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The Grail Legend, as treated by
Wolfram von Eschenbach, Wagner, Tennyson
and Lowell.

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Stretched on the gigantic loom of the centuries, like a marvellous piece of tapestry, the legend of the Grail was being woven under the changing hands of the poets of many nations. What a variety of patterns flashed forth as one weaver succeeded another! Celt, Moor, Briton, French and German vied in unconscious rivalry to produce the glowing, richly-colored fabric.

Altho the legend was firmly rooted in the mythology of all primitive people, the barbarous Celts possessed the earliest known version as far back as the seventh century. Gradually the saga grew into a confusion of many legends, for from time to time from folklore and from the teachings of the church, new elements were added until it became a medley of Celtic, pagan and mythological traditions, Christian legends and mysticism.

Each of the four artists under discussion, handled the subject to suit his natural bent, rejecting or reshaping the material as he saw fit. Wolfram von Eschenbach retold it at length in a mediaeval epic: Wagner saw in it a moving theme for a music drama: Tennyson made it one of the gems of his beautiful "Idylls of the King", and Lowell reset it in a nature poem.

In Germany, it took its most popular form under the hands of Wolfram von Eschenbach, whose sources probably were Crestien De Troye's "Perceval le Gallois ou le Conte del Graal", and Guiot, an unknown Provencal singer. Wolfram with his natural love for story telling and rich

imagination, spins out the tale in a leisurely, highly poetic fashion, introducing a wealth of incident and irrelevant matter designed to delight the eager readers of his time. He has departed widely from the legend, with the purpose of making it more human. His "Parzival" is more than an epic of chivalry, it is also psychological and religious, for it describes the development and purification of a human soul, the reconciliation of a spiritual and worldly life, and the transfiguration of earthly joys thru love of God. It is vibrant with living truths and vital lessons, with a broad, fine religious spirit, imbued with noble mysticism. With his tendency toward diffuseness, in the early part of the poem, he gives a detailed account of the genealogy of his hero, passing on to tell of the childhood of Parzival with his mother, which is spent, in the solitude of a forest. Wishing him to grow up in ignorance of the life of chivalry and warfare, Herzeloide has come here to lead a simple, uncultured life, and to get into communion with nature. With no knowledge of the outside world, the boy has also very scanty instruction in religion; he has been told of the brightness of God and that he represents Treue and should be sought in all need. In his simple, naive faith, he falls on his knees and offers to worship the knights in brilliant armor, whom he meets in the paths of the forest. Their advent closes this idyll of a simple forest life and our hero steps into the world, in all the simplicity of his perfect innocence. As he proceeds to Arthur's court, a too literal carrying out of his mother's parting advice, makes him the unwitting cause of much pain to others. Altho he profits some from the good

counsel of Gurnemanz, in that he wins the hand of Condwiramur, the tragic fate of his literalness still pursues him when he appears at the Grail castle and forbears to express sympathy for Amfortas and Titurel. The curse of the sorceress, Kundrie, opens his eyes to his guilt; conscience stricken and in the bitterness of his remorse, he renounces God, but keeps his faith in his earthly love, Condwiramur. After five years of wandering, of adventure and continued search for the Grail, on a Good Friday morning, he comes to Trevrizent, realizes the blessing of repentance and becomes reconciled to God. He is once more admitted to the presence of the Grail, and fulfills the requirements of the prophecy by asking the question which relieves the suffering Amfortas.

Analyzing only a few out of the kaleidoscopic maze of characters, we can readily see that Wolfram has created types. Parzival is represented as highly endowed with physical beauty; he has the heroic might of his father, Gahmuret, and the true heartedness of his mother, Herzeloide. In him, knightly and spiritual attributes are interwoven. His character develops from the perfect purity and innocence of boyhood to the doubt, trouble and gloom of manhood and finally to the peace of soul, gained thru faith and obedience. Parzival obtains his first sight of the Grail with its accompanying splendor and ceremony, not because of acquired pureness of soul, but by reason of his youthful innocence. He proves unworthy of the opportunity given him, because he is too self sufficient and because his natural warm heartedness is crushed by the conventional precepts of propriety inculcated by Gurnemanz. However, the

counsel of Gurnemanz eventually bears fruit, for thru it Parzival gains knowledge of the world and men, and thus his mind becomes open and receptive for the deeper, more vital lesson to come. The character development is very slow, the inner transformation is not clearly brot out. Parzival is an admirable character whose days are varied by tiltings with knights. He loses his spiritual faith, but not his human loyalty nor sense of duty and he still keeps up a standard of knightly conduct. At the moment when his secular knighthood has attained its highest glory, Kundrie appears and rebukes him and he renounces allegiance to God. From Trevrizent, he learns humility and submission to the dispensations of Providence. Henceforth, his actions are guided by trust in God and he becomes worthy to regain the Grail.

