

*The Lost Book
of the Grail*

or

*A Visitor's Guide to
Barchester Cathedral*

I

THE LADY CHAPEL

The Lady Chapel, at the east end of the cathedral beyond the high altar, once housed the shrine of St Ewolda, founder of the Saxon monastery on which the cathedral was built. The shrine was pulled down during the Reformation, and for over five hundred years a simple black stone cross in the floor marked its location. Little is known of Ewolda beyond a brief mention by the Venerable Bede: “On the twelfth of October is the feast of the martyr Saint Ewolda, who converted the kingdom of Barsyt and founded a monastery there. With the sacrifice of her life she kept the light of Christ burning in that place.”

7th February 1941, Barchester

Barchester was not equipped with air-raid sirens, being both beyond the range of German bombers and of no strategic value – but bomber squadrons could become lost on nights when fog unexpectedly blanketed the south of England, and while the emergence of a cathedral spire from that fog might confirm to the navigator that he was too far off course to return home safely, to the bombardier it would recall the words of the commanding officer: “Some target is better than no target.” And so Edward was woken from his dreams not by sirens but by shouts and the blaring of car horns and a roaring overhead that grew louder every minute.

His brother’s bed was empty, and when he had pulled on some clothes and emerged from his room, he found no one else in the house. A sudden flash of light was followed by an explosion, and in

an instant Edward was covered with glass, his ears ringing so loudly that for a moment they drowned out all other sound. Being nine years old hadn't kept him from reading the papers and listening to the wireless – he knew what had been happening in London. His parents had told him Barchester was safe from air raids; obviously, they had been wrong. Edward stumbled to the front door and flung it open. Across the street, the Greshams' house was a blazing pile of rubble. He heard screams and cries from all directions and was just about to add his own to the raucous cacophony when he saw a familiar face and felt a hand on his arm.

“Edward, are you all right? Your parents asked me to look in on you.”

“Quite all right, sir,” said Edward, for whom the presence of his neighbour and choirmaster was exactly what he needed to steel his nerves and change his outlook from fear to determination. “What can I do to help?”

“Come with me,” said Mr Grantly.

“Where are we going?”

“To the library.”

By the time they reached the cathedral precincts, four other members of the choir had joined them – two older boys and two of the vicars' choral, the men who sang the tenor and bass parts. Orange light outlined the spire of the cathedral, and as they ran towards the cloister the source became apparent – a raging fire at the east end. Edward could hardly see through the smoke, but it looked as if the Lady Chapel, in which the choir often practiced, was at the centre of the blaze.

Mr Grantly allowed no time for gawking, however, and the musicians quickly made their way through the cloister and up the winding stone stairs to the library, lit only by the flames that flickered outside the windows.

“The fire could reach here any minute,” said Mr Grantly. “We need to save as much as we can. Start with these manuscripts.”

Edward had never had occasion to visit the cathedral library, but there was no time to admire the cases of ancient books that glowed in the light of the fire. He reached up and took hold of a vellum-bound manuscript on the shelf in front of him. It was not a huge volume – larger

than his schoolbooks, but not as large as the family Bible – yet it felt weighted with mystery. He had just settled the book in his arms and was turning to go when it jerked out of his hands. He reached out to keep it from falling to the floor, only to find the ancient tome floating in mid-air. It must be a magic book, he thought, watching transfixed as it swayed in front of him, its pages illuminated by the orange light.

Edward loved languages. He had already learnt a lot of Latin and a smattering of Old English, but even though he caught only a glimpse of them, the words before him made no sense. The letters were what he expected from medieval Latin, but the combinations in which they filled the page were meaningless. Each word was the same length, and Edward was just thinking that perhaps all magical incantations came in words of exactly nine letters when a desperate voice rang out next to him.

“How do we get them loose?” asked one of the vicars’ choral. Edward realized that the volume he had been holding was not hovering in the air through some enchantment, but hanging from a chain that connected it to the shelf. Each of the manuscripts in the case before him, he saw, was similarly chained.

“The librarian keeps the key in his lodgings,” said the other vicar choral. “But he’s gone to Wells to visit his mother.” Suddenly there was a crashing sound as one of the high windows burst inward and glass rained down upon a library table.

“There’s no time,” said Mr Grantly. “Tear off the covers.”

The man next to Edward grabbed the chain of the dangling manuscript in one hand and the book in the other. With a loud grunt, he rent the two apart, leaving the manuscript’s front cover hanging by its chain. He thrust the volume at Edward, who clasped it to his chest. As the vicars’ choral pulled the next manuscript off the shelf, Edward ran for the exit, winding down the stairs until he stumbled into the cloister. He saw that Mr Grantly, who had dashed down the steps ahead of him, had already begun a pile of books near the yew tree on the far side of the cloister, but the volume Edward held seemed too important merely to cast onto the heap. He crept into the darkest corner of the cloister and laid the book in a niche in the stone wall. He stood breathing heavily for a few seconds, then dashed back to the library.

