

***Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* plot summary**

based on https://www.mcgoodwin.net/pages/otherbooks/ct_perceval.html

Introduction includes an homage to Count Philip of Flanders (the author's patron after 1181).

Perceval grows up in the Waste Forest, raised alone and in ignorance of knighthood by his mother. On his way through the forest he meets five knights and marvels at their appearance, thinking they are angels and the most handsome of them is God. To satisfy Perceval's insistent inquiries, their leader describes their knightly furnishings. He has been recently knighted by King Arthur, who is staying in Carlisle.

His mother is distraught to learn he has met the knights, and tells him of his father, the knight Gahmuret, how he was wounded, lost his wealth, was came home. Perceval's two brothers became knights and died in combat, and Gahmuret died of grief. But Perceval can only think of becoming a knight, and leaves his mother with her reluctant blessing. She advises him to assist any lady in need, to serve ladies and maidens.

In an encounter with an unnamed damsel in a vermillion and striped tent, Perceval forces kisses from her and forcibly takes her ring, misinterpreting his mother's advice. The woman's lover returns, and accuses her of infidelity, resolving to punish her by making her go naked and on foot. He is also heading toward King Arthur's. King Arthur has fought and defeated King Ryon. He is at Carlisle, a castle above the sea.

Perceval encounters the knight in red armor (Red Knight), who has laid claim to Arthur's land, and sends Perceval to bear a message to Arthur.

Perceval comes into Arthur's court, refuses to dismount, hurriedly asks to be knighted (but does not seem to wait for this to be done), and asks to be granted the armor of the Red Knight. The handsome but evil-tongued seneschal Kay mocks him, challenging him to get the Red Knight's armor, and Arthur rebukes Kay. A maiden (the queen's handmaiden, unnamed) laughs for the first time in 6 years, and Kay strikes her and also the court jester (who has prophesied "This maiden will not laugh until she has seen the man who will be the supreme lord among all knights."

Perceval returns to the Red Knight, demands him armor, and quickly kills him with a javelin through the eye. He is advised by Yonet, a page at Arthur's court, and takes the knight's armor and horse--Yonet receives Perceval's own horse. He sends Yonet with Arthur's stolen cup and a message to Arthur. The jester prophesies that Perceval will avenge the kick Kay gave him.

Perceval rides away and comes to a castle by a river and the sea. He encounters a gentleman in ermine, Gornemant of Gohort, and they converse. Perceval asks for lodging, and Gornemant begins to teach him how to conduct himself as a knight. Perceval expresses concern about his mother, whom he saw faint as he was leaving her. The next morning, Gornemant gives him clothing and a sword, conferring on him knighthood. Gornemant advises Perceval to not be too talkative or prone to gossip, to find a maiden or woman whom he can console, and to go to church, and not to claim publicly that he was taught by his mother. Perceval departs to find his mother.

He encounters another castle, Biaurepaire, by the sea. There he finds a charming maiden Blancheflor whose followers are weakened by hunger and famine. She is Gornemant's niece. At night she comes innocently into the sleeping Perceval's bedroom and gets into bed with him, embracing him. She relates there will be an imminent attack by Anguigneron, the seneschal of the evil knight Clamadeu of the Isles, and that they have previously attacked and carried away many of her men. She will kill herself before allowing herself to be taken to Clamadeu. Perceval promises to help Blancheflor and asks only for her love in return. She stays the night with him in bed. The next morning, Perceval does battle with Anguigneron, whom he fells but spares after Anguigneron begs for mercy. Perceval orders him back to Arthur's court to serve the maiden that Kay

struck. Clamadeu learns his seneschal has been defeated. Perceval does battle with twenty of Clamadeu's knights and wins the day. Clamadeu's adviser suggests he wait it out and let the starvation inside have its effect. But a ship with wheat and provisions arrives. At last Clamadeu does battle with Perceval and is forced to beg for mercy. He also is sent back to Arthur's court to the maiden whom Kay struck. Clamadeu also releases all his prisoners. The two defeated knights appear before Arthur and his queen – they are staying now at Disnadarion in Wales. The two knights tell of their defeat by Perceval, and the jester again rejoices that he will be avenged. Arthur expresses regret that Kay drove Perceval away. The knights Girflet and Yvain [not the same as Gawain] hospitably escort the 2 new arrivals away.

