

The Episode of the Knights of the Round Table

From *The Merry Wives of London*

By James Lindridge

The gentlemen who constituted the society distinguished by the ancient and chivalric title of the “Knights of the Round Table”, were a singular set of beings; for, although as loyal as Britons are expected to be, they would persist in throwing the mantle of secrecy around all their proceedings. They feared not the light, but preferred that the business of their incorporation should be conducted in private. Having this characteristic, it will not excite much surprise that their meetings were held and many precautionary ceremonies, and accompanied by several almost masonic solemnities. The locality selected was the classic one of Covent Garden Market, where, as if by common consent, the last faint lines of West End decency terminate, and those of eastern squalor and filth commence. The street was a respectable one, and the public-house in it the largest in the whole region of Bedfordiana. Imagine the hour to be nine o’clock in the evening, and that a couple of apparently gentlemanly-looking men are emerging from the snug bar-parlour, and, preceded by a hoary-headed confidential waiter, ascend a long flight of stairs, until they arrive at the third floor, where they pause, and then, by means of a house-key open a substantial iron-bound door, which, moving inwards, noiselessly discloses a neatly-furnished ante-room, in which the two gentlemen, after ordering brandy-and-water, seat themselves. Presently others, garbed as if belonging to the well-to-do classes, arrive, and, after many whisperings and exchanges of passwords, are allowed to pass through another iron-bound door, which admitted them into the brilliantly-lighted hall of the Knights of the Round Table. This room was a circular one, painted in gold and black; but surely the artist must have had large amatory organs; for on the panels was every species of display of the perfections of woman, and the modes in which man can render them serviceable to his devouring propensities. At one end of the room was a beautiful scroll, which contained the following sentence, in raised golden letters:

“Eat, drink, and love—the rest’s not worth a straw.”

Underneath this, resting on a pedestal on the floor, was a statue of the Venus de Medici, and at the other end of the room was a gigantic one of Bacchus. At intervals round were several busts, chiefly of men distinguished in literature and for latitudinarianism in morals. Among them was George IV, Charles James Fox, Sheridan, Mirabeau, Duncombe, Handsome Jack (a notorious *protégé* of a distinguished actress), Edmund Kean, *cum multis aliis*. In the centre of the room was a large oval table, around which were armed and well-cushioned chairs, bearing on their backs numbers ranging from one to fifty. As the members entered, each took possession of one of these seats, and at ten o’clock they were all filled, except one, from the piece of black crape bound round the arms of which, it might have been inferred that its former occupant had departed to the unknown realm, where the good and the bad have to render a true and just account of themselves. Dr Wiggles—who, by the way, had left Walter in the ante-room—presided; and, after taking a preliminary glance round the table, struck it two or three sharp blows with the hammer which lay before him. At this intimation every voice was hushed, and the members adjusted themselves in their seats, so as to face the chair.

“No. 45,” said the president, “read the minutes.”

No. 45, a hawk-eyed, wiry little man, of about forty years of age, opened a large book before him, and read as follows:

“Since our last meeting I regret to have to announce the loss of No. 49, the oldest member of the order, with the exception of your venerable self. He died full of years, and in the firm persuasion that, as he had never violated a single law of nature, he had nothing to fear, either for his memory or that future which is such a bugbear to the imaginations of the vulgar. On this point it may be interesting to record his last observations. ‘The immortality of the soul,’ said he, is one of those consoling beliefs which it would be impolitic to destroy. It is the highest and last hope of man, and must exercise a beneficial influence over his mental faculties, restraining some and encouraging and developing others. The idea of an individual immortality is absurd, but that of a general one is correct but to support the latter the former is indispensable, for few among us have the courage to recognize only the general immutable principles of nature. We make others to meet our individual wants and aspirations. The only immortality worth anything to man is the Egyptian one of the resuscitation of the body, afterwards adopted by the early Christians, under the fanciful conception of the complete resurrection of the body after its total annihilation, and the mingling of its elements with the common original ones from which they sprang.’ These were his last words,” continued No. 45, “and soon after he died as placidly as a child falling to sleep.”