More and more people crowded the room, and soon a queue had formed from the shelves down the stairs and into the cloister. Edward found himself at the top of the stairs, passing volume after volume to a pair of hands that reached out from the shadows. At first the books were like the manuscript he had taken to the cloister – their front covers torn off. Soon the manuscripts were replaced with leather-bound books of every size, boxes of letters and papers and stacks of documents, some bearing huge wax seals. Edward's arms began to ache as he passed everything that came his way to those mysterious hands. Every few minutes another window broke from the heat of the fire. Edward could feel the room growing hotter.

After more than an hour, he heard Mr Grantly's voice shouting, "Get out! Get out! The fire's here." Edward looked up to see flames shooting through the windows and licking the tops of the now empty bookcases that lined the far wall. In another second, he felt himself pressed along by the line of people and almost carried down the stairs. He followed the line across the cloister towards the cathedral close.

The mound of books Mr Grantly had begun in the cloister had been moved far from harm's way by people who had flocked from all over the city to save the cathedral's treasures. Edward stood for a minute gulping in the cool night air. As Mr Grantly and several others carried the last of the books from the cloister and farther away from the fire, Edward suddenly remembered the manuscript. He ran to the corner of the cloister where he had secreted it, but a man in a strange grey clerical robe was lifting the book from its hiding place. He had seen this man in the library helping to remove a few of the smaller furnishings. Now the man glanced around and, apparently not seeing the choirboy, disappeared around a corner. Edward followed him out of the cloister and beheld a scene of chaos.

Some who had helped empty the library were now passing buckets of water from the river to the fire. Others were busy loading the books and manuscripts, along with other valuables, into a variety of transport. Wagons and carts full of books disappeared into the darkness. In the shadows, Edward saw the man in grey slipping through the crowd towards St Martin's Lane. He was just about to chase after him, to ask why he had taken the manuscript, when he felt a hand clap on his shoulder.

“A good night’s work, Edward,” said Mr Grantly. “But we’d better get you home. Your parents are sure to be worried.”

“Won’t they need help unloading?”

Mr Grantly laughed. “You’ve done enough. We’ll unload the wagons in the morning and find safe places for all the books until this” – he waved his hand at the sky in disgust – “until all this is over.”

They turned towards Edward’s home, and as they walked away from the crowd, the boy glanced back towards the arch that led into St Martin’s Lane, but the strange figure was gone.

The next morning, Edward learnt that his father and older brother had helped extinguish the fire, while his mother had worked with the other women of the Flower Guild to remove the plate from the cathedral. Save for some smoke damage, the main body of the cathedral was unharmed. The Lady Chapel had been completely destroyed, and the row of buildings on the east side of the cloister, including the library, had suffered significant damage. Edward read in the newspaper that over eighty medieval manuscripts and almost three thousand books had been saved from the library. Assisting in that rescue was the only part he ever played in the war, but for the rest of his life he was proud of what he had done that night.

4th April 2016

SECOND MONDAY AFTER EASTER

Arthur Prescott sometimes thought he was born in the wrong generation. It’s not that he thought he should be a Knight of the Round Table, but he should at least be living in the 1920s with Jeeves pulling on his morning coat for him, or better yet in the 1880s, discussing the relative merits of Gladstone and Disraeli in a first-class railway carriage. These daydreams generally came to an abrupt end as soon as he thought about things like public sanitation and penicillin. Still, if he was not living in the wrong time, he was at least teaching at the wrong institution – one must grant him that. Arthur was not born for the concrete-and-glass confines of the modern University of Barchester. Arthur was moulded for the ancient stonework of

Oxford. Arthur, by all rights, should be climbing a creaking staircase to his top-floor rooms in the great quadrangle of Lazarus College. He should be reading *The Daily Jupiter* in the panelled Senior Common Room and taking his meals in the cavernous hall hung with portraits of scholars past. Instead, he taught at a plate-glass university, which, in a recent ranking of the top fifty universities in the UK, did not rate a mention, honourable or otherwise.

But Arthur had come to Barchester willingly, not because of the university but in spite of it. For as much as he hated those breeze-block walls that imprisoned him each day, he loved Barchester itself, with its narrow streets, its meandering river and its ancient cathedral towering over the compact city centre. Arthur had taken the job at the university so he could live in his favourite place in the world, the only place where he had known happiness as a child. During Arthur's childhood, his father had hopped from job to job and his parents had fought and broken up and got back together in an unending cycle. But every summer, Arthur had spent two glorious weeks with his maternal grandfather in Barchester. They had swum in the river and taken long walks in the countryside; they had played chess on rainy days; they had even climbed the tower of the cathedral. Arthur's grandfather was a retired clergyman, and seemed to know every churchman for miles around, from the bishop of Barchester to the verger who kept the keys to every secret part of the cathedral. Arthur's love for his grandfather had expanded into a love for Barchester. He loved how every stone of the old city had a story, how every wall and corner and rooftop dripped with history, and he loved that his grandfather knew all those stories and all that history and shared it all with him. Arthur was eight when he first visited, and by the time he was a teenager he had promised himself he would live in Barchester someday. Unfortunately, keeping that promise meant that every morning he rode to the third floor of the humanities building in a lift that somehow managed to seem simultaneously sterile and unsanitary.

