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Opening Extract from...

The Waste Land

An Entertainment

Written by Simon Acland

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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*?"

Chapter One

THE ROOTS THAT CLUTCH

"Hugues de Verdon semme,
Et cil est mon histoire.
Ni conte ni roman est
Quoi qu'il soit bien etrange,
Mais est un vrai histoire."

"Hugh de Verdon is my name,
and this is my story.
No tale or romance is this,
however strange it may seem;
it is a true story."

I come of a family of knights which held land near Verdun under the Dukes of Lorraine. I was born in the year of the Lord 1077. Or so I was told. My birth is the only event in my story which I do not remember witnessing myself. So that much at least I have to take on trust, and pass on to you in that spirit.

Why should I trouble to chronicle this history? Well, for a start, I have too much time on my hands. And the important truths in this document should not die with me, however much some might so wish. Read this manuscript with care and discretion. So much of my suffering stems from my own illicit reading. I would not wish my fate on you.

I know you want me to move on quickly to tell of battlefields

and adventure. But first I must set out some events from my early life so that you may understand what made me the man that I am. My male kin died when I was young. To protect me from the same fate, my mother placed me in the great monastery of Cluny.



When I look back all those years it seemed almost that I had two childhoods. The first was set inside the warm dark cocoon of my mother's chamber. The loudest noise came from the crackling of her fire, the brightest light from its flames and their reflections dancing on the walls. I would listen with half an ear to my mother's quiet, soothing voice, as she sat conversing over needlework with her maids, her moist eyes, dark with care and occasional reproach, following me round the room as I played.

But it was the light-filled world outside that held my attention. My ears pricked up whenever I heard horses clatter into the yard. Silent hope turned to secret thanks when my mother's door burst open. There stood my father, filling the doorway, his deep-set eyes sparkling with vigorous good humour.

"What is my boy doing in this dark roomful of women? Does he not come of a family of knights who take their descent from the great Emperor Charlemagne?"

I flushed with excitement, and then twinged with guilt as I tried to ignore my mother's sighs. I knew they were directed at me, for my ill-concealed glee, as much as at her husband, for the interruption and his attention on son not wife. As my father gathered me up, I tried not to flinch away from the bristling tickle of his beard. I filled with excitement as he rushed me outside through the great hall, threw me onto a horse and rode off to hunt. My two elder brothers complained bitterly that their young sibling would slow the party down

and spoil their sport. My exuberance overcame my fear of the pummelling that they would mete out to me later, as I pulled triumphant faces and stuck out my tongue at them when my father's back was turned.

I was anyway determined not to give grounds for their gripes. I was far too eager to impress and to earn my next outing. Any fear that I might have had of hurt and pain was washed away by excitement. I took many tumbles but by the time I was ten it was hard to shake me out of a saddle and I could skilfully handle a lance and a bow to kill boar and deer. This much my brothers tacitly acknowledged when their remonstrations ceased and I became a member of the party by right.

Sometimes my father and brothers went after more dangerous quarry. Called to avenge a theft, or to erase a slight, they donned their mail coats, strapped on their long swords and gripped their shields. Their brows encased in the shells of their helmets, grimly closed away behind their noseguards of steel, they set off after two-legged game, hard-faced and tense with a greater excitement. I begged to go too but was told that I was too young, that my time would come. My mother then gazed on me in unspoken reproach and when I squirmed with guilty discomfort, she turned to watch painfully until my father and my two elder brothers were out of sight.

A day arrived in late autumn, the mournful season, after the leaves but before the first bright fall of snow, when instead of hooves clattering into the yard there came the dolorous rumble of an ox cart. A servant panicked into the hall and shrilled for my mother.

"My lady, my lady, I beg you, come at once."

Catching the urgent fear in that call, she threw her needlework aside with an uncharacteristic lack of heed. All the colour had washed from her face. She passed into the court, rushing forward and slowing, then rushing forward again, as

her anxiety tore at her desire to maintain the appearance of dignity. I followed forgotten behind.

My childish unconcern froze to horror at the chilling wail that broke from my mother's throat. Never had I heard such a sound. Never had I imagined that her calm composure could conceal such passion, such pain.

