Excerpts from *Le Morte D’Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory – Lancelot and the Quest for the Holy Grail

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ADVENTURES OF SIR LAUNCELOT

After Sir Launcelot had parted from his fellows at the Castle of Vagon, he rode many days through the forest without adventure, till he chanced upon a knight close by a little hermitage in the wood. Immediately, as was the wont of errant knights, they prepared to joust, and Launcelot, whom none before had overthrown, was borne down, man and horse, by the stranger knight. Thereupon a nun, who dwelt in the hermitage, cried: "God be with thee, best knight in all this world," for she knew the victor for Sir Galahad. But Galahad, not wishing to be known, rode swiftly away; and presently Sir Launcelot got to horse again and rode slowly on his way, shamed and doubting sorely in his heart whether this quest were meant for him.

When night fell, he came to a great stone cross which stood at the parting of the way and close by a little ruined chapel. So Sir Launcelot, being minded to pass the night there, alighted, fastened his horse to a tree and hung his shield on a bough. Then he drew near to the little chapel, and wondered to see how, all ruinous though it was, yet within was an altar hung with silk and a great silver candlestick on it; but when he sought entrance, he could find none and, much troubled in his mind, he returned to his horse where he had left it, and unlacing his helm and ungirding his sword, laid him down to rest.

Then it seemed to Sir Launcelot that, as he lay between sleeping and waking, there passed him two white palfreys bearing a litter wherein was a sick knight, who cried: "Sweet Lord, when shall I be pardoned all my transgressions, and when shall the holy vessel come to me, to cure me of my sickness?" And instantly it seemed that the great candlestick came forth of itself from the chapel, floating through the air before a table of silver on which was the Holy Grail. Thereupon the sick knight raised himself, and on his bended knees he approached so nigh that he kissed the holy vessel; and immediately he cried: "I thank Thee, sweet Lord, that I am healed of my sickness." And all the while Sir Launcelot, who saw this wonder, felt himself held that he could not move. Then a squire brought the stranger knight his weapons, in much joy that his lord was cured. "Who think ye that this knight may be who remains sleeping when the holy vessel is so near?" said the knight. "In truth," said the squire, "he must be one that is held by the bond of some great sin. I will take his helm and his sword, for here have I brought you all your armour save only these two." So the knight armed him from head to foot, and taking Sir Launcelot's horse, rode away with his squire. On the instant, Sir Launcelot awoke amazed, not knowing whether he had dreamed or not; but while he wondered, there came a terrible voice, saying: "Launcelot, arise and leave this holy place." In shame, Sir Launcelot turned to obey, only to find horse and sword and shield alike vanished. Then, indeed, he knew himself dishonoured. Weeping bitterly, he made the best of his way on foot, until he came to a cell where a hermit was saying prayer. Sir Launcelot knelt too, and, when all was ended, called to the hermit, entreating him for counsel. "With good will," said the hermit. So Sir Launcelot made himself known and told the hermit all, lamenting how his good fortune was turned to wretchedness and his glory to shame; and truly, the hermit was amazed that Sir Launcelot should be in such case. "Sir," said he, "God has given you manhood and strength beyond all other knights; the more are ye bounden to his service." "I have sinned," said Sir Launcelot; "for in all these years of my knighthood, I have done everything for the honour and glory of my lady and naught for my Maker; and little thank have I given to God for all his benefits to me." Then the holy man gave Sir Launcelot good counsel and made him rest there that night; and the next day he gave him a horse, a sword and a helmet, and bade him go forth and bear himself knightly as the servant of God.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HOW SIR LAUNCELOT SAW THE HOLY GRAIL

For many days after he had left the hermitage, Sir Launcelot rode through the forest, but there came to him no such adventures as had befallen him on other quests to the increase of his fame. At last, one night-tide, he came to the shores of a great water and there he lay down to sleep; but as he slept, a voice called on him: "Launcelot, arise, put on thine armour and go on thy way until thou comest to a ship. Into that thou shalt enter." Immediately, Sir Launcelot started from his sleep to obey and, riding along the shore, came presently to a ship beached on the strand; no sooner had he entered it, than the ship was launched—how, he might not know. So the ship sailed before the wind for many a day. No mortal was on it, save only Sir Launcelot, yet were all his needs supplied. Then, at last, the ship ran ashore at the foot of a great castle; and it was midnight. Sir Launcelot waited not for the dawn, but, his sword gripped in his hand, sprang ashore, and then, right before him, he saw a postern where the gate stood open indeed, but two grisly lions kept the way. And when Sir Launcelot would have rushed upon the great beasts with his sword, it was struck from his hand, and a voice said: "Ah! Launcelot, ever is thy trust in thy might rather than thy Maker!" Sore ashamed, Sir Launcelot took his sword and thrust it back into the sheath, and going forward, he passed unhurt through the gateway, the lions that kept it falling back from his path. So without more adventure, Launcelot entered into the castle; and there he saw how every door stood open, save only one, and that was fast barred, nor, with all his force, might he open it. Presently from the chamber within came the sound of a sweet voice in a holy chant, and then in his heart Launcelot knew that he was come to the Holy Grail. So, kneeling humbly, he prayed that to him might be shown some vision of that he sought. Forthwith the door flew open and from the chamber blazed a light such as he had never known before; but when he made to enter, a voice cried: "Launcelot, forbear," and sorrowfully he withdrew. Then where he knelt, far even from the threshold of the wondrous room, he saw a silver table and, on it, covered with red samite, the Holy Grail. At sight of that which he had sought so long, his joy became so great that, unmindful of the warning, he advanced into the room and drew nigh even to the Table itself. Then on the instant there burst between him and it a blaze of light, and he fell to the ground. There he lay, nor might he move nor utter any sound; only he was aware of hands busy about him which bore him away from the chamber.

