

CHIVALRY by Neil Gaiman (1992)

Mrs. Whitaker found the Holy Grail; it was under a fur coat.

Every Thursday afternoon Mrs. Whitaker walked down to the post office to collect her pension, even though her legs were no longer what they were, and on the way back home she would stop in at the Oxfam Shop and buy herself a little something.

The Oxfam Shop sold old clothes, knickknacks, oddments, bits and bobs, and large quantities of old paperbacks, all of them donations: secondhand flotsam, often the house clearances of the dead. All the profits went to charity.

The shop was staffed by volunteers. The volunteer on duty this afternoon was Marie, seventeen, slightly overweight, and dressed in a baggy mauve jumper that looked like she had bought it from the shop.

Marie sat by the till with a copy of Modern Woman magazine, filling out a “Reveal Your Hidden Personality” questionnaire. Every now and then, she’d flip to the back of the magazine and check the relative points assigned to an A), B), or C) answer before making up her mind how she’d respond to the question.

Mrs. Whitaker pattered around the shop.

They still hadn’t sold the stuffed cobra, she noted. It had been there for six months now, gathering dust, glass eyes gazing balefully at the clothes racks and the cabinet filled with chipped porcelain and chewed toys.

Mrs. Whitaker patted its head as she went past.

She picked out a couple of Mills & Boon novels from a bookshelf—Her Thundering Soul and Her Turbulent Heart, a shilling each—and gave careful consideration to the empty bottle of Mateus Rosé with a decorative lampshade on it before deciding she really didn’t have anywhere to put it.

She moved a rather threadbare fur coat, which smelled badly of mothballs. Underneath it was a walking stick and a water-stained copy of Romance and Legend of Chivalry by A. R. Hope Moncrieff, priced at five pence. Next to the book, on its side, was the Holy Grail. It had a little round paper sticker on the base, and written on it, in felt pen, was the price: 30p.

Mrs. Whitaker picked up the dusty silver goblet and appraised it through her thick spectacles.

“This is nice,” she called to Marie.

Marie shrugged.

“It’d look nice on the mantelpiece.”

Marie shrugged again.

Mrs. Whitaker gave fifty pence to Marie, who gave her ten pence change and a brown paper bag to put the books and the Holy Grail in. Then she went next door to the butcher's and bought herself a nice piece of liver. Then she went home.

The inside of the goblet was thickly coated with a brownish-red dust. Mrs. Whitaker washed it out with great care, then left it to soak for an hour in warm water with a dash of vinegar added.

Then she polished it with metal polish until it gleamed, and she put it on the mantelpiece in her parlor, where it sat between a small soulful china basset hound and a photograph of her late husband, Henry, on the beach at Frinton in 1953.

She had been right: It did look nice.

For dinner that evening she had the liver fried in breadcrumbs with onions. It was very nice.

The next morning was Friday; on alternate Fridays Mrs. Whitaker and Mrs. Greenberg would visit each other. Today it was Mrs. Greenberg's turn to visit Mrs. Whitaker. They sat in the parlor and ate macaroons and drank tea. Mrs. Whitaker took one sugar in her tea, but Mrs. Greenberg took sweetener, which she always carried in her handbag in a small plastic container.

"That's nice," said Mrs. Greenberg, pointing to the Grail. "What is it?"

"It's the Holy Grail," said Mrs. Whitaker. "It's the cup that Jesus drunk out of at the Last Supper. Later, at the Crucifixion, it caught His precious blood when the centurion's spear pierced His side."

Mrs. Greenberg sniffed. She was small and Jewish and didn't hold with unsanitary things. "I wouldn't know about that," she said, "but it's very nice. Our Myron got one just like that when he won the swimming tournament, only it's got his name on the side."

"Is he still with that nice girl? The hairdresser?"

"Bernice? Oh yes. They're thinking of getting engaged," said Mrs. Greenberg.

"That's nice," said Mrs. Whitaker. She took another macaroon.

Mrs. Greenberg baked her own macaroons and brought them over every alternate Friday: small sweet light brown biscuits with almonds on top.

They talked about Myron and Bernice, and Mrs. Whitaker's nephew Ronald (she had had no children), and about their friend Mrs. Perkins who was in hospital with her hip, poor dear.

At midday Mrs. Greenberg went home, and Mrs. Whitaker made herself cheese on toast for lunch, and after lunch Mrs. Whitaker took her pills; the white and the red and two little orange ones.

The doorbell rang.