The cart was heaped with the broken bodies of the three familiar knights. The keening lamentation of mother and wife rose and fell as she clutched and clawed at her beloveds' remains. The carcasses were already grotesquely stiff, rigidly rejecting her caresses. Limbs jutted out at odd angles like the legs of the stags and boar we used to bring home from the hunt. My mother's howls were tossed back without sympathy by the cold walls of the courtyard. Slowly they subsided into low racking sobs.

Our family steward, hurt too, dishevelled and bloodied, struggled to lower his portly frame from his horse. The jovial expression that he always showed me was now wiped over with pain and grief. The magic arm that used to pluck tasty sweetmeats for me from behind my left ear now dangled limp and useless.

"They caught us in an ambush. First we knew was a hail of arrows from the trees. That knocked many of us down."

He paused in a grimace of pain and drew breath.

"Your sons were almost the first to fall. My lord charged forward. He always did. This time his luck deserted him. The spear went up under his mail and deep into his guts. After a rough fight we scattered them and chased them off. When I came back, I found him lying pierced on the field. We carried him back to the place where his – your – sons lay. We found one dead and already food for crows and ravens. The other was almost gone. My lord's groans were awful to hear. As your second son gave up his spirit, so he too swooned away and we heard his death rattle."

Hesitantly my mother's maids tried to pull her away. At

first she resisted angrily but then her shoulders sank in broken resignation and she allowed herself to be turned from the scene. Ignored, I stood still by the cart and gazed at those bodies which I remembered shortly before so full of life and vigour. Gripped by some macabre fascination, my hand trembled out to touch them. I felt the clamminess of death on their faces. I shuddered at my elder brother's eye sockets, one pitted and pocked by the ravens and crows which had just begun their meal, the other red and empty where the vicious beaks had pecked their fill. Something irresistible pulled my hand and forced my fingers into the slimy cavity. The other well-known faces seemed to turn on me disapproving expressions of vacant agony and fear. I span and ran, full of pity and fright, but whether for them or for myself I could not tell. There were so many unanswered questions that I had wanted to ask of my father. One thing I did know then without doubt was that my life, previously running its course so cheerfully and so predictably, had ruptured, as a fracture in the rock under a river causes a waterfall, and was now pouring in an unexpected direction.

No more hunting and hopes of knightly adventure for me; from all that I was disinherited. My grief-broken mother intended at all costs to protect me from the fate of the husband and sons she had loved so well. Her youngest, dearest child was to be a monk, safely cloistered away from danger and death. She gave grateful thanks for our kinship with Hugh de Semur, the sixth abbot of the great monastery at Cluny. She wrote to beg him to take me in as one of a small number of boys who would train from an early age to become novices and then full members of the Benedictine order. For herself, she begged leave to enter Cluny's sister convent at Marcigny.

The turn of the years 1087 and 1088 was the darkest winter I had seen. My mother wore sepulchral mourning. Ironically her hair, once jet black, began to grey and lighten as if in

protest at her funereal clothes. The pools of her eyes took on infinite depths, darker and harder to fathom than the night sky, whose stars were mirrored in miniature by the pricks of light scattering through her tears. Her sorrow and her grief deadened her quiet to a conventual silence. Now the fire in the grate in her chamber seemed to smoulder and smoke rather than crackle and blaze as of old. The bursts of energy brought to my life by my father were gone. Through that winter I became wan and listless. All my zest had been stripped away.

"Dear son," my mother would say, sighing lugubriously, "you must promise me to learn well what you are taught. You must lead a life dedicated to God and to your duty. Promise me. Don't think of the life led by your father and your brothers as knights. If you follow that path you will destroy not just yourself but your poor mother as well. Your father and brothers died with blood on their hands. They received no absolution. They enjoyed no remission of their sins. We must save them from the eternal fires of hell. Without our constant prayers they will burn there forever."

And at that solemn thought her hands met, and her eyes rolled upwards in supplication. My faith was secured by the callowness of youth, so I could only agree that my mother's wishes were meet and fitting. I had been stirred by the stories of Our Lord Jesus Christ, his disciples and the old prophets told to me by my mother's fire. I almost felt proud to be asked to subsume my own hopes and ambitions into a life of monastic abstinence. I had not been allowed to protect my kin with the strength of my arm; perhaps now I could save their immortal souls through the power of my prayers.

