

Excerpt from *A Knights Own Book of Chivalry* by Geoffroi de Charny, circa 1350. Translation by Elspeth Kennedy.

### The Men-at-Arms of Supreme Worth

After this examination of all these good qualities and achievements described above, it is now time to speak of another category of men who are and ought to be supreme among all lay people. These are men who are rightly said to be of high merit, and are more honored, better loved and prized than any other men-at-arms. And in order better to learn about the men of high merit, one needs to know how and why they should be held in such high esteem. You should know that if a man were sufficiently intelligent but not a man of worth, his intelligence would be turned wholly to evil. And if a man were of worth and had not enough wisdom, he would still be of merit, but not of such value and of such merit as the wise men of natural good sense who are true men of worth. And as for having a reputation for prowess without being a man of worth or wise, do not expect in the end any great perfection in such prowess. For this reason, if you know of someone who is endowed with the gift of the kind of intelligence presented as the best of the three kinds of intelligence described above, and you know that in this person is also to be found all the qualities of a man of worth, the very best of the three kinds of worth, as mentioned above, and you know that in addition there is in this man true and loyal prowess, of the best of the three kinds described above, so that this man and others like him combine within themselves throughout their lives these three supreme qualities, if you find such a man or men, consider them to be most assuredly of high merit. You should indeed do so because they had the will to be of high merit, and indeed they have been and are of high merit, and they strive to their utmost to be of high merit until death. And it is good to take such men as examples and to strive to act in such a way as to resemble them. You should know that in no way can anyone in the world, now or in the past or the future, ever have such a complete set of good qualifications as have been described above as possessed by men of high merit, except purely by the grace of God and of His gentle Mother and of His heavenly court. And thus, it is that these people whom Our Lord has of His grace endowed with so many gifts should not maintain nor think nor believe that in any way do any of these virtues listed above, for which they are so much loved, praised and honored, come from themselves. Indeed no, for if they had such an overweeningly proud thought, just as certainly as snow melts away through the powerful heat directed on it by the sun, so would it be for all the good things, the favors, the honors, the high estate, the power, the beauty, the intelligence, the worth, the prowess, and the other strengths which might be found in someone. Were these men to claim the credit for all these qualities, believing that they all stem from themselves, and were they not to give thanks as they should and it is their duty to do to this mighty sun, to this Almighty Lord from whom they have received them and hold them and do not acknowledge this, then this Almighty Lord would cause all these benefits, so ill merited and unacknowledged, to crumble and collapse in various ways, as, for example, by chronic illness through which they would lose the glory they had won. Thus, many of the benefits, the favors, and the honors which in such a short time are forgotten and lapse into oblivion, and the high position and power are soon reduced to nothing by the force of their enemies, which increases so that they are brought down from this high position and their power is greatly diminished. As for beauty, it soon fades and vanishes, and because of this Our Lord grants beauty to the unworthy so that the worthy may not attach too great importance to it. As for intelligence, you can be certain that when Our Lord wants to harm the wise who do not acknowledge Him, He takes away their intelligence, as One who has the power to take away just as He has the power to give. And as for the reputation for worth on account of which some might have the foolish belief that they were not and could not be guilty of sin, it is this very belief which makes