The doors opened jerkily to reveal the scowling face of Frederick Slopes, head of the Department of Literature in which Arthur toiled away as a junior lecturer.

"Late again, Prescott," said Slopes.

“And good morning to you, sir,” said Arthur.

“You do realize that we had a meeting of the Curriculum Expansion Committee at eight?”

“This may be a radical notion, sir, but do you think perhaps the Curriculum Expansion Committee ought to be populated by members of the faculty who actually favour curriculum expansion?”

“Your personal tastes are entirely irrelevant to your committee work, Prescott.”

“Now, if you had asked me to serve on the Curriculum Contraction Committee, I would have been here at seven.” Arthur turned to walk down the hall, but heard Slopes’s steps close behind.

“Prescott, I cannot allow your continued absence from the work of this department to go unpunished.”

“Do you know, sir,” said Arthur, turning on his heels and facing his tormentor, “that we teach a seminar in this department called ‘Anagnorisis in the Existential Hogwarts’, but we do not teach a seminar on Shakespeare?”

“Prescott, you—”

“That’s William Shakespeare. He was a playwright. Not bad, actually. Nor do we teach seminars on Charles Dickens or Jane Austen. They wrote books. Cracking good ones.”

“They are all covered in the core module. And by the way, Prescott, the Hogwarts course is oversubscribed this term.”

“I have no doubt. But that shouldn’t mean—”

“This university must move with the times, Prescott. And so must you, or you will be left behind. Do I make myself clear?”

“There was a time,” said Arthur, “when universities led the culture rather than followed it.”

“There was also a time,” barked Slopes, “when the Committee on Curriculum Expansion met. And that time was eight o’clock. Now, if you miss one more meeting I will have to report you to the Committee on Faculty Disciplinary Affairs.”

And no doubt they, thought Arthur as Slopes stomped off, will report my actions to the Committee on Flushing British Culture Down the Loo.

Yes, Arthur would have been happier in an earlier generation. It was a cruel trick of fate that had landed him in a century when universities

had “core modules” and taught courses on “anagnorisis” to students who couldn’t be bothered to read books they hadn’t already read in childhood. The irony was, thought Arthur as he squeezed into his cubicle of an office, that he liked the Harry Potter books. He had read them last summer. But he didn’t think they belonged in a university curriculum.

The day that had begun with so little promise continued in that vein for Arthur through two lectures and a tutorial – populated by three students whom he insisted on calling Mr Crawley, Miss Stanhope, and Miss Robarts, in spite of the fact that they called him “Arthur”. The tutorial was part of the dreaded core module, and so Arthur had anticipated with pleasure an introductory discussion of Jane Austen. Instead he had to endure a diatribe from Miss Stanhope – meekly supported by Mr Crawley, who was clearly trying to ingratiate himself with her in the hope of future sexual favours – in which Austen was taken to task for not being “enough of a feminist”. Arthur listened for a half-hour, doing his best to focus his mind on a P.G. Wodehouse story he had read on the bus that morning, but eventually he could take no more.

“Jane Austen never married,” he said in frustration. “She entered the male-dominated field of novel-writing and her female heroines are strong, independent characters. Just what do you imagine a feminist in a rural English village in the late eighteenth century looks like?”

“Oh, Arthur,” said Miss Stanhope with an exasperated sigh, “you are such a *man*.”

“You can’t deny the accusation,” said Gwyn, as she and Arthur took their regular twice-weekly walk around the water meadows the next morning. “Yes, but she said it with such disdain,” said Arthur, stooping to pick up a drool-covered tennis ball that one of the dean’s chocolate-coloured spaniels had deposited at his feet. Arthur could never tell the two dogs, Mag and Nunc, apart, but he flung the ball as far as he could and they both bounded off after it. He loved these early-morning walks with Gwyn. They meant his Tuesdays and Thursdays, at least, could start off on a civilized note.

Gwyneth Bowen had been dean of Barchester Cathedral for almost six years. Arthur had shaken hands with her after evensong shortly after she was installed, but the two cannot be said to have genuinely

met until a few weeks later, when they happened to fall in together while walking in the water meadows outside the cathedral close one foggy morning. They had had a long and heated debate about the nature of faith; Arthur had liked her immediately.

