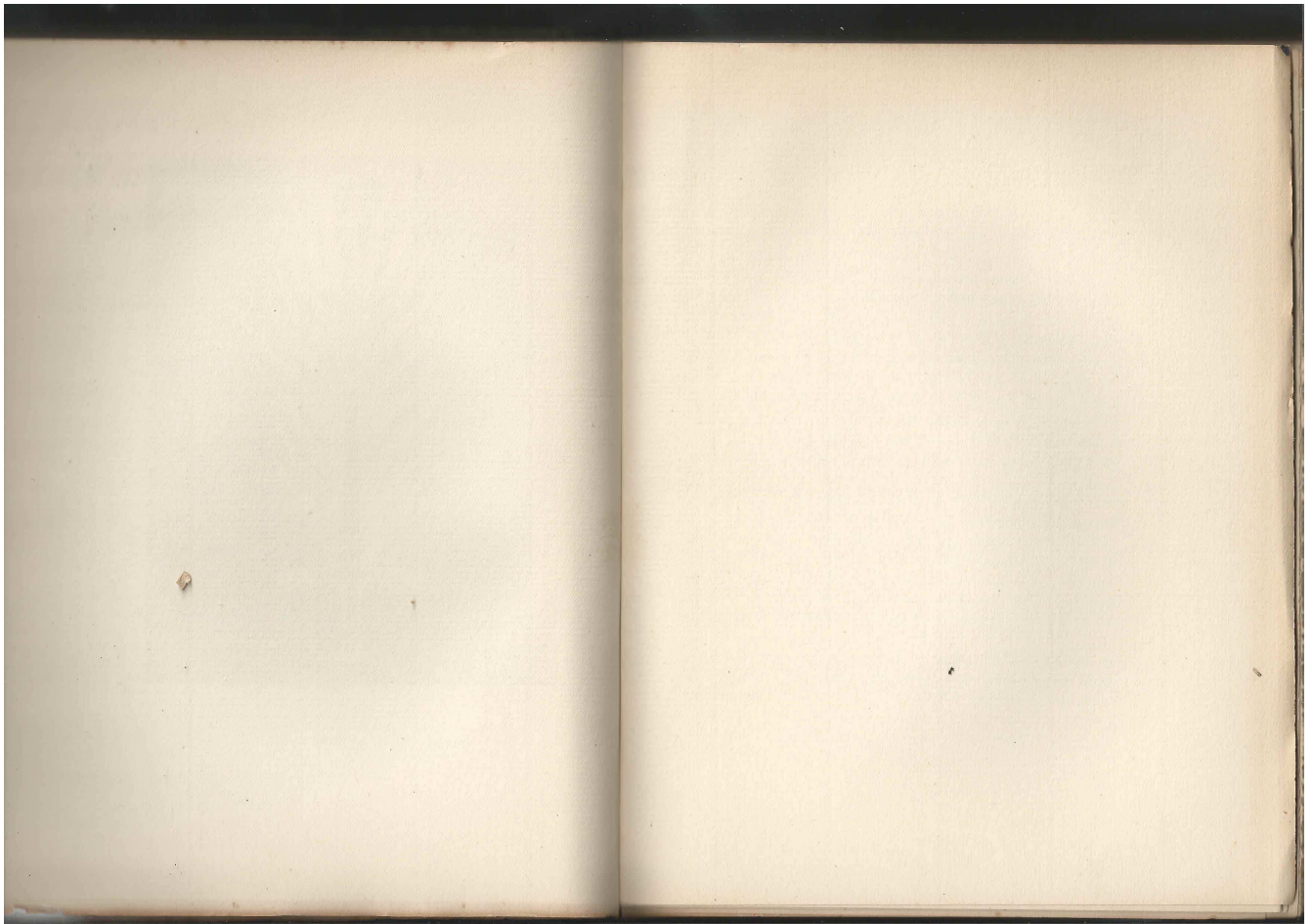


THE LAST ADVENTURE OF
DON QUIXOTE

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CIDE HAMETE BENENGELI relates this; though I cannot tell how he came by it. Indeed, it would be hard to say. All else he wrote was attested by numberless witnesses; but who could give testimony as to this? Perhaps it was for such a reason that his illustrious translator, having a passion for exactitude above all things, concluded to omit it from the Castilian version. Though again, it may have been among the many passages that were scissored out, as he tells us, by the authorities; or he may have felt in it an inferiority of style, and been too much the artist to allow it in. Yet I think it but fair to the patient and accurate Cide that it should come to light at last; and let the critics judge for themselves!

