Wolfram von Eschenbach

PARZIVAL

A KNIGHTLY EPIC

(Vol. 1&2)

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Parzival: A Knightly Epic (Vol. 1&2)

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INTRODUCTION

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In presenting, for the first time, to English readers the greatest work of Germany's greatest mediæval poet, a few words of introduction, alike for poem and writer, may not be out of place. The lapse of nearly seven hundred years, and the changes which the centuries have worked, alike in language and in thought, would have naturally operated to render any work unfamiliar, still more so when that work was composed in a foreign tongue; but, indeed, it is only within the present century that the original text of the *Parzival* has been collated from the MSS. and made accessible, even in its own land, to the general reader. But the interest which is now felt by many in the Arthurian romances, quickened into life doubtless by the genius of the late Poet Laureate, and the fact that the greatest composer of our time, Richard Wagner, has selected this poem as the groundwork of that wonderful drama, which a growing consensus of opinion has hailed as the grandest artistic achievement of this century, seem to indicate that the time has come when the work of Wolfram von Eschenbach may hope to receive, from a wider public than that of his own day, the recognition which it so well deserves.

Of the poet himself we know but little, save from the personal allusions scattered throughout his works; the dates of his birth and death are alike unrecorded, but the frequent notices of contemporary events to be found in his poems enable us to fix with tolerable certainty the period of his

literary activity, and to judge approximately the outline of his life. Wolfram's greatest work, the *Parzival*, was apparently written within the early years of the thirteenth century; he makes constant allusions to events happening, and to works produced, within the first decade of that period; and as his latest work, the *Willehalm*, left unfinished, mentions as recent the death of the Landgrave Herman of Thuringia, which occurred in 1216, the probability seems to be that the *Parzival* was written within the first fifteen years of the thirteenth century. Inasmuch, too, as this work bears no traces of immaturity in thought or style, it is probable that the date of the poet's birth cannot be placed much later than 1170.

The name, Wolfram von Eschenbach, points to Eschenbach in Bavaria as in all probability the place of his birth, as it certainly was of his burial. So late as the end of the seventeenth century his tomb, with inscription, was to be seen in the Frauen-kirche of Ober-Eschenbach, and the fact that within a short distance of the town are to be found localities mentioned in his poems, such as Wildberg, Abenberg, Trühending, Wertheim, etc., seems to show that there, too, the life of the poet-knight was spent.

By birth, as Wolfram himself tells us, he belonged to the knightly order (Zum Schildesamt bin Ich geboren), though whether his family was noble or not is a disputed point, in any case Wolfram was a poor man, as the humorous allusions which he makes to his poverty abundantly testify. Yet he does not seem to have led the life of a wandering singer, as did his famous contemporary, Walther von der Vogelweide; if Wolfram journeyed, as he probably did, it was

rather in search of knightly adventures, he tells us: 'Durchstreifen muss Der Lande viel, Wer Schildesamt verwalten will,' and though fully conscious of his gift of song, yet he systematically exalts his office of *knight* above that of *poet*. The period when Wolfram lived and sang, we cannot say *wrote*, for by his own confession he could neither read nor write ('I'ne kan decheinen buochstap,' he says in *Parzival*; and in *Willehalm*, 'Waz an den buochen steht geschrieben, Des bin Ich kunstelos geblieben'), and his poems must, therefore, have been orally dictated, was one peculiarly fitted to develop his special genius. Under the rule of the Hohenstaufen the institution of knighthood had reached its highest point of glory, and had not yet lapsed into the extravagant absurdities and unrealities which characterised its period of decadence; and the Arthurian romances which first found shape in Northern France had just passed into Germany, there to be gladly welcomed, and to receive at the hands of German poets the impress of an ethical and philosophical interpretation foreign to their original form.

