

The Necessity of Chivalry

The word chivalry has meant at different times a good many different things – from heavy cavalry to giving a woman a seat in a train. But if we want to understand chivalry as an ideal distinct from other ideals – if we want to isolate that particular conception of the man *comme il faut* which was the special contribution of the Middle Ages to our culture – we cannot do better than turn to the words addressed to the greatest of all the imaginary knights in Malory's *Morte Darthur*. "Thou wert the meekest man", says Sir Ector to the dead Launcelot. "Thou wert the meekest man that ever ate in hall among ladies; and thou wert the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put spear in the rest."¹

The important thing about this ideal is, of course, the double demand it makes on human nature. The knight is a man of blood and iron, a man familiar with the sight of smashed faces and the ragged stumps of lopped-off limbs; he is also a demure, almost a maidenlike, guest in hall, a gentle, modest, unobtrusive man. He is not a compromise or happy mean between ferocity and meekness; he is fierce to the *n*th and meek to the *n*th. When Launcelot heard himself pronounced the best knight in the world, "he wept as he had been a child that had been beaten".²

What, you may ask, is the relevance of this ideal to the modern world? It is terribly relevant. It may or may not be practicable – the Middle Ages notoriously failed to obey it – but

¹ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur* (1485), XXI, xii.

² *Ibid.*, XIX, v.

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it is certainly practical; practical as the fact that men in a desert must find water or die.

Let us be quite clear that the ideal is a paradox. Most of us, having grown up among the ruins of the chivalrous tradition, were taught in our youth that a bully is always a coward. Our first week at school refuted this lie, along with its corollary that a truly brave man is always gentle. It is a pernicious lie because it misses the real novelty and originality of the medieval demand upon human nature. Worse still, it represents as a natural fact something which is really a human ideal, nowhere fully attained, and nowhere attained at all without arduous discipline. It is refuted by history and experience. Homer's Achilles knows nothing of the demand that the brave should also be the modest and the merciful. He kills men as they cry for quarter or takes them prisoner to kill them at leisure. The heroes of the Sagas know nothing of it; they are as "stern to inflict" as they are "stubborn to endure". Attila "had a custom of fiercely rolling his eyes, as if he wished to enjoy the terror which he inspired". Even the Romans, when gallant enemies fell into their hands, led them through the streets for a show, and cut their throats in cellars when the show was over. At school we found that the hero of the First XV might well be a noisy, arrogant, overbearing bully. In the last war we often found that the man who was "invaluable in a show" was a man for whom in peacetime we could not easily find room except in Dartmoor. Such is heroism *by nature*—heroism outside the chivalrous tradition.

The medieval ideal brought together two things which have no natural tendency to gravitate towards one another. It brought them together for that very reason. It taught humility and forbearance to the great warrior because everyone knew by experience how much he usually needed that lesson. It demanded valour of the urbane and modest man because everyone knew that he was as likely as not to be a milksop.

In so doing, the Middle Ages fixed on the one hope of the

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world. It may or may not be possible to produce by the thousand men who combine the two sides of Launcelot's character. But if it is not possible, then all talk of any lasting happiness or dignity in human society is pure moonshine.

If we cannot produce Launcelots, humanity falls into two sections – those who can deal in blood and iron but cannot be “meek in hall”, and those who are “meek in hall” but useless in battle – for the third class, who are both brutal in peace and cowardly in war, need not here be discussed. When this dissociation of the two halves of Launcelot occurs, history becomes a horribly simple affair. The ancient history of the Near East is like that. Hardy barbarians swarm down from their highlands and obliterate a civilization. Then they become civilized themselves and go soft. Then a new wave of barbarians comes down and obliterates *them*. Then the cycle begins over again. Modern machinery will not change this cycle; it will only enable the same thing to happen on a larger scale. Indeed, nothing much else can ever happen if the “stern” and the “meek” fall into two mutually exclusive classes. And never forget that this is their *natural* condition. The man who combines both characters – the knight – is a work not of nature but of art; of that art which has human beings, instead of canvas or marble, for its medium.

In the world today there is a “liberal” or “enlightened” tradition which regards the combative side of man's nature as a pure, atavistic evil, and scouts the chivalrous sentiment as part of the “false glamour” of war. And there is also a neo-heroic tradition which scouts the chivalrous sentiment as a weak sentimentality, which would raise from its grave (its shallow and unquiet grave!) the pre-Christian ferocity of Achilles by a “modern invocation”. Already in our own Kipling the heroic qualities of his favourite subalterns are dangerously removed from meekness and urbanity. One cannot quite imagine the adult Stalkey in the same room with the best of Nelson's captains,

still less with Sidney! These two tendencies between them weave the world's shroud.

Happily we live better than we write, better than we deserve. Launcelot is not yet irrecoverable. To some of us this war brought a glorious surprise in the discovery that after twenty years of cynicism and cocktails the heroic virtues were still unimpaired in the younger generation and ready for exercise the moment they were called upon. Yet with this "sternness" there is much "meekness"; from all I hear, the young pilots in the R.A.F. (to whom we owe our life from hour to hour) are not less, but more, urbane and modest than the 1915 model.

In short, there is still life in the tradition which the Middle Ages inaugurated. But the maintenance of that life depends, in part, on knowing that the knightly character is art not nature – something that needs to be achieved, not something that can be relied upon to happen. And this knowledge is specially necessary as we grow more democratic. In previous centuries the vestiges of chivalry were kept alive by a specialized class, from whom they spread to other classes partly by imitation and partly by coercion. Now, it seems, the people must either be chivalrous on its own resources, or else choose between the two remaining alternatives of brutality and softness. This is, indeed, part of the general problem of a classless society, which is too seldom mentioned. Will its *ethos* be a synthesis of what was best in all the classes, or a mere "pool" with the sediment of all and the virtues of none? But that is too large a subject for the fag-end of an article. My theme is chivalry. I have tried to show that this old tradition is practical and vital. The ideal embodied in Launcelot is "escapism" in a sense never dreamed of by those who use that word; it offers the only possible escape from a world divided between wolves who do not understand, and sheep who cannot defend, the things which make life desirable. There was, to be sure, a rumour in the last century that wolves would gradually become extinct by some natural process; but this seems to have been an exaggeration.