The argument that had engrossed them on their first meeting had gone something like this: the dean did not understand how Arthur could come to services at the cathedral nearly every day yet profess he didn't actually *believe* in the doctrines of the Christian church. Arthur argued that the dean should be pleased to have non-believers in her pews – what better place for non-believers? Arthur guessed her argument stemmed not so much from the apparent inconsistency of his beliefs and his actions as from her assumption that a non-believer in the pews was a rare bird. But Arthur suspected it was not nearly as rare as Gwyn thought, or perhaps wished. He imagined that any number of regular attendees, especially at the main Sunday-morning service, if put to the test about their reasons for darkening the doors of the cathedral on a regular basis, might say all sorts of things about music and preaching and architecture and fellowship, but would very carefully skirt around the issue of faith.

Since that first day, they had met twice a week during term time, more often during holidays, immediately after the seven-o'clock morning prayer, for an hour-long walk across the broad expanse of the water meadows, along the riverside path, and back to the cathedral close, where the gardens came down to the river just across from Arthur's cottage. Whatever the weather, when they made the turn at the far end of the meadow and emerged from a row of trees to catch sight of the cathedral, Arthur always felt as if he were in a Constable painting. On some days they continued the debate that had begun that first morning; more often they engaged on different topics – some found them in agreement; others led to spirited jousting, which Arthur quite enjoyed.

When Gwyn's husband had died a year ago, the walks had continued for a time in a more sombre vein, but they had never missed a Tuesday or Thursday that entire term. "I need this," Gwyn had said when Arthur had suggested a hiatus. "I may not be the first woman dean in the Anglican Church, but I believe I am the first who is the single mother of two small children, grieving for her husband

and trying to manage the finances of Britain's poorest cathedral. Sometimes I think our walk is my only hour of sanity in the day." So Arthur listened to her troubles, and she listened to his, and by the time they reached the river they were more often than not deep into an argument that took them each away from their work on the other side of the water meadows.

"And I don't see why the students have to call the faculty by their first names," said Arthur, continuing his complaint about the previous afternoon's tutorial. "We aren't their mates: we're their instructors. Would it be so awful to be shown a little respect?"

"Come now, Arthur. You don't call me the Very Reverend Bowen."

"That's because we are peers – practically."

"We're nothing of the sort. I'm a dean and you're a layman."

They walked in unusual silence for a few minutes, Arthur again throwing the tennis ball when Mag (or perhaps Nunc) dropped it at his feet. "Something's bothering you," he said at last.

"Some bad news this morning, I'm afraid," said Gwyn.

"Has Daniel been sent down from nursery school?" said Arthur. Daniel was Gwyn's energetic three-year-old.

"No," said Gwyn with a laugh, "but it wouldn't surprise me. He's become overly fond of kissing girls, apparently."

"Ah, to be three and in love!"

"We heard from the Heritage Lottery Fund this morning. Our application was rejected."

"Astounding," said Arthur, shaking his head. "I suppose they think it's more important to build a museum of thread bobbins or a centre for the study of Cornish pasties."

"I thought perhaps I could leave a mark as dean," said Gwyn.

"You leave a mark every day," said Arthur.

"But not like this would have been."

For years, Gwyneth had been seeking funding to rebuild the Lady Chapel, destroyed by German bombs in 1941. Under her direction, the chapter and a local firm of architects had spent three years preparing a plan for a chapel that was modern in design – built of local oak, steel and huge glass panels extending from floor to ceiling on three sides and looking out onto a surrounding garden. Gwyn and the architects had visited several cathedrals as they searched for

inspiration, and she had been especially struck by the juxtaposition of the modern cathedral at Coventry with the bombed-out ruins of the medieval building.

"I suppose it's just as well," she said. "Half the community loved the design and the other half hated it."

"I despise modern architecture," said Arthur. "You know with what a searing passion I loathe the so-called campus of my current employer. But I love your chapel. It will be what contemporary architecture ought to be and so seldom is."

"The precentor said it looked like a cheap conservatory on a seaside holiday cottage."

"Yes, well the precentor is a slab of Gorgonzola."

"Thank you, P.G. Wodehouse."

"A pleasure," said Arthur.

"I thought you liked the precentor."

"I never said I liked the man. I just like the style of worship he brings to the cathedral."

"I find all the incense and chanting so..." Gwyn trailed off.

"You were going to say Roman, weren't you?" said Arthur.

"Actually I was going to say ancient," said the dean.

"What better place to keep alive ancient practices than Barchester, where Christianity has been practiced for twelve hundred years."

"Has it?" said the dean. "I wouldn't know. You see, the man who is working on the cathedral guidebook has missed his deadline again."

"In a cathedral with twelve centuries of history, what difference could a few months make?"

"How long have you been working on that guide, Arthur? Because it does seem like something approaching a millennium."

"I thought we were talking about the Gorgonzola," said Arthur with disdain.

"Don't you care for Gorgonzola, Mr Prescott?" said the dean, and they spent the rest of their walk debating the relative merits of English, French and Italian cheeses.

"I'm truly sorry about the chapel, Gwyn," said Arthur as they stood once again in the close outside the deanery, Mag and Nunc circling round them. "Is there no other way to raise the money?"