It was in these romances that Wolfram, in common with other of his contemporaries, found his chief inspiration; in the *Parzival*, his master-work, he has told again the story of the Quest for, and winning of, the Grail; told it in connection with the Perceval legend, through the medium of which, it must be remembered, the spiritualising influence of the Grail myth first came into contact with the brilliant chivalry and low morality of the original Arthurian romances; and told it in a manner that is as truly mediæval in form as it is modern in interpretation. The whole poem is instinct with

the true knightly spirit; it has been well called *Das Hohelied von Rittertum*, the knightly song of songs, for Wolfram has seized not merely the external but the very soul of knighthood, even as described in our own day by another German poet; Wolfram's ideal knight, in his fidelity to his plighted word, his noble charity towards his fellow-man, lord of the Grail, with Its civilising, humanising influence, is a veritable 'true knight of the Holy Ghost.' In a short introduction such as this it is impossible to discuss with any fulness the fascinating problems connected with this poem, one can do no more than indicate where the principal difficulties lie. These may be briefly said to be chiefly connected with the source from which Wolfram derived his poem, and with the interpretation of its ethical meaning. That Wolfram drew from a French source we know from his own statement, he quotes as his authority a certain 'Kiot the Provençal,' who, in his turn, found his information in an Arabian MS. at Toledo. Unfortunately no such poet, and no such poem, are known to us, while we do possess a French version of the story, *Li Conte del Graal*, by Chrêtien de Troyes, which, so far as the greater part of the poem (*i.e.* Books III. to XIII.) is concerned, shows a remarkable agreement not only in sequence of incidents, but even in verbal correspondence, with Wolfram's work. Chrêtien, however, does not give either the first two or the last three books as we find them in Wolfram. The account of Perceval's father, and of his death, is by another hand than Chrêtien's, and does not agree with Wolfram's account; and the poem, left unfinished by Chrêtien, has been continued and concluded at great length by at least three other writers,

who have evidently drawn from differing sources; whereas Wolfram's conclusion agrees closely with his introduction, and his whole poem forms the most harmonious and complete version of the story we possess. Wolfram knew Chrêtien's poem, but refers to it with contempt as being the wrong version of the tale, whereas 'Kiot' had told the venture aright. The question then is, where did Wolfram really find those portions of his poems which he *could not* have drawn from Chrêtien? Is 'Kiot' a real, or a feigned, source?

Some German critics have opined that Wolfram really knew no other poem than Chrêtien's, and that he boldly invented all that he did not find there, feigning another source in order to conceal the fact. Others have maintained that whether 'Kiot' be the name of the writer or not, Wolfram certainly had before him a French poem other than *Li Conte del Graal*.

It certainly seems in the highest degree improbable that a *German* poet should have introduced the Angevin element, lacking in Chrêtien; Wolfram's presentment of the Grail, too, differs *in toto* from any we find elsewhere, with him it is not the cup of the Last Supper, but a precious stone endowed with magical qualities. It is true that Chrêtien does not say *what* the Grail was, but simply that '*du fin or esmeree estoit, pieres pressieuses avoit el graal de maintes manieres*,' yet it seems scarcely likely that Wolfram should have interpreted this as a precious stone, to say nothing of sundry Oriental features peculiar to his description. But whence Wolfram derived his idea of the Grail is a problem which it is to be feared will never now be completely solved.

The discussion as to the ethical meaning Wolfram attached to the story seems more hopeful of results, as here we do possess the requisite data, and can study the poem for ourselves. The question between critics is whether Wolfram intended to teach a purely religious lesson or not; whether the poem is an allegory of life, and Parzival a symbol of the Soul of man, hovering between Faith and Doubt, perplexed by the apparent injustice of God's dealings with men, and finally fighting its way through the darkness of despair to the clear light of renewed faith in God; or have we here a glorification of the knightly ideal? a declaration of the poet-knight's belief that in loyal acceptance of, and obedience to, the dictates of the knightly order, salvation is to be won? Can the true knight, even though he lack faith in God, yet by keeping intact his faith with man, by very loyalty and steadfastness of purpose, win back the spiritual blessing forfeited by his youthful folly? Is Parzival one of those at whose hands 'the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence'? It may well be that *both* these interpretations are, in a measure, true, that Wolfram found the germ of the religious idea already existing in his French source, but that to the genius of the German poet we owe that *humanising* of the ideal which has brought the *Parzival* into harmony with the best aspirations of men in all ages. This, at least, may be said with truth, that of all the romances of the Grail cycle, there is but one which can be presented, in its entirety, to the world of to-day with the conviction that its morality is as true, its human interest as real, its lesson as much needed now as it was seven hundred years ago, and that romance is the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach.