The president tapped in approval of so dignified a termination to a life of gaiety; each member, with the same object in view, gently inclined his head, and No. 45 proceeded:

“The affairs of the order continue in the same prosperous condition, but I regret to have to report several grave cases, which call for immediate attention. The first is that of No. 7, who has been charged by one of his late servants with having caused her present pregnancy. No. 7 does not object to afford the girl pecuniary assistance as a matter of charity, for none of us can be too liberal to women in that respect; but he does object to being made the victim of extortion. He asks the advice and counsel of the order.”

“No. 7,” said the president, “in what private relation did this girl stand to you?”

No. 7, a bald-headed, unwieldy, plethoric man of seventy, rose, and gravely replied:

“She was my servant, and sometimes lay with me to keep my extremities warm; but I declare, on the honour of a knight of this table, that I never was carnally acquainted with her. I regret to say the capability has disappeared. My valet, I suspect, is the author of the woman’s condition, but I will do as you advise in the matter.”

“Then I would propose,” said the president, “that No. 45 be instructed to give the girl a ten-pound note, and settle the affair. Your incapacity did not extend to manipulations of the girl’s body, and your valet only completed what you began. Gentlemen, do you approve of my proposal?” None spoke. “Carried,” and down went the president’s hammer.

“The next case,” resumed No. 45, “is that of No. 30. He has had an action brought against him by a peer of the realm, for criminal conversation with his wife, the Lady Tyrone, formerly known as Peggy Johnson, the most lascivious actress on the Irish stage. He admits the fact, but submits that, as the lady has notoriously been guilty of amours with other men since her marriage, he would be justified in defending the action, with the view of either obtaining a verdict, or reducing the damages to a nominal amount. He confesses that the case perplexes him, for, should the judgment be adverse, it would prejudice him in the proceedings he is about to institute with respect to his wife, whom he strongly suspects.”

“What say you, No. 30?” inquired the president.

No. 30, who was the readers' old acquaintance, Mr Smythe, the banker, rose, and said he had nothing to add to the statement of the secretary; all he wished to know was, whether resistance or a compromise would be preferable.

"I know something of the facts of this case," said the president; "both the lady and her husband, it is true, are adventurers: he lives upon her want of chastity, and would starve if he divorced her; but then No. 30, who has a charge against his wife—from statements already made, I fear a true one—should go into court with clean hands. I strongly advise a compromise, and will gladly lend my assistance. I know the lady's brothers—the O'Blazes—and a whisper from me into one of their ears would be sufficient. I undertake to settle the affair for a thousand pounds."

No. 30 gladly accepted the offer.

"This being a compromise, the money will have to come entirely out of your own pocket," said the president.

No. 30 bowed his acquiescence, and No. 45 continued:

"The next case is that of No. 48, who has been sued for loss of services, by the father of the girl who accuses him of having been her seducer."

"No. 48," said the president, "answer upon your honour did the girl willingly and cheerfully submit to your embraces?"

"She did," replied No. 48, standing up and presenting the commanding appearance of a dark, handsome man of about thirty.

"Did you make any promise of marriage?"

"I did not."

"Then she was as willing as yourself?"

"Quite. The occasion was inviting. I placed her gently on her back, and she lay as quiet as a lamb."

"Has the connection been repeated?"

"Innumerable times."

"And pregnancy has ensued?"

"It has."

"A clear case," said the president. "I move that No. 45 be instructed to either compromise or defend the case. Any amendment? No: then it is carried."

No. 45 proceeded:

"The next case is that of No. 5. He has been accused of being the father of a male child, to which his servant, a girl of seventeen, lately gave birth. He admits the fact of connection, but denies that of paternity."