When it was time to journey to Cluny, at least spring had come. As nature came back to life and the green leaves began to bud from their branches, so my youthful high spirits tried to push forth again. But the change in season also made me sadder that my father's lands would be left untended and barren instead of bursting with vitality.

As our retinue reached the abbey's double-doored entrance, my emotions seethed in a maelstrom. The excitement of my first journey drained away and the unknown life lurking behind those high walls stirred fear into my curiosity. The dark monks scared me as they worked the surrounding orchards and fields, scratching at the soil like a flock of rooks, their white faces beaking out under their black cowls. The abbey awed me; it was in itself the largest town I had seen, ringed by a thick wall broken by occasional narrow windows, with the houses of the village scattered around outside. By the wall loomed the skeleton of a building greater than I had dreamed possible, clad in wooden scaffolding. The ribbed bones of huge arches made me think of the great fish which had swallowed up holy Jonah.

The entrance was guarded by a solid gatehouse. It squatted on the walls with menace. I realised that it hunched there as much to close the inhabitants in as to keep strangers out. Above the gates was carved the Cluniac coat of arms – two large keys crossed over a single heavenwards pointing sword. It pictured to me an uncompromising message: 'Here forever you will be locked away from your childhood knightly ambition.' Fear had now conquered my curiosity, hollowing my belly and spreading through it in a thick cold soup. Our steward hammered on the gate with his left arm – for his right still hung useless, and I knew that the magic which had once delighted me was vanished for ever – calling forth at the grille a pale face which asked our business. Presumably the answer was satisfactorily provided, for the heavy oak door swung wide and my mother and I were shown to a small room at one side of the entrance.

"Welcome, my lady," said the monk in charge of the portal, "you are expected. Wait while I send for my Lord Abbot. Stay here – no woman may pass beyond the inner gate," indicating a thick door bound stoutly with black iron. I took in little of his appearance save the rough black habit and the round

shaven tonsure, which made me shudder and reach up to check the soft hair on the top of my own head.

That dark room by the gate was furnished only with two hard chairs and a wooden settle. Like penitents we waited in discomfort for a while. We did not speak; what little I had to say had been already said. My mother sat very straight, watching me standing, quivering with anticipation, too tense to sit but too overawed by the stark surroundings to run about. The walls had been washed white and their only ornament was a crucifix from which Christ looked down. Thinking Jesus' expression tinged with pity, I whispered a brief inner prayer as my mother had taught me. A single shaft of sunlight shone through the narrow barred window, illuminating a funnel of dust down to a cross of shadow in a bright rectangle on the flagstone floor. As if the outside world were mocking my plight, denying my prayer, a cloud passed over the sun, closing out the beam of light and plunging the room into a gloom still deeper. Just at that moment the door swung open to reveal a tall, commanding figure. He bowed with respect to my mother, keeping his arms folded and his hands hidden deep in his habit's wide sleeves, as if he did not want to risk contact with female flesh. She stood and returned his salute with a curtsey.

"Cousin Hugh…My Lord Abbot…"

The Abbot contemplated her in silence. I wondered if he too were thinking a prayer. How could he not feel sympathy for this lady whose grief was etched so plainly in new lines over her beautiful face? And then a warm smile lit the Abbot's gaunt face.

"Yes, Lady Claire. Yes, you do have a look of your mother about you. I am now in my sixty-fifth year, so it is a long time ago, but I still remember her gentleness to me as a child in Semur at my father's court."

'At least he remembers what it was to be a child,' I thought. I gained some courage from this notion as I met his gaze as

firmly as I could. I felt myself transfixed, pierced through, by the Abbot's grey eyes. They carried out their examination from deep beneath unruly eyebrows. They were not unkind; indeed even in that moment of anxiety I could not mistake their humanity. Somehow, though, they seemed to read my innermost soul. Before I gave away all my secrets, I averted my face towards the floor in a gesture that I hoped showed respect, not subservience.

"Well, Hugh, we share our given name. Perhaps when we both die they will dry our bones and turn them into tools for making shoes too, eh? For that was the fate of the first Saint Hugh the shoemaker."

I felt very small and awkward and could find no response to make. I breathed a quiet sigh of relief when the Abbot turned back to my mother.