Some words as to the form of the original poem, and the method followed in translation, may be of interest to the reader. The original *Parzival* is a poem of some 25,000 lines, written in an irregular metre, every two lines rhyming, *reim-paar*. Among modern German translators considerable difference of opinion as to the best method of rendering the original appears to exist. Simrock has retained the original form, and adheres very closely to the text; his version certainly gives the most accurate idea of Wolfram's style; San Marte has allowed himself considerable freedom in versification, and, unfortunately, also in translation; in fact, he too often gives a paraphrase rather than a reproduction of the text. Dr. Bötticher's translation omits the Gawain episodes, and, though close to the original, has discarded rhyme. It must be admitted that Wolfram is by no means easy to translate, his style is obscure and crabbed, and it is often difficult to interpret his meanings with any certainty. The translator felt that the two points chiefly to be aimed at in an English version were, that it should be faithful to the original text, and easy to read. The metre selected was chosen for several reasons, principally on account of the length of the poem, which seemed to render desirable a more flowing measure than the short lines of the original; and because by selecting this metre it was possible to retain the original form of *reim-paar*. As a general rule one line of the English version represents two of the German poem, but the difference of language has occasionally demanded expansion in order to do full justice to the poet's meaning. Throughout, the translator's aim has been to be as literal as possible, and where the differing conventionalities of the

thirteenth and nineteenth centuries have made a change in the form of expression necessary, the *meaning* of the poet has been reproduced, and in no instance has a different *idea* been consciously suggested. That there must of necessity be many faults and defects in the work the writer is fully conscious, but in the absence of any previous English translation she can only hope that the present may be accepted as a not altogether inadequate rendering of a great original; if it should encourage others to study that original for themselves, and learn to know Wolfram von Eschenbach, while at the same time they learn better to understand Richard Wagner, she will feel herself fully repaid.

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The translator feels that it may be well to mention here the works which have been principally relied on in preparing the English translation and the writers to whom she is mostly indebted.

For the Text Bartsch's edition of the original *Parzival*, published in *Deutsche Classiker des Mittelalters*, has been used throughout, in connection with the modern German translation by Simrock.

In preparing the Notes use has been made of Dr. Bötticher's Introduction to his translation of the *Parzival*, and the same writer's *Das Hohelied von Rittertum*; San Marte's translation has also been occasionally referred to.

The Appendix on proper names has been mainly drawn up from Bartsch's article on the subject in *Germanistische Studien*; and that on the Angevin allusions from Miss

Norgate's *England under the Angevin Kings*, though the statements have been verified by reference to the original chronicles.

For all questions connected with the Perceval legend in its varying forms the authority consulted has been *Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail*, by Mr. Alfred Nutt, to whom, personally, the translator is indebted for much valuable advice and assistance in preparing this book for publication.

BOOK I
GAMURET

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ARGUMENT

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In the Introduction the poet tells of the evil of doubt and unsteadfastness—against which he would warn both men and women; he will tell them a tale which shall speak of truth and steadfastness, and in which many strange marvels shall befall.

Book I. tells how Gamuret of Anjou at the death of his father, King Gandein, refused to become his brother's vassal, and went forth to seek fame and love-guerdon for himself. How he fought under the Baruch before Alexandria, and came to Patelamunt. How Queen Belakané was accused of having caused the death of her lover Eisenhart, and was besieged by two armies, which Friedebrand, King of Scotland, Eisenhart's uncle, had brought against her. How Gamuret defeated her foemen, and married the Queen, and became King of Assagog and Zassamank. How he grew weary for lack of knightly deeds, and sailed away in secret from Queen Belakané, and left her a letter telling of his name and race. How Feirifis was born, and how Gamuret came to Seville.

BOOK I

GAMURET

If unfaith in the heart find dwelling, then the soul it shall reap but woe;
And shaming alike and honour are his who such doubt shall show,
For it standeth in evil contrast with a true man's dauntless might,
As one seeth the magpie's plumage, which at one while is black and white.
And yet he may win to blessing; since I wot well that in his heart,
Hell's darkness, and light of Heaven, alike have their lot and part
But he who is false and unsteadfast, he is black as the darkest night,
And the soul that hath never wavered stainless *its* hue and white!