Mrs. Whitaker answered the door. It was a young man with shoulder-length hair so fair it was almost white, wearing gleaming silver armor, with a white surcoat.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello,” said Mrs. Whitaker.

“I’m on a quest,” he said.

“That’s nice,” said Mrs. Whitaker, noncommittally.

“Can I come in?” he asked.

Mrs. Whitaker shook her head. “I’m sorry, I don’t think so,” she said.

“I’m on a quest for the Holy Grail,” the young man said. “Is it here?”

“Have you got any identification?” Mrs. Whitaker asked. She knew that it was unwise to let unidentified strangers into your home when you were elderly and living on your own. Handbags get emptied, and worse than that.

The young man went back down the garden path. His horse, a huge gray charger, big as a shire-horse, its head high and its eyes intelligent, was tethered to Mrs. Whitaker’s garden gate. The knight fumbled in the saddlebag and returned with a scroll.

It was signed by Arthur, King of All Britons, and charged all persons of whatever rank or station to know that here was Galaad, Knight of the Table Round, and that he was on a Right High and Noble Quest. There was a drawing of the young man below that. It wasn’t a bad likeness.

Mrs. Whitaker nodded. She had been expecting a little card with a photograph on it, but this was far more impressive.

“I suppose you had better come in,” she said.

They went into her kitchen. She made Galaad a cup of tea, then she took him into the parlor.

Galaad saw the Grail on her mantelpiece, and dropped to one knee. He put down the teacup carefully on the russet carpet. A shaft of light came through the net curtains and painted his awed face with golden sunlight and turned his hair into a silver halo.

“It is truly the Sangrail,” he said, very quietly. He blinked his pale blue eyes three times, very fast, as if he were blinking back tears.

He lowered his head as if in silent prayer.

Galaad stood up again and turned to Mrs. Whitaker. “Gracious lady, keeper of the Holy of Holies, let me now depart this place with the Blessed Chalice, that my journeyings may be ended and my geas fulfilled.”

“Sorry?” said Mrs. Whitaker.

Galaad walked over to her and took her old hands in his. “My quest is over,” he told her. “The Sangrail is finally within my reach.”

Mrs. Whitaker pursed her lips. “Can you pick your teacup and saucer up, please?” she said.

Galaad picked up his teacup apologetically.

“No. I don’t think so,” said Mrs. Whitaker. “I rather like it there. It’s just right, between the dog and the photograph of my Henry.”

“Is it gold you need? Is that it? Lady, I can bring you gold . . .”

“No,” said Mrs. Whitaker. “I don’t want any gold thank you. I’m simply not interested.”

She ushered Galaad to the front door. “Nice to meet you,” she said.

His horse was leaning its head over her garden fence, nibbling her gladioli. Several of the neighborhood children were standing on the pavement, watching it.

Galaad took some sugar lumps from the saddlebag and showed the braver of the children how to feed the horse, their hands held flat. The children giggled. One of the older girls stroked the horse’s nose.

Galaad swung himself up onto the horse in one fluid movement. Then the horse and the knight trotted off down Hawthorne Crescent.

Mrs. Whitaker watched them until they were out of sight, then sighed and went back inside.

The weekend was quiet.

On Saturday Mrs. Whitaker took the bus into Maresfield to visit her nephew Ronald, his wife Euphonia, and their daughters, Clarissa and Dillian. She took them a currant cake she had baked herself.

On Sunday morning Mrs. Whitaker went to church. Her local church was St. James the Less, which was a little more “Don’t think of this as a church, think of it as a place where like-minded friends hang out and are joyful” than Mrs. Whitaker felt entirely comfortable with, but she liked the vicar, the Reverend Bartholomew, when he wasn’t actually playing the guitar.

After the service, she thought about mentioning to him that she had the Holy Grail in her front parlor, but decided against it.

On Monday morning Mrs. Whitaker was working in the back garden. She had a small herb garden she was extremely proud of: dill, vervain, mint, rosemary, thyme, and a wild expanse of parsley. She was down on her knees, wearing thick green gardening gloves, weeding, and picking out slugs and putting them in a plastic bag.

Mrs. Whitaker was very tenderhearted when it came to slugs. She would take them down to the back of her garden, which bordered on the railway line, and throw them over the fence.

She cut some parsley for the salad. There was a cough behind her. Galaad stood there, tall and beautiful, his armor glinting in the morning sun. In his arms he held a long package, wrapped in oiled leather.

“I’m back,” he said.

“Hello,” said Mrs. Whitaker. She stood up, rather slowly, and took off her gardening gloves. “Well,” she said, “now you’re here, you might as well make yourself useful.”

