

"Chivalry"

An Oration
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Circumstances are the grand instruments in the hands of an over-ruling Providence for swaying the destinies of the Universe. In the eyes of Omniscience, they are direct and well known agents, but in the limited vision of humanity, the undisguised implements of mere chance. So important, however, are their effects, that after the most trivial in human eyes, marks "an impress on the sands of time", which shall never be effaced, and whose influence shall wield the fate of generations yet unborn. Man, "the noblest work of Divine creation" in all his moral grandeur, intellectual sublimity and physical beauty, is but the crown ornament of confluent circumstances. Nations have had their origin in the concourse of peculiar circumstances, and by circumstances their career was stamped for glory

and renown, or infancy and ruin. But most striking are their effects on the human mind, that "Harp of a thousand strings" whose delicate chords vibrate to the touch of every gentle breeze. Of this, magnificent examples are afforded us in the masterly exhibitions of the fine arts, by Raffaello and Michael Angelo, and in the renowned poetry of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton. ^{P.} Most beautifully is the same principle exemplified, in the formation and progress of that remarkable institution of the Middle Ages, known as "Chivalry" arising in its true sense, but a development of certain feelings of the human mind, it would be absurd to contend that circumstances, however great they may have been, could ever have created the germ from which it sprung. But their province was, like that of the circumstances of the soil and climate in the vegetable kingdom, to operate upon the innate qualities im-

planted by the hand of the Creator, and thus, by an increasing influence from one generation to another, to bring forth prominently those elements which constituted the Spirit of Chivalry. ^P In seeking the origin of the circumstances which tended directly to develop this spirit and bring it to the condition, in which it appeared in the middle Ages, we seem to be led back to the history of the ancient Scandinavians. In their mythology, which must have tended greatly to cultivate in the minds of those who dwelt under its influences, the spirit, which it breathed, the principal object seems to have been to create a brave and war like people. Taught to expect the bliss of Valhalla, the abode of the valiant who fell in martial glory, they were incited to valorous deeds even at the peril of life. ^P Subsequently when the Normans poured down in swarms upon Great Britain, France and Spain,

they exhibit Chivalry in its embryonic state
 fearless and irresistible in conflict, and cruel
 to their foes, they observed the most strin-
 gent rules among themselves, and held
 woman in the highest esteem, deeming
 no act too great to be performed in her
 behalf. This spirit, modified and expand-
 ed by the powerful influence of the chival-
 rous romances which soon after pervaded
 the land, so rapidly spread through ^{out} that
 portion of Europe, that it found a home
 in almost every breast. But the Crusades
 gave the last great circumstances which
 gave the "finishing touch" to Chivalry. The
 Christian religion, which had then begun to
 prevail, softened and elevated by its genial
 and purifying influences, the superstitious
 notions and barbarous fancies which
 had before characterized the Chivalric spirit.
 In the strength of its sanctions, guided, as
 he was, by fanaticism, the knight found
 a most powerful incentive to the perfor-

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 afforded

manhood of gallant deeds. It is also, some-
 times, as has ever been a necessary consequence
 of its supremacy, was raised to her proper
 sphere, and her ~~power~~ influence rendered
 subservient to the same end. While the grand
 object of rescuing Jerusalem, from the
 palating dominion and sacrilegious rites
 of a false and degrading religion, (and
 as a consequence of the resulting wars, the
 protection and preservation of sick and
 wounded Prisoners, and of destitute and
 defenceless women and children) afforded
 a strong, additional motive, All these
 together appealed to the strongest sympa-
 thies of the human heart, and the most
 powerful motives of religious duty. Then
 it was that Chivalry became indeed a
 Profession - that the proudest name, which
 could be borne, was that of the knight,
 that the most welcome guest and the most
 honored companion was he who wore the
 insignia of his Order. He it was, who graced

* Prisoners

by an insatiable desire for glory, and the halls of pride and fashion, who bore the proud escutcheon of the field and of the fire side, upon whose brow was entwined the laurel wreath of admiration and love

II. This true spirit of Chivalry as it then appeared, combined a daring courage, an elevated pride of character, a sacred devotion to duty, a high respect and admiration for woman, and a profound reverence for God, in whose service the Knight was enlisted, and whose sanction he claimed for all his actions. An institution in whose spirit was concentrated the full development of all these powerful principles of the human mind, could scarcely be other wise than wonderful in its effects. That indomitable courage which supported the Knight rendered him fearless and invincible in the discharge of whatever task he regarded as his duty. Nor did he quietly await an opportunity for displaying his valor, restless for adventure, impelled

by an insatiable desire for glory, and
feeling it to be his mission to succour
the weak and protect the defenceless,
he roved abroad throughout the land,
and while he became a terror to vil-
doers, he afforded comfort and consola-
tion to the distressed. The Chivalric char-
acter, as beautifully expressed by Sydney,
consisted of "high thoughts, seated in a
heart of courtesy". The exalted feeling of
personal regard which ever glowed in the
bosom of the true knight, elevated him
above the low practices and mean devices
which characterized that day. Himself
of noble birth, bred under the influence
of the most refined society and taught
from youth to regard Honor, as the watch
word of his career, he disdained the de-
grading associations of the age. And
though the code of honor, which was then
upheld may meet severe condemnation
for its inhuman and unreasonable re-
quirements, it finds an apology in the

