

23 July 1962

You might like to hear at your last meeting this week some of the description of the Ladder given at the end of Castiglione's *Courtier* in the Elizabethan translation. But first we must set the scene.

The little city of Urbino, on the side of the Appenines towards the Gulf of Venice, in the midst of fruitful country, enjoyed the benefit of government by good princes, so that through all the wars of Italy it had at least a spell of freedom. This was largely due to the famous Duke Frederick who earned such rewards from Pope and Emperor as Captain General of the Church that he was able to spend his money freely for the benefit of his subjects.

This man among his other deedes praise-worthie, in the hard and sharpe situation of Urbin buylt a Palace, to the opinion of many men, the fairest that was to bee found in all Italie, and so furnished it with all necessarie implementes belonging thereto, that it appeared not a Palace, but a Citie in forme of a Palace, and that not onelye with ordinarie matters, as Silver plate, hangings for Chambers of very rich cloth of Golde, of Silke and other like, but also for sightlines: and to decke it out withall, placed there a wondrous number of auncient Images, of Marble and Mettall, very excellent paintings and Instruments of Musicke of all sortes, and nothing would he have there but what was most rare and excellent.

He died at the age of 60, leaving a ten-year old son who, though similarly 'blessed with invincible courage', became crippled at the age of twenty. He continued, however, to enjoy the favour of Pope Julius II, and his wife, Lady Elizabeth Gonzaga, was renowned throughout Italy as a wise and virtuous lady. Therefore they used to invite to stay at the Court the most noble and valiant guests, who during the day would practise feats of chivalry.

And upon this Tilt, at Tourney, in playing at all sorts of weapon, also in inventing devices in pastimes, in Musicke. Finally in all exercises meete for noble Gentlemen, every man strived to show himselfe such a one, as might deserve to bee judged worthie of so noble assembly.

Therefore were all the houres of the day divided into honourable and pleasant exercises, as well of the bodie, as of the minde. But because the Duke used continually, by reason of his infirmitie, soone after Supper to goe to his rest, everie man ordinarily, at that houre drew where the Dutchesse was, the Ladie Elizabeth Gonzaga where also continually was the Ladie Emilia Pia, who for that shee was indued with so lively a wit and judgement, as you know, seemed the maistresse and ringleader of all the company, and that everie man at her received understanding and courage.

There was then to bee heard pleasant communications and merie conceits, and in everie mans countenance a man might perceive painted a loving jocundnesse. So that this house truely might wel be called the very Mansion place of mirth and joy. And I beleeve it was never so tasted in other place, what manner a thing the sweete conversation is that is occasioned of an amiable and loving company, as it was once there.'

The four dialogues of the *Courtier* began the night after the departure of Julius II from Urbino on the 7th March 1507. Castiglione himself had been in England where, as proxy, he had received from Henry VII the Companionship of the Garter for his Lord the Duke, but he had returned to Urbino two days before. Among the well-known men who were there and who

will be mentioned in the course of the dialogue were the Lord Octavian, later Doge of Genoa; Master Peter Bembo, a Venetian humanist, afterwards Papal Secretary and Cardinal, then aged 37; great friend, Lord Julian de Medici, the son of Il Magnifico, later immortalised by Michaelangelo in the Chapel of San Lorenzo where 'Night' and 'Day' lie at his feet; Lord Caesar Gonzaga, kinsman of the Duchess, aged about 32; and the young Lord Gaspar Pallavicin aged 21. This amusing young misogynist and the lady Emilia with whom he was constantly sparring, have been thought to be the models for Shakespeare's Benedict and Beatrice, in *Measure for Measure*.[†]

The conversation on the first night began in desultory fashion with the Lady Emilia instructed to invite those present to speak of their experiences of love, but soon developed into an exchange of views about the characteristics that would most be required for a man who would make a good courtier. When several had spoken in a manner which reminds one very much of Ophelia's account of Hamlet, 'the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword; the expectancy and rose of the fair state, the glass of fashion and the mould of form', the Lord Octavian pointed out that these *external* characteristics of the courtier were insufficient. The courtier's main duty would be to advise his Prince; for Princes of all men had least opportunity for instruction in wisdom and yet their powers and influence for good or for evil were very great. After much debate concerning how this *goodness and wisdom* required of the Courtier could be come by, Master Peter Bembo (having been called on by the Duchess to speak), began to give his account of the Ladder of Love, on the fourth and last night of the discussion. Since the argument was long and was much interrupted, you must be content just now with hearing the end of the account, beginning at the fourth step:

When our Courtier therefore shall bee come to this point, although hee may bee called a good and happie lover, in respect of them that be drowned in the miserie of sensuall love, yet will I not have him to set his hart at rest, but boldly proceede farther, following the high way after his guide, that leadeth him to the point of true happinesse. And thus in steade of going out of his wit with thought, as he must doe that will consider the bodily beautie, hee may come into his wit, to beholde the Beautie that is seene with the eyes of the Minde, which then begin to be sharpe and throughly seeing, when the eyes of the bodie lose the floure of their sightlinesse.

