

## IN THE DAYS OF THE KNIGHTS

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"I made them lay their hands in mine and swear  
To reverence the king as if he were  
Their conscience; and their conscience as their king.  
To ride abroad redressing human wrongs.  
To speak no slander no, nor listen to it.  
To honor their own word as if their God's.  
To love one maiden only, cleave to her,  
And worship her by years of fruitful deeds,  
Until they won her."

Oath of the Knights—Tennyson.



CHIVALRY has been the theme of many a great poem and romance. In fact it is through the medium of imaginative works that the story of this great and unique institution is largely known. Yet there are few if any of these literary works which give a true picture of Chivalry. In all of them, even the best, the delineation is either clouded or distorted. The foregoing extract from Tennyson's "Morte d'Arthur," the last book of his "Idylls of the King," is but an example of the part poets have played in falsifying the subject. The oath of the knights as described in this beautiful bit of verse is, to some extent, inaccurate. Moreover it is largely through the medium of the poets that Chivalry has come to be considered by many people as merely a medieval tradition,—a tradition rich in tales of magic and love, brave knights and fair maidens, dragons and Excaliburs, but withal a tradition which has no foundations in fact.

Of the romanticists, Walter Scott, peer of historical novelists, has drawn with his sharp and prodding pen, a fairly realistic picture as far as it goes but it doesn't go far enough. He omits to mention that factor which was the very soul of Chivalry—religion; or when he does mention it, it is: "To damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer." But that was natural, for to Scott, the Church was the mystery of iniquity and anything connected with Her could not be good. So what good he finds in Chivalry, he finds apart from the Church.

The great Spanish writer, Cervantes, wrote his farcical "Don Quixote" on the subject of Chivalry, a work which caused gales of laughter in the world of his own day and provoked chuckles and

smiles from succeeding generations. It was written during the latter part of the 16th century, at a time when Chivalry had degraded from a noble institution to a futile pastime and Cervantes by holding it up to the ridicule of the public did much to hasten its end. Getting nearer home, we find Charles Major, Hoosier novelist, whose romances did much to lighten the dull hours of high school girls a decade or so ago. He wrote his "Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall" and "When Knighthood was in Flower" about a period when the blossom of knighthood had long since withered. I could go on citing poem after poem, romance after romance which has contributed more or less to the distortion of the features of Chivalry, but the works of the writers above mentioned are those which have done most to produce the wrong impression of Chivalry on Americans. The next logical step is to present a true picture of the institution and let the reader judge which is the more noble, Chivalry as it really was or Chivalry as fictionists would have it.

In what particular nation or peculiar circumstances Chivalry had its origin is not precisely known but it is probable that it arose among the Teutonic tribes, where, says the *Encyclopedia Americana*, "the moral and aesthetic principles of the Christian religion, its ideals of chastity, marriage and loyalty, and in particular the wide-spread veneration paid to the Virgin Mother of Christ, powerfully contributed to its development." However, when history first takes note of it, it is well-spread throughout Europe and engrafted into the feudal system. It gained its greatest purity in Germany, France and Spain, later being introduced into England where its progress was rather slow. It is very problematic that there is even a remote foundation for the Round Table myths. It is possible that Arthur was the half-civilized chieftain of a fierce Welsh tribe, powerful and successful in war, around whom the bards of later years, when tales of Chivalry became popular, constructed the Arthurian legend with its Round Table and galaxy of peerless knights.

The honor of knighthood, although not strictly hereditary, was reserved generally to the nobility; yet common soldiers who distinguished themselves in battle were knighted by way of reward. The hierarchical system of Chivalry was very simple, there being but three degrees—esquires, knights, and bannerets. The name banneret arose from the fact that attached to the middle of his spear there was a small square banner on which his arms were emblazoned. This custom, incidentally, gave rise to the complicated science of heraldry, a science which is still used when wealthy Americans, whose family records go back two or three generations, wish to ascertain whether

they are in direct descent from Charlemagne the Dook of Westphalia, or the King of Armagh.

The knight's education began at an early age. When he had attained his seventh year he was placed by his father in the castle of some friendly baron, there to serve as a page. To us moderns this seems to be a rather tender age at which to send a boy off to war; if it had been decided to give him an earlier start he would have had to be wheeled there in his perambulator. But the idea behind it was really sound, the object being to inculcate in him from an early age the ideals of his institution. Surrounded by knights and ladies, the postulant would be apt to acquire their virtues. From the ladies he learned his religion and courtly manners, from the knights he imbibed a love of valour. At the age of fourteen he was made an esquire and in this capacity he served until his twenty-first year, at which time he was admitted to the honors of knighthood. The young man prepared himself for his profession day by prayer and fasting. . . . on the day preceding the ceremony he made a general confession and spent the night in vigil before his Eucharistic King, to whose honor he was to dedicate himself the following day. What could have served better to impress on the mind of the novice that his first duty was to protect the faith? What noble resolutions must he have formed as he knelt there before the lonely King of the ages! How he must have yearned this child of the "dark" ages, who could see the light so much better than we of this enlightened era, how he must have longed for an opportunity (such as had been given the paladins of Charlemagne) to lay down his life to prevent impious hands desecrating that adorable Sacrament in which the All-Powerful lay defenceless! It may be that the ideals formed during the night of vigil had a great deal to do in bringing about the miracle of Faith that was the Crusades. Who can tell? With the coming of a day, the knight-to-be bathed, then clothed himself in a white garment as a sign of purity, and received the Blessed Sacrament. The ceremony thus begun he took an oath consisting of twenty-one articles, the chief vows of which consisted in promises to protect his faith and country, to defend the weak, to be chaste and never to break his word. He then donned his armour and girded on his sword which had been blessed by the priest. Lastly, the most distinguished knight present would bestow on him the Accolade, which consisted in giving him a light blow on the shoulder or cheek with the flat of the sword and dubbing him knight in the name of God and St. Michael or St. George. He went forth from the ceremony a full-fledged knight, possessed of many privileges and dignities. Thanks to the binding force exerted

by the Church among nations he could wander over all Europe and as a professed knight be received with honor everywhere. As the poet truly put it he "rode abroad redressing human wrongs." He made the cause of those unable to defend themselves, especially women, his own cause and protected them with his life if necessary. Should a knight fall in battle and be taken by the enemy, he was given the best of care and every courtesy was extended him.