It seems, then, that the book as we have it closes too soon. Don Quixote rose from his sick-bed cured, and something more than that. He had been very ill, certainly; now, it pertained to the marvellous how little ill he felt. In all the long length of his body there was not so much as one ache or pain—unless one might speak of the ache of bounding and glowing health; while as for his mind——

He realized a curious clarity in it, quite unknown to him before. Of old—you know—he had always been troubled with a kind of—how shall I express it?—uncer-

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tainty—a sense of being haunted by shams. There had been, as it were, a wraith on the borders of his consciousness: one Alonso Quixano, called *the Good*: whose quiet prosaic life had somehow mingled its drab cotton with the rich silks and gold of his own. The powers of some enchanter had been wont to prevail against him, poisoning with a subtle confusion the truth of things. A giant or a paynim emperor with his hosts, heroically encountered, would loom up suddenly to mock him, on some fantastic plane of vision, as no more than a wretched windmill or a shepherd with his flocks; there had been times when, through the reality of glorious Rozinante, a lean miserable hack had trembled into view—an illusion, if ever there was one; and when Mambrino's magical helmet had seemed a barber's basin. There had been moments when to be God's Knight Errant had appeared a mirage, an unattainable splendour; and all attempts to come up with it a forlorn hope. One rode atilt at one's objective, but as in a dream stumbled and fumbled over irrelevancies; the atmosphere became as wet wool or as treachery about one; progress so to say evaporated: until, like a drunkard or a dreamer, one staggered at last into inevitable thwackings and ignominy.

Not that he had ever broken the faith of his calling, or given an inch to doubt. He had known that that tremendous thing the Glory of Service, or Knight Errantry, did exist: as surely as the rainbow of heaven, as the flames of sunset and dawn, it was *there*; and one might come

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to plunge one's being in it: one might attain. But there was a world of deceits to fight one's way through first. And if he had never despaired, it was also true that the bright reality of hope had become a little unfamiliar to him. He knew he had been feeding his faith from the stores of his conscious will: had had to provide for it himself. No manna of the spirit had fallen for it from heaven; nor ravens had brought it food, as they did to Elijah of old. He had not really hoped, but had only made himself hope—until now.

But now all was different; and he did not even hope, but *knew*. Master Notary had made his will, and the Curate had taken his confession: of which matters, though one would have supposed them solemn enough, he took the smallest account. Sancho, he recollected, had besought him with much blubbering not to be so injudicious as to die—whatever that might mean. It was somewhere about then that the turn had come in the tide of his affairs: he must have fallen asleep for a little, to wake thus a new man; with the perfect assurance that, going forth now, nothing but victories and serious work awaited him. So he looked on his surroundings, as on the recent past, with the detachment of a mind keyed to higher things. The people in the house seemed to him, as he passed out, shadowy and half unreal. He commended them to God perfunctorily—really, perhaps only in his thoughts: he was going upon a grand adventure, and knew too well they would not be interested. They hardly answered

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him—that is, if indeed he spoke. There was the house-keeper, good soul,—very busy about something, and apparently weeping the while; there was his niece, red-eyed and mouse-like quiet; Bachelor Samson Carrasco; the Curate; and Master Nicholas the Barber: the last-named three in consultation seemingly, and melancholy enough by the look of them—but unreal, unreal. Sancho, in the kitchen, he noticed as he passed its open door, blubbering over a very hearty meal. He would have had some kind of connexion with that Sancho, he supposed;—or was it merely that the fat shrewd fellow had borne the same name as his, Don Quixote's squire? But all that belonged to the foreclosed period of enchantments, and was not to be peered at too closely. It hardly mattered; since the day of real things had come. In the same vague manner he noticed the general air of dejection, and wondered what its cause might be—but not much, for the business ahead was too insistent in its call.

