

PROLOGUE

The Master of St Lazarus' College was annoyed. His guest of honour for dinner at high table was late. The Master remembered that the Best-Selling Author had been a poor timekeeper as an undergraduate at the college. When he had turned up for anything at all, that was. Still, a little inconvenience could be suffered if it proved possible to extract the coveted donation to the College's funds.

The other members of the Senior Common Room stayed well out of the Master's way, even though this meant loitering in the colder corners of the classically proportioned room, away from the fire blazing under the Adam mantelpiece. They had all learned to read the expression of irritation in those harsh eyes, magnified and distorted by the hard steel-rimmed bifocals. The Master's temper had not been improved by five years away from the college presiding over an obscure branch of the intelligence service. An unacademic brusqueness had entered his manner. This now notched with his undeniable intellect to fire cruel shafts of sarcasm that were hard to bear before a couple of glasses of sherry.

Had the College Fellows been given to kindly thoughts, they might have blamed the parlous state of the College finances for the Master's moods. His frosty eyes glanced with scorn around the room. What did they know about the real world outside, where cold winds blew? Did they even begin to understand the threat to their comfortable lives if he could not raise the millions needed to make good the damage to the College Foundation by a series of disastrous private equity

investments? Gah. What did he care about keeping them lazy in their cosy chambers? Why on earth had he taken on the task of dragging the most backward of colleges into the modern age? St. Lazarus indeed! If ever an institution needed to be raised from the dead it was this one. But what really mattered was his peerage. Everyone recognised that it was richly deserved, but it would still elude him if he failed in his task and instead became the first Master to preside over the bankruptcy of an ancient college. It would make no difference that those foolish investments had been made before his time.

This painful reverie was interrupted by the door to the Common Room. It opened to reveal the Best-Selling Author wearing an unaccustomed expression of shame-faced apology under his affectedly tousled leonine hair.

“I’m so sorry, dreadful traffic. My driver, lost in the one way system. All very different to my day.”

“Well, there we are. There’s just time for a quick glass of sherry before dinner. Dry?”

The Best-Selling Author brightened at the offer of a drink. He perked up even more when he saw that he was the focus of the room’s attention. The bloody College had taken his scholarship away – justifiably maybe as he had done no work and ended up with a Third – but now they were fawning over him.

The critics had never exactly focused their praise on the Best-Selling Author’s sensitive understanding of third party characters. Plot yes, excitement yes, definitely hard to put down. Plenty of page-turning Boy’s Own action. Some quite good sex. But subtle characterization? No, not really. In fact not at all. So it was no surprise that the Best-Selling Author basked in the Senior Common Room’s attention under a misapprehension.

For in fact the fellows hid critical appraisal behind their bland expressions. Each was busy matching the Best-Selling Author’s features to the publicity photographs so well-known

from the back cover of his books. Not one of them would have owned up to buying the Best-Selling Author's *oeuvre*. Of course not. Too low brow by far. But the truth was that curiosity had conquered their intellectual snobbery. Each had surreptitiously plucked a gaudy volume from a bookstand in airport or railway station before paying at the counter with the shamefaced bravado normally reserved for purchases of pornography.

"Airbrushed," thought the History Don caustically. "The true facts eliminated. The source material rewritten and distorted by the addition of more, thicker, darker curls."

"How cruel the passage of time," thought the Chaplain with a modicum of Christian charity. "How the lines have deepened and the cheeks have sagged."

"What a clever point of view," thought the Professor of English. "A neat perspective created by showing only the head, not the loose decaying spread of the body underneath."

"A poor translation," thought the Modern Languages Tutor. "An inaccurate rendering."

"The adjective does not agree with the noun," thought the Classics Fellow. "Definitely the wrong case."

And then there was just time to arrange the smiles, extend the hands, and murmur appreciation at their introduction to the celebrity, before dinner was announced. They all marched to their stations in the oak-panelled hall.