Gurnemanz appears as a mediaeval feudal lord, whose life is devoted to the eradication of the false. He is not closely connected with the order of the knights of the Grail, but represents the connecting link between a worldly life and a spiritual life, and is the mediator between Parzival and the Grail.

By the introduction of Gawain, the epic becomes a complete chivalrous poem. As Parzival typifies the higher order of knighthood, so Gawain represents the lower. Altho a type of the formal Christian, he is unworthy to find the Grail, because he does not "follow the gleam" with a steady, unwavering faith. His fight with Parzival and his defeat, symbolizes the triumph of the higher spiritual chivalry over secular knighthood.

Kundrie lacks all physical charm; she is very ugly, almost bestial in appearance, and is a sort of unsexed creature. In her relation to the priestly order of the Knights of the Grail, and in her prophetic power, she is reminiscent of the ancient Sibyls. Her function is to be a prod to Parzival's conscience and to pronounce upon him a curse, which proves to be the turning point of his career.

Threatening the spiritual knighthood of the Grail and the worldly chivalry of Arthur's court is Klinschor, who represents the principle of evil and destruction. He is lord of a magic castle, where he keeps noble ladies in confinement, but is not exceptionally malignant.

If the theme of the epic could be expressed in one word, it would be "Treue". That is the guiding principle, the highest motive which actuates the characters from Kundrie to Parzival. As for Wolfram's philosophy, he conceived the highest end of human effort to be the securing of heaven's grace without forswearing the joys of earth. To gain the Grail, is to realize the highest conception of earthly and heavenly happiness. Parzival represents the sinful man, who, relying on self alone, despairs of God and himself and obtains the heavenly kingdom only by repentance and humility.

Wonderfully rich in setting the epic presents not only a highly-colored picture of mediaeval days, with its varied types of living creations, but it strikes as well a higher note of spirituality, which comes to us with perhaps even greater force than its creator intended.

For his music drama, "Parsifal", Wagner drew largely for the source of his material on Wolfram's epic. But he was not a mere borrower - his genius was too large to be content to follow closely the ideas of another. Not only was he original in making changes suited to the purpose of the drama, but he also expressed his own philosophy. Free from the super-sensuality so frankly expressed in Wolfram, the drama arouses a most reverential mood - an unspeakable consecration rests over the whole play.

In the first act, the suffering Amfortas appears, while the voices of the chorus lament and repeat the prophecy of the coming of a pure fool, in whose sympathy lies relief for them all. Hardly has the mournful procession bearing the king passed on, when a wild swan drops into the midst of the assembly and dies. Parsifal, an uncouth youth, is brought in as the offender and upon being reproached by Gurnemanz breaks his bow to express his remorse. In answer to queries he tells of his mother, Herzeloide, and of his lonely life in the forest. With the hope that the prophecy is now to be fulfilled, he is led to the castle, where the Grail is to be unveiled and holy communion held. The appearance of the sick king, the feeble Titurel, the saddened knights and the sacred cup, all leave him indifferent, cold and unsympathetic, and he is angrily thrust out by Gurnemanz.

The second act is in Klingsor's Palace, to which Parsifal has been lured and where the beautiful flower maidens bewilder his simple soul, and the fascinating Kundry tries to enkindle passion for her. With her kiss, the

scales drop from his spiritual eyes, and a wide compassion for humanity awakes in him. In angry disappointment, Klingsor hurls his spear, which remains poised in the air above Parsifal's head until he lifts his arm and brings it to his side. The garden becomes transformed into a desolate waste, where the sirens lie like withered flowers. Parsifal, having found himself, with a voice of faith and hope, calls to the falling Kundry, that they will meet again. The third act opens at the hut of Gurnemanz, not far from Montsalvat. The time is on a good Friday morning. The regenerated Kundry is at the well, to which Parsifal sadly approaches. Gurnemanz recognizes him and admonishes him to lay aside his arms, as is fitting on such a day. He tells him that Titurel is dead and that the knights of the Grail are wasting away because Amfortas does not reveal the sacred vessel. Kundry serves the returned hero as Mary did Christ, and Gurnemanz salves his head. After Parsifal baptizes Kundry, all proceed to the Grail Castle, where the wound of Amfortas is closed with the holy spear. A dove descends and poises over Parsifal's head, while all honor him as their savior and new king.

As an opera, Parsifal is picturesque and emotional, the characters are clear cut and there is sufficient action, but more than this, it is a lesson in Christian ethics.

Wagner differs essentially from Wolfram, in the way he has condensed the material - he has reduced outward action to its simplest form to concentrate attention on the inner action. All of the temptations of Parsifal, which are told with such a wealth of detail in the epic, are here symbolized by one episode - Kundry in

the garden. This same condensation is carried out in the treatment of the characters - many of Wolfram's are omitted entirely or several are combined into one.