She gave him the plastic bag full of slugs and told him to tip the slugs out over the back of the fence.

He did.

Then they went into the kitchen.

“Tea? Or lemonade?” she asked.

“Whatever you’re having,” Galaad said.

Mrs. Whitaker took a jug of her homemade lemonade from the fridge and sent Galaad outside to pick a sprig of mint. She selected two tall glasses. She washed the mint carefully and put a few leaves in each glass, then poured the lemonade.

“Is your horse outside?” she asked.

“Oh yes. His name is Grizzel.”

“And you’ve come a long way, I suppose.”

“A very long way.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Whitaker. She took a blue plastic basin from under the sink and half-filled it with water. Galaad took it out to Grizzel. He waited while the horse drank and brought the empty basin back to Mrs. Whitaker.

“Now,” she said, “I suppose you’re still after the Grail.”

“Aye, still do I seek the Sangrail,” he said. He picked up the leather package from the floor, put it down on her tablecloth and unwrapped it. “For it, I offer you this.”

It was a sword, its blade almost four feet long. There were words and symbols traced elegantly along the length of the blade. The hilt was worked in silver and gold, and a large jewel was set in the pommel.

“It’s very nice,” said Mrs. Whitaker, doubtfully.

“This,” said Galaad, “is the sword Balmung, forged by Wayland Smith in the dawn times. Its twin is Flamberge. Who wears it is unconquerable in war, and invincible in battle. Who wears it is incapable of a cowardly act or an ignoble one. Set in its pommel is the sardonynx Bircone, which protects its possessor from poison slipped into wine or ale, and from the treachery of friends.”

Mrs. Whitaker peered at the sword. “It must be very sharp,” she said, after a while.

“It can slice a falling hair in twain. Nay, it could slice a sunbeam,” said Galaad proudly.

“Well, then, maybe you ought to put it away,” said Mrs. Whitaker.

“Don’t you want it?” Galaad seemed disappointed.

“No, thank you,” said Mrs. Whitaker. It occurred to her that her late husband, Henry, would have quite liked it. He would have hung it on the wall in his study next to the stuffed carp he had caught in Scotland, and pointed it out to visitors.

Galaad rewrapped the oiled leather around the sword Balmung and tied it up with white cord.

He sat there, disconsolate.

Mrs. Whitaker made him some cream cheese and cucumber sandwiches for the journey back and wrapped them in greaseproof paper. She gave him an apple for Grizzel. He seemed very pleased with both gifts.

She waved them both good-bye.

That afternoon she took the bus down to the hospital to see Mrs. Perkins, who was still in with her hip, poor love. Mrs. Whitaker took her some homemade fruitcake, although she had left out the walnuts from the recipe, because Mrs. Perkins’s teeth weren’t what they used to be.

She watched a little television that evening, and had an early night.

On Tuesday the postman called. Mrs. Whitaker was up in the boxroom at the top of the house, doing a spot of tidying, and, taking each step slowly and carefully, she didn’t make it downstairs in time. The postman had left her a message which said that he’d tried to deliver a packet, but no one was home.

Mrs. Whitaker sighed.

She put the message into her handbag and went down to the post office.

The package was from her niece Shirelle in Sydney, Australia. It contained photographs of her husband, Wallace, and her two daughters, Dixie and Violet, and a conch shell packed in cotton wool.

Mrs. Whitaker had a number of ornamental shells in her bedroom. Her favorite had a view of the Bahamas done on it in enamel. It had been a gift from her sister, Ethel, who had died in 1983.

She put the shell and the photographs in her shopping bag. Then, seeing that she was in the area, she stopped in at the Oxfam Shop on her way home.

“Hullo, Mrs. W.,” said Marie.

Mrs. Whitaker stared at her. Marie was wearing lipstick (possibly not the best shade for her, nor particularly expertly applied, but, thought Mrs. Whitaker, that would come with time) and a rather smart skirt. It was a great improvement.

“Oh. Hello, dear,” said Mrs. Whitaker.

“There was a man in here last week, asking about that thing you bought. The little metal cup thing. I told him where to find you. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No, dear,” said Mrs. Whitaker. “He found me.”

“He was really dreamy. Really, really dreamy,” sighed Marie wistfully. “I could of gone for him.

“And he had a big white horse and all,” Marie concluded. She was standing up straighter as well, Mrs. Whitaker noted approvingly.