High Table was the battlefield across which the dons were accustomed to ride their hobby-horses, jousting with whichever lance their research or teaching had that day provided.

"At least he has not written a holy grail book yet," remarked the Chaplain with *sotto voce* mischief to his neighbour the Professor of History. "I hate all that cod religion. As far as I'm concerned, it's downright blasphemous."

As the Chaplain had intended, the Modern Languages Tutor overheard and looked affronted. *Modern Languages* was

not quite the right way to describe his subject because he was a medieval specialist and believed that no French literature was worth reading after Rabelais – except Nerval perhaps.

“Actually Chrétien de Troyes’ *Roman de Perceval*’ shows a great poetic imagination. There is nothing specifically Christian about Chrétien’s grail, if you’ll excuse the pun. The word *graal* in the original just translates as dish – the sort of dish in which you’d serve a large fish.”

The Chaplain snickered slightly because just at that moment one of the ancient college servants began to pass round a plattered poached salmon. The Modern Languages Tutor ignored him with as much scorn as he could muster.

“All the religious stuff was tacked on later by Robert de Boron and the rest. If Chrétien had only lived to finish his story the grail would never have become holy, much less a popular mystery.”

The Professor of English leant forward aggressively. “I’d take issue with the idea that there is any real originality in the grail romances at all. Most of the imagery is just recycled from earlier fertility legends. I know that it is fashionable these days to rubbish Jessie Weston but nobody who has read Frazer’s *Golden Bough*’ can really doubt the arguments in her *From Ritual to Romance*’. The real poet of imagination was Eliot, whose genius melded the grail stuff with Ovid and the earlier myths. *The Waste Land*’ is simply the last word on the subject.”

The History Don intervened quickly because he knew from past experience that the misty expression now creeping over the Professor of English’s face presaged a torrent of quotation. “It’s all a load of nonsense. Simply not rooted in fact. A waste of time.”

The Classics Fellow liked the last word to be his, like the proper thump of a Latin verb at the end of a sentence. “Just comparing the crudeness and lack of sophistication of the grail romances with the magnificent achievements of Homer, Virgil

and Ovid so many centuries before, will show you instantaneously the distance of civilization's backward movement since the glorious era of Ancient Greece and Rome."

The combatants glared at each other across the table.

In the body of the hall the undergraduates had finished their lesser meal and trooped away noisily from their hard benches. The Master leant back in his comfortably armed chair, withdrawing before re-engaging his guest.

"Do have some port. In your honour I've had them dig out the last couple of bottles of the Taylor '45. I think you'll find it's still drinking exceptionally well. Of course, at the rate we are going, the whole cellar will have to be sold off to pay the College debts. That is unless an insolvency practitioner gets to it first. My predecessor allowed some truly terrible investment decisions. So we need help and I am talking to as many of our distinguished alumni as I can."

The Best-Selling Author had known that this moment would come and as his final fortification took a deeper draft of the old port than was quite decent. He sighed as the sweet-sharp warmth travelled down his throat. He avoided the steel of the Master's gaze by making a great play of appreciative concentration on the ruby glow refracting in the antique cut glass.

"Yes of course, I quite understand. I'd really like to help the old *alma mater*. The trouble is, I'm in a bit of a pickle myself. My divorce was painful, and came just after that fantastic film rights deal. You might have read about it in the tabloids. So the bloody wife got half of it. And frankly we creative types are not much good at looking after money either. It just seems to trickle away."

Now he leaned forward and injected a confidential tone into his voice.

"But to be honest, the real problem is that I haven't written anything new for quite a while. My last book goes back three,

no four years. It takes a long time for these things to reach the shop shelves, you know. Sometimes I wonder what my publisher does all day. And the advance was spent a long time ago. My agent negotiated such a good deal up front that there is no chance of any royalties coming through. Now I just seem to have run out of ideas. I can't get any good plots going."