Great festivals were generally celebrated by a tournament. These tournaments were at the time the sport of Europe, as popular then as are collegiate football games in present day America. Royal marriages, peace treaties, great feasts of the Church and many other events were celebrated thusly. Tournaments were supposed to be conducted with pointless lances and there were constables appointed to see that the rules were carried out. But "boys will be boys" and therefore pointed lances were bootlegged into the tournaments at times when there were bad blood between the contending parties. Such real battles always resulted in the deaths of numerous contestants so to check the abuse the Church refused Christian burial to all those who fell thus. At the close of the tournaments, jousts were held between the two knights who had survived the elimination to decide which was the champion. It was the privilege of the winner to choose the queen of the tournament. Duels of this kind were also fought to establish the innocence of some person charged with crime. If the defendant were a woman or a knight not of the fighting age (under twenty or over sixty) he or she selected a champion to fight. Such a duel was that which was fought by Ivanhoe on behalf of Rebecca against Brian de Bois Guilbert. The Church always opposed such duels, claiming that they were no criteria of innocence or guilt.

The Crusades brought Chivalry to its golden age. In the Holy Wars knighthood rose to its acme of perfection. European Chivalry, inspired by the purity of its ideals, the preaching of Peter the Hermit and the hopes of gaining great indulgences, vowed to rescue from infidel hands the places made sacred by the presence of Christ. In spite of gigantic obstacles this great task was actually accomplished. To us looking at the achievement in retrospect it seems little short of miraculous. It seems impossible in the first place, that in feudal times, when there were often five or six or more wars going on at the same time among the barons of one nation, difficulties could be forgotten, racial hatreds smothered and national differences set aside long enough for nations to unite and set forth on a perilous expedition to rout an entrenched foe. But Chivalry did all this. In the first crusade the knights took Nice, Antioch and Jerusalem. In the

ancient capital of the Israelites they set up a Christian kingdom and made Protector of the Holy Places, that model knight, that Galahad in the flesh, Godfrey of Bouillon, whose colorful career would furnish apt matter for a romance. Sir Godfrey, who because he is, next to St. Louis, Christendom's most exemplary knight, deserves a mention here. To him the lines that Tennyson puts into the mouth of Galahad well apply :

"My good blade carves the casques of men,  
My tough lance thrusteth sure,  
My strength is as the strength of ten  
Because my heart is pure."

So great was Godfrey's strength that he could cut a man in twain with a blow from his sword. One day on being asked the secret of his strength he replied, "This hand has never known the touch of a woman. It is purity that imparts strength to my will and my arm." It is true that the kingdom established by the Crusades did not last long (only 78 years), but the mere fact of its establishment is an imperishable monument to Chivalry.

There were seven crusades in all, the most notable, apart from the first, being the third, which featured the great fighting prowess of Richard Coeur de Lion, the Launcelot of Chivalry, and the sixth and seventh on which St. Louis of France, its Tristram, spent his substance and life. The third crusade would have succeeded even better than the first if a quarrelsome character, the pagan Frederick of Germany, had not blocked the efforts of the valiant Richard. The sixth and seventh crusades are not notable for their success. From a military point of view they were rank failures, but they are notable in so far as they exhibited the character of a great saint, king and knight, Louis IX of France. When the Moslems had Louis in captivity, they loved him so much that they endeavored mightily to convert him to the faith of Islam so that they could make him their Sultan. This great saint and knight died on foreign soil, cut down by the plague, while undertaking the last of the Crusades.

As a result of the Crusades there arose several religious Orders which over and above the three ordinary monastic vows, took a vow to protect the Holy Lands. The most notable of these were the Knights of Malta, the Teutonic Knights and the Knights of the Temple. The last named Order to which the modern brotherhood of Freemasons traces its origin (the justice of which claim I will not discuss here) was suppressed by Pope Clement on account of certain abuses.

The Crusades over, Chivalry seems to have fulfilled its part in the Divine plan, for it soon started down the road to oblivion, following well-defined tracks left on that broad highway by other institutions of human origin, all of which sooner or later go down the same road. The knights cared no longer for the wars. They spent their spirit in quixotic extravagance. The modern so-called Orders of Chivalry are but shadows on the grass, cast by the cold light of the moon, a poor imitator of the sun's glory. Shades they are at best, adumbrations, faint and grotesque as those cast by the lantern of the night. But possibly the statement is too sweeping. The Papal Order of the Knights of St. Gregory has at least some resemblance to the Chivalry of old. This Order, nourished and fostered by the same faith under which Chivalry flourished, is conferred on men who resemble the knights of old in that they are vigorous defenders of the same glorious Church. It is true that they do not use arms but such weapons as they have, and these are generally mightier than the sword, are consecrated to the service of the Church. It is by secular powers that the term "knight" is so grossly misused. The honor of knight-hood is now and has been for centuries but a pawn on the political chess-board. Chivalry is dead.