

The Lost Centaur

It is somewhere set down (or does the legend only exist in the great volume of ought-to-be-writ?) that the young Achilles, nurtured from babyhood by the wise and kindly Cheiron, accustomed to reverence an ideal of human skill and wisdom blent with all that was best and noblest of animal instinct, strength and swiftness, found poor humanity sadly to miss, when at last he was sent forth among his pottering little two-legged peers. Himself alone he had hitherto fancied to be the maimed one, the incomplete; he looked to find the lords of earth even such as these Centaurs; wise and magnanimous atop: below, shod with the lightning, winged with the wind, terrible in the potentiality of the armed heel. Instead of which -- ! How fallen was his first fair hope of the world! And even when reconciled at last to the dynasty of the forked radish, after he had seen its quality tested round the clangorous walls of Troy -- some touch of an imperial disdain ever lingered in his mind for these feeble folk who could contentedly hail him -- him, who had known Cheiron! -- as hero and lord!

Achilles has passed, with the Centaurs and Troy; but the feeling lingers.

Of strange and divers strands is twisted the mysterious cord that, reaching back ``through spaces out of space and timeless time," somewhere joins us to the Brute; a twine of mingled yarn, not utterly

base. As we grow from our animal infancy, and the threads snap one by one at each gallant wing-stroke of a soul poising for flight into Empyrean, we are yet conscious of a loss for every gain, we have some forlorn sense of a vanished heritage. Willing enough are we to "let the ape and tiger die"; but the pleasant cousins dissembled in hide and fur and feather are not all tigers and apes: which last vile folk, indeed, exist for us only in picture-books, and chiefly offend by always carrying the Sunday School ensign of a Moral at their tails. Others -- happily of less didactic dispositions -- there be; and it is to these unaffected, careless companions that the sensible child is wont to devote himself; leaving severely alone the stiff, tame creatures claiming to be of closer kin. And yet these playmates, while cheerfully admitting him of their fellowship, make him feel his inferiority at every point. Vainly, his snub nose projected earthwards, he essays to sniff it with the terrier who (as becomes the nobler animal) is leading in the chase; and he is ready to weep as he realises his loss. And the rest of the Free Company, -- the pony, the cows, the great cart-horses, -- are ever shaming him by their unboastful exercise of some enviable and unattainable attribute. Even the friendly pig, who (did but parents permit) should eat of his bread and drink of his cup, and be unto him as a brother, -- which among all these unhappy bifurcations, so cheery, so unambitious, so purely contented, so apt to be the guide, philosopher, and friend of boyhood as he? What wonder that at times, when the neophyte in life begins to realise that all these desirable accomplishments have had to be surrendered one by one in the process of developing a Mind, the course

of fitting out a Lord of Creation, he is wont -- not knowing the extent of the kingdom to which he is heir -- to feel a little discontented?

Ere now this ill-humour, taking root in a nature wherein the animal is already ascendant, has led by downward paths to the Goat-Foot, in whom the submerged human system peeps out but fitfully, at exalted moments. He, the peevish and irascible, shy of trodden ways and pretty domesticities, is linked to us by little but his love of melody; but for which saving grace, the hair would soon creep up from thigh to horn of him. At times he will still do us a friendly turn: will lend a helping hand to poor little Psyche, wilfully seeking her own salvation; will stand shoulder to shoulder with us on Marathon plain. But in the main his sympathies are first for the beast: to which his horns are never horrific, but, with his hairy pelt, ever natural and familiar, and his voice (with its talk of help and healing) not harsh nor dissonant, but voice of very brother as well as very god.

And this declension -- for declension it is, though we achieve all the confidences of Melampus, and even master with him the pleasant argot of the woods -- may still be ours if we suffer what lives in us of our primal cousins to draw us down. On the other hand, let soul inform and irradiate body as it may, the threads are utterly shorn asunder never: nor is man, the complete, the self-contained, permitted to cut himself wholly adrift from these his poor relations. The mute and stunted human embryo that gazes appealingly from out the depths of their eyes

must ever remind him of a kinship once (possibly) closer. Nay, at times, it must even seem to whelm him in reproach. As thus: "Was it really necessary, after all, that we two should part company so early? May you not have taken a wrong turning somewhere, in your long race after your so-called progress, after the perfection of this be-lauded species of yours? A turning whose due avoidance might perhaps have resulted in no such lamentable cleavage as is here, but in some perfect embodiment of the dual nature: as who should say a being with the nobilities of both of us, the basenesses of neither? So might you, more fortunately guided, have been led at last up the green sides of Pelion, to the ancestral, the primeval, Centaur still waiting majestic on the summit!" It is even so. Perhaps this thing might once have been, O cousin outcast and estranged! But the opportunity was long since lost. Henceforth, two ways for us for ever!