CHAPTER I

THE ROMANCE OF CHIVALRY IN THE SPANISH PENINSULA BEFORE THE YEAR 1500

LAST year[1] being the tercentenary of the death of Cervantes, many who had hitherto known *Don Quixote* only from pictorial illustrations were no doubt tempted to make acquaintance with the text of that immortal masterpiece. They cannot have read very far without realising the existence of a body of literature almost certainly unknown to them before. If they were methodical enough to read the preface, they would gather that *Don Quixote* was, "from beginning to end, an attack upon the books of chivalry," and if they were persevering enough to read to the last chapter they would see Cid Hamet Benengeli hang up his pen, satisfied and proud at having accomplished his desire of "delivering over to the detestation of mankind the false and foolish tales of the books of chivalry." In the course of their reading, they would acquire some vague idea as to what is meant by these books of chivalry, more especially from "the diverting and important scrutiny which the curate and the barber made in the library of the Ingenious Gentleman[2]," and they would form a very precise

[1] 1916. See preface.

[2] *Don Quixote*, pt I. ch. VI. Throughout these pages Ormsby's translation is used for all quotations from *Don Quixote*; his rendering of *cura*—really a *parish priest*—is therefore retained outside these quotations for the sake of uniformity.

estimate of their defects and demerits from the judgment delivered by the Canon of Toledo in his conversation with the curate when, to his great amazement, he came across Don Quixote "enchanted" and imprisoned in the cage[1]:

To tell the truth, señor curate, I for my part consider what they call books of chivalry to be mischievous to the State; and though, led by idle and false taste, I have read the beginnings of almost all that have been printed, I never could manage to read any one of them from beginning to end; for it seems to me they are all more or less the same thing; and one has nothing more in it than another; this no more than that....And though it may be the chief object of such books to amuse, I do not know how they can succeed, when they are so full of such monstrous nonsense. For the enjoyment the mind feels must come from the beauty and harmony which it perceives or contemplates in the things that the eye or the imagination brings before it; and nothing that has any ugliness or disproportion about it can give any pleasure. What beauty, then, or what proportion of the parts to the whole, or of the whole to the parts, can there be in a book or fable where a lad of sixteen cuts down a giant as tall as a tower and makes two halves of him as if he was an almond cake? And when they want to give us a picture of a battle, after having told us that there are a million of combatants on the side of the enemy, let the hero of the book be opposed to them, and we have perforce to believe, whether we like it or not, that the said knight wins the victory by the single might of his strong arm. And then, what shall we say of the facility with which a born queen or empress will give herself over into the arms of some unknown wandering knight? What mind, that is not wholly barbarous and uncultured, can find pleasure in reading of how a great tower full of knights sails away across the sea like a ship with a fair wind, and will be to-night in Lombardy and to-morrow morning in the land of

[1] Pt I. ch. XLVII.

Prester John of the Indies, or some other that Ptolemy never described nor Marco Polo saw? And if, in answer to this, I am told that the authors of books of the kind write them as fiction, and therefore are not bound to regard niceties of truth, I would reply that fiction is all the better the more it looks like truth, and gives the more pleasure the more probability and possibility there is about it. Plots in fiction should be wedded to the understanding of the reader, and be constructed in such a way that, reconciling impossibilities, smoothing over difficulties, keeping the mind on the alert, they may surprise, interest, divert, and entertain, so that wonder and delight joined may keep pace one with the other; all which he will fail to effect who shuns verisimilitude and truth to nature, wherein lies the perfection of writing. I have never yet seen any book of chivalry that puts together a connected plot complete in all its numbers, so that the middle agrees with the beginning, and the end with the beginning and middle; on the contrary, they construct them with such a multitude of members that it seems as though they meant to produce a chimera or monster rather than a well-proportioned figure. And besides all this they are harsh in their style, incredible in their achievements, licentious in their amours, uncouth in their courtly speeches, prolix in their battles, silly in their arguments, absurd in their travels, and, in short, wanting in everything like intelligent art; for which reason they deserve to be banished from the Christian commonwealth as a worthless breed.

The Canon's criticism is not an attractive advertisement of our subject, which is the very romances of chivalry here so roundly condemned. These books represent a revival in the Spanish Peninsula, almost entirely within the limits of the sixteenth century, of a class of literature which had originated, flourished, and declined, at a much earlier period elsewhere. Yet in spite of the justness of the Canon's censure, they occupied,

so long as their vogue lasted, a most prominent position in the realm of polite literature, especially in their native land, but generally too in the rest of cultured Europe—Italy, France, Germany, Holland and England—over which they spread. Two of them, *Amadis of Gaul* and *Palmerin of England*, were excepted even by Cervantes from the general condemnation which he levelled against their class, and have since been recognised as respectively a Spanish and a Portuguese classic. We are therefore not without excuse if we devote a few hours to considering the origin and nature of these romances, their development within the Peninsula, and their extension abroad.