No. 5, a spare old man, with a profusion of white hair, here nodded his acquiescence, and the president rather briskly said:

"The admission damns the denial. He must pay; besides, it is well known that a man is never too old to get a woman with child. Many instances are on record of men being fathers at 120, and even 140 years of age. I move that No. 45 be instructed to compromise the affair, and be allowed for that purpose five pounds out of the funds."

Several members here suggested that the amount should be ten pounds, which was ultimately agreed to; No. 5 being advised to keep a complying male servant, on whom for the future he could safely throw the onus of all such responsibilities.

“The last case,” said No. 45, “is the gravest of the whole. It refers to No. 29, who has been accused of a criminal assault upon the person of a married woman. He has been prosecuted, and is now out on bail.”

“Stand up 29,” said the president, severely.

No. 29 did so. He was a hale, stalwart, middle-aged man, with a jovial, pleasant countenance.

“Are you guilty or not guilty?” demanded the president.

“Not guilty of the assault, most decidedly,” replied No. 29, with a laugh; “if there is any charge at all against me it is that of rape.”

“Explain yourself.”

“Being a bachelor I have no establishment of my own, but live in apartments in Park Lane. My landlady, a merry, pleasant creature, of about thirty, plump and pretty, with a large roguish eye, that follows you wherever you go, deigned for several weeks to listen to my idle nonsense, and at last suffered me to embrace her warm waist, and kiss her moist lips. I saw immediately that she would, and she would not. Her husband I found out was a jealous Turk, and she was afraid of him. A few evenings ago she came into my sitting-room to make some inquiry, when I invited her to take a glass of wine with me. She did so, and I began to pull her about. At first she was angry, but soon cooled down, and went off into another kind of heat, which, I perceiving, became more ardent in my advances, and after a good deal of struggling—for at the critical moment she got horridly afraid of venturing—I had my way. She then began to cry, and who should then walk in but the monster, her husband, to whom she complained that I had assaulted her, with intent, &c. She was obliged to say something, for her clothes and hair were in great disorder, and so she put the most charitable construction on the affair, and assured her husband that, villain as I was, she had resisted so stoutly, that she was still his pure, true, and lawful wife. I was dragged to the station-house, and next morning committed, but liberated on bail.”

“A narrow escape for you, 29,” said the president; “but you could not have displeased the woman, or you would at this moment have been in Newgate. Will any member make a proposition?”

It was promptly moved, seconded, and carried, that No. 29 should be defended at the expense of the order, and that the president should admonish him upon his indiscretions, this being the third of the kind of which he had been guilty within the last three years.

“No. 29,” said the president, with great gravity, “for a man of your years, being now—”

“Forty-five last birthday,” said the secretary.

“Being now forty-five years old,” continued the president, “this amour of yours is positively an offence; and you must be cautious for the future, or you may meet with a spiteful woman, who will not hesitate to prefer the graver charge of violation. But your conduct amazes me. Until this moment I had always believed that every Knight of the Round Table was too much a man of the world to risk his liberty for the sake of possessing an unwilling woman, when, by a little diligence, scores might be found who would not make the slightest objection. The man who uses violence to a woman is a recreant knight (hear, hear) and dangerous companion. Love, like honey, must be gathered with caution. Even in plucking the rose it is necessary to avoid the thorn by its side; and how much more necessary it is, in gathering the fairest flowers of the earth, that we should use circumspection, and that gentleness which protects the tender plants from injury either by accident or design. Unless we mingle refinement with our pleasures they soon pall upon the senses; and if we pursue them further, it is only in the degenerated form of mere animals. To a knight of your experience, and established reputation for kindness of disposition and purpose, I

need say no more. Be warned in time, and refrain from setting our younger members so vicious an example.”

No. 29 returned thanks for the consideration shown towards him, and promised to be more discreet in his future commerce with the fair sex.

The secretary, No. 45, then read the remainder of the minutes.

