolute purity of thought and deed, and at the same time united to the released damsel, and sometimes to several others.

I think the confusion is due to the allegorical accounts of the union of the various principles in man, such as the emotional soul with the thinking soul, and the soul with the spirit, and so on in various degrees and subdivisions, coming down to the numerous magnetic centres in the body in which the different currents are united, and which are personified in the most elaborate manner in the ancient Hindoo myths. Then sometimes the parent force after giving off a branch re-absorbs it, and this may be described as a father marrying his daughter, and so on, and so long as the [Page 6] original allegory remains in its first form, it may possibly be read again, and instruction in psycho-physiology be obtained; but once it has been bowdlerized into a conventional story of a good king and a wicked knight and a false queen, all that allegory is destroyed. Then, on the other hand, a simple account of the struggle of a soul to obtain enlightenment by means of self-conquest, would show the aspirant as fighting against all his lower passions, and consequently as living celibate and in strict asceticism. But when the modern student of folklore finds these different stories all told of the same hero, he is put to great extremities to reconcile the two, and usually falls back upon the useful explanation that these things are due to the poetic fancy of the writer.

So Tennyson makes the attachment between Arthur and the wife of King Lot of Orkney purely platonic, but in the Malory version Modred is born of that attachment, and Merlin prophesies that the incestuous union will ruin Arthur and the realm. Tennyson also omitted to mention the massacre of the Innocents which Arthur ordered in order to destroy the child that should be born on May Day, and who should cause his destruction. Thus we have the good King Arthur playing the *rôle* of the wicked King Herod, and so on; the foundation remains, but all else is turned topsy-turvy to suit the particular form of religion prevailing in any particular country.

In the *Conte du Graal*, there is a prologue which seems freer from the later Christian interpolations, and therefore more interesting. "The Story tells of the 'Graal', whose mysteries, if Master Blihis lie not, none may reveal", and this at once stamps all that follows as more or less allegorical. "The wells and springs of the rich land of Logres harboured damsels who fed the wayfarer. But King Amangous did wrong to one and carried off her golden cup, so that never more came damsels out of the springs to comfort the wanderer". Here we are at once reminded of the myth of Truth who lived in the well, and also of the stories of ancient races that enjoyed knowledge and power over the forces of nature, until these powers were turned to ill account, and were then removed. Thereafter the springs dried up, the grass withered, and the land became waste, and no more might be found the court of the Rich Fisher, which had filled the land with plenty and splendour. Arthur's knights then, hearing of the ill done to the damsels, resolved to restore them, and sought long the court of the Rich Fisher, and Gawain found it, but failed to ask the necessary questions as to the Graal, the spear that dripped blood, and the broken sword, and before him, Percevauld le Galois found the court and asked whereto the Graal served, but nought of the spear and the sword, so that he had again to seek the court which had vanished — having only partially succeeded in the trial — and the court was found seven times. The land in [Page 7] the meantime was repopled by a caitiff set who sprang from the wronged damsels, and these people built the Castel Orguellous and the Bridge Perillous and the Rich Maidens' Castel, and the Knights of the Round Table fought with them and destroyed them.

Just so from the remains of the old occult ceremonies and initiations sprang all the many religions of the earth; indeed, I have read that all religions take their rise from the divulgence of some part of the great Esoteric Wisdom Religion. Now, if the disciples of this school give out their knowledge to unfit persons the same thing happens; it is turned into a religious system; which is the most powerful instrument in the

hands of the ambitious, and the priesthoods spring up and thrive and the land perishes, spiritually, and the springs of knowledge no longer flow and the spirits of the earth are no longer serviceable to the wanderer in search of truth. So the Knights of the Round Table, the brothers of humanity, go out and destroy these systems and seek again the Graal, the vessel that contains the truth, the ark, and the spear of power, the two symbols of the Bacchus, the gold cup and the rod with cone at the top, the magnetic fir cone; for wine is the symbol of spirit, and the Bacchus was a pure spiritual principle before it was degraded by the popular fancy to the rank of genius of debauchery. So you will see the winged eagle-headed figures in Assyrian sculptures bearing the vessel and the cone.