The revival of which we have spoken began with the publication of the romance *Amadis de Gaula*. It is still uncertain whether this was first printed at the end of the fifteenth or the beginning of the sixteenth century; but although it was not, as the curate in *Don Quixote*[1] had heard say, "the first book of chivalry printed in Spain," it certainly was the father of the "innumerable progeny[2]" which sprang up in Spanish and Portuguese literature during the succeeding hundred years. To understand properly the new literary movement constituted by this revival, we must first of all consider briefly the original development of the romance of chivalry, and then bridge over as far as possible the interval between the two. Fortunately one portion of our task is lightened by the fact that the original movement concerns our own literature very nearly: its general outlines are therefore well known to all in any way

[1] Pt I. ch. VI. [2] Pt II. ch. I.

interested in letters. A few facts may however be recalled, and certain features emphasised, for the purpose of comparison at a later stage.

The literature of chivalry which flourished in western Europe during the Middle Ages is nothing more or less than a natural evolution, an inevitable degeneration, of that wealth of epic poetry localised in northern Gaul during the period following the Frankish invasion. At the end of the eleventh century, as the battle of Hastings reminds us, the French *chanson de geste*, representing the epic material crystallised around national or local heroes, still inspired the soldier on the battlefield. During the twelfth century the scene of its appeal began to extend from its normal theatre, the castle with its assembled barons, to the market place, where it served to amuse the populace at fair or festival. From the middle of the thirteenth century it descended one step further: from a public entertainment it became a private recreation; it was no longer sung or declaimed in the baronial halls or open squares, but read in the seclusion of the chamber. Various changes accompanied the increase in the numbers, and deterioration in the quality, of the audience. The *trouvère*, in earlier times often a soldier, like those to whom he sang, became a mere man of letters, retailing material to his inferior substitute, the *jongleur*, who passed from town to town and from village to village, supplying the popular wants and therefore influenced by the popular tastes. When the *jongleur* ceased to attract audiences, and his wares were no longer recited but read, this material, originally in assonanced, then in various forms of rhyming verse,

according to the period, degenerated into prose, and produced the romance of chivalry properly so called.

Obviously this stage was not reached without considerable developments in the spirit and substance of the original epics. The chief developments in the substance were its simplification through the formation of cycles, and its subsequent amplification through the addition of purely invented matter—for both of which the later *jongleurs* of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were mainly responsible. Travelling as they did from place to place, and depending on popular favour, they were under the necessity of making the smaller and the local legends of general appeal, and this they did by absorbing, assimilating, fusing them with the larger and national legends. Hence a vast and diverse mass of material became reduced roughly to the three cycles of Jean Bodel's well-known couplet:

> Ne sont que trois matières à nul homme attendant,
> De France et de Bretaigne et de Rome le grant.

In the formation of these cycles much of the apparent historical value of the epic was sacrificed, and so, when the public grew accustomed to the *jongleurs'* usual stock-in-trade, and began to clamour for new sensations, these gentlemen had little scruple in extending their repertory out of their own imagination, thus bringing us nearer to the romantic fiction of less remote times.

The division into three cycles indicated in Bodel's couplet corresponds to a threefold origin of the epic material, and it is therefore natural to find that each cycle had a characteristic spirit of its own. The *matière de Rome* is the least important of the three groups, and

along with all that relates to the eastern Mediterranean may be neglected for our present purpose; from that source came little more than the setting of some of the romances we are to consider. The keynote of the *matière de France*, which centred round the person of Charlemagne—a Teutonic seed germinating in the soil of feudal and Christian France—is a lofty idea of honour and sacrifice in the service of God and the Emperor, and a high sense of the value of an oath of fealty, for the breaking of which, no matter what the provocation or justification, there could never be any proper atonement. The *matière de Bretagne*, of Celtic origin, is the most important for us at the present moment; fortunately too it is the most important for our own literature, and its consequent familiarity, in its various forms, to all English people who have any literary interests whatever, renders unnecessary a description of the Breton lays or the early romances of chivalry which developed from them and the corresponding French *chansons de geste*.

The French *trouvères* had made themselves complete masters of the *matière de Bretagne* by the middle of the thirteenth century, and in appropriating the myths of the passionate, imaginative and idealistic Celts, they were confronted with new and strange elements: the fantastic, the mysterious, the marvellous.