“All the children of the order are in good health. Two of them—boys—with the consent and approbation of their parents, have been apprenticed to good trades. Three girls, having completed their education, have been received into most respectable families as governesses. Those approaching the age when they should mingle with the busy world, have been sedulously attended to, and the governess of the institution reports very favourably of their progress. It is perhaps scarcely necessary to repeat, that all the children are being most carefully trained under the rules of the system of education of which our venerated president is the author; and that when they leave school, they do so with a thorough knowledge of their duties, responsibilities, and passions, as men and women. It is not left to them to acquire knowledge through the channels of vice or sad experience, but are taught everything that it is proper a human being should know, and which, when unwisely withheld from them, they are sure inevitably to obtain surreptitiously.” (Hear, hear.)

No. 45 closed his books, and sat down. The president then tapped three times very significantly, and every member simultaneously began writing something on a slip of paper, which he passed to those seated near the centre of the table, who deposited it in a beautiful urn standing before them. Presently the president said:

“No. 25, ring the bell.”

The member so requested pulled a bell-handle, which rested in a groove in the table, and in a moment the part of the table whereon the urn stood opened, and when it closed again the urn had disappeared.

The members then indulged in a general and unrestrained conversation, which continued until the compartment in the table again opened, and closed again, but this the bearing upon its surface not only the urn, but a little army of well-filled decanters, jugs of hot water, wine-glasses, goblets, tumblers, lemons, cigars, tobacco, pipes, and all the etceteras indispensable in convivial hours. As soon as each member had filled his glass, and selected his pipe or cigar, the president again tapped, and there was again the most profound silence.

“I declare the Good and Welfare opened!” cried the president—and up sprang every man to his feet—“and give you the loyal and constitutional toast of our order—‘MERRY GIRLS, MERRY WIVES, AND PLENTY OF THEM’.”

This sentiment was received with uproarious applause, and then each member in the drinking department did as he liked. Harmony, in the shape of song, jest, and anecdote, then commenced, and at the end of an hour the hammer again sounded, and, as before, there was a dead silence.

“Gentlemen,” said the president, before whom stood a steaming tumbler of brandy-and-water, “we will once more proceed to business, if you please. The only address I have to make to you, is one of congratulation. We are in a prosperous condition, and every one of us as moral as the state of society and our own peculiar organizations will allow us. But I must, nevertheless, recommend to you moderation in all your enjoyments. The true end of life is to live as long as possible, and at the same time be as happy as possible. This cannot be attained without temperance—no true epicurist is intemperate. Therefore I warn you, in the language of the poet, to—

‘Beware the poison in the cup of gold,
The asp among the flowers.’

In the shape of information I have only to communicate that a royal commission has been appointed to inquire into our marriage laws, and, from the elevated rank which many of you hold, I have no doubt you will be called upon to give evidence as to their operation among the higher grades of society. I entertain not the slightest doubt that you will denounce their stringency as oppressive and vicious, and show that, as far as morality is concerned, they are wholly inoperative. Adultery should not be the sole ground of divorce, as some of you, perhaps to your sorrow, can too well advance. But this is delicate ground, and each member must, if called upon, act as a true knight and a man of experience and common sense. The bill legalizing marriages with a deceased wife’s sister, will be again introduced, and it will be for the interest and welfare of legitimate children that those among you who are legislators should give it your earnest and undivided support. On general grounds it is entitled to—it demands—our cordial support and sympathy, for, not trenching upon the objection as to affinity of blood, it does not tend to promote any deterioration of race, to guard against which is one of the true ends of marriage; if it were not so, the necessity for the enactment of laws at all would be obviated, and, like the lower animals, we ought only to obey the impulses of instinct. As to the moral features, nothing novel is introduced: sexual connection between husbands and their wives’ sisters has been practised from the earliest ages, and the opinion of the multitude does not condemn the union as repulsive. Legalize such marriages, and you at once put an end to the majority of illicit connections between husbands and their deceased wives’ sisters, for few women, unless intoxicated by desire, will voluntarily throw an obstacle in the way of marriage with the man with whom she is pleased; and, as you all know, surrender of person without the sanction of the body is rarely followed by the man performing either his given or implied promise. But this also is a question for your own private judgments, and to that tribunal I confidently commit it. It now becomes my duty to receive the propositions members may make.”