A deep gloom fell as the diners silently contemplated their problems. The fire at the side of the hall burned too far distant to cast any warmth, and instead just flickered ominous shadows on the hammer beam ceiling. The dark corners of the ancient room closed in menacingly around the small pools of light cast on the table under the heavy silver candelabra. A breath of cold air whispered through the chamber, guttering the candles and chilling the dons under their gowns. One or two of them glanced over their shoulders, as if to see what had caused the draught, but in reality anxious to check that nothing was creeping up behind them. The ancient spirits of long-dead fellows seemed to circle the room in threatening disapproval.

A voice, harsh and nasal, cut the silence. It came from the dark shadows beyond the candles' range.

"I think the time has come for me to share what I have been working on these past few months."

The Fellows started at this unexpected intrusion. They had forgotten the insignificant Research Assistant, who now leaned forward into the light. The other members of the Senior Common Room shuddered as the candles lit up the livid red scar which so grotesquely disfigured one side of his twisted face. The Chaplain felt some Christian pity for the Modern Languages Tutor who had to supervise this monstrosity.

"A few months ago I made the most extraordinary discovery in the library. I found a parchment manuscript, written partly in old French, interspersed with medieval Latin and occasional koine Greek. It was stuck in the middle of an uninteresting palimpsest – probably the reason it had not been spotted before. I'd date it to the first half of the twelfth century. It

certainly predates Chrétien de Troyes. One really interesting thing is that there are bits of it that Chrétien must have drawn on for his *Perceval*. I've deciphered virtually all of it now. It seems to be the journal of some Crusader monk who claims to have discovered the truth of the Holy Grail. It is an extraordinary story, as gripping as anything that our honoured guest has ever devised."

The Best-Selling Author gathered himself to challenge such an outrageous statement. But the History Don got his blow in first.

"Does it fit with the facts? Does it match the contemporary chronicles, the reliable sources? Although that could hardly be accurately ascertained by a member of the Modern Languages faculty, could it?"

The History Don looked round the table for support. Cautiously the Chaplain intervened.

"Does it touch on religious matters too? I imagine it nails all the silly old heresies surrounding the grail and eternal life."

"How do you know that you have translated the Latin and the Greek correctly? Before you go making a fool of yourself and circulating your findings you had better allow me to check the manuscript over." The Classics Fellow's offer was prompted less by charity than by academic greed.

"And of course I can help you to render the translation into elegant prose," oozed the Professor of English.

Now it was the Master's turn. Perhaps his preprandial dissatisfaction with his college colleagues, his frustration at the Best-Selling Author's excuses, and the lure of the old port had encouraged greater alcoholic self-indulgence than was his wont. Or perhaps there was just something strange in the air that night. In any case, his fancy took off on an atypical flight.

"I have an idea. I think I have a solution to our problems. The manuscript, college property of course, could provide our friend here with his new plot. He will write it in his inimitable style, and share the royalties with the College. It will kick-

start his career, help to get me my...I mean help us to overcome our little financial difficulties.”

The Taylor '45 had clearly also assuaged the fellows' awe of their Master, for now a hubbub rose round the table.

“We must check the facts and make sure it is historically correct and tallies with the sources.”

“It must be religiously sound. It should deal appropriately with the clash between Christianity and Islam.”

“The old French must be translated correctly.”

“Not to mention the Greek and the Latin.”

With a gesture that had once struck terror into Whitehall committees and brooked no disagreement, the Master demanded silence.

“You seem to forget who is Master here. I shall retain full editorial control. You may be permitted to contribute some ideas, and perhaps a bibliography. But nothing, nothing at all, must be allowed to interfere with the readability, the popularity of the book.” The Best-Selling Author nodded with grave surprise. “Our objective here is purely commercial. We need a bestseller.”

This time the Professor of English managed the last word.

“But we must have a good literary title at least. What about *The Waste Land?*”