Perceval departs Blancheflor, determined to find his mother. He encounters monks and nuns from the town, and speaks of his mother to them.

At a river, he sees two men in an anchored boat fishing (one of whom is the Fisher King). Perceval is unable to cross, and the Fisher King offers him lodging for the night. Perceval climbs up a cleft in the rock to the top of a hill where he arrives at a splendid castle with tower and hall. Inside, he sees a nobleman with graying hair seated on a bed, the lord of the castle (the Fisher King) who is unable to rise to greet him. A squire enters carrying a sword with engraved blade, and announces that the lord's niece has sent it to him—the lord gives the sword to Perceval. Another squire enters carrying a white lance on whose tip blood oozed and flowed down onto the squire's hand. Perceval refrains from asking about this lance, recalling Gornemant's admonishment. More squires bring in candelabras. A maiden brings in a grail (a serving dish) held in both hands, and the room becomes brightly illuminated. Another brings in a silver carving platter. The grail is made of gold and set with precious stones – it and the platter are carried to another chamber. Perceval fails to ask who is being served by the grail. They dine at an ivory table. The grail returns borne in the opposite direction. Later that night, the Fisher King excuses himself and has to be carried off to his bedroom, and Perceval again fails to ask what ails him. The next morning, Perceval discovers that the hall is deserted and everyone has left. As he rides over the drawbridge, the drawbridge mysteriously raises up on its own.

He encounters a maiden weeping beneath an oak tree. She holds a dead knight, whose head has been cut off by another knight that morning. She marvels that he stayed with the Fisher King. She says the Fisher King was wounded in a battle by a javelin through both thighs and is still in much pain, and that he seeks diversion from his pain by fishing. She rebukes him for not asking why the lance bled or what is done with the grail or who was being served by the grail and silver platter, saying he would have brought great succor to the king if he had. Perceval says as a guess that his name is Perceval the Welshman, but she renames him Perceval the wretched. She says much suffering will now befall him instead of what could have happened. She says she is Perceval's first cousin, was raised with him for many years, and that his mother is dead. Perceval offers to pursue her lover's killer. She warns him that the sword he was given could shatter in his moment of need, and that Trabuchet alone could fix it.

Perceval departs and soon encounters a weary palfrey ridden by a wretched girl with torn clothing and lacerations. She recognizes Perceval as the man who stole the ring and kisses from her, and warns him that the Haughty Knight of the Heath will kill him just as he has earlier that day killed another knight. The Haughty Knight of the Heath arrives and tells his tale of how he suspects the Welshman lay with her. Perceval confesses he was the man, is challenged to a fight, and defeats the knight. He informs him of her faithfulness to him, and demands they both go to Arthur's court and the damsel that Kay struck. The couple rides on and comes before Arthur at Caerleon. Arthur frees him from his imprisonment and turns him over to his nephew Gawain. Arthur does not know Perceval's name, and resolves to set off from Caerleon in search of Perceval. Later, Perceval is near Arthur's camp, and is lost in thought on seeing three drops of wounded goose blood on the snow, which reminds him of his beloved Blancheflor. Sagremor informs Arthur that they have found a knight asleep on his horse. Sagremor challenges Perceval, and is defeated. Kay also challenges him, and breaks his collar bone and arm, just as the jester had foretold. The king takes pity on Kay and has the physician attend him. Gawain offers to go to watch how Perceval behaves and to bring him back through

more diplomatic means. He approaches Perceval, and Perceval learns from him that it was the seneschal Kay whom he defeated and on whom he had wanted to have his vengeance. They become friends, and Perceval introduces himself as Perceval the Welshman. Gawain says Perceval has fulfilled the prophecies of the jester and the maiden. Perceval comes before the court, and addresses the maiden, saying he will always come to her aid. They return to Caerleon.