"So you wish your Hugh to become a monk? To devote his life to the service of Our Lord, disinherited? To eschew a knight's life and all worldly pleasures, just as my own mother desired for me? I wanted it as much as my mother. I was only fourteen when I renounced my title of Count and my rights to my father's lands. Then I began my novitiate. My full vows came the following year. I was unusually young – I do not know that we would allow it again. Eight or ten years are normally required to learn the ways of the abbey, and to establish that a vocation to a life in the service of Our Lord is real. A false calling only leads to corruption and sin. The rule of Blessed Saint Benedict is too strict to follow without a true vocation. Our Holy Father the Pope was himself prior here. He has now entrusted us with the duty of stamping out improper practices in our Mother Church. So we have to maintain the highest standards. I am afraid that we have many enemies who view our power with suspicion and jealousy. To withstand their attacks we must place ourselves beyond reproach. Then achieve our task we will, to the greater glory of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom we owe so much."

The Abbot stopped abruptly, perhaps realising that his enthusiasm was running away. It seemed to me almost that he was unaccustomed to speaking for so long.

"You must go now. Say goodbye…for the last time."

I hesitated, unsure how to behave and fearing embarrassment in front of this forbidding figure. But then emotion overcame my reticence and I threw myself into my mother's arms. I felt sure then that I would never again feel their embrace. I caught a murmur of maternal lamentation. We kissed. I fought to hold back my tears. I pulled away, hoping to see my mother's cheeks wet, but her self-control was unbroken. Then the inner gate opened. I passed through into a strange new world where the future held unknown tests and challenges. Glancing back, I saw my mother now in a swoon on the floor. I felt guilty at leaving her thus, but also strangely gladdened at last to see such a clear demonstration of affection. Before I could consider further, and before my gratitude for this proof of my mother's love could turn to shame for my own selfishness, the door shut with a firm thud.

With it closed the chapter of my childhood.



"Now do you see why I am so excited?"

The Research Assistant was perched uncomfortably in the Modern Language Tutor's untidy rooms on the only upright chair which was not piled with books and papers. The perpetrator of this mess was hiding in a greasy brown velvet wing chair, a dry martini in one hand and a half-smoked cigarette in the other. He was carefully positioned to the right of the younger man so that he did not have to see the awful mark which scarred the far side of his face. From here, he thought, the fellow looks almost human. This uncharacteristically compassionate reflection was broken by the harsh, nasal voice emanating from the object of his pity.

"It *must* have been Chrétien's *Urtext*. There are just too many similarities with *Perceval*. It can't be a coincidence. Take the death of the father and the brothers for a start, the way their eyes are pecked out by crows and ravens. Then there are the words the mother uses to address her son – *biax fix* – dear Son – and her swoon when he leaves her. Later in the manuscript you'll find that the young man's description of Blanche follows Chrétien almost word for word – sorry, the other way round I mean. I tell you, Chrétien copies the young man's description nearly verbatim. That Hugh must have been quite a poet himself, you know. Near the very end of the manuscript he describes the falling of the wounded goose in the snow with exquisite lyricism. Chrétien must have liked the image and lifted it."

The Research Assistant leaned forward, bringing the scarred side of his face into view. The Modern Languages Tutor shuddered, causing the long tail of ash on his cigarette to fall to the floor. He thought of the lower body wound suffered by the boy Hugh's father, his unasked questions, the lands going to waste. That was the Fisher King all right. Yes,

perhaps the Research Assistant was on to something. His attention was dragged back again by the unpleasant nasal voice.

"I must be allowed to publish. I must. It will be the most important advance in grail scholarship for decades. It is my big chance. For once and for all the arguments about the legend's source material will be laid to rest. Forget Loomis and the others. My reputation will be made."

The Modern Languages Tutor sighed and took a last long drag on his cigarette. He drained his martini to signal the end of the interview.

"You know perfectly well that the Master will never allow it. He won't give you the manuscript back. Not for a long time after his precious bestseller is finished at any rate. I am almost as keen as you – after all I am your supervisor. My name would be on the publication in front of yours. We would share the glory. But for the time being I just don't see what we can do."

The Research Assistant's eyes widened and then narrowed, their expression of twisted surprise turning to ill-concealed hatred. He stood abruptly and left the room.