In the drama, Parsifal is almost stripped of his knightly character, which is so prominent a feature of the epic - he is wholly lacking in worldliness and represents the ascetic ideal. Here too he makes his first appearance in the castle of the Grail as a guileless fool. After the crucial meeting with Kundry, where his soul has been awakened and his moral nature becomes a positive force, he never wavers but is a devoted follower of Christ, thruout his probationary period and afterward. He represents the evolution of a life from self absorption to selflessness, from guilelessness to positive virtue. His self-mastery thru renunciation of the sensuous life comes as the rich fruition of a life of strenuous endeavor, a life of loyalty to duty and to love. In him is exemplified the lesson that pure love is the greatest thing in the world, that all else is ephemeral, and it alone can lead the soul to the heights of virtue. Only then is he worthy to serve the Grail, when he has become aware of the vivid reality of other lives, and when sympathy is an unconscious natural expression of the heart. As soon as he experiences the feeling of compassion for another, the guileless one is no longer, but becomes enlightened by this feeling, and is an open avower of and combatant for good. Pity is the promising bud out of which the blossom of love gradually unfolds.

Wagner's Kundry is really the pivotal character of the drama. Her nature is protean, for while under the influence of Klingsor, she personifies sensuality, at other times she is the tireless servitor of Amfortas and the Grail. In her is represented the aspiring soul chained by passion and desire to worship at the shrine of the material, while the spirit revolts and tries to break from its base servitude. When Parsifal in his purity spurns her proffered love, he loosens the chains of her bondage, and henceforth her life becomes an offering of pious service.

The character of Klingsor is also given an illuminating touch - it is expanded into a destructive, demoniac force, into a glorification of the human will. He is the opponent and enemy of the Knights of the Grail, whom he is continually trying to lure to evil by charms and with his seductive flower maidens. Diametrically opposed to the Kingdom of God as symbolized in the Order of the Grail, he represents the destructive, disintegrative power of force and hate as against the creative and constructive influence of love.

The moral of the opera has necessarily been touched in the discussion of the characters. While the emotional worship of the Grail is a prominent feature, this is done perhaps more for the sake of the picturesque than for spiritual effect. For certain it is, we get from the drama much more than formal worship. It contains the lesson of walking in the paths of righteousness for righteousness sake and portrays the ennobling beauty of a life devoted to higher

things. But were the moral set aside and the philosophy disregarded, still the drama could not fail to appeal to the aesthetic, from the several points of view of structure, setting and music.

Tennyson, too, saw in the legend opportunities to express his poet fancy, both on the side of truth and beauty. The source from which he drew his material was Mallory's "Morte D'Arthur". From this fact and from his creative originality we must account for the wide difference in treatment between his version and the two already treated. The Arthur cycle and the Grail legend are here more firmly welded together than in Wolfram, where there is a sharp line of differentiation between the secular and spiritual knights, whose paths merely cross and do not run parallel and unite as in Tennyson.

During the absence of Arthur, the king, Sir Galahad resolves to occupy the "Siege Perilous", which had been fashioned by Merlin, in such a manner that he who sat in it was lost. In his uplifted mood Sir Galahad cries "If I lose myself, I save myself", and takes the chair. Accompanied by portentous sounds and blasts, the Grail descends on a long beam, covered with a luminous cloud. Because Sir Galahad alone has seen it, the other knights are filled with disappointment and take a vow to go in search of the sacred cup. When Arthur returns and the miracle is told him, he regrets that the vow was so freely taken. His practical mind likens the quest to following a cloud, altho he concedes the fitness of the undertaking for such as Galahad, Percevale, and Sir Bors. Nevertheless, their

vows being sacred, they must all go. The adventures of Percevale are recounted at length. Altho they lack concreteness and seem more like the visions of a fevered mind, they symbolize the temptations which man is often wont to encounter. Sense pleasures, lustful passion, love of gold, desire for fame and honor, and pure human love - all these exert their influence and are overcome. Finally meeting with Galahad, to whom the Grail is a frequent apparition, the zeal for the quest rekindles in Percevale. He witnesses the mystic passing of Galahad into the spiritual city and at the same time beholds the Holy Vessel, "redder than any rose". Sir Bors, too, gains the vision, but all the others fail. Gawain, being deaf and blind to holy things, is soon diverted from the quest; Lancelot makes a desperate attempt, but for him, the Grail has "a stormy glare, a heat as from a seven times heated furnace". From these various experiences, Arthur concludes that the undertaking is too intangible and cannot hold the ordinary man: that the world needs practical goodness, not an emotional, ecstatic religion: that visions must pass unheeded by the man who is bound by ties of duty.