“If we do it properly, and follow all the rules about the restoration of ancient monuments – do a full archaeological dig and that sort of thing – we’ll need something like two and a half million pounds. So far the generous community of Barchester and our paltry stream of tourists have mustered about a hundred thousand.”

“Did they say why the application was refused?”

“They said they would have preferred an application for an educational or multi-purpose building. They don’t want to fund what they call ‘superfluous worship space’ in a cathedral that can’t fill the pews it has.”

“Superfluous!” said Arthur. “Let them come to compline on a moonlit night in your glass chapel and then talk about ‘superfluous.’”

“What would I do without you?” said Gwyn, smiling and squeezing Arthur’s hand.

“First of all, you might have a new cathedral guide by now,” said Arthur. “And second, you might go on naively believing that Brie or Pecorino or *chèvre* are superior to a good old English cheddar.”

That afternoon, Arthur had a blessed opportunity to leave work early, as the two-o’clock meeting of the Campus Sustainability Committee was cancelled owing to the fact that all the committee members (excepting Arthur) were going to Manchester for the conference on green technology and construction. He took the number 42 bus to the city centre and walked the short distance to the cathedral, bypassing the path that led to his own cottage for the pleasures of his favourite room in the world.

Arthur had worked in the Bodleian and in most of the Oxford college libraries as an undergraduate. One year he had spent his Easter holidays ensconced in a reading room at the British Library. He had toured the libraries of stately homes and visited fellow book collectors in their own private havens. But nothing compared, in his mind, to what awaited him at the top of the winding stone staircase off the cloister of Barchester Cathedral. The few tourists who strayed far enough from London to visit Barchester rarely noticed the narrow wooden door just past the much larger entry to the chapter house and never suspected what

treasures that door hid. Now Arthur turned his key in the lock and stepped inside. He flicked the light on, pulled the door shut and began to climb.

Slightly breathless from the steep steps, he emerged at the top of the stairs into a long, high-ceilinged room that ran almost the entire length of the east side of the cloister. He stood, by perpetual invitation of the dean, in the library of Barchester Cathedral. The library was overseen by Oscar Dimsdale, a local schoolteacher who volunteered in a variety of capacities around the cathedral. Arthur and Oscar had met in Barchester the summer Arthur was twelve, and had been best friends ever since. Oscar worked odd hours, coming to the library whenever he had the time. He had no training as a librarian, but he kept the books dusted and made arrangements to allow access to any members of the community who wanted to use the collection. Few did. When Arthur had begun working on his guide to Barchester Cathedral some years ago, Oscar, with the permission of the dean, had given him his own key. That Arthur had leave to come to this room whenever he liked seemed a privilege of unparalleled fortune.

Save for a small collection of modern reference books on the shelf behind Oscar's desk, nothing in the room was less than a century old, and many of the books, manuscripts and furnishings surrounding him were much older. The interior woodwork, from the bookcases to the thick beams overhead, was seventeenth century, having been installed by one of Barchester's only bibliophile bishops, Bishop Atwater, who had also donated a substantial collection of books to the cathedral.

The wall to Arthur's left was covered with oak bookcases, reaching high overhead. Most of these still had their original decorated finials above each section – though those at the far end of the room were badly charred from the wartime fire. On the right wall, several narrow windows looked into the cloister, and panelling bore the scratched initials of long-ago readers. In the centre of this wall was a case decorated with elaborate carvings and containing the cathedral's collection of some eighty medieval manuscripts, all, thanks to the events of 1941, lacking their covers.

Down the centre of the room was a row of long, wooden trestle tables. One held a few stacks of books Oscar was working with,

but most stood empty. In the days when Barchester had been a monastic foundation, long before this space had been constructed, monks would have consulted the cathedral's books for guidance on everything from agriculture to engineering to medicine. For centuries, clergy of the cathedral used the library often, having no place else to look for historical and theological writing. Even into the nineteenth century, young men of Barchester studying for ordination at Oxford or Cambridge made frequent use of the collection when home for the long vacation. In 1890, parts of the collection were opened as a circulating library for the people of the city – an innovation that lasted until the establishment of a public library in Barchester a few years later. Today, however, Barchester was far from the British centres of scholarship, its library held few items that scholars couldn't examine much more easily in Oxford or Cambridge or London, and little on the shelves that surrounded Arthur was of interest to the local population. None of this bothered Arthur; it meant he often had this wonderful space to himself.

He stood a moment with his eyes closed and inhaled the smell of antiquity. He could catch a hint of charred wood and a dash of dried mildew. The library smelt substantial; it smelt of both life and death. The air was stale and still and Arthur felt the atmosphere of the place envelop him. He was home.