IV

Therefore the soul ridde of vices, purged with the studies of true Philosophie, occupied in spirituall, and exercised in matters of Understanding, turning her to the beholding of her owne substance, as it were raised out of a most deepe sleepe, openeth the eyes that all men have, and few occupie, and seeth in her selfe a shining beame of that Light, which is the true image of the Anglike Beautie communicated to her, whereof she also partneth with the bodie a feeble shadow.

[†] Note. Of the appearance of some of these distinguished people in their youth we can know something from Raphael's paintings, for his father Giovanni Santi was for many years Court Painter at Urbino. The Duchess Elizabeth gave the boy his first commissions; portraits of her and of the Lady Emilia, and of the heir to the Duchy are to be found, as well as the famous portrait of Castiglione himself now in the Louvre. Moreover it is said that the author of the *Courtier* discussed with Raphael the composition of the mural in the Vatican, 'The School of Philosophy', and is shown there in the character of Pythagoras, speaking to the painter on the right of the fresco.

V Therefore waxed blinde about earthly matters, is made most quicke of sight about heavenly. And otherwhile when the stirring vertues of the bodie are withdrawne alone through earnest beholding, either fast bound through sleepe, when she is not hindred by them, she feeleth a certaine far-off perfume of the right Angelike Beautie, and ravished with the shining of that Light, beginneth to be inflamed, and so greedely followeth after, that (in a manner) she waxeth dronken and beside her selfe, for coveting to couple her self with it, having found (to her weening) the footsteps of God, in the beholding of whom (as in her happie ende) she seeketh to settle her selfe.

VI And therefore burning in this most happie flame, she ariseth to the noblest part of her which is the Understanding, and there no more shadowed with the darke night of earthly matters, seeth the Heavenly Beautie: but yet doth she not for all that enjoy it altogether perfectly, because she beholdeth it onely in her particular understanding, which can not conceive the passing great Universal Beautie.

Whereupon not throughly satisfied with this benefit, Love giveth unto the soule a greater happinesse. For like as through the particular beautie of one bodie Hee guideth her to the Universal Beautie of all bodies: Even so in the least degree of perfection through particular understanding Hee guideth her to the Universall Understanding.

VII Thus the soule kindled in the most Holy Fire of true Heavenly Love, fleeth to couple her selfe with the nature of Angels, and not onely cleane forsaketh sense, but hath no more neede of the discourse of reason, for being chaunged into an Angell, she understandeth all thinges that may be understood: and without any veil or cloud, she seeth the maine sea of the pure Heavenly Beautie and receiveth it into her, and enjoyeth the soveraigne happinesse, that can not be comprehended of the senses.

Since therefore the beauties, which we dayly see with these our dimme eyes in bodies subject to corruption, that neverthesse be nothing els but dreames and most thinne shadowes of beautie, seeme unto us so well favored and comely, that oftentimes they kindle in us a most burning fire, and with such delight, that we reckon no happinesse may bee compared to it, that wee feele otherwhile throughe the onely Love which the beloved countenance of a woman casteth at us.

What happie wonder, what blessed abashment may we reckon that to bee, that taketh the soules, which come to have a sight of the Heavenly Beauty? What sweet flame? What sweete incense may a man believe that to be, which ariseth of the fountaine of the soveraigne and right Beautie? Which is the originall of all other Beautie which never encreaseth nor diminisheth, alwaies beautifull, and of it selfe, as well on the one part as on the other, most simply, only like it selfe, and partner of none other, but in such wise beautifull, that all other beautifull thinges be beautifull, because they be partners of the beautie of it.

This is the Beautie unseparable from y high Bountie, which with Her voice calleth and draweth to Her all thinges: and not onely to the indowed with Understanding giveth Understanding, to the reasonable reason, to the sensuall sense and appetite to live, but also partaketh with plantes and stones (as a print of her Self) stirring, and the natural instinct of their properties.