They encounter a damsels on a tawny mule and having a beard and humpback. She taunts Perceval for not asking the needed questions at the Fisher King's hall. She is on her way to the Proud Castle. Gawain resolves to help the maiden besieged on the peak of Montesclere. Perceval however resolves to not rest until he has learned who was served by the grail and why the lance bled.

Here begins a long tale of Gawain's pursuits only partially summarized: Guinganbresil enters before Arthur and says Gawain killed his lord, insults him and challenges him to a fight. Gawain agrees to fight in 40 days before the king of Escavalon. Gawain departs. Meliant of Liz has challenged Tiebaut of Tintagel though raised in his household like a son – he seeks the hand of the elder of Tiebaut's daughters. She is haughty and headstrong and has demanded he challenge her father to a tourney. Gawain meets a vavasour Sir Garin in Tintagel's castle... The maiden's sister, the Maiden with the Small Sleeves [otherwise unnamed, Wolfram=Obilot] is mistreated by her older sister... Meliant de Liz wins the early jousting. The sharp tongued sister mocks Gawain.... The vavasour defends Gawain to Tintagel against the slanders. The young daughter clasps Gawain's legs and asks him to defend her against her sister, who has hit her. She asks him to bear arms for her in the upcoming tourney, and he accepts the charming girl's request, agreeing to be her knight. Her father agrees for her to give him a sleeve to wear as a token of her love. Gawain jousts with Meliant and defeats him. He presents the horses he has won to the young girl, the vavasour's wife, and the vavasour's daughters.

Gawain departs and comes upon a castle, where a youth invites him to go to meet his sister. He is left alone with the maiden, and they immediately speak of love and begin kissing. A vavasour discovers them, recognizes Gawain, and we learn that Gawain had killed her father. Gawain has Excalibur at his side and resolves to defend himself against the attack which the vavasour threatens. She prepares to assist him in the fight. Gawain defends himself against the onslaught of men. Guinganbresil, an adviser to the king, arrives and chastises the men for prematurely beginning a fight he himself had taken promised to have with Gawain. He suggests the fight be postponed a year, and that Gawain go in search for the lance of the Fisher King – Gawain accepts this quest, swearing to it over a reliquary. The vavasour foretells that the lance will be used some day to destroy the kingdom of Logres.

Perceval tale resumes: Perceval has gone five years without entering a church, and has sent sixty defeated knights to Arthur's court. He encounters knights and ladies on the trail, penitential. They criticize him for bearing arms on Good Friday. One pilgrim blames the Jews for the death of Christ. They have gone to see a holy hermit, and Perceval wants to do the same. With their directions, he arrives at the hermitage, tells the hermit of his years of wandering, and the encounter with the grail and the lance. The hermit, Perceval's uncle, tells him how his mother had died from sorrow at his departure, a sin which requires repentance and which caused him to fail to ask about the grail. The man who is served from the grail is the hermit's brother, brother also to Perceval's mother, and he believes the Fisher King is the man's son. He says the grail is holy and sustains the holy man because it carries a single consecrated host – he has lived on this host for twelve years. Perceval agrees to undergo penance and take a limited diet with the hermit, acknowledging Christ and taking communion.