Despite the ample space on the tables in the centre of the room, Arthur preferred to work at a small table under one of the cloister windows. Though the legs had been made in the nineteenth century, the table top was, according to tradition, the oldest piece of furniture in the cathedral – though no one knew exactly how old. It may have once been a piece of an altar, as the words *Mensa Christi*, or "Table of Christ," were carved into its front edge in Gothic letters. Its surface was uneven and worn, pitted and gouged. It was much too small for spreading out research papers and entirely unsuitable for writing. Arthur loved it.

He started towards his favourite spot, then paused for a moment, listening. Save for the occasional creaking of beams overhead, all was silent – no turning of the door handle far below, no steps upon the staircase. Arthur walked softly to a case at the far end of the room, stood on tiptoe and removed a plain-looking, squat volume. Its leather

binding was badly worn at the joints and corners, and nearly two inches of the lower spine was lacking. It bore no markings, no indications to a casual observer that it was Arthur's favourite book in the library. He loved to take it down from its shelf to caress its covers, to lose himself in the artwork of the frontispiece and to read from its pages.

The book was the 1634 William Stansby edition of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, or, as the title page called it, *The Most Ancient and Famous History of the Renowned Prince Arthur King of Britaine*. Malory's was the first collection in English of many of the King Arthur tales, some of which had begun as medieval French romances. This wasn't the original printing of Malory – that had been published by England's first printer, William Caxton, in 1485 and survived in only two copies. Four more editions, nearly as rare as the Caxton, followed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Stansby 1634 edition was the earliest Arthur was ever likely to hold in his own hands. It was also the first to be updated into what Arthur thought of as Shakespearean English, and the text upon which many future editions were based.

He had first held this book when he was nine years old, the first time his grandfather had brought him to the cathedral library. Even then, before he had any understanding of bibliography or publishing history, before he knew the difference between paper and vellum or calf and morocco, he had felt the history of this place – a deep sense of almost electric connection to the past. Looking back on it, he supposed his first steps into the room, breathless from following his lanky, loping grandfather up the stairs, had been a spiritual experience. He didn't feel God in the library, but he felt something beyond himself.

But his grandfather had not brought him to the library to overwhelm him with history, rather to show him a specific book – the Stansby *Morte d'Arthur*.

"This is a book about your namesake," said his grandfather.

"My namesake?"

"The person you were named after. I suggested the name myself – the name Arthur – because of this book. And since I was to be your godfather, your parents agreed. This book is about a king named Arthur."

“What does he do?” asked Arthur.

“He has adventures,” said his grandfather, with a twinkle in his eye.

“Can we check it out and read it?” asked Arthur.

“Not this copy,” said his grandfather with a chuckle, as he took the book from the boy. “But I have another edition at home we can read.”

Now Arthur opened the book to the title page and turned the volume sideways so he could examine the frontispiece. He had looked at it a thousand times; every detail of the woodcut was burnt into his memory, but on days like this, when the modern world exasperated him at every turn, he loved nothing better than returning to this book and this image. The picture showed King Arthur and his knights seated at the Round Table. Arthur popped up through a circular hole in the centre of the table, holding a lance and a sword. He had a large nose and an English moustache – without the extended handlebars. He wore a full suit of plate-mail armour – more Jacobean than Arthurian. On a bench encircling the table and draped with linen sat thirteen of Arthur’s knights, similarly moustachioed and armoured. There seemed a general air of camaraderie among the knights. Most chatted with one another; one had his hand on another’s back. Arthur could almost imagine himself as one of the company. The caption for the woodcut listed thirty knights, with no indication of which of them appeared in the image. Every time Arthur looked at the picture he attributed different names to the figures. Today the knight sitting squarely in the centre of the image, the only one with his back completely to the viewer, seemed more Lancelot than Kay. Sir Bors and Sir Gawain were certainly chatting in the bottom-right corner. The hardest to put a name to was at the top of the picture, his face almost totally obscured by the feather streaming from Arthur’s helmet. Today he was Galahad, achiever of the Grail, sitting in the Siege Perilous.

Arthur turned the soft, worn pages and inhaled the scent of history. The paper was a pale brownish yellow, but the dark type was still as legible as it had been almost four hundred years ago. He had work to do today, so he just read a short passage from a chapter titled “How sir Galahad and his fellowes were fed with the Sancgreall, and how our Lord appeared to them, and of other matters”.

Then King Pelles and his sonne departed. And therewith it beseemed them that there came a man and foure Angels from heaven, clothed in the likenesse of bishops, and had a crosse in his hand, and the foure Angels beare him up in a chaire, and set him downe before the table of silver, whereupon the Sancgreall was.

The Sancgreall – the Holy Grail. Arthur closed his eyes and tried to picture the scene. Malory was not one for detailed descriptions, and he never wrote what the Holy Grail looked like, but to Arthur this meant the Grail could be whatever he needed it to be. Today it was an anchor, a solid link to a past that mattered and that, for Arthur, was as alive as the present – perhaps more alive.

