

The Order of Chivalry

translated by Isabel Butler

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The Order of Chivalry.

Well it is when the wise man speaketh, for thereby may we win much of wisdom and good and courtesy; well it is to haunt the company of him who taketh heed to his ways and setteth not his heart upon folly. For as we read in Solomon, the man who hath understanding doeth well in all things, and if at whiles he fail in aught unwittingly, lightly should he be forgiven, inasmuch as he would forsake his wrongdoing.

But now it behooveth me to speak and tell and relate a tale I heard of a king in the land of paynimry, who of old was a right great lord and a full loyal Saracen. Saladin was his name; cruel he was, and many a time did great hurt to our faith and damage to our folk by his pride and outrageousness; until upon a time it fell that a prince came to do battle with him. Hugh of Tabarie he hight, and with him was a great company of knights of Galilee, for he was lord of that land. Many good deeds of arms were done that day, but it was not the will of the Creator, whom we call the King of Glory, that the victory should be with us, for there Prince Hugh was taken prisoner. He was led away down the streets, and forthwith brought before Saladin, who greeted him in his own tongue which he knew right well. "By Mahomet," so saith the king, "I am right glad of thy taking, Hugh; and now one thing I promise thee, either thou must die or render great ransom." "Since you give me choice herein,"

Hugh answered him, "I will take the ransom, if it be that I have the wherewithal to defray it." "Yea," so saith the king to him, "thou shalt give over to me a hundred thousand besants." "Ha, sir, that could I not compass, even were I to sell all my land." "In sooth ye shall do it," quoth Saladin. "But by what means, sir?" "Thou art of great valiance and full of high chivalry, and no man of worth will refuse thee when thou askest for thy ransom, but will give thee a fair gift; and in this wise thou shalt acquit thee." "Now I would fain ask thee how I may depart from here?" And Saladin made answer: "Hugh, thou shalt pledge me on thy word and thy law that two years from to day without fail thou shalt have paid thy ransom, or thou wilt return again to my prison; on these terms ye may depart." "Sir," saith he, "I give thee good thanks, and even so make pledge."

Then he straightway asked leave in that he would return again to his own country, but the king took him by the hand and led him away into his own chamber, and gently besought him: "Hugh," he saith, "by the faith that ye owe to the God of your law, make me wise for I am fain to know all the Order of Chivalry, and how knights are made." "Fair sir,"

Hugh made answer, "this I may not do." "Why so, fair sir?" "Even that will I tell thee. In thee the holy order of knighthood would be ill bestowed, for thou art of the false law, and have neither faith nor baptism. It were great folly were I to deck and cover a dunghill with cloth of silk to the end it should no longer stink; in no wise could I compass it; and even so would I misdo, were I to invest thee with this order; never would I dare do it, for much would I be blamed." "Not so, Hugh," saith he, "no blame would be thine herein, for thou art my prisoner and needs must do my will, howsoever much it mislike thee."

"Sir, if I must perforce do this thing, and no denial will avail, do it I will without more caviling."

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Thereupon Hugh beginneth to show him all it behooved him to do, and let dress his hair and beard and face right fairly, as is meet for a new knight. And next he made him enter a bath, and when the soudan asked him what this might signify, "Sir," he made answer, "this bath wherein you are bathed is to signify that even as the child which is born in sin issueth out of the font pure after baptism, even so, sir, should you issue forth clean of all felony, and be fulfilled with courtesy; for you should bathe in honesty and courtesy and kindness, that you may come to be loved of all men." "God! right fair is this beginning," then said the king.

And thereafter he was taken out of the bath, and laid in a goodly bed which was dight right heedfully. "Hugh, tell me now without fail what this bed betokeneth." "Sir, this bed signifieth to you that by your chivalry you should win the bed of Paradise that God granteth to his friends; for this is the bed of rest, and great is the folly of him who will not lie therein."

Now when he had lain in that bed for a little space, they raised him up, and clothed him in white garments of linen. Then again Hugh spake in his own tongue: "Take not this thing lightly, for these white garments that cover your body give you to understand that a knight should always study to keep his flesh pure if he would attain to God." Thereafter he invested him with a robe of scarlet, whereat Saladin marveleth much why the prince so dighteth him. "Hugh," he saith, "now what does this robe betoken?" And Hugh of Tabarie maketh answer: "Sir, this robe giveth you to understand that you must hold you ready to shed your blood for the defense of holy church, that it be wronged of no man; for so it behooveth a knight to do, if he would fain please God: this the scarlet colour betokeneth." "Hugh," saith he, "much I marvel."