them fail in their intention, for they should not attribute this grace to themselves but to Almighty God who gives such gifts; it is He to whom thanks should be given and to whom entreaties should be made. And if these men do otherwise, they fall under the dominion and power of the devil who will lead them into sin and damnation. And as for the skills and achievements of prowess which are acquired through great effort and danger over a number of years, in one hour they can be and have been lost for lack of gratitude towards Him who granted them. But nowadays shame is so familiar and honor so unfamiliar that little account is taken of them, but those who put great effort into acquiring these honorable skills and achievements of prowess and those to whom God has by His grace granted that they should acquire them should indeed spend all their time giving thanks, praising and honoring Our Lord, praying and entreating humbly that as He has given and granted to them, so He will not take away and withdraw according to what they deserve. And so that you may have sure and certain knowledge of the things said above, that is, that no one should be confident concerning any good within him, that it can be put to any good use unless it be acknowledged that it comes from the Lord and depends upon Him, you can take Samson as a true example from ancient times: he was so strong, as the old accounts tell us, that through despair and through hatred he tore down the pillar of a building to kill himself and all the others who were inside, and through this he greatly misused his strength. And there was Absalom, who was as handsome as anyone could be and had the most beautiful hair in the world; through the delight he took in his beauty, as he rode beneath a tree, his hair became entangled in that tree, and he remained hanging by his beautiful hair and died there. And there was Solomon, who was so very wise; as it is told in the ancient accounts, he made such ill use of his intelligence, that because of his wife's admonitions he began to adore idols, and in this way seemed to abandon the worship of God; he therefore failed most shamefully in relation to his wisdom. And when one speaks of great worthiness, St. Peter, who steadfastly loved and believed in Our Lord as His true disciple and apostle, did he not deny him thrice in one night with words from his lips but not from his heart; on each of these three occasions, he committed mortal sin, for which he soon repented, by the grace of Our Lord, as His true disciple; nevertheless, he sinned. Therefore, it would be a great thing for men of worth, if they could be as steadfast in the faith of Our Lord as was this holy man of worth, St. Peter, who lived in such a holy way and who is so honored for his saintly life. And as for military achievement, there was Julius Caesar, who was such a very good knight and engaged in so many great and wonderful battles and made so many fine conquests for those of Rome. On his return from all his glorious battles and all his fine and rich conquests, when he came back to Rome, he saw and understood that through envy the people of Rome did not show him as much honor as they were wont to do to other men who had conquered and fought for the honor and profit of Rome and who had not done as much as he had, so it seemed to him. Then his heart was filled with great anger and hatred against the people of Rome, the city from which he himself came, so much so that after that he waged war on them and inflicted great losses and overcame them and had himself crowned emperor of Rome. He gave them strong government and forbade the bearing of any knife or sword in his Senate House for fear lest they might kill him, for he could not trust them. What happened then was that the evil men who so hated and envied him had the idea of carrying styles with their tablets, apparently for writing, and by this means they were to kill him. When the emperor went into the Senate House, one of those who knew about this wicked enterprise wanted to warn him of this and gave him, as he walked alone, a letter in which this plot was set out; but he did not read it, rather he carried it away in his hand, from which great harm came to him. When he entered the Senate House and the doors were shut, then the wicked traitors took their styles and with these stabbed him to death very painfully and cruelly, and this was a grievous loss of such a good knight, so worthy and so valiant. But no one should become so annoyed and full of such ill will if he is not given the honor he should receive for such feats of arms, especially not against his lord or his own men; nor ought one to want to harm nor show hatred as Caesar did to the men of Rome, for which he himself died so strangely and painfully as has been told above. And perhaps, if he had not turned against the men of Rome, he

might have lived longer and with great honor among all kinds of people as the very perfect knight that he was. Therefore no one should have too high an opinion of himself nor should he expect too much praise nor place too much value on it, for the good things and honors of this world are not certain and constant except insofar as it may please God who grants these benefits and from whom they are held. And those who perform great deeds should know that no great deed can be lost or hidden so that it is unknown and forgotten, but such deeds should be talked of and made known by the friends and enemies of those who perform them and many other people besides. And those who have performed these great deeds should not be concerned with this but only with thanking God, that Lord by whose grace these deeds can be achieved, in such a way that He should regard with favor those to whom He has granted these achievements for the true acknowledgment and service they give Him in return; nothing else should matter to them provided they continue to perform great deeds. And may he who wishes say it, and he who wishes remain silent about it: the men of worth are always those who get furthest. Now each of you can know and be certain that there is no wisdom, worthiness, strength, beauty, prowess, or valor that may be found in anyone and may remain and endure save only by the grace of Our Lord. And some might say that all these above-mentioned graces and virtues cannot be found in one man alone, and they might well be speaking the truth according to the time and the circumstances to be found today; yet all those who were willing to devote themselves entirely to winning these high honors, which they must achieve by force of arms and by heroic deeds, should be intent on learning how the best knights there ever were came by and won the noble qualities and high honors of which there is so much and so truly said, as the Bible testifies.