



Knights and Knighthood

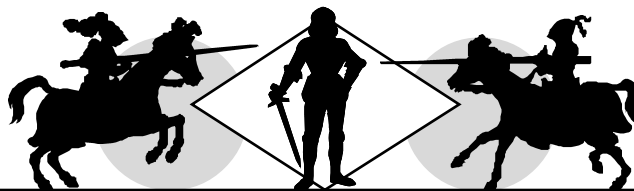
You might think that most young men were knights who just went through some elaborate ceremony and then dashed off on their horses to slay dragons and rescue pretty ladies in distress. It is true that early in the Middle Ages, any noble could make a person a knight and under almost any circumstance. William the Conqueror, who ruled England from 1066 to 1087, once knighted his cook for making a delicious kind of broth! Kings also knighted writers, artists, musicians, and others they saw fit to knight. However, later in the Middle Ages, as the Crusades began, men were knighted and given a religious charge: to fight in the holy wars to retake the Holy Land (Jesus' birthplace) from the Muslim Turks.

After the procedure of knighthood became more refined, a young candidate passed through several stages to become a knight. First, between the ages of seven and ten, he served a lord as a page. From ages fourteen to twenty-one, he was a squire. Then, at age twenty-one, after he had been tested and not found wanting, he became a knight. Most knights came from the upper classes, but a few ambitious peasants managed to break into the ranks of knights.

When a young boy was seven or so, he was sent away from home to the castle or manor house of a great lord to begin his training for knighthood. For seven years, his chief duty was to serve the adults, including the ladies, of the castle. He carried messages, ran errands, and waited at table during meals. The ladies of the court taught him manners and possibly how to sing and play the harp. They might also teach him how to play chess and other board games. Some pages were even taught to read and write, although literacy was not considered important to becoming a good knight.

Much of the page's time was spent outdoors. Here he boxed, wrestled, hunted, and rode with his fellow pages. He also learned to care for horses and practiced with toy swords and shields. Sometimes the miniature swords were blunt on the end. At other times, they were made of wood and therefore relatively harmless. The page's outdoor training was supervised by squires, who were known to show little pity for their young charges.

At age fourteen the page became a squire. Now his responsibilities shifted to accompanying his lord everywhere: on hunting and fishing excursions, on journeys to inspect land and other holdings, to tournaments, and, of course into battle. His primary responsibility was to care for his lord's horses and armor. He saw to it that the horses were properly exercised and groomed, and he kept his armor polished and free from rust.





A squire worked at mastering a variety of weapons. A stuffed dummy called the *quintain* was used for lance practice. But it was a stuffed dummy with an attitude. It was really a swiveling device with a large club at the opposite end of the dummy target. If the squire struck the target dead-center with his lance, things were fine. But if he was a little off-center, the target swung around and the club delivered a sharp blow to the back of the head. Imagine how his fellow squires must have laughed each time the lad missed the target and reaped the unpleasant consequences.

Indoors, the squire saw to his lord's every need. A lord could not even arise in the morning without his squire's assistance. The squire combed his lord's hair and helped him into his clothes. At night, he prepared his bed and helped him undress. He even took a switch or club and drove out the dogs and cats so his lord could sleep undisturbed.

Although a squire was a knight-in-training, he still had a number of duties to perform inside the house. One important job was serving his master at mealtime. Not only was he expected to serve the dishes in the correct order and manner and to carve the meat properly, he had to know the right word for each type of carving. A deer was broken. A swan was lifted. A duck was unbraced. A hen got despoiled. Finally, a peacock ended up disfigured. Considering that the squire did his carving with a sword, you might make a point that every kind of meat he addressed ended up disfigured.

Although a few men were knighted on the battlefield for some brave deed—and this was often how peasants or serfs rose to knighthood—most went through an elaborate ceremony. On the day before, the young man fasted all day. He was bathed, to symbolize washing away his sins—and dressed in a white robe to symbolize service to God and purity of heart. That night, in the quiet of the church, he stood guard over his armor and prayed that he would live up to the expectations associated with knighthood.



A squire became a knight when his lord tapped his shoulder with the flat side of a sword.





In the morning a priest heard the young man's confession and blessed his weapons. The priest reminded him of his duties to the Church once he became a knight. Afterward, the excited squire was dressed for the ceremony. Everything he wore was cloaked in symbolism. His red tunic indicated that he was willing to shed his blood to defend the Church. His white belt or sash stood for a clean life and his white coif (cap or hat) for a pure heart. As a squire he wore spurs of silver, but as a knight he wore gold-covered spurs, which meant he was ready for service. His two-edged sword stood for self-defense and aid to others.

As the young man knelt before a noble—usually the one he had served as a squire—he was questioned about his reasons for becoming a knight. He vowed

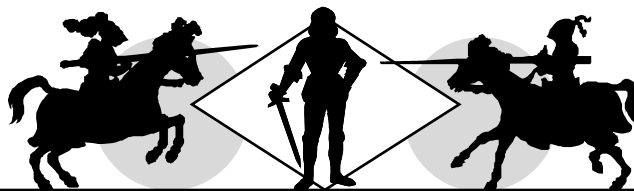
to tell the truth, to faithfully serve the king and the church, to respect women, and never to run from an enemy. His spurs were buckled on and his sword girded around his waist. This done, his lord, in a gesture referred to as the *acolade*, tapped him on each shoulder three times with a sword, declaring: "I dub thee Sir Whoever, knight." The young man was now officially a knight.

Once knighted, the new warrior was ready to do battle and perform good deeds. It was easy to distinguish a knight by his dress. He looked a little like



Three knights of the Middle Ages. Not only did they wear protective gear, their horses did also.

the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*. By the fourteenth century, the typical knight was covered with plate armor from head to foot, some 55 pounds of it. Beneath his suit of armor he wore a hauberk, a garment made of a network of linked iron rings weighing at least another 20 pounds. Over his head he wore a steel helmet, which sometimes included a long metal nose protector. The helmet had a visor that could be raised and lowered to cover the face. Sometimes the only way for an opponent to kill a knight he had unhorsed was to raise his visor and stab him in the face. (Ouch!)





The knight's chief weapons were a lance and a sword. He used the lance in an attempt to either run an enemy through or knock him off his horse. The latter done, he resorted to his sword to finish the fight. His sword was made of fine, hammered steel, and it was the weapon he relied on most. A knight might also carry a dagger, a battle-axe, a mace, or even a flail. A mace was a nasty-looking club with a metal head, often spiked. A flail consisted of an iron ball attached to a chain, which the user swung round-and-round when engaged with an enemy.

Whether in war or peace, a knight was expected to follow a set of rules and customs. A knight's special set of rules was a code of conduct referred to as *chivalry*. *Chivalry* comes from the French word *chevalier*, which means "horseman" or "knight." Although at first applying only to one's skill at horsemanship, by the middle of the twelfth century, the term had taken on a whole new meaning.

The code of chivalry stressed fair play and Christian values. The knight pledged to be brave and fair in battle, to protect the weak, and to display good manners toward women. But while it is true that many knights tried their best to follow the code, just as many ignored it. It was not unusual for knights to rough up and kill serfs or to even rob an occasional church. Chivalry, therefore, was an ideal often more upheld by writers and troubadours than by the knights themselves. Regardless, in an age noted for its barbarism and instability, chivalry did play a role in transforming rough and crude medieval warriors into something resembling gentlemen.