For four-and-twenty days, Sir Launcelot lay as in a trance. At the end of that time, he came to himself, and found those about him that had tended him in his swoon. These, when they had given him fresh raiment, brought him to the aged King—Pelles was his name—that owned that castle. The King entertained him right royally, for he knew of the fame of Sir Launcelot; and long he talked with him of his quest and of the other knights who followed it, for he was of a great age and knew much of men. At the end of four days, he spoke to Sir Launcelot, bidding him return to Arthur's court; "For," said he, "your quest is ended here, and all that ye shall see of the Holy Grail, ye have seen." So Launcelot rode on his way, grieving for the sin that hindered him from the perfect vision of the Holy Grail, but thanking God for that which he had seen. So in time he came to Camelot, and told to Arthur all that had befallen him.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE END OF THE QUEST

After he had rescued Sir Percivale from the twenty knights who beset him, Sir Galahad rode on his way till night-fall, when he sought shelter at a little hermitage. Thither there came in the night a damsel who desired to speak with Sir Galahad; so he arose and went to her, "Galahad," said she, "arm you and mount your horse and follow me, for I am come to guide you in your quest." So they rode together until they had come to the sea-shore, and there the damsel showed Galahad a great ship into which he must enter. Then she bade him farewell, and he, going on to the ship, found there already the good knights Sir Bors and Sir Percivale, who made much joy of the meeting. They abode in that ship until they had come to the castle of King Pelles, who welcomed them right gladly. Then, as they all sat at supper that night, suddenly the hall was filled with a great light, and the holy vessel appeared in their midst, covered all in white samite. While they all rejoiced, there came a voice saying: "My Knights whom I have chosen, ye have seen the holy vessel dimly. Continue your journey to the city of Sarras and there the perfect Vision shall be yours."

Now in the city of Sarras had dwelt long time Joseph of Arimathea, teaching its people the true faith, before ever he came into the land of Britain; but when Sir Galahad and his fellows came there after long voyage, they found it ruled by a heathen king named Estorause, who cast them into a deep dungeon. There they were kept a year, but at the end of that time, the tyrant died. Then the great men of the land gathered together to consider who should be their king; and, while they were in council, came a voice bidding them take as their king the youngest of the three knights whom Estorause had thrown into prison. So in fear and wonder they hastened to the prison, and releasing the three knights, made Galahad king as the voice had bidden them.

Thus Sir Galahad became King of the famous city of Sarras, in far Babylon. He had reigned a year when, one morning early, he and the other two knights, his fellows, went into the chapel, and there they saw, kneeling in prayer, an aged man, robed as a bishop, and round him hovered many angels. The knights fell on their knees in awe and reverence, whereupon he that seemed a bishop turned to them and said: "I am Joseph of Arimathea, and I am come to show you the perfect Vision of the Holy Grail." On the instant there appeared before them, without veil or cover, the holy vessel, in a radiance of light such as almost blinded them. Sir Bors and Sir Percivale, when at length they were recovered from the brightness of that glory, looked up to find that the holy Joseph and the wondrous vessel had passed from their sight. Then they went to Sir Galahad where he still knelt as in prayer, and behold, he was dead; for it had been with him even as he had prayed; in the moment when he had seen the vision, his soul had gone back to God.

So the two knights buried him in that far city, themselves mourning and all the people with them. And immediately after, Sir Percivale put off his arms and took the habit of a monk, living a devout and holy life until, a year and two months later, he also died and was buried near Sir Galahad. Then Sir Bors armed him, and bidding farewell to the city, sailed away until, after many weeks, he came again to the land of Britain. There he took horse, and stayed not till he had come to Camelot. Great was the rejoicing of Arthur and all his knights when Sir Bors was once more among them. When he had told all the adventures which had befallen him and the good knights, his companions, all who heard were filled with amaze. But the King, he caused the wisest clerks in the land to write in great hooks this Quest of the Holy Grail, that the fame of it should endure unto all time.