On the bookshelf Mrs. Whitaker found a new Mills & Boon novel—Her Majestic Passion—although she hadn’t yet finished the two she had bought on her last visit.

She picked up the copy of Romance and Legend of Chivalry and opened it. It smelled musty. EX LIBRIS FISHER was neatly handwritten at the top of the first page in red ink.

She put it down where she had found it.

When she got home, Galaad was waiting for her. He was giving the neighborhood children rides on Grizzel’s back, up and down the street.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said. “I’ve got some cases that need moving.”

She showed him up to the boxroom in the top of the house. He moved all the old suitcases for her, so she could get to the cupboard at the back.

It was very dusty up there.

She kept him up there most of the afternoon, moving things around while she dusted.

Galaad had a cut on his cheek, and he held one arm a little stiffly.

They talked a little while she dusted and tidied. Mrs. Whitaker told him about her late husband, Henry; and how the life insurance had paid the house off; and how she had all these things, but no one really to leave them to, no one but Ronald really and his wife only liked modern things. She told him how she had met Henry during the war, when he was in the ARP and she hadn’t closed the kitchen blackout curtains all the way; and about the sixpenny dances they went to in the town; and how they’d gone to London when the war had ended, and she’d had her first drink of wine.

Galaad told Mrs. Whitaker about his mother Elaine, who was flighty and no better than she should have been and something of a witch to boot; and his grandfather, King Pelles, who was well-meaning although at best a little vague; and of his youth in the Castle of Bliant on the Joyous Isle; and his father, whom he knew as “Le Chevalier Mal Fet,” who was more or less completely mad, and was in reality Lancelot du Lac, greatest of knights, in disguise and bereft of his wits; and of Galaad’s days as a young squire in Camelot.

At five o’clock Mrs. Whitaker surveyed the boxroom and decided that it met with her approval; then she opened the window so the room could air, and they went downstairs to the kitchen, where she put on the kettle.

Galaad sat down at the kitchen table.

He opened the leather purse at his waist and took out a round white stone. It was about the size of a cricket ball.

“My lady,” he said, “This is for you, and you give me the Sangrail.”

Mrs. Whitaker picked up the stone, which was heavier than it looked, and held it up to the light. It was milky translucent, and deep inside it flecks of silver glittered and glistened in the late-afternoon sunlight. It was warm to the touch.

Then, as she held it, a strange feeling crept over her: Deep inside she felt stillness and a sort of peace. Serenity, that was the word for it; she felt serene.

Reluctantly she put the stone back on the table.

“It’s very nice,” she said.

“That is the Philosopher’s Stone, which our forefather Noah hung in the Ark to give light when there was no light; it can transform base metals into gold; and it has certain other properties,” Galaad told her proudly. “And that isn’t all. There’s more. Here.” From the leather bag he took an egg and handed it to her.

It was the size of a goose egg and was a shiny black color, mottled with scarlet and white. When Mrs. Whitaker touched it, the hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Her immediate impression was one of incredible heat and freedom. She heard the crackling of distant fires, and for a fraction of a second she seemed to feel herself far above the world, swooping and diving on wings of flame.

She put the egg down on the table, next to the Philosopher’s Stone.

“That is the Egg of the Phoenix,” said Galaad. “From far Araby it comes. One day it will hatch out into the Phoenix Bird itself; and when its time comes, the bird will build a nest of flame, lay its egg, and die, to be reborn in flame in a later age of the world.”

“I thought that was what it was,” said Mrs. Whitaker.

“And, last of all, lady,” said Galaad, “I have brought you this.”

He drew it from his pouch, and gave it to her. It was an apple, apparently carved from a single ruby, on an amber stem.

A little nervously, she picked it up. It was soft to the touch—deceptively so: Her fingers bruised it, and ruby-colored juice from the apple ran down Mrs. Whitaker’s hand.

The kitchen filled—almost imperceptibly, magically—with the smell of summer fruit, of raspberries and peaches and strawberries and red currants. As if from a great way away she heard distant voices raised in song and far music on the air.

“It is one of the apples of the Hesperides,” said Galaad, quietly. “One bite from it will heal any illness or wound, no matter how deep; a second bite restores youth and beauty; and a third bite is

said to grant eternal life.” Mrs. Whitaker licked the sticky juice from her hand. It tasted like fine wine.

There was a moment, then, when it all came back to her—how it was to be young: to have a firm, slim body that would do whatever she wanted it to do; to run down a country lane for the simple unladylike joy of running; to have men smile at her just because she was herself and happy about it.