No one spoke; indeed, there rather seemed to be a prevailing disposition to be more hilarious than methodical; but the president arose, and announced that he had a new member to propose in the room of their lately deceased one. This aroused the attention of every one, and the president commenced:

“Gentlemen, my new member, or rather candidate, is a gentleman and a soldier. Like us all, he worships more at the shrine of Venus and Bacchus than those more sacred ones which we are pledged to respect. He is in every respect a man of honour, and one in whom we may place the utmost reliance. He graduated at Cambridge, where perhaps he won more hearts than academic laurels; but, as a soldier, he acquired imperishable renown in those hard-fought battles on the north-west frontier of India, which perhaps, more than any other modern ones, have served to consolidate the power of Britain in that interesting and remarkable portion of the globe. His valour was so distinguished that, unsolicited, it obtained for him a captain’s commission in her Majesty’s Guards; and in that celebrated corps he established, or, I should say, confirmed, his reputation as an officer and a gentleman. Among the ladies he is an universal favourite; and, from an intimate knowledge of his career and conduct, I can confidently say that I do not know of an instance in which he has behaved with the slightest heartlessness, or been guilty of the least want of principle. He is a gay man, but a chivalric one; and a recent exhibition of his spirit on behalf of a persecuted maiden, enables me to announce his name—Captain Morris. He is now, as you are aware, owing to his duel, in a kind of abeyance, or prudent retirement; but, wishing to

have him amongst us, and aware that I could safely trust both you and him, I have brought him with me tonight. I now, therefore, beg to propose him as a member of our order.”

A dozen rose to second the nomination, and the election by ballot was ordered to be proceeded with. While it was going on Wiggles drew Smythe into a corner, and, after a brief, but emphatic conversation, extracted from him a promise not to oppose the election by throwing in his black ball. When the box was examined it was found that Walter had been unanimously elected, and the result was received with loud applause. Order having been restored, the president tapped, and a slip of paper being transmitted to the regions below, through the medium of the urn, the gas-lights in the room were suddenly lowered, so as to veil it in comparative darkness.

“Tilers, admit the applicant at the door,” cried the president. And Walter in a few seconds was conducted to where his proposer stood ready to receive him.

“Captain Morris,” said the president, “I have the honour to announce to you that you have been unanimously elected a member of this order; but to complete your success it is necessary that you should answer a few questions, and’ enter into an engagement, as a man of honour, to preserve our secrets inviolable. We do not ask for oaths, because we are convinced of their inefficacy, compared with the plighted word of a gentleman, and more especially one who has carried arms in the service of his country. As a preliminary, I must request you to listen to the general rules, which our secretary will recite to you. No. 45, inform Captain Morris of the nature of our general laws.”

No. 45 then recited the following, as glibly as a well-conned lesson:

“Our motto is, the greatest amount of pleasure with the least amount of pain; and the objects of our association are, mutual assistance in cases of distress, and the promotion of enjoyment in all its phases. To carry out these views, we have acknowledged, and do abide by, the following maxims and rules, namely, that— “Love is the keenest, noblest, and most glorious of all earthly pleasures: it is the spring from whence bubbles the pure waters of hope, and the sunbeam that gives them light and beauty. All nature acknowledges its sovereign sway; therefore, it is one of the lords of the universe. Difficulties, however, attend the gratification of its impulses, and to overcome them men often subject themselves to the gravest accusations, and plunge into dilemmas from which they can only be extricated by the charity and forbearance of their fellow-men. To afford this assistance, and, at the same time, to refine the passions of mankind, is the primary regulation of this society. And to develop the intention in its full integrity, we have adopted eight cardinal sentiments, upon which we base our laws:

“1. Love is a physical pleasure, out of which—from association and mutual agreement of organization—proceed the spiritualities that endear a man to a woman, and a woman to a man, independent of the sexual connection.