VIII So much therefore is this Love greater and happier than others, as the cause that stirreth it, is more excellent. And therefore, as common fire tryeth gold and maketh it fine, so this most Holy Fire in soules destroyeth and consumeth whatsoever there is mortall in them, and relieveth and maketh beautifull the heavenly part, which at the first by reason of the sense was deade and buried in them.

This is the great Fire in the which (the Poets write) that Hercules was buried on the toppe of the mountaine Octa: and through that consuming with fire, after his death was holy and immortall.

This is the fiery bush of Moses: The devided tongues of fire: the inflamed Chariot of Helias: which doubleth grace and happinesse in their soules that be worthie to see it, when they forsake this earthly basenesse, and flee up unto heaven.

Let us therefore bend all our force and thoughtes of soule to this most Holy Light, that sheweth us the way which leadeth to heaven: and after it, putting off the affections we were clad at our coming downe, let us climbe up the staires, which at the lowermost steppe have the shadow of sensuall beautie, to the high mansion place where the Heavenly, amiable and right Beautie dwelleth, which lyeth hidden in the innermost secretes of God, lest unhallowed eyes shoulde come to the sight of it: and there shall wee finde a most happie end for our desires, true rest for our travels, certaine remedie for miseries, a most healthfull medicine for sicknesse, a most sure haven in y troublesome stormes of the tempestuous sea of this life.

What tongue mortall is there then (O most Holy Love) that can sufficiently prayse Thy worthinesse? Thou most beautifull, most good, most wise, art derived of the unitie of the Heavenly Beautie, goodnesse and wisdom, and therein dost Thou abide, and unto it through it (as in a circle) turnest about.

Thou the most sweete bond of the world, a meane betwixt heavenly and earthly thinges, with a bountifull temper bendest the high vertues to the government of the lower, and turning backe the mindes of mortall men to their beginning, couplest them with it.

Thou with agreement bringest the Elements in one, stirrest Nature to bring forth, and that which ariseth and is borne for the succession of the life. Thou bringest severed matters into one, to the unperfect givest perfection, to the unlike likenesse, to enimite amitie, to the earth fruites, to the Sea calmnesse, to the heaven, lively Light.

Thou art the Father of true pleasures, of grace, peace, lowlinesse, and good will, enemy to rude wildnesse, and sluggishnesse: to be short, the beginning, and end of all goodnesse.

And forsomuch as Thou delightest to dwell in the floure of beautifull bodies and beautifull soules, I suppose that Thy abiding place is now here among us, and from above otherwhile shewest Thy Self a little to the eyes and mindes of them that bee not worthie to see Thee.

Therefore vouchsafe (Lorde) to hearken to our prayers, pour Thy Self into our harts, and with the brightnesse of Thy most Holy Fire lighten our darkenesse, and like a trustie guide in this blinde mase shew us the right way: correct the falsehood of the senses, and after long wandering in vanitie, give us the right and sound Joy. Make us to smell those spirituall savours that quicken the vertues of the Understanding, and to heare the heavenly harmony so tunable, that no discorde of passion takes place any more in us. Make us dronken with the bottomlesse fountaine of contentment, that alwaies doth delight, and never giveth fill, and that giveth a smacke of the right Blisse unto who so drinketh of the renuing and cleare water thereof. Purge with the shining beames of Thy Light our eyes from mistie ignorance, that they may no more set by mortall beautie, and well perceive that the thinges which at the first they thought them selves to see, be not in deede, and those that they saw not, to be in effect. Accept our soules, that bee offered unto Thee for a sacrifice. Burne them in the lively flame that wasteth all grosse filthinesse, that after they be cleane sundered from the bodie, they may bee coupled with an everlasting and most sweete bond to the Heavenly Beautie. And wee severed from ourselves, may bee changed like right lovers into the Beloved, and after we be drawn from the earth, admitted to the feast of the Angels, where fed with immortall ambrosia and nectar, in the end we may die a most happie and lively death, as in times past died the fathers of olde time,

whose soules with most fervent zeale of beholding, Thou didst hale from the bodie, and coupledst them with God.

When Bembo had hitherto spoken with such vehemencie, that a man woulde have thought him (as it were) ravished and beside himself, hee stood still without once moving, holding his eyes towarde heaven as astonied: when the Ladie Emilia which together with the rest gave most diligent care to this talke, tooke him by the plaite of his garment, and plucking him a little said.