This my parable so fleeting too swift for the dull shall be,
Ere yet they may seize its meaning from before their face 'twill flee,
As a hare that a sound hath startled: yea, metal

behind the glass,
And a blind man's dream yield visions that as swift from the eye do pass,
For naught shall they have that endureth! And at one while 'tis bright and sad,
And know of a truth that its glory but for short space shall make ye glad.
And what man shall think to grip me, where no hair for his grasp shall grow,15
In the palm of mine hand? The mystery of a close clasp he sure doth know!

If I cry aloud in such peril, it 'seemeth my wisdom well.
Shall I look for truth where it fleeteth? In the fire that the stream doth quell,
Or the dew that the sun doth banish? Ne'er knew I a man so wise,
But was fain to learn the wisdom my fable doth ill disguise, 20
And the teaching that springeth from it: for so shall he ne'er delay
To fly and to chase as shall fit him, to shun and to seek alway,
And to give fitting blame and honour. He who knoweth the twain to tell,
In their changing ways, then wisdom has tutored that man right well.
And he sits not o'er-long at leisure, nor his goal doth he overreach,25
But in wisdom his ways discerning, he dealeth with all

and each.
But his comrade, of heart unfaithful, in hell-fire shall his portion be,
Yea, a hailstorm that dims the glory of a knightly fame is he.
As a short tail it is, his honour, that but for two bites holds good,
When the steer by the gad-fly driven doth roam thro' the lonely wood.30

And tho' manifold be my counsel not to *men* alone I'ld speak,
For fain would I show to women the goal that their heart should seek.
And they who shall mark my counsel, they shall learn where they may bestow
Their praise and their maiden honour; and the manner of man shall know
Whom they freely may love and honour, and never may fear to rue 35
Their maidenhood, and the true love they gave him of heart so true.
In God's sight I pray all good women to keep them in wisdom's way,
For true shame on all sides doth guard them: such bliss I for them would pray.
But the false heart shall win false honour—How long doth the thin ice last,
If the sun shineth hot as in August? So their praise shall be soon o'erpast.40

Many women are praised for beauty; if at heart they shall be untrue,
Then I praise them as I would praise it, the glass of a sapphire hue
That in gold shall be set as a jewel! Tho' I hold it an evil thing,
If a man take a costly ruby, with the virtue the stone doth bring,
And set it in worthless setting: I would liken such costly stone
To the heart of a faithful woman, who true womanhood doth own.
I would look not upon her colour, nor the heart's roof all men can see,
If the heart beateth true beneath it, true praise shall she win from me!

Should I speak of both man and woman as I know, nor my skill should fail,
O'er-long would it be my story. List ye now to my wonder-tale:
And this venture it telleth tidings of love, and anon of woe,
Joy and sorrow it bringeth with it. 'Stead of *one* man if *three* ye know,
And each one of the three hath wisdom and skill that outweigh my skill,
Yet o'erstrange shall they find the labour, tho' they toil with a right good-will
To tell ye this tale, which I think me to tell ye myself, alone,

And worn with their task and weary would they be ere the work was done.

A tale I anew will tell ye, that speaks of a mighty love;
Of the womanhood of true women; how a man did his manhood prove;
Of one that endured all hardness, whose heart never failed in fight,
Steel he in the face of conflict: with victorious hand of might
Did he win him fair meed of honour; a brave man yet slowly wise
Is he whom I hail my hero! The delight he of woman's eyes,
Yet of woman's heart the sorrow! 'Gainst all evil his face he set;
Yet he whom I thus have chosen my song knoweth not as yet,
For not yet is he born of whom men this wondrous tale shall tell,
And many and great the marvels that unto this knight befell.

