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Title: Chivalry

Author: James Branch Cabell

Release Date: March 28, 2004 [eBook #11752]
[Date last updated: September 30, 2005]

Language: English

Character set encoding: US-ASCII

START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CHIVALRY

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CHIVALRY

JAMES BRANCH CABELL

1921

TO
ANNE BRANCH CABELL

"AINSI A VOUS, MADAME, A MA TRES HAULTE ET
TRES NOBLE DAME, A QUI J'AYME A DEVOIR
ATTACHEMENT ET OBEISSANCE,

J'ENVOYE CE LIVRET."

Introduction

Few of the more astute critics who have appraised the work of James Branch Cabell have failed to call attention to that extraordinary cohesion which makes his very latest novel a further flowering of the seed of his very earliest literary work. Especially among his later books does the scheme of each seem to dovetail into the scheme of the other and the whole of his writing take on the character of an uninterrupted discourse. To this phenomenon, which is at once a fact and an illusion of continuity, Mr. Cabell himself has consciously contributed, not only by a subtly elaborate use of conjunctions, by repetition, and by reintroducing characters from his other books, but by actually setting his expertness in genealogy to the genial task of devising a family tree for his figures of fiction.

If this were an actual continuity, more tangible than that fluid abstraction we call the life force; if it were merely a tireless reiteration and recasting of characters, Mr. Cabell's work would have an unbearable monotony. But at bottom this apparent continuity has no more material existence than has the thread of lineal descent. To insist upon its importance is to obscure, as has been obscured, the epic range of Mr. Cabell's creative genius. It is to fail to observe that he has treated in his many books every mainspring of human action and that his themes have been the cardinal dreams and impulses which have in them heroic qualities. Each separate volume has a unity and harmony of a complete and separate life, for the excellent reason that with the consummate skill of an artist he is concerned exclusively in each book with one definite heroic impulse and its frustrations.

It is true, of course, that like the fruit of the tree of life, Mr. Cabell's artistic progeny sprang from a first conceptual germ--"In the beginning was the Word." That animating idea is the assumption that if life may be said to have an aim it must be an aim to terminate in success and splendor. It postulates the high, fine importance of excess, the choice or discovery of an overwhelming impulse in life and a conscientious dedication to its fullest realization. It is the quality and intensity of the dream only which raises men above the biological norm; and it is fidelity to the dream which differentiates the exceptional figure, the man of heroic stature, from the muddling, aimless mediocrities about him. What the dream is, matters not at all--it may be a dream of sainthood, kingship, love, art, asceticism or sensual pleasure--so long as it is fully expressed with all the resources of self. It is this sort of completion which Mr. Cabell has

elected to depict in all his work: the complete sensualist in Demetrios, the complete phrase-maker in Felix Kennaston, the complete poet in Marlowe, the complete lover in Perion. In each he has shown that this complete self-expression is achieved at the expense of all other possible selves, and that herein lies the tragedy of the ideal. Perfection is a costly flower and is cultured only by an uncompromising, strict husbandry.

All this is, we see, the ideational gonfalon under which surge the romanticists; but from the evidence at hand it is the banner to which life also bears allegiance. It is in humanity's records that it has reserved its honors for its romantic figures. It remembers its Caesars, its saints, its sinners. It applauds, with a complete suspension of moral judgment, its heroines and its heroes who achieve the greatest self-realization. And from the splendid triumphs and tragic defeats of humanity's individual strivings have come our heritage of wisdom and of poetry.

Once we understand the fundamentals of Mr. Cabell's artistic aims, it is not easy to escape the fact that in *Figures of Earth* he undertook the staggering and almost unsuspected task of rewriting humanity's sacred books, just as in *Jurgen* he gave us a stupendous analogue of the ceaseless quest for beauty. For we must accept the truth that Mr. Cabell is not a novelist at all in the common acceptance of the term, but a historian of the human soul. His books are neither documentary nor representational; his characters are symbols of human desires and motives. By the not at all simple process of recording faithfully the projections of his rich and varied imagination, he has written thirteen books, which he accurately terms biography, wherein is the bitter-sweet truth about human life.

II

Among the scant certainties vouchsafed us is that every age lives by its special catchwords. Whether from rebellion against the irking monotony of its inherited creeds or from compulsions generated by its own complexities, each age develops its code of convenient illusions which minimize cerebration in dilemmas of conduct by postulating an unequivocal cleavage between the current right and the current wrong. It works until men tire of it or challenge the cleavage, or until conditions render the code obsolete. It has in it, happily, a certain poetic merit always; it presents an ideal to be lived up to; it gives direction to the uncertain, stray impulses of life.

The Chivalric code is no worse than most and certainly it is prettier than some. It is a code peculiar to an age, or at least it flourishes best in an age wherein sentiment and the stuff of dreams are easily translatable into action. Its requirements are less of the intellect than of the heart. It puts God, honor, and mistress above all else, and

stipulates that a knight shall serve these three without any reservation. It requires of its secular practitioners the holy virtues of an active piety, a modified chastity, and an unqualified obedience, at all events, to the categorical imperative. The obligation of poverty it omits, for the code arose at a time when the spiritual snobbery of the meek and lowly was not pressing the simile about the camel and the eye of the needle. It leads to charming manners and to delicate amenities. It is the opposite of the code of Gallantry, for while the code of Chivalry takes everything with a becoming seriousness, the code of Gallantry takes everything with a wink. If one should stoop to pick flaws with the Chivalric ideal, it would be to point out a certain priggishness and intolerance. For, while it is all very well for one to cherish the delusion that he is God's vicar on earth and to go about his Father's business armed with a shining rectitude, yet the unhallowed may be moved to deprecate the enterprise when they recall, with discomfort, the zealous vicarship of, say, the late Anthony J. Comstock.

But here I blunder into Mr. Cabell's province. For he has joined many graceful words in delectable and poignant proof of just that lamentable tendency of man to make a mess of even his most immaculate conceivings. When he wrote *_Chivalry_*, Mr. Cabell was yet young enough to view the code less with the appraising eye of a pawnbroker than with the ardent eye of an amateur. He knew its value, but he did not know its price. So he made of it the thesis for a dizain of beautiful happenings that are almost flawless in their verbal beauty.

III

It is perhaps of historical interest here to record the esteem in which Mark Twain held the genius of Mr. Cabell as it was manifested as early as a dozen years ago. Mr. Cabell wrote *_The Soul of Melicent_*, or, as it was rechristened on revision, *_Domnei_*, at the great humorist's request, and during the long days and nights of his last illness it was Mr. Cabell's books which gave Mark Twain his greatest joy. This knowledge mitigates the pleasure, no doubt, of those who still, after his fifteen years of writing, encounter him intermittently with a feeling of having made a great literary discovery. The truth is that Mr. Cabell has been discovered over and over with each succeeding book from that first fine enthusiasm with which Percival Pollard reviewed *_The Eagle's Shadow_* to that generous acknowledgment by Hugh Walpole that no one in England, save perhaps Conrad and Hardy, was so sure of literary permanence as James Branch Cabell.

With *_The Cream of the Jest, Beyond Life_*, and *_Figures of Earth_* before him, it is not easy for the perceptive critic to doubt this permanence. One might as sensibly deny a future to Ecclesiastes, *_The Golden Ass_*, Gulliver's Travels, and the works of Rabelais as to predict oblivion for such a thesaurus of ironic wit and fine fantasy, mellow wisdom and strange beauty as *_Jurgen_*. But to appreciate the tales of *_Chivalry_*

is, it seems, a gift more frequently reserved for the general reader than for the professional literary evaluator. Certainly years before discussion of Cabell was artificially augmented by the suppression of Jurgen there were many genuine lovers of romance who had read these tales with pure enjoyment. That they did not analyse and articulate their enjoyment for the edification of others does not lessen the quality of their appreciation. Even in those years they found in Cabell's early tales what we find who have since been directed to them by the curiosity engendered by his later work, namely, a superb craftsmanship in recreating a vanished age, an atmosphere in keeping with the themes, a fluid, graceful, personal style, a poetic ecstasy, a fine sense of drama, and a unity and symmetry which are the hall-marks of literary genius.

BURTON RASCOE. New York City, September, 1921.

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THE EPILOGUE

Precautional

Imprimis, as concerns the authenticity of these tales perhaps the less debate may be the higher wisdom, if only because this Nicolas de Caen, by common report, was never a Gradgrindian. And in this volume in particular, writing it (as Nicolas is supposed to have done) in 1470, as a dependant on the Duke of Burgundy, it were but human nature should he, in dealing with the putative descendants of Dom Manuel and Alianora of Provence, be niggardly in his ascription of praiseworthy traits to any member of the house of Lancaster or of Valois. Rather must one in common reason accept old Nicolas as confessedly a partisan writer, who upon occasion will recolor an event with such nuances as will be least inconvenient to a Yorkist and Burgundian bias.

The reteller of these stories needs in addition to plead guilty of having abridged the tales with a free hand. Item, these tales have been a trifle pulled about, most notably in "The Story of the Satraps," where it seemed advantageous, on reflection, to put into Gloucester's mouth a history which in the original version was related *ab ovo*, and as a sort of bungling prologue to the story proper.

Item, the re-teller of these stories desires hereby to tender appropriate acknowledgment to Mr. R.E. Townsend for his assistance in making an English version of the lyrics included hereinafter; and to avoid discussion as to how freely, in these lyrics, Nicolas has plagiarized from Raimbaut de Vaqueiras and other elder poets.[1]

And--"sixth and lastly"--should confession be made that in the present rendering a purely arbitrary title has been assigned this little book; chiefly for commercial reasons, since the word "dizain" has been adjudged both untranslatable and, in its pristine form, repellantly *outré*.

2

You are to give my titular makeshift, then, a wide interpretation; and are always to remember that in the bleak, florid age these tales commemorate this Chivalry was much the rarelier significant of any personal trait than of a world-wide code in consonance with which all estimable people lived and died. Its root was the assumption (uncontested then) that a gentleman will always serve his God, his honor and his lady without any reservation; nor did the many emanating by-laws ever deal with special cases as concerns this triple, fixed, and fundamental homage.

Such is the trinity served hereinafter. Now about lady-service, or *_domnei_*, I have written elsewhere. Elsewhere also I find it recorded that "the cornerstone of Chivalry is the idea of vicarship: for the chivalrous person is, in his own eyes at least, the child of God, and goes about this world as his Father's representative in an alien country."

I believe the definition holds: it certainly tends to explain the otherwise puzzling pertinacity with which the characters in these tales talk about God and act upon an assured knowledge as to Heaven's private intentions and preferences. These people are the members of one family engrossed, as all of us are apt to be when in the society of our kin, by family matters and traditions and by-words. It is not merely that they are all large children consciously dependent in all things upon a not foolishly indulgent Father, Who keeps an interested eye upon the least of their doings, and punishes at need,--not merely that they know themselves to act under surveillance and to speak within ear-shot of a divine eavesdropper. The point is, rather, that they know this observation to be as tender, the punishment to be as unwilling, as that which they themselves extend to their own children's pranks and misdemeanors. The point is that to them Heaven is a place as actual and tangible as we consider Alaska or Algiers to be, and that their living is a conscious journeying toward this actual place. The point is that the Father is a real father, and not a word spelt with capital letters in the Church Service; not an abstraction, not a sort of a something vaguely describable as "the Life Force," but a very famous kinsman, of whom one is naively proud, and whom one is on the way to visit.... The point, in brief, is that His honor and yours are inextricably blended, and are both implicated in your behavior on the journey.

We nowadays can just cloudily imagine this viewing of life as a sort of boarding-school from which one eventually goes home, with an official report as to progress and deportment: and in retaliation for being debarred from the comforts of this view, the psychoanalysts have no doubt invented for it some opprobrious explanation. At all events, this Chivalry was a pragmatic hypothesis: it "worked," and served society for a long while, not faultlessly of course, but by creating, like all the other codes of human conduct which men have yet tried, a tragi-comic melee wherein contended "courtesy and humanity, friendliness, hardihood, love and friendship, and murder, hate, and virtue, and sin."

3

For the rest, since good wine needs no bush, and an inferior beverage is not likely to be bettered by arboreal adornment, I elect to piece out my exordium (however lamely) with "The Printer's Preface." And it runs in this fashion:

"Here begins the volume called and entitled the Dizain of Queens, composed and extracted from divers chronicles and other sources of information, by that extremely venerable person and worshipful man, Messire Nicolas de Caen, priest and chaplain to the right noble, glorious and mighty prince in his time, Philippe, Duke of Burgundy, of Brabant, etc., in the year of the Incarnation of our Lord God a thousand four hundred and seventy: and imprinted by me, Colard Mansion, at Bruges, in the year of our said Lord God a thousand four hundred and seventy-one; at the commandment of the right high, mighty and virtuous Princess, my redoubted Lady, Isabella of Portugal, by the grace of God Duchess of Burgundy and Lotharingia, of Brabant and Limbourg, of Luxembourg and of Gueldres, Countess of Flanders, of Artois, and of Burgundy, Palatine of Hainault, of Holland, of Zealand and of Namur, Marquesse of the Holy Empire, and Lady of Frisia, of Salins and of Mechlin; whom I beseech Almighty God less to increase than to continue in her virtuous disposition in this world, and after our poor fleet existence to receive eternally. Amen."

THE PROLOGUE

"_Afin que les entreprises honorables et les nobles aventures et faicts d'armes soyent noblement enregistres et conservees, je vais traiter et raconter et inventer ung galimatias_"

THE DIZAIN OF QUEENS OF THAT NOBLE MAKER IN THE FRENCH TONGUE,
MESSIRE
NICOLAS DE CAEN, DEDICATED TO THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS ISABELLA OF
PORTUGAL,
OF THE HOUSE OF THE INDOMITABLE ALFONSO HENRIQUES, AND
DUCHESS DOWAGER
OF BURGUNDY. HERE BEGINS IN AUSPICIOUS WISE THE PROLOGUE.

The Prologue

A Sa Dame

Inasmuch as it was by your command, illustrious and exalted lady, that I have gathered together these stories to form the present little book, you should the less readily suppose I have presumed to dedicate to your Serenity this trivial offering because of my esteeming it to be not undeserving of your acceptance. The truth is otherwise: your postulant approaches not spurred toward you by vainglory, but rather by equity,

and equity's plain need to acknowledge that he who seeks to write of noble ladies must necessarily implore at outset the patronage of her who is the light and mainstay of our age. I humbly bring my book to you as Phidyle approached another and less sacred shrine, *_farre pio et saliente mica_*, and lay before you this my valueless mean tribute not as appropriate to you but as the best I have to offer.

It is a little book wherein I treat of divers queens and of their love-business; and with necessitated candor I concede my chosen field to have been harvested, and scrupulously gleaned, by many writers of innumerable conditions. Since Dares Phrygius wrote of Queen Heleine, and Virgil (that shrewd necromancer) of Queen Dido, a preponderating mass of clerks, in casting about for high and serious matter, have chosen, as though it were by common instinct, to dilate upon the amours of royal women. Even in romance we scribblers must contrive it so that the fair Nicolete shall be discovered in the end to be no less than the King's daughter of Carthage, and that Sir Dooen of Mayence shall never sink in his love affairs beneath the degree of a Saracen princess; and we are backed in this old procedure not only by the authority of Aristotle but, oddly enough, by that of reason.

Kings have their policies and wars wherewith to drug each human appetite. But their consorts are denied these makeshifts; and love may rationally be defined as the pivot of each normal woman's life, and in consequence as the arbiter of that ensuing life which is eternal. Because--as anciently Propertius demanded, though not, to speak the truth, of any woman--

*Quo fugis? ah demens! nulla est fuga, tu licet usque
Ad Tanaim fugias, usque sequetur amor.*

And a dairymaid, let us say, may love whom she will, and nobody else be a penny the worse for her mistaking of the preferable nail whereon to hang her affections; whereas with a queen this choice is more portentous. She plays the game of life upon a loftier table, ruthlessly illuminated, she stakes by her least movement a tall pile of counters, some of which are, of necessity, the lives and happiness of persons whom she knows not, unless it be by vague report. Grandeur sells itself at this hard price, and at no other. A queen must always play, in fine, as the vicar of destiny, free to choose but very certainly compelled in the ensuing action to justify that choice: as is strikingly manifested by the authentic histories of Brunhalt, and of Guenevere, and of swart Cleopatra, and of many others that were born to the barbaric queenhoods of extinct and dusty times.

All royal persons are (I take it) the immediate and the responsible stewards of Heaven; and since the nature of each man is like a troubled stream, now muddied and now clear, their prayer must ever be, *_Defenda me, Dios, de me_!* Yes, of exalted people, and even of their near associates, life, because it aims more high than the aforementioned

Aristotle, demands upon occasion a more great catharsis, which would purge any audience of unmanliness, through pity and through terror, because, by a quaint paradox, the players have been purged of humanity. For a moment Destiny has thrust her scepter into the hands of a human being and Chance has exalted a human being to decide the issue of many human lives. These two--with what immortal chucklings one may facilely imagine--have left the weakling thus enthroned, free to direct the heavy outcome, free to choose, and free to evoke much happiness or age-long weeping, but with no intermediate course unbarred. *_Now prove thyself!* saith Destiny; and Chance appends: *_Now prove thyself to be at bottom a god or else a beast, and now eternally abide that choice. And now_* (O crowning irony!) *_we may not tell thee clearly by which choice thou mayst prove either_.*

In this little book about the women who intermarried, not very enviably, with an unhuman race (a race predestinate to the red ending which I have chronicled elsewhere, in *_The Red Cuckold_*), it is of ten such moments that I treat.

You alone, I think, of all persons living, have learned, as you have settled by so many instances, to rise above mortality in such a testing, and unfailingly to merit by your conduct the plaudits and the adoration of our otherwise dissentient world. You have often spoken in the stead of Destiny, with nations to abide your verdict; and in so doing have both graced and hallowed your high vicarship. If I forbear to speak of this at greater length, it is because I dare not couple your well-known perfection with any imperfect encomium. Upon no plea, however, can any one forbear to acknowledge that he who seeks to write of noble ladies must necessarily implore at outset the patronage of her who is the light and mainstay of our age.

Therefore to you, madame--most excellent and noble lady, to whom I love to owe both loyalty and love--I dedicate this little book.

I

THE STORY OF THE SESTINA

"Armatz de fust e de fer e d'acier, Mos ostal seran bosc, fregz,
e sendier, E mas cansos sestinas e descortz, E mantenrai los frevols
contra 'ls fortz."

THE FIRST NOVEL.--ALIANORA OF PROVENCE, COMING IN DISGUISE AND IN ADVERSITY TO A CERTAIN CLERK, IS BY HIM CONDUCTED ACROSS A HOSTILE

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