Take heede (maister Peter) that these thoughts make not your soule also to forsake the bodie.

Madam, answered maister Peter, it should not be the first miracle that Love hath wrought in me. Then the Dutchesse and all the rest began a fresh to bee instant upon maister Bembo that he would proceede once more in his talke, and every one thought he felt in his minde (as it were) a certaine sparkell of that godly Love that pricked him, and they all coveted to heare farther: but maister Bembo,

My Lords (quoth he) I have spoken what the Holy furie of Love hath (unsought for) indited to me: now that (it seemeth) He inspireth mee no more, I wot not what to say. And I thinke verily that Love will not have His secretes discovered any farther, nor hat the Courtier should passe the degree that His pleasure is I should shew him, and therefore it is not perhaps lawfull to speake any more of this matter.

Surely, quoth the Dutchesse, if the not yong Courtier be such a one, that he can follow this way which you have shewed him, of right he ought to be satisfied with so great a happinesse and not to envie the younger.

Then the Lord Cesar Gonzaga, the way (quoth he) that loadeth to this happinesse is so steepe (in my mind) that (I believe) it will be much adoe to get to it.

The Lord Gaspar saide: I believe it be hard to get up for men, but unpossible for women.

The Ladie Emilia laughed and saide: If ye fall so often to offend us, I promise you, ye shall be no more forgiven.

The Lord Gaspar answered: It is no offence to you, in saying, that womens soules be not so purged from passions as mens be, nor so accustomed in beholding, as maister Peter hath saide it is necessary for them to be, that will taste of the Heavenly Love.

Therefore it is not read that ever woman hath had this grace: but many men have had it, as Plato, Socrates, Plotinus and many others: and a number of our holy fathers, as Saint Francis, in whom a fervent spirite of Love imprinted the most holy seale of five woundes.

And nothing but the vertue of Love coulde hale up Saint Paule the Apostle to the sight of those secretes, which is not lawfull for man to speake of, nor shewe Saint Stephen the heavens open.

Here answered the Lord Julian. In this point men shall nothing passe women, for Socrates himselfe doth confesse that all mysteries of Love which he knew, were opened unto him by a woman, which was Diotima. And the Angell that with the fire of Love imprinted the five woundes in Saint Francis, hath also made some women worthie of the same print in our age.

You must remember moreover that Saint Marie Magdalen had many faultes forgiven her, because she loved much: and perhaps with no lesse grace than Saint Paule, was she many times through Angeliike Love haled up to the third heaven. And many others (as I shewed you yesterday more at large) that for love of the name of Christ have not passed upon life, nor feared torments, nor any other kind of death how terrible and cruel so ever it were. And they were not (as maister Peter will have his Courtier to be) aged, but soft and tender maidens, and in the age, when he saith that sensuall love ought to be borne withall in men.

The Lord Gaspar began to prepare himself to speake to the Dutchesse. Of this (quoth

shee) let maister Peter be judge, and the matter shall stand to his verdict, Whether women be not as meete for Heavenlie Love as men. But because the plea betweene you may happen (to) be too long, it shall not be amis to defer it until to morrow.

Nay, to night, quoth the Lord Cesar Gonzaga. And how can it be to night, quoth the Dutchesse?

The Lord Cesar answered: Because it is day already, and shewed her the light that began to enter in at the clefts of the windowes.

Then every man arose upon his feete with much wonder, because they had not thought that the reasonings had lasted longer than the accustomed wont, saving only that they were begon much later, and with their pleasantnesse had deceived so the Lordes mindes, that they wist not of the going away of the houres. And not one of them felt any hevinesse of sleepe in his eyes, the which often happeneth when a man is up after his accustomed houre to goe to bed.

When the windowes then were opened on the side of the Pallaice that hath his prospect towarde the high top of Mount Catri, they sawe already in the East a faire morning like unto the colour of roses, and all starres voyded, saving only the sweete Governesse of heaven, Venus which keepeth the boundes of the night and day, from which appeared to blowe a sweete blast, that filling the aire with a biting colde, began to quicken the tunable notes of the prettie birdes, among the hushing woodes of the hils at hand.

Whereupon they all taking their leave with reverence of the Dutchesse, departed toward their lodgings without torche, the light of the day sufficing.

(From *The Book of the Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione,
translated by Sir Thomas Hoby, Dent)

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