NOW they do to-day as of old time, where a foreign law holds sway
(Yea, in part of our German kingdom, as ye oft shall have heard men say),
Whoever might rule that country, 'twas the law, and none thought it shame
('Tis the truth and no lie I tell ye) that the elder son might claim

The whole of his father's heirdom—And the younger sons must grieve,
What was theirs in their father's lifetime, they perforce at his death must leave.
Before, all was theirs in common, now it fell unto one alone.
So a wise man planned in his wisdom, that the eldest the lands should own,
For youth it hath many a fair gift, but old age knoweth grief and pain,75
And he who is poor in his old age an ill harvest alone doth gain.
Kings, Counts, Dukes (and no lie I tell ye) the law holdeth all as one,
And no man of them all may inherit, save only the eldest son,
And methinks 'tis an evil custom—So the knight in his youthful pride,
Gamuret, the gallant hero, lost his Burg, and his fair lands wide, 80
Where his father had ruled with sceptre and crown as a mighty king,
Till knighthood, and lust of battle, to his death did the monarch bring.

And all men were sore for his sorrow, who truth and unbroken faith
Bare ever throughout his lifetime, yea even unto his death.
Then the elder son he summoned the princes from out his land, 85

And knightly they came, who rightly might claim from their monarch's hand,
To hold, as of yore, their fiefdoms. So came they unto his hall,
And the claim of each man he hearkened, and gave fiefs unto each and all.

Now hear how they dealt—As their true heart it bade them, both great and small,
They made to their king petition, with one voice from the people all,90
That to Gamuret grace and favour he would show with true brother's hand,
And honour himself in the doing. That he drive him not from the land
But give him, within his kingdom, a fair Burg that all men might see,
That he take from that Burg his title, and he held of all tribute free!—
Nor the king was ill-pleased at their pleading, and he quoth, 'A small grace, I trow,95
Have ye asked, I would e'en be better than your prayer, as ye straight shall know,
Why name ye not this my brother as Gamuret Angevin?
Since Anjou is my land, I think me the title we *both* may win!'

Then further he spake, the monarch, 'My brother in sooth may seek
Yet more from my hand of favour than my mouth may

as swiftly speak,100
With me shall he have his dwelling—I would that ye all should see
How one mother alike hath borne us; his riches but small shall be,
While I have enough; of free hand would I give him both lands and gold,
That my bliss may be ne'er held forfeit by Him, Who can aye withhold,
Or give, as He deemeth rightful!' Then the princes they heard alway,105
How the king would deal well with his brother, and they deemed it a joyful day!

And each one bowed him low before him. Nor Gamuret long delayed,
But he spake as his heart would bid him, and friendly the words he said:
'Now hearken, my lord and brother, if vassal I think to be
To thee, or to any other, then a fair lot awaiteth me.110
But think thou upon mine honour, for faithful art thou and wise,
And give counsel as shall beseem thee, and help as thou shalt devise.
For naught have I now save mine armour, if within it I more had done,
Then far lands should speak my praises, and remembrance from men were won!'
Then further he spake, the hero: 'Full sixteen my

squires shall be,115
And six of them shall bear harness; four pages give thou to me
Of noble birth and breeding, and nothing to them I'll spare
Of all that my hand may win them. Afar in the world I'ld fare,
(Somewhat I ere now have journeyed,) if Good Fortune on me shall smile,
I may win from fair women favour. If a woman I serve awhile, 120
And to serve her she hold me worthy, and my heart speaketh not amiss,
True knight shall I be and faithful! God show me the way of bliss!
As comrades we rode together (but then o'er thy land did reign
The King Gandein, our father), and sorrow and bitter pain
We bare for Love's sake! At one while I knew thee as *thief* and *knight*,125
Thou couldst serve, and thou couldst dissemble, for the sake of thy lady bright.
Ah! could I steal love as thou couldst, if my skill were but like to thine,
That women should show me favour, then a blissful lot were mine!'

'Alas! that I ever saw thee,' spake, sighing, the king so true,
'Who lightly, with words of mocking, my heart would

in pieces hew 130
And would fain that we part asunder! One father hath left us both
A mighty store of riches, I would share with thee, nothing loth.
Right dear from my heart I hold thee; red gold and jewels bright,
Folk, weapons, horse, and raiment, take thou as shall seem thee right,
That thou at thy will mayst journey, and thy free hand to all be known.135
Elect do we deem thy manhood, didst thou Gylstram as birthplace own,
Or thou camest here from Rankulat, yet still would that place be thine,
Which thou boldest to-day in my favour; true brother art thou of mine!'