Then comes the history of the knight who is to be the Grail finder. This history seems to be based on a regular formula, for though it varies widely, the variations are due principally to the omission or addition of incidents. When collated and examined an interesting formula is discovered, which Nutt calls the Aryan expulsion and return formula. Thus:—

I. Hero is born: (a) out of wedlock, (b) posthumously, (c) supernaturally, (d) one of twins.

II. Mother, princess residing in her own country.

III. Father: (a) God, (b) Hero, — from afar.

IV. Tokens and warning of hero's future greatness.

V. He is in consequence driven forth from home.

VI. Is suckled by wild beast.

VII. Is brought up by a childless couple, or shepherd, or widow.

VIII. Is of passionate and violent disposition.

IX. Seeks service in foreign lands.

IX.

(a) Attacks and slays monsters.

(b) Acquires magical knowledge through eating a fish or other magic animal.

X. Returns to his own native country, retreats, and again returns.

XI. Overcomes his enemies, frees his mother, seats himself on the throne.

[Page 8] Aryan expulsion and return formula (*Folklore Record*, Vol. IV.), Alfred Nutt.

Almost all the heroes of antiquity have histories corresponding in many respects to this formula. And for this there are good reasons. The true hero is the Higher Ego, which is the God in man, born of the Immortal Spiritual Soul in conjunction with the Universal Principle. This I take to be the allegory of the twins. Thus Manas the Mind Principle is said to be dual, the one aspect living by day, the other by night, the day and night being symbols of life incarnate and discarnate. This is the allegory of Castor and Pollux, one said to be of divine origin, the other of human, but of the same mother. I believe the myth of the birth of the Hero or Saviour from an immaculate virgin is common not only to Roman and Greek, Egyptian and Hindoo mythology, but also to the mythology of the Red Indian and Central American Indians. In fact the Heroes and Saviours and Avatars seem to be variations on the same theme, which has now been again given out, but this time more plainly to the world by the Adepts who have caused the Theosophical Society to spring into existence. This is the teaching of the dual Manas, the higher and lower aspects of the Ego, sprung from Atma, Buddhi. And here I must point out that we must distinguish between the application of the myth to the outer history of the life and deeds of the incarnate Hero, and the internal application to the real Ego; and this is to each of us of real interest for it represents the history of our own internal development, the Hero and his enemies being the spirit and the passions of each one of us. The country in which these events occur is the body; the cities, fortresses, deserts, etc., are all magnetic and vital centres in the body, seats of the various emotions, sensations and passions; the mystic castles, cities, and lands, with their inhabitants, are the astral body; and the Grail Castle I take to be the highest of these bodies, which forms the link between physical, astral, and spiritual astral, in which alone is to be found the real enlightenment, and which is so hard to find, and to hold in sight when found. The difficulty of following out the allegory in detail is largely due to the difficulty of realising that, while in an allegorical representation the different phases and aspects of the one consciousness are symbolised as different personages, and classified in philosophical analysis under different heads, they are all in reality the same individual consciousness under different conditions. So different stages of this internal progress are told as different legends, afterwards, perhaps, woven into a whole and made to fit in with the history of the external life of some hero. And though the external events will have a correspondence with the internal, still they belong to another category, and must be kept on their own line if we would avoid confusion.

Mother, princess residing in her own country. This would be equivalent [Page 9] to Buddhi, the Spiritual Soul, which is inseparable from Atma, the latter being the Universal principle always in every hierarchy, the Eternal Father immutable and unchangeable in regard to all else below it, and corresponding to the divine Father, which is symbolised as a God or as a Hero from afar.

In Manas is said to reside the individualizing tendency, which produces separation from the divine Parents, or rather the illusion of separateness, which causes the lower aspect of Manas to appear as cast out from its paradise and is symbolised in the allegory of the fallen angels, of the exiled son, of the flight into other lands and so on. In some cases the child is suckled by wild beasts, which I suppose would correspond to the lower ego being housed in the body and fed by the lower nature, which is said to be fourfold, and is symbolised by the four sacred animals, which correspond to the four Maharajahs and the four evangelists.