Thereafter the knight did upon his feet shoes of dark and fine-wrought say, and saith to him: "Sir, of a sooth, this black foot-gear should remind you to hold death ever in remembrance, and the earth wherein you shall lie, that dust from which you came and to which you shall return again; upon this you should set your eye, and fall not into pride; for pride should not hold sway over a knight, nor have any place within him, but he should seek simplicity in all things." "All this is right good to hear,"

saith the king, "and rejoiceth me much." Thereafter he stood upon his feet, and Hugh girt him about with a white girdle finely wrought. "Sir, by this girdle you are given to understand that you should keep your flesh, your reins and all your body pure, even as in virginity, and scorn and blame all luxury. For a true knight greatly loveth purity of body, that he sin not herein, in that such vileness is sore hated of God." And the king maketh answer: "Good is uprightness." Next Hugh did two spurs upon his feet, and said to him: "Even as swift as you would have your horse, and eager for the race when you smite him with your spurs, and that he turn quickly this way or that according to your will, even so these golden spurs betoken that ye be eager to serve God all your life; for so do all knights that love God with their very hearts, always they serve him loyally." Well pleased therewith was Saladin.

Thereafter he was girt with a sword, and asked what the blade might signify. "Sir," saith Hugh, "ward and surety against the onset of the foe."

The sword is two-edged, even as You see, which giveth you to understand that always should the knight have both justice and loyalty; which is to say, meseemeth, that he should always protect the poor that the rich may not tread them down, and support the weak that the strong may not bring them to shame. Even such is the work of mercy." Saladin, who hath given good heed to his words, agreeth well thereto. Next Hugh set upon his head a coif all of white, and of this likewise the Sultan asked the meaning. "Look you sir," saith Hugh, "even as you know the coif to be without spot, but that, fair and white, clean and pure, it crowneth your head, even so upon the Day of Doom must we straightway render up the soul pure and clean of our sins and all the wrong that the body ever doeth to God, that we may earn the delights of Paradise, for tongue may not tell, nor the ear hear, nor the heart dream what is the beauty of that Paradise which God granteth to his friends."

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The king gave heed to all this, and thereafter asked if there were now no more to be done. "Yes, fair sir, but this one thing I dare not." "And what may it be?" "Sir, the accolade." "But why have you not given it to me and told its significance?" "Sir, it is the reminder of him who girt a knight with his gear and invested him with the order; but never will I give it to you, for though I am in your power I ought to do no felony for aught that may be said or done to me, wherefore I will not give you the accolade; and this you must hold for true. But none the less I will show and tell and teach you the four weightiest matters that a knight should know and hold to all his life, if he would fain win honour.

"First of all let him have no part in false judgments, or be in that place wherein is treason, but flee from it right speedily, for if he may not change the wrong, let him straightway depart from it. Full fair is the second charge: that he in no wise miscounsel dame or damsel, but if they have need of him, aid them he must with all his might, if he would have glory and praise; for a knight should hold women in honour and do high deeds in their defense. Now soothly the third point is that he should practise abstinence; and truly I tell you that he should fast on Friday in holy remembrance of Jesus Christ, that for our redemption he was smitten with the spear and gave pardon to Longinus. All his life through should the knight fast upon that day for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, if he be not forced to fail of it by reason of sickness, or of fellowship, and if for such cause he fail of his fast it behooveth him to make peace with God by alms-giving or other good deeds. And lastly, the fourth charge is that he should hear mass each day, and if he have the wherewithal should make offering, for right well is that gift placed that is laid upon the table of God, for so it beareth great virtue."

The king hath given right good heed to all that Hugh telleth him, and hath great joy therein. And now he riseth, dight even as he is, and goeth straight into his hall, where were assembled fifty amirals, all of his own land. He sitteth down in his great chair; and Hugh sat at his feet, but right soon the king raised him up, and showed him to one of the high seats, and spoke, saying: "Know now of a sooth that I would fain make thee a fair gift in that thou art a man of valour and worth, for I promise thee fairly that if any of thy folk are taken, in melee or battle, they shall for thy sake go free, if thou wilt come to ask it. But thou shalt ride through my land peacefully and without disorder; hang thy helm on the neck of thy palfrey in all men's sight, that no man may do thee any hurt.