'Sir King, thou of need must praise me, so great is thy courtesy!
So, courteous, thine aid be given, if thou and my mother free 140
Will share with me now your riches, I mount upward, nor fear to fall,
And my heart ever beateth higher—Yet I know not how I should call
This life, which my left breast swelleth! Ah! whither wouldst go mine heart?
I would fain know where thou shalt guide me—'Tis time that we twain should part.'

And all did the monarch give him, yea, more than the knight might crave,145
Five chargers, picked and chosen, the best in his land he gave
High-couraged, swift to battle; and many a cup of gold,
And many a golden nugget, for naught would his hand withhold.
Four chests for the road he gave him, with many a jewel rare
Were they filled. Then the squires he took him who should for the treasure care,150
And well were they clad and mounted; and none might his grief withhold
When the knight gat him unto his mother, who her son in her arms did fold.

Spake the woman, as woman grieving: 'Wilt thou tarry with me no more,
King Gandein's son? Woe is me! yet my womb this burden bore
And the son of my husband art thou. Is the eye of God waxed blind, 155
Or His ear grown deaf in the hearing, that my prayer doth no credence find?
Is fresh sorrow to be my portion? I have buried my heart's desire,
And the light of mine eyes; will He rob me, who have suffered a grief so dire,
Who judgeth with righteous judgment? Then the tale it hath told a lie,

That spake of His help so mighty, Who doth help unto me deny!'

'God comfort thee,' quoth the hero, 'for the death of my father dear,
For truly we both must mourn him—But I think from no lips to hear
Such wailing for my departing! As valour shall show the way,
I seek knighthood in distant countries—So it standeth with me to-day.'

Quoth the queen, 'Since to high love's service thou turnest both hand and heart,
Sweet son, let it not displease thee to take of my wealth a part
That may serve thee upon thy journey; let thy chamberlain take from me
Four chests, each a pack-horse burden, and heavy their weight shall be.
And within, uncut, there lieth rich silk of Orient rare,
No man as yet hath cut it, and many a samite fair.
Sweet son, I prithee tell me what time thou wilt come again,
That my joy may wax the greater, and I look for thee not in vain!'

'Nay, that I know not, Lady, nor the land that shall see my face,
But wherever I take my journey, thou hast shown unto me such grace

As befitteth knightly honour: and the king he hath dealt with me
In such wise that grateful service his rewarding shall ever be.
And this trust have I, O Lady, that for this thou wilt love him more
Henceforward, whate'er the future yet keepeth for me in store.'
And as the venture telleth, to the hand of this dauntless knight,
Thro' the favour he won from a woman, and the working of true love's might,
Came a token fair, and its value was full thousand marks, I trow,
E'en to-day an a Jew were craving a pledge, he would deem enow
Such jewel, and ne'er disdain it—'Twas sent by his lady true,
And fame did he win in her service, and her love and her greeting knew,
Yet seldom his pain found easing—Then the hero he took his leave
Of mother, brother, and brother's kingdom, and many I ween must grieve
Since his eyes never more beheld them. And all who his friends had been,
Ere he passed from the land of his fathers, tho' the grace were but small, I ween,
He gave them of thanks full measure; he deemed they too much had done,

And, courteous, little thought him, that of right he their love had won!
Straighter his heart than straightness; did one of his praises speak
In a full and fitting measure, then doubt were not far to seek,
But ask ye of those his neighbours, or of men who in distant lands
Had seen his deeds, then the marvel ye were swifter to understand.

And Gamuret he trode ever where Temperance aye should guide,
And naught else might rule his doings, nor he boasted him in his pride
But bare great honour meekly; from loose ways he e'er had flown;
And he thought him, the gallant hero, that none bare on earth a crown,
Were they King, or Queen, or Kaiser, whom he deemed of his service worth
Were they not the mightiest reckoned of all monarchs that be on earth.
This will in his heart he cherished—Then men spake, at Bagdad did reign
A monarch so strong and powerful, that homage he well might claim
From two-thirds or more of earth's kingdoms. The heathen his name held great,
And they spake of him as the Baruch, and kings did on his bidding wait,