He went out to the stable; and—there was, indeed, a lean miserable hack at the manger: a wretched horse-skin hung on bones and propped up on four caricatures of legs at the corners: just such a thing as he had been condemned, when the enchanter's power prevailed against him, to imagine Rozinante to be. But there also, beside that mockery of Knight Errantry's companion, the Horse, stood the real Rozinante, all fire and gentleness and beauty: limbs made for speed and endurance, glossy skin, hoofs like shells from the sea, proud mien and arching neck:

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Rozinante, of the unique renown, veritably surpassing (and by far) Bucephalus of old or the Cid's own Babieca. The beautiful creature whinnied him a welcome: with a note of triumph, as knowing how glad a season had come. As for the hack, it lacked but the strength to grow restive at sight of that knightly man in his splendid armour;—for in armour Don Quixote was, though without memory, exactly, how he came to be so clad; in armour he was: not to linger over it too tediously, all panoplied, like Don Apollo of the Heavens, in burnished radiance and rubicund gold.

To him there came Sancho Panza: not the man he had but now left blubbering and guzzling in the kitchen, but the true Sancho at last, the right squire for a knight errant. 'Is it your highness's will to ride forth?' said this Sancho. 'It is, good friend,' said Don Quixote; 'since now the day has come when we are to meet the grand adventure, and win vast empires for the glory of knight errantry.' He must, I think, have forgotten the lady Dulcinea del Toboso; or surely would have mentioned her here. 'As God wills,' said Sancho; and without more words saddled the beautiful Rozinante and led him forth. On the road a mule was waiting, excellently caparisoned: having held the stirrup for his master, and seen him duly a-horseback, the squire mounted the mule, and together they rode forward.

Not, however, upon the familiar (and famous) Campo de Montiel; but through vast regions unlike any in La

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Mancha. In front there were the dim bluenesses of immense distance; on this side topless precipices soared dizzily into the heavens above; on that, fathomless abysses that hid the far world beneath their carpeting of cloud. There were prodigious valleys, wide as the world; there were august mountains towering afar in faint turquoise and purple, about whose peaks in the sweetness of the evening clustered the large white flames of the stars. A keen ecstasy and lightness encompassed Don Quixote, limbs and mind and spirit; his soul was nourished with wonder and inspiration, in tutelage to the mountains and to the fires of heaven. Neither weariness nor need of food or drink overtook him; that gigantic beauty momentarily renewed and increased his strength.

He rode forward, conversing at whiles with his squire on the deeds of knighthood; calm wonderful words came to his lips; noble and beautiful were the replies he had from his companion. Long journeying elapsed before it came to his mind that the name of Sancho was somehow inappropriate for that one. He had listened to grave utterances of poetry and wisdom, at first without heeding their unwontedness, then with a growing surprise; until certainty at last took him that he never had been squired by such a one before. He turned his glance wonderingly from the infinity before him, to behold the most kingly of men riding at his side.

‘Señor,’ said he, drawing rein.

‘Take it not ill, Señor Don Quixote,’ said the other,

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'that I ride beside your highness through these regions as your squire. My master, having taken account of your deeds and fame in La Mancha, and noted that that region deserved you little, desires that you shall visit his court; furthermore, he has set apart for you, if your grace will honour him by accepting it, command of a wide dangerous region in his dominions; since he knows your ability to win victories against the most stubborn of his foes. The way is long, however, and not easy to find; and therefore he sent me to escort you to his palace.'

'*Caballero*,' said Don Quixote, 'for this lofty graciousness thanks must be given in deeds rather than in words. My sword and my lance are henceforth at your great monarch's disposal.'—So they rode forward; but it did not occur to Don Quixote at that time to make inquiry as to the names and titles of his squire.