Woman had played but a minor part in their native cycle, but in the *Tristan* legends there was presented to them the love of woman, illicit but ineluctable, as a feverish, delirious, all-consuming passion; adventures, perilous and marvellous, undertaken for capricious

or for futile reasons—in a word, knight-errantry—were exhibited to them in the legends of the Round Table; a new and strange symbolism and mysticism were introduced with the legend of the Holy Grail.

Much of what was new in the spirit of the Celtic tales was alien to the *trouvère's* own character; consequently it suffered considerable modification in the process of adaptation. The more practical genius of the French *trouvères*—chief among them the matter-of-fact Chrétien de Troyes—in making the *matière de Bretagne* conform to the Christian and feudal standards, stripped it of much of its subtlety and mystery, and the fantastic, the marvellous and the miraculous tended to become merely extravagant, and even at times absurd. At the same time the refining influence of the southern *troubadours* removed much of the savagery or wildness of the French and Celtic cycles; the society became more elegant and luxurious, the material more civilised, more formal, more conventional. But as a result of all this, woman emerged with her status raised, while honour and love were the mainspring of the action, whether in the gorgeous pageants or the strange adventures of the later romances. These are the tales which spread over most of Europe, and with which few people who read at all can avoid becoming to some extent familiar. Here we need only concern ourselves with the study of their fortunes south of the Pyrenees in the Middle Ages, as a necessary step towards understanding the revival which took place there during the sixteenth century.

The growing Christian kingdoms in the north of the Spanish Peninsula had their own epic poetry, *et pour*

cause. But the *cantares de gesta* developed on different lines from the *chansons de geste*. Simple and severe, and free from the influence of the fantastic and marvellous, they retained a reputation for veracity, and were either incorporated in the learned historic or quasi-historic compilations of later times, or else reappeared as the short popular ballads. The way was therefore free for the passage not only of the varied subject-matter of the northern French epic, but also for the varying forms it assumed. That advantage was taken of this is clear from the ballads themselves. In their existing form, it is true, few of them date back even to the fifteenth century; but many of them celebrate the heroes of the Charlemagne cycle, and their present state implies a long ancestry on the other side of the Pyrenees. There were indeed very good reasons why the legends that had collected round Charlemagne should be naturalised there at an early period. Some of them told of wars carried on against the very infidels with whom the Christian kingdoms were contending for their lost inheritance, and the theatre of action of the *Chanson de Roland*, the finest poem in the whole *matière de France*, was in Spain itself. Those who had at heart the interests of the shrine of St James at Compostela in Galicia made the most of these circumstances. Various opinions are held as to the composition of the pseudo-Turpin Chronicle, but it is generally agreed that it was begun, if not altogether written, at Santiago de Compostela. When the pious compilers of that work—in its way a learned book of chivalry—utilised the Charlemagne legends to "boom" the historic associations of the pilgrim-way to the

Apostle's shrine, religion and literature rendered each other mutual services, and literature at any rate has amply repaid any debt it may have incurred. So successful was the pseudo-Turpin Chronicle in Spain that it started a patriotic protest, a national rival, in the fabulous figure of Bernardo del Carpio, victor at Roncesvalles, whose very creation is a testimony to the popularity of the opposite faction. It was from the pseudo-Turpin Chronicle that the author of the *Poema de Fernan Gonçalez*—written in the third quarter of the thirteenth century—drew his list of Carlovingian heroes[1]. To the Charlemagne series belongs a theme incorporated in the thirteenth century *Cronica General*[2] compiled under the direction of Alfonso the Learned: the legend of *Maynete y Galiana*, claimed by some Spanish scholars as a native addition to the cycle. This is the story, which exists in various forms, of Charlemagne's stay in Toledo and his marriage with Galiana, the Moorish King's daughter. Another version of the same story is embedded in the *Gran Conquista de Ultramar*[3], an enormous compilation relating to the Crusades, adapted from the *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum* of William of Tyre, perhaps through the medium of the French *Histoire*

[1] Stanza 352, edition of C. Carroll Marden, 1904:

Carlos [e] Valdouinos, Rroldan e don Ojero,
Terryn e Gualdabuey, (e) Arnald e Oliuero,
Torpyn e don Rrynaldos e el gascon Angelero,
Estol e Salomon e el otrro (su) conpan[n]ero.

[2] Sections 597–599, edition of R. Menéndez Pidal, 1906 (*Neuva Biblioteca de Autores Españoles*, vol. v.), pp. 340–343.

[3] Bk II. ch. XLIII., edition of Gayangos, 1858 (*Biblioteca de Autores Españoles*, vol. XLIV.), pp. 173–185.