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XXVIII.22 On morals relative to combats

- The Spirit of Law - Book XXVIII. On the origin and transformations of the civil laws among the French -

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Our intimacy with women is based on the delight attached to the pleasures of the senses, on the charm of loving and being loved, and also on the desire of pleasing them, because they are very enlightened judges of some of the things that constitute personal merit. This general desire to please produces gallantry, which is not love, but the delicate, the light, the perpetual illusion of love.

According to the different circumstances in each nation and in each century, love inclines more towards one of these three things than the other two. Now I say that in the times of our combats, it was the spirit of gallantry that must have been gaining in strength.

I find in the law of the Lombards [1] that if one of the two champions had on his person herbs used in charms, the judge made him remove them, and made him swear he had no others. This law could only be based on common opinion : it is fear, which as we have said has invented so many things, that made people imagine these sorts of enchantments. Since in individual combats the champions were fully armed, and since with heavy weapons, offensive and defensive, those of a certain temper and a certain strength conferred infinite advantages, the opinion that some combatants had enchanted weapons must have made many people credulous.

Hence arose the marvelous system of chivalry. Every mind opened to these ideas. Romances were peopled with knights errant, necromancers, fairies, winged or intelligent horses, invisible or invulnerable men, magicians who attended the birth or education of great personages, enchanted and disenchanting palaces : a new world in our world, and the ordinary course of nature left to common people.

Knights-errant, ever armed, in a part of the world filled with châteaux, fortresses, and brigands, found honor in punishing injustice and defending the vulnerable. Whence again, in our romances, the gallantry based on the idea of love, combined with those of strength and protection.

Thus gallantry was born, when they imagined extraordinary men who, seeing virtue allied with beauty and distress, were impelled to expose themselves to dangers for her, and to please her in the ordinary acts of life.

Our chivalric romances flattered this desire to please, and gave to part of Europe that spirit of gallantry that we can say was little known to the Ancients.

The prodigious luxury of that immense city of Rome flattered the notion of pleasures of the senses. A certain notion of tranquility in the Greek countryside inspired descriptions [2] of the sentiments of love. The idea of knights errant, protectors of the virtue and beauty of women, led to that of gallantry.

That spirit was continued by the practice of tourneys, which combining the rights of valor and love, added further to the great importance of gallantry.

[1] Book II, tit. 55, §11.

[2] One can look at the Greek novels of the Middle Ages.