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occasion. Extremes must be met by extremes
to prevent the predominance of either, a
most powerful antidote was needed to en-
counter and stay the strong tide of moral
corruption which was sweeping over the
masses. And however we may lament the
transmission to the present day of some of
the barbarous practices, which they orig-
inated, they served a noble end in eleva-
ting the tone of public opinion and pro-
moting the purity of society - in pro-
ducing that high toned standard of per-
sonal duty and rights, of which we our-
selves reap the benefit. Devotion and self
sacrifice in the human heart, are terms
of almost synonymous import, - the one
necessarily includes the other. The hus-
band who forgets not self in the ^{service} sacrifice
of her whom he has promised "to love, cherish
and protect", disgraces the relation which
he has assumed. The statesman whose
only end and aim in the service of his coun

Becomes the valiant "Toub adou"

But simple devotion to his order and to the performance of heroic deeds, was not the only cord (was not) which bound the knight to his profession. The power of grace the magic of a name formed a tender link whose powerful influences appealed to the deepest feelings of the brain and heart. Reared in the society of woman, taught to consider it his most sacred duty to ^{honour &} protect her, about whose name clustered the most hallowed associations of childhood, and the memory of youthful joys; and regarding her as "the ideal of beauty, gentleness and love, each knightly bosom was inflamed with a desire to serve to her, to perform great deeds at her bidding, to worship her as a protecting divinity or saint, or to die fighting under her colors" This feeling, augmented with all the strength of prolonged tutorage and concentrated affections. And this at once gave Chivalry a prevailing influence in social

life which chiefly contributed to civilize and soften the rough and revolting manners of the age. But a more powerful incentive still lay behind all these. The Knight went forth as the champion of religion, the sanction of whose Author he claimed, and whose reward he expected. The power exercised by an approving conscience and a sense of Divine justifications, can be rightly estimated only when we conceive of the unnumbered years of eternity and the infinite bliss of Heaven. Under the influence of this principle, martyrs have met the penalties of the scaffold and the stake with joyful hearts. This enabled them, when the rabid flames were crisping their very limbs, to break forth in songs of praise. It was this which drew from Luther, when warned not to enter Worms, the sentiment "Were there as many devils in Worms as there are ^{there are} roof-tiles, I would go!" But whether or not it was ^{was} the portion of the Knight to

receive the reward which he anticipated, it is not for us to say. Sufficient for our purpose, which involves only temporal considerations, is that he confidently expected it. He is indeed, as he doubtless was, by the fanatical and corrupted religion of the day, he committed with an approving conscience, deeds which would be revolting to the ^{sense} most insensate of our times. The principle, however, was good, and needed only the enlivenment of reason and the proper understanding of religious sanctions which the Reformation soon after produced to commend it to the most upright. ^{Ph}Chiefly, then, the true spirit of which we have endeavored to delineate, presented the mightiest phalanx of operative principles which the human soul is capable of affording. And though it did not ²¹exist long as a distinct institution, calculated, as it was, to attract the admiration of man, and excite him to its imita-

tion, it exerted a most potent influence in purifying and elevating the degraded manners and customs of the day, in dispelling the moral darkness which had so long unshrouded mankind, and in starting on its course the mighty tide of human progress which soon succeeded, ^{and} in which Chivalry itself was swallowed up. Deprived by the Reformation of the unholy sanction under which it had operated, its spirit being diffused throughout the mass of civilized men, - ~~and~~ in a word, its end being accomplished, - its mission was completed and only its influences remained to be transmitted to future generations. But the spirit, having its foundation in the human soul, can never be extinct while man retains his nature. It is some other than this spirit, modified by different circumstances, which actuates the true soldier on the field of battle, the true statesman in the halls of legislation, the true citizen in the

mark of business. Chivalry does ^{still} exist - not
encased in knightly armor, marked by super-
stitious symbols, but living in the hearts of
our people; - and it needs only a call for its ex-
ercise, to be exhibited in all its origin strength
and beauty. If any dispute the assertion we
point you to but a recent period in the history
of our own cherished city. In the time of that
dreadful scourge which came upon her, when
the wrath of an avenging God seemed to over-
hang, like a thick cloud, her very precincts,
where the moans and sighs of the dying, and
the cries and lamentations of the bereaved,
rang from house to house, from street to street
what nobler, what truer band of Knights
would you desire than that of the "Howard
Associations". Day after day and night after
night they trod, with hushed footsteps, the
desolate streets, seeking the home of the needy
and administering to the wants of the dying. No
flashing helmet decked their brows, no glitter-
ing armor shielded their mailed frames

no fiery charger bore them on their missions of
charity. Supported by the strongest emotions
of moral bravery, and impelled by the pu-
rest feelings of love and duty, they nobly
discharged their arduous task. ^{P.} And
would you be pointed to an individual
Knight, seek him who but four summers ago,
when in quest of recreation and enjoyment
heard the cry of afflicted
~~received a summons from afflicted Nor-~~
folk. See him as he forsakes anticipated
pleasure and enters fearlessly upon his
gloomy mission; behold him as amidst
the most dismal and heart rending scenes
he zealously performs his offices of love and
kindness. True is true moral courage, here
is spotless magnanimity, here is exalted de-
votion. All honor to you, people of Charleston,
that you have cherished so noble a son, that
you have conferred upon him the highest digni-
ty of your City, and that you have now returned
upon his brow the civic wreath - a nobler fel-
net than ever Timplar wore!