Then this lower Manas becomes for a time almost wholly influenced and controlled by Kama, the principle of desire in the widest sense, which appears allegorically as the foster mother, and in this

condition is said to be of passionate and violent disposition. The mind then seeking knowledge wanders in the region of the material planes, and is so said to seek service in foreign lands. And then come all the various exploits, the slaying of monsters, as the mind frees itself and attacks false ideals, false principles, ignorance and superstition, and thereby begins to acquire truer knowledge of the powers and forces of nature. Finally overcoming all the passions, which have now become his enemies, he reasserts his divine nature, and seats himself on the throne as lord of the mind and body, the crowned King, the Initiate, the anointed Saviour, the Divine Hero once more.

This is of course a mere suggestion of a possible reading of the foundation of these allegories. Particular legends may have a special relation to some one phase of the development, and then all the characters will find their correspondence in some sub-divisions perhaps of what might in another case be viewed as one principle. In the Quest of the Grail I think that the knight must be looked upon as the lower ego in search of the Truth, the Elixir of Life which gives immortality. And this is no hallucination of fanatics, but an allegorical expression of fact. Man becomes immortal when he has acquired the knowledge during life of the states of death and after, and the mastery over the lower nature which makes him able at will to learn and return to the conditions of material life and so to pass consciously over the Bridge Perillous; thus passing with full consciousness from life in one physical body to life in another without break in the chain of conscious existence; so attaining immortality, not by perpetuating a physical body necessarily, but by so uniting the lower with the higher mind as to be independent of and master of the lower material planes of nature. [Page 10]

In the *Mabinogi of Peredur*, which appears to be the Welsh equivalent of the French *Percevauld le Galois*, the mother gives him some strange instructions. If he requires food and none will give it him he must take it by force. Now if the knight is the Ego, the food must be knowledge or experience, and we are reminded of the saying that the Kingdom of Heaven must be taken by violence, and so the thinker who is unable to get answers to his questions as to the how and the why of life, must go out and seek for himself. Then again, she tells her son that if he see a fair jewel he must possess himself of it and give it to another. The jewel is to be regarded as a jewel of wisdom, seeing that the seeker is the mind; and here is the Theosophic teaching that knowledge is not to be hoarded up but given out to others, and this in no way clashes with the teaching, "Cast not your pearls before swine", if we read it with a view to its possible meaning, for, intellectually, pearls are esoteric truths and swine are exoteric ritualists of dead letter worship.

When the knight has found the Grail Castle, the court of the Rich Fisher, he sees the procession of mystic symbols, and if he fails to ask concerning these mysteries he has failed in the final trial and passes out into a desert, land and court and castle are invisible to him once more and the land remains in its barren condition; but if he ask the questions he is at once enlightened and all is well, the land becomes fertile, the wounded king is healed, and he is crowned king, the late guardian of the Grail speaks the secret words to his successor and he becomes the guardian of the spiritual wisdom from which light flows to all parts of the land. Again, when Galahad takes his seat in the Seige Perillous and receives no harm, at once all those knights who had dared to try the chair and had been swallowed by the earth, come to life again. What can this mean? Are these knights former incarnations in which the trial had been essayed? And is it another way of saying that at a certain stage of progress and initiation the past lives become known to the candidate? Perhaps it may be so. And the same story is told in the legend of the Sleeping Beauty and in the description of how the locusts cross the stream in Olive Schreiner's *Three Dreams in a Desert*, when she asks, "And what of those who are swept away by the

stream and whose bodies do not even serve to make a bridge for the others to pass over? " and the guide, the old man, says, "They serve to make a path to the river'. So perhaps those bold pioneers who have tried the path of Occultism and perhaps failed to reach the goal, and whose ruined lives are swept away on the stream of vice or of madness? should be very lovingly thought of, and if possible protected, by those who follow on the track and profit by the work they have done before they fell, and by the example of the danger of that particular fault which caused that failure, remembering that when the light is reached the greatest failure may appear as one step secured on the upward path.