Gawain tale resumes: Gawain escapes the tower. He comes eventually on a damsels who is in grief over a wounded knight Greoreas. The knight warns him not to proceed further into Galloway, but Gawain is undeterred. He comes to a castle and finds a haughty maiden. She wants him to fetch her palfrey, and to do this he leaves his horse with her. The townspeople warn him about her. He returns and she speaks haughtily

to him. On returning to the injured knight, he bandages him using the damsel's wimple. The knight asks Gawain to give him the horse of an approaching hideous squire, but in the confusion that follows the knight springs up and rides off on Gawain's horse Gringalet, having fooled Gawain in the process. The knight recounts a previous episode when Gawain had tormented him. The haughty sharp-tongued maiden agrees to follow Gawain, who now rides the nag that the squire rode.

They ride until they arrive at a river with a castle on the other side. Gawain sees a knight coming on his horse Gringalet, and the maiden says the knight is nephew of Greoreas, sent to kill him. Gawain fights and defeats the knight, but the maiden and his horse have disappeared – the boatman has laid claim to it. However, he agrees to accept the injured knight as prisoner instead. The boatman warns Gawain about the "maiden", who is worse than Satan. Gawain accepts his invitation to come to his home.

The next morning, Gawain asks about the castle in the distance. The boatman tells of numerous guards, two queens, Arnive and Igerne, and a lovely daughter there, and that the hall is protected by enchantment... The inhabitants are awaiting a knight who will come to protect them and restore their inheritances, etc. Reluctantly the boatman escorts Gawain to the great hall. The hall holds a great bed with bedposts decorated by carbuncles, but the boatman warns him about it. Gawain sits on the Bed of Marvels, and bolts and arrows fly toward him through the windows, which he dodges. Then he is attacked by a lion, but succeeds in fending it off. He has passed the test and conquered the hall, and is invited by the boatman to remove his armor.

A beautiful maiden, Clarissant, his sister, appears, says her queen sends greetings and will consider him their rightful lord. She presents him an ermine robe. The boatman warns him that if he becomes the lord of the castle, he will never be able to leave again. The maiden, granddaughter to the queen, tells the queen how Gawain has changed in attitude, and the queen comes to him. She does not yet know his identity. She asks him about the sons of King Lot, his father, and he relates that Gawain is Lot's eldest son. He tells her what he has been warned, and she confirms that no knights have ever emerged or stayed alive there. That night he sleeps in the Bed of Marvels. In the morning, Gawain asks the queen who the haughty woman is, and she warns him about her. She grants to him permission to leave the castle during the day, and he asks her not to ask his name for 7 days.

Gawain rides to the river and crosses with the boatman. He encounters the haughty damsel escorted by a knight, Florant of Itolac), who immediately attacks Gawain but is defeated by him. The maiden now asks Gawain to undertake a task, which the ladies in the castle know will place him in great danger. She asks him to jump a deep fjord on his horse – but his horse cannot span the gap and he must climb up the steep bank after falling in the river. He encounters a lone knight, Guiromelant, hunting. They talk, and the knight says he won the maiden by defeating her lover in combat, killing him, but that she had left him – he says she is called the Haughty Maid of Logres. Gawain asks him about the castle, but he suddenly is suspicious, though eventually convinced Gawain tells the truth. He says the white-haired queen is mother of Arthur, wife of Utherpendragon. The second queen is Igerne, wife to Lot, mother of Gawain. Guiromelant says Lot killed his father, and Gawain confesses he is Gawain. Guiromelant insists on fighting Gawain to seek vengeance for his father, and suggests he have Arthur gather his court to witness it. Gawain agrees.

He leaps the water, returns to the haughty maiden. She confesses how she hated Guiromelant, how he had caused her such pain by killing her lover. She agrees to do Gawain's bidding, and they return to the castle. All are glad to see him return safely. Gawain presents to his sister Clarissant a ring from Guiromelant, and she confesses her love for him, though they have only seen each other in the distance across the river. The queen who is Gawain's mother Igerne still does not recognize him. Gawain secretly sends a squire to fetch Arthur, telling the squire that he is Arthur's nephew Gawain, and that Arthur will witness the fight with Guiromelant. The squire arrives at Arthur's court.

[The story abruptly ends here].