Mrs. Whitaker looked at Sir Galaad, most comely of all knights, sitting fair and noble in her small kitchen.

She caught her breath.

“And that’s all I have brought for you,” said Galaad. “They weren’t easy to get, either.”

Mrs. Whitaker put the ruby fruit down on her kitchen table. She looked at the Philosopher’s Stone, and the Egg of the Phoenix, and the Apple of Life.

Then she walked into her parlor and looked at the mantelpiece: at the little china basset hound, and the Holy Grail, and the photograph of her late husband Henry, shirtless, smiling and eating an ice cream in black and white, almost forty years away.

She went back into the kitchen. The kettle had begun to whistle. She poured a little steaming water into the teapot, swirled it around, and poured it out. Then she added two spoonfuls of tea and one for the pot and poured in the rest of the water. All this she did in silence.

She turned to Galaad then, and she looked at him.

“Put that apple away,” she told Galaad, firmly. “You shouldn’t offer things like that to old ladies. It isn’t proper.”

She paused, then. “But I’ll take the other two,” she continued, after a moment’s thought. “They’ll look nice on the mantelpiece. And two for one’s fair, or I don’t know what is.” Galaad beamed. He put the ruby apple into his leather pouch. Then he went down on one knee, and kissed Mrs. Whitaker’s hand.

“Stop that,” said Mrs. Whitaker. She poured them both cups of tea, after getting out the very best china, which was only for special occasions.

They sat in silence, drinking their tea.

When they had finished their tea they went into the parlor.

Galaad crossed himself, and picked up the Grail.

Mrs. Whitaker arranged the Egg and the Stone where the Grail had been. The Egg kept tipping on one side, and she propped it up against the little china dog.

“They do look very nice,” said Mrs. Whitaker.

“Yes,” agreed Galaad. “They look very nice.”

“Can I give you anything to eat before you go back?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Some fruitcake,” she said. “You may not think you want any now, but you’ll be glad of it in a few hours’ time. And you should probably use the facilities. Now, give me that, and I’ll wrap it up for you.”

She directed him to the small toilet at the end of the hall, and went into the kitchen, holding the Grail. She had some old Christmas wrapping paper in the pantry, and she wrapped the Grail in it, and tied the package with twine. Then she cut a large slice of fruitcake and put it in a brown paper bag, along with a banana and a slice of processed cheese in silver foil.

Galaad came back from the toilet. She gave him the paper bag, and the Holy Grail. Then she went up on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re a nice boy,” she said. “You take care of yourself.”

He hugged her, and she shooed him out of the kitchen, and out of the back door, and she shut the door behind him. She poured herself another cup of tea, and cried quietly into a Kleenex, while the sound of hoofbeats echoed down Hawthorne Crescent.

On Wednesday Mrs. Whitaker stayed in all day.

On Thursday she went down to the post office to collect her pension. Then she stopped in at the Oxfam Shop.

The woman on the till was new to her. “Where’s Marie?” asked Mrs. Whitaker.

The woman on the till, who had blue-rinsed gray hair and blue spectacles that went up into diamante points, shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. “She went off with a young man,” she said. “On a horse. Tch. I ask you. I’m meant to be down in the Heathfield shop this afternoon. I had to get my Johnny to run me up here, while we find someone else.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Whitaker. “Well, it’s nice that she’s found herself a young man.”

“Nice for her, maybe,” said the lady on the till, “But some of us were meant to be in Heathfield this afternoon.”

On a shelf near the back of the shop Mrs. Whitaker found a tarnished old silver container with a long spout. It had been priced at sixty pence, according to the little paper label stuck to the side. It looked a little like a flattened, elongated teapot.

She picked out a Mills & Boon novel she hadn’t read before. It was called *Her Singular Love*. She took the book and the silver container up to the woman on the till.

“Sixty-five pee, dear,” said the woman, picking up the silver object, staring at it. “Funny old thing, isn’t it? Came in this morning.” It had writing carved along the side in blocky old Chinese characters and an elegant arching handle. “Some kind of oil can, I suppose.”

“No, it’s not an oil can,” said Mrs. Whitaker, who knew exactly what it was. “It’s a lamp.” There was a small metal finger ring, unornamented, tied to the handle of the lamp with brown twine.

“Actually,” said Mrs. Whitaker, “on second thoughts, I think I’ll just have the book.”

She paid her five pence for the novel, and put the lamp back where she had found it, in the back of the shop. After all, Mrs. Whitaker reflected, as she walked home, it wasn’t as if she had anywhere to put it.