When Arthur returned home that summer after his grandfather had introduced him to the stories of the Round Table, he had run straight to the library and checked out the only volume about King Arthur he could find – a 1911 book called *King Arthur's Knights: The Tales Retold for Boys and Girls*. The title page claimed that the book contained “16 Illustrations in Colour by Walter Crane”, but some disrespectful former library patron had removed the colour plates. Arthur didn't care: he was too busy falling in love with the stories.

King Arthur's Knights had been the first book Arthur had read late at night under the covers with a torch, long after he was supposed to have been asleep. It was the first book that took him completely out of himself, his room, his home and his home town to a place that seemed both mythical and real, a place where magic was ordinary and heroes were plenteous. It was, he supposed, thinking back on it, the first book that showed him what reading was really all about.

At first Arthur had been drawn to the adventure in the stories – knights battling other knights, the King holding tournaments at Camelot. Then in his teenage years, the love stories began to be favourites – the great Sir Lancelot's tragic love for Queen Guinevere, Tristram and Isoude drinking a love potion even while he was supposed to be wooing her on behalf of another. But the Grail stories had been a constant source of fascination. In the version of Malory that Arthur read as a boy, the story of the Grail was wonderfully vague, never explicitly stating what the Grail was or why Arthur

and his knights were so determined to find it. It was unclear who possessed the Grail or why or what they did with it or even whether it was real or just a vision. Arthur had grown to love the mysterious nature of the Grail, but as a child it had fascinated and frustrated him in equal parts.

“What is the Grail?” Arthur had asked his grandfather the night after his first visit to the cathedral library, as his grandfather read to him from an abridged version of Malory.

The popular legend of the Grail, his grandfather told him, was simple – the cup from which Christ served the wine at the Last Supper was taken by Joseph of Arimathea to the island of Britain. Arriving near what is now Glastonbury, Joseph pushed his staff into the ground and it flowered into a bush known as the Glastonbury Thorn. Joseph later buried the Grail under a nearby hill – the Glastonbury Tor – and a torrent of clean, fresh water sprang forth and flows from the spot to this very day. Centuries later, knights of King Arthur’s Round Table sought the Grail – a symbol of purity and perfection. In some versions of the tale, the Glastonbury Tor is also the Isle of Avalon, Arthur’s mysterious final resting place. In the late twelfth century, monks of Glastonbury claimed to have found the graves of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere, but no one ever found the Grail.

Arthur might have thought the story of the Grail no more than a mysterious legend of a magical cup with healing powers – as fascinating, and as fictional, as Tolkien’s One Ring. But the first time his grandfather read him the Grail story from Malory, he laid the book aside and looked Arthur in the eyes.

“King Arthur, and Merlin, and Lancelot, and all the rest – in all likelihood they are only stories. But the Grail, Arthur – the Grail was real. The Grail *is* real. And I’m going to tell you a secret – a secret you must promise to share with no one.”

“I promise,” said Arthur breathlessly.

“I believe that the Grail is right here in Barchester.”

Arthur loved no one in the world more than his grandfather, and that kindly man rarely spoke as seriously as he did now.

“I’m getting too old for adventures,” said his grandfather, “but you have your whole life ahead of you. You must be the one to find the Grail. And you must keep it secret.”

“But why does it have to be a secret?” said Arthur.

“Do you trust me?” said his grandfather.

“Yes,” said the boy.

“Then you must believe. Someday you will understand. You will understand what the Grail is and where it is and why it must be kept a secret, but for now all you have to do is believe in it. Do you, Arthur? Do you believe in the Grail?”

And Arthur’s response had been absolutely instinctual. Staring into the deep blue of his grandfather’s eyes, he had spoken without the slightest shadow of doubt.

“I do.”

Arthur opened his eyes and looked back at the page. At the edge of the text block was a bit of marginalia written in browning ink in a seventeenth-century hand.

Libro huic nullus locus melior præter Baronum Castrum.

Baronum Castrum was the name of the Roman settlement that had become Barchester. The marginalia translated: “No better place for this book than Barchester.” His grandfather had shown him this mysterious notation on one of their visits to the cathedral library, translating it without comment or explanation. Arthur ran his finger lightly across the inscription, wondering, as he always did when he looked at it, who had written those words and, more importantly, why. Some monk or priest or scholar had thought Barchester the perfect place for a book about King Arthur and had chosen a page about the Holy Grail to note this. How he wished he could see into the past and know the reason.

After another moment, he turned and slipped the book back into its place, carefully aligning the spine with the adjacent volumes so no one would know it had been removed. As much as he wanted to follow his grandfather’s exhortation and find a way to seek the Holy Grail in Barchester, that would have to wait for another day. He walked back to his usual table and slid into the worn velvet seat of his Gothic chair – a castoff from the chapter-house renovations of the nineteenth century. On the table in front of him lay the Barchester

Breviary. It was the only medieval manuscript of Barchester not damaged during the emptying of the library in 1941. Its intact survival was owed to its occasional use, even after the Reformation, as a service book. It had originally been kept in the vestry and so had not been part of the chained library. Occupying, as it did, a place of pride in the library, on a lectern near the entrance, it would have been one of the first books removed on the night of the bombing.