Vaster and vaster grew the mountains; wider the valleys as they advanced. Along the lips of chasms where blue infinity fell endlessly below them; by the shores of night-blue waters strewn with a million trembling flame-splashes of gold; night and day, night and day they rode on; and ever the consciousness of immortal strength, the serenity of pure being, grew in the spirit and limbs of the knight. In what Spain were these cosmic mountains? Had any Amadis of Wales¹ or Palmerin of England, ridden through them before?

They came, early of an evening, to the top of a barren

¹ Amadis de Gaula is properly so translated, and not as 'of Gaul'.

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pass where the road branched: one way leading to the right high up along the mountain-side, the other sweeping clean down into the valley. Far off, shining like a huge coronet in the sunset, gleamed a city with many gem-bright cloud-soft towers and minarets; it shone beyond the immensity of the valley—beyond and above ranges and ranges of snow-capped mountains all velvet blue and dark and pale purple below their snows, whose austerity it crowned. 'It is the high metropolis of my sovereign,' said the squire.

'What dark army is that, which moves in the valley?' said Don Quixote. 'Whose grim castle is that, yonder in its depths to the southward?'

'It is the army of my king's enemies,' said the other anxiously and with a sigh. 'The castle is their chief stronghold; thence their leader, a great insurgent baron, works huge oppressions against the world.'

The soul of Don Quixote swelled into grandeur within him. 'Señor,' he said, 'I little thought the opportunity would be granted me so early to prove the truth of my new allegiance.'

'Do not think of it, Señor Don Quixote, I beseech you! Taking this road to the right, we shall avoid them and act prudently; it is to be considered that they are numberless and puissant. Nay, nay indeed! My royal master would never forgive me, should the smallest harm befall your grace! It will be yours presently to ride against them at the head of armies; but now——'

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Ta! he spoke to *Don Quixote!* The soul of that great man was as little to be shaken as the mountains, as luminous as the morning sun. He bowed with a very haughty gesture: 'Señor,' he said, 'I have the honour of knight errantry to think of'; and with the word, couched lance, spurred steed, and away.

Down the slope thundered glorious Rozinante; with less danger of stumbling than the renowned Pegasus of antiquity charging through the middle air. Enchantment could prevail nothing against him now; right into the grim host flashed the golden figure of him; lance did its work, breaking the outermost ranks, and was gone; and in his hand instead flashed a falchion out of the mythologies. A roar of consternation arose in front, and he heard his own name carried to the horizons: *Don Quixote of La Mancha!* *Alas, it is Don Quixote!* Borne on still by the impetus of his charge, he hacked and hewed to left and right; nought in mind but the ideals of his profession and the gloomy standard, held aloft by giants, towards which he had aimed his horse from the first. They receded; then gathered and surged in on him; but he fought on and on. The force of his charge was spent; but he fought forward. Blows rained upon his shield and upon his armour; it began to go hard with him . . . and through all the ardour of the conflict a certain sound came to him: the patter and bleating of a thousand sheep on the road; sheep coming up behind him; he could hear the cries of the shepherd,

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the *yap! yap!* of the sheepdogs; and it appeared to him that enchantment was making head against him again; and lo, with the very sigh that escaped him upon that thought, the patter and baaing and the barking became the triumphant shouting of his name: *For Don Quixote of La Mancha! For the Tenth Worthy of the World!* and up from behind a great host in armour swept to his aid, and at their head (he recognized) the valiant knight Pentapolin of the Naked Arm; and they drove back the enemy, and left Don Quixote alone for a moment on the field; so that he took breath, and recovered, and with a word to Rozinante charged again; but what had become of the army of Pentapolin he was not aware.

And now he charged into the centre, and grasped, after many deeds of prowess, at the standard pole; and fought and reeled and struggled; and the great dark champions were about him like swarming bees about their queen; so that he made no headway, nor succeeded to drag away the standard pole; yet held it and would not part with it; and so, rocking to and fro, that *mêlée* surged; Don Quixote in the midst, heroically combating . . . and rejoicing, thinking that——

Enchantment again; and he might not be free from it; for he heard the creak, creak, clang of the sails as they went round; the groaning and complaining of the mill-wheels; and it was a miracle . . . for he beheld them, from this side and from that; the windmills, gigantic, lumbering across the plain; not stