

CHIVALRY

by George William Russell



I read in one of the Celtic stories, a tale rudely told but instinct with a magnificent spirit of rivalry, how Maeve, queen of the Olnemacta, stood upon the walls of her liss and saw below the Knights of the Red Branch arrayed and ready for battle against her; and as her druid pointed out one famous hero after another - Concoibar, most subtle of princes, Cuculain the champion, Conal, Laegaire, and the rest, how a glow of heroic admiration lit up her speech: 'Noble and regal is the description,' cried the queen. 'Noble and regal are they of whom it is said,' her druid also spoke. Not the fear of conquest, not death, could still the impartial love of beauty, wisdom, and courage shining even in a foe. Such was the tradition of Celtic chivalry. It has almost passed into the night, this great and fearless spirit. Whatever honeyed words are addressed by one nation to another have good material expectation, the making of some advantageous treaty, at the back of them. Let that hope be shattered, and where is the chivalry? And between public men the tone is equally ignoble: to praise an opponent, to grant him sincerity and patriotism, seems almost a betrayal of one's own party. But could we not hail like Maeve with equal joy whatever of beautiful or good shines in those who are opposed to us? How meagre then would appear the hostile array! The distinctions of party, the pride of nationality, have no place in those who see One alone living in all. With this ideal before us we declare ourselves free from all parties and to belong to one nation only. Our people are humanity

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and our foes are yet to be discovered. Whoever deny us we shall not deny. If they are witty at our expense they shall have made us to laugh also; and if they are cruel we will remember that we can only be hurt by departing from our own ideals. We shall hail whatever is beautiful in them as their contribution to a common cause. And indeed it seems to us that it is only through such tolerance and mutual recognition that the dream brooded upon with awe and hope by so many great thinkers in the past will ever become possible, that spiritual fusion of nations where a limitless spirit pervades a multiform life, and one eternal will inspires all with equal intent. Though this divine event be far off in the sunset of time, it is not too early to begin our efforts while the clash and roar of battle are about us. While we are in the turmoil, O spirit of ancient chivalry, return again to us. Return, return!

Chivalry and the image of the oil painting by A.E. are taken from the following:
Russell, George William. [The Descent of the Gods](#). Eds. Nandini and Raghavan Iyer.
Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1988. (This volume is Part 3 of the Collected Works.)