And of thy folk that are now in my prison I will surrender ten of them to thee, if thou wouldst fain take them hence with thee." "Gramercy sir,"

saith Hugh, "for this deed deserveth good thanks. But I would not forget that thou didst bid me whenever I met with a man of worth, that I ask him to aid me in my ransom; now none know I of so great worth as thou thyself, sir king, wherefore give me somewhat, as is meet in that thou didst bid me ask." Whereupon Saladin laughed and spoke, even as a man well pleased, saying: "Thou hast begun right well, and freely and fairly will I give thee fifty thousand good besants, for I would not that thou shouldst fail through me." Thereafter he arose and said to Hugh:

"Go now to each baron and I will go with thee." And he spoke to them, saying, "Lords, give us wherewith to help ransom this high prince." Then the amirals there gathered began to give to him, so that he had his full ransom, and thirteen thousand besants over and above, so much they gave and promised him.

Thereafter Hugh asked leave to go from the land of paynimry.

"Nay," saith the king, "go thou shalt not until thou hast received the residue of that they have promised us, for out of my own treasury shall be taken those thirteen thousand besants of pure gold." Whereupon he commanded his treasurer that he give the besants to Hugh, and thereafter claim them again from those who had made promise to give.

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And the treasurer hath justly measured out the besants, and given them over to Count Hugh who must needs take them, though liefer had he left them behind, for he was fain to ransom his folk who were in thraldom and sore captivity in the hands of the Saracens. But when Saladin heard this, he swore by Mahomet that never should they be ransomed; and Hugh, when he heard him say so, had great wrath in his heart, but inasmuch as the king had sworn by Mahomet, he did not make bold to press him further, for he dared not anger him.

Then he bade array his ten companions, the which he was free to take back into his own land. Yet thereafter he abode and tarried a good eight days in high feasting and great delight, but at the end demanded safe-conduct through that land of disbelief. And Saladin granted him good store of his men, fifty there were who without pride or felony escorted them through the land of paynimry, that they had no let or hindrance on the way. Then the Saracens turned back, and each departed into his own land; and the Prince of Galilee likewise returned home, but sore he grieved because of his folk he must needs leave behind him; he might no wise amend it, yet he was more wroth thereat than any man beside. So into his own land he came with those ten and no more.

Thereupon he divided the great treasure he had brought with him, and gave of it to many a man who thereby grew wealthy.

Lords, this tale should be welcome to good folk, but to others it shall be as nought, for they understand no better than silly sheep. By the faith I owe to God in Paradise, he will of a sooth lose his jewels who casteth them before swine, for know ye they will tread them underfoot, and take no delight therein, for they have not wit thereto, rather they will take them all awry. And whoso should tell this tale to such like, he too would be spurned and held as nought by their folly. But whoso would learn herein may find two things right goodly in this same tale: one, in the beginning, telleth the manner wherein knights are made, such as all men should honour, inasmuch as they defend us all. For if it were not for chivalry little would our baronage avail, for 't is the knights defend Holy Church, and do justice against those who would mishandle us; and I will not withhold me from their praise. He who loveth them not showeth himself a fool, even as one who should steal away the chalices from the table of God before our eyes, and might not be restrained therefrom.

Now their righteousness taketh heed that by them we have good defense; for if they did not repulse evil folk the good might not endure, and there would be none left save Albigenses and Saracens and Barbarians and folk of the false law who would make us deny our faith.

But such as these stand in fear of knights, wherefore of us those same should be held right dear, and exalted and honoured, and we should always rise upon our feet when from afar we see them coming. Certes, we should scorn those who hold them of little worth. And now I tell you of a sooth the knight is privileged to have all his arms and to bear them in holy church when he goeth to hear mass, that no ill man may interrupt the service of the Son of Mary, or that of the Holy Sacrament whereby we win salvation; and if any seek to hinder it, him the knight may slay forthwith.

Yet a little more it behooveth me to say: come what may, do ye the right. This command is laid upon the knight, and if we are to hold him dear, let him give good heed to it. And boldly I tell you that if he live according to his order, he cannot fail of coming straight into Paradise. So have I taught you this: do that you ought, and honour knights above all other men, save only the priest who doth the sacrament of God's own body.

Now soothly I tell you by this tale ye may know the truth of what befell Prince Hugh, who was right brave and wise. And inasmuch as he found him full valiant, Saladin praised him, and bade great honour be done to him, in that he did good with all his might, for thereby may one win great worth. And I find writ in Latin, good deeds bring a good ending. And now at the end let us pray to him who is without end, that when we come to the end of all things, we may so end that we shall win that pure joy which for the good hath no end.

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And for him who wrote this, may he dwell with Jesus Christ, and in the love of Saint Mary; amen, amen, saith each and all.

Here endeth The Order of Chivalry.