The thirteenth-century manuscript contained the psalms, readings and prayers for the daily offices – the seven services conducted by monks of the medieval monastery each day. The Barchester Breviary was particularly distinguished for the inclusion of medieval musical settings for several of the psalms and canticles. Many such musical manuscripts had been destroyed at the time of the Civil War by Parliamentarians, who saw chanting as too Roman Catholic. But the breviary had survived and had been an important source for one of the few pieces of scholarship to emerge from the library in the nineteenth century, a book called *Harding's Church Music*, by the then precentor of the cathedral, Septimus Harding.

The breviary also contained prayers and services unique to Barchester. Of these, the one that held the most interest for Arthur was the service for the feast day of St Ewolda, founder of the monastery that became Barchester Cathedral. He had pored over these four pages of Latin again and again, searching for any clue about her life.

The chief sticking point in Arthur's attempts to craft a new guide to Barchester Cathedral was the lack of information about Ewolda. Arthur knew she had been martyred – she was included in the Venerable Bede's *Martyrologium*. But Bede gave no details about either Ewolda's life or her death.

"Our visitors don't care about some seventh-century saint," Gwyn had told him when he explained that he couldn't finish his guide until he knew at least something about Ewolda. "They just want to know when the nave was built, who designed the stained-glass windows and what time the café closes." But Arthur had persisted in the belief that if he stared at those four pages hard enough they would reveal something of Ewolda's story.

He picked up the manuscript, as he had so many times before, hoping for new insight. The volume had been rebound sometime shortly after

the Reformation, and the present binding of brown calf was worn to the softness of suede. There were no markings on the exterior – or at least none that had survived four hundred years of use – but Arthur nonetheless turned the thick volume in his hands, carefully examining the binding before opening it. Handling this book was, to Arthur, like a liturgical rite – there were certain unwritten rubrics he always followed.

The manuscript was about eleven inches high and just over seven inches wide and contained 160 vellum leaves, each covered on both sides with closely spaced Latin text. There was no title page or table of contents. The first page, to which Arthur now turned, simply began the service of matins.

Vellum, especially eight-hundred-year-old vellum, felt like nothing else. Arthur revelled in the texture of the pages as he slowly turned them over. Each had its own thickness, its own weight, yet each also possessed those peculiar characteristics of vellum – the sheen; the smooth, almost slick surface; the supple flexibility; and that underlying strength. When turning vellum pages, Arthur always took great care, but he also knew he didn't need to. Unlike paper, vellum was extremely difficult to tear.

Everything about the manuscript transported Arthur back across the centuries – the faint red lines that had served the scribe as a guide to keeping his lettering straight; the darkening at the bottom corner of every page, where a thousand, or ten thousand thumbs had turned the leaves; and the vellum itself – that calfskin parchment that was so expensive and difficult to prepare.

Eventually, Arthur arrived at the order for the service of vespers for the feast day of St Ewolda. It differed only slightly from vespers on other days, and Arthur had never been able to read anything into the particular selection of psalms and Scripture readings. Only the final prayer made any direct reference to Ewolda:

Harken we beseech thee O Lord Christ to our prayers and deign to bless with thy grace thy servant Ewolda, whose sacrifice in thy name we remember this day and every day. As you made your blessed virgin Ewolda come to heaven through the palm frond of martyrdom, grant that we by following her example may earn the right to approach you.

As always, the prayer left Arthur with more questions than answers. Ewolda was a virgin and a martyr – both fairly standard for early female saints. But what was her sacrifice? What was the “palm frond of martyrdom”? What was her example that those who prayed this prayer sought to follow?

In the margin next to the prayer was a crude sketch, presumably of Ewolda – a blue-robed woman who seemed to hover over the page. While her halo conferred saintly status, the marginalia also displayed the bawdy tradition of some such drawings. From the hem of her robes issued a stream of water that trickled to the bottom of the page. Why some medieval artist would choose to depict St Ewolda urinating in the margins of her prayer Arthur could not imagine. He looked into her vacant eyes for a long minute, but she offered him no insight.

After reading the prayer one more time without further illumination, Arthur gently closed the manuscript. Perhaps Gwyn was right. Perhaps he should just get on with writing the cathedral guide, pouring into it all the things he *did* know about the history of Barchester. Perhaps he shouldn't worry about the things he *didn't* know. He pulled out his fountain pen, a few sheets of thick, cream-coloured paper and a leather blotter – to provide a smooth writing surface on the ancient table. In an elegant script that he had learnt from a nineteenth-century handwriting manual, he wrote: *A Visitor's Guide to Barchester Cathedral*. But what, thought Arthur, comes next?

He stared at the empty page and could think only one thing. If he really wanted to write the guide properly, it wasn't the Holy Grail he needed to find but another missing treasure – the lost Book of Ewolda.