“2. The sensual estimate of woman is the natural one, but with civilized races it is refined by marriage and other conventional necessities; therefore, it is proper to respect all the moral and social laws which have been enacted for the control and subjection of the appetites to salutary restraint.

“3. Mere coition is not love, but, being necessary to the health of the body, is, when enjoyed in moderation, a fundamental necessity.

“4. Man having the life-giving power, polygamy does not outrage any natural law or sentiment of the human mind; but in the densely-populated countries the institution, for political purposes, is disallowed; and hence are formed illicit connections, which no human laws can repress; and the responsibilities attached to them being thrown upon the parties concerned, it follows that too much discretion, prudence and generosity, cannot be associated with these indulgences.

“5. The union of the sexes being indispensable to the propagation of the species, regulations placing obstacles in its way are illegal and repugnant to nature.

“6. Promiscuous intercourse is a brutish and abominable outrage upon health and decency, therefore a woman should only enjoy the society of the man to whom she is engaged, either for life or a limited term. But as extraordinary emergencies will arise, such as physical incapacity in the man, or such a bankruptcy of conduct that he is no longer worthy of her favours: then the woman, whether married by law or promise, is at liberty to choose another mate.

“7. As society, as at present constituted, is imperfect, and human beings are not all formed alike, all errors should be viewed as mildly and extenuatingly as possible; and those of woman, owing to her inefficient training, more so than those of the stronger animal, man.

“8. Drunkenness, gluttony, and excesses in love are positive crimes.

“With these views, and believing them to be correct, we have formed ourselves into a society for the promotion of the gratification of all our propensities and faculties, and their confinement within the bounds of reason, propriety, and social convenience. To develop our objects, we have pledged ourselves to be bound by the following regulations:

“1. To meet once a fortnight. 2. To contribute rateably to the pecuniary necessities of the order; but the amount subscribed within one year not to exceed 100*l*. 3. To keep the secrets of the order. 4. To abstain from the discussion of theological or political subjects. 5. Each member in turn to deliver a lecture on the philosophy of the Epicureans. 6. To defend each other from the slanders of the world. 7. To promote the education of the illegitimate children of the members of the order. 8. To contribute by general vote towards the damages and costs which any member may have sustained in his commerce with women. 9. To obey the mandate of the chair.”

No. 45 ceased, and the president then said:

“Captain Morris, you have heard the rules of our order—are you willing to subscribe to them?”

“I am.”

“Will you promise, on your honour as a gentleman, not to divulge any of its secrets?”

“I do.”

“Will you, at all times and at all hazards, protect women, whether young or old, from outrage or injury?”

“I will.”

“Then, Captain Morris, I have to announce your complete election to our vacant number, by which you will only henceforth be recognized here; and long and worthily may you enjoy it. After you have passed your noviciate, you will be still further initiated into the mysteries of our order; but before that the shall have elapsed, you will have discovered that we are no anchorites, but that our motto is the right royal one: ‘Eat, drink and love; the rest’s not worth a straw.’ A health, gentlemen, to the new Knight of the Round Table.”

The lights shot up and blazed brilliantly, and Walter, and uproarious cheers, was conducted to his seat, from the arms of which, at the same time, the sign of mourning for its late occupant was removed. Merriment then became the order of the evening, and, and flashes of wit and floods of eloquence from lips, the names of whose owners are treasured by the multitude, Walter yielded to the charm of the excitement, and soon became one of the gayest of the gay. At midnight the member whose turn it was to deliver a lecture, read a paper on the worship of the ancients of idols, symbolizing the creed of the obscene god Priapus; and at its conclusion there was held an animated but lascivious conversation, interspersed and enlivened by songs and jests. At four in the morning the president rose, and as a hint to break up, gave the standing toast of the order—“Merry girls, merry wives, and plenty of them”.