Tennyson makes the quest of the Grail the common impulse of an entire order, out of which three are successful, not only one as in the other two versions discussed. Sir Galahad appears in the pure, white light of perfect stainlessness, whose "chair desires him here in vain", "However they may crown him elsewhere". Upon Sir Bors, a "square-set, honest man", the vision has had a subduing effect - his voice is low and sad, his eyes fill with tears, and he

cannot speak of what he has seen. In Percevale, the mean between the two, lacking the complete spiritual exaltation of Galahad, and yet something of a dreamer, the vision has aroused all latent religious emotions. Leaving human wrongs to right themselves, he has entered a secluded life, where he lives over again, in telling, his great experiences.

It is a little difficult to explain the philosophy in "The Holy Grail", without analyzing the moral purpose of the Idylls as a whole. The quest of the Grail is the last desperate attempt of the Knights of the Round Table to regain the lost virtue of their order, and to reinvigorate its moral tone. Their comparative failure predicts the disintegration that is shortly to follow. The moral is also obscured by a deep mysticism, which makes the underlying lesson somewhat elusive and intangible.

The setting of the poem, in keeping with all of the Idylls, is extremely picturesque - the background is highly colored and fanciful, the several appearances of the Grail are weirdly beautiful.

On the whole, it lacks the positive spiritual quality found in Wolfram and to a greater extent in Wagner. Its highest merit lies outside the moral sphere - it makes its greatest appeal on the artistic side, in the glowing word pictures and character setting.

In Lowell's "Sir Launfal", the legend is stripped bare of all the mediaeval vesture,

with which it has been so lavishly clothed by the other poets, and is almost entirely free from rich imagery and mysticism, but it still carries with it the great theme of pity and love.

Sir Launfal determines to seek the Holy Grail and in his enthusiasm conceives the ascetic notion of sleeping on rushes, until his vow has been kept. In a vision he has the following experiences. As he leaves the castle in all the freshness and buoyancy of youth, a leper crouches at the gate, begging for alms. In scorn Sir Launfal tosses a coin, which is left untouched, while the leper rebukes him for his lack of proper charity. After a lapse of years, the knight returns, old and bent, to find his earldom usurped. As he sits and muses, the leper again appears at his side, and repeats the request for alms. The chastened soul of Sir Launfal sees in the stricken wretch, the image of "Him, who died on the tree", and the sharing of his crust is a spontaneous act of pity and kindness. The leper now becomes the transfigured Christ, who pronounces his blessing on the giver. With this the vision closes, and Sir Launfal awakes, resolved to seek for the Grail no farther since it can be found in his own castle, which now becomes a refuge and ready shelter to wanderers and serfs.

While differing widely from the original legend, there are several incidents which connect closely with the Parsifal saga. Sir Launfal's sympathy is parallel to Parsifal's first appearance at the Grail Castle, where he fails to

express pity. Like Parsifal, Sir Launfal must go thru a period of probation and trial before he has the opportunity to redeem himself. Lowell treats the Grail wholly as a symbol - in the ready expression of Christian sympathy, in the forgetting of self, when the heart has become ashes and dust - then is the Grail realized. After the awakèning of Sir Launfal's higher self, he is not called to any high office of service to God, as the head of a priestly order, for since the Grail is only the rebirth of himself, it requires no body of priestly servitors, no solemn worship other than the free giving of self.

There might be read into the poem the spirit of American freedom, for it contains a broad interpretation of democracy - the levelling of all ranks in the interest of a common humanity. It might also be classed as a nature poem, for Lowell's genius as a landscape poet has here attained its most perfect expression. But in the last analysis, it is a parable of striking beauty, teaching the lesson of brotherly love in inspired phrases that sink into the mind of the reader, thru the appealing force of their simplicity and truth.

I have endeavored to show how each writer has revived the legend to embody his own philosophy and artistic expression. Wolfram's mediaeval epic has not only the charm of its pictorial setting and flowing narrative, but also the merit of a deeper, spiritual significance. While Wolfram has made use of the legend in its full development, Wagner has boldly discarded the burdensome bulk of extraneous material to concentrate on the main theme, thereby gaining

dramatic unity of action. Where Wolfram makes his moral appeal thru simple, earnest language, Wagner does so thru his soul-stirring music. Tennyson has been equally free in reshaping the legend to fit his poetic conception. The main points of the saga are merely sketched in etching-like, to provide for the rich imagery of the back-ground. Altho the high, spiritual ideal inspires awe and reverence, it does not get the human, sympathetic response which is spontaneously given to Wolfram and Wagner. From Lowell, on the contrary, we get a combination of visionary exaltation and practical, every-day religion, which needs no subtle interpretation. The spiritual note rings out more clearly and has fewer overtones than in Tennyson's poem. Altho there are these striking differences in treatment, not one has been able to cast off the witching spell of the legend, which lies in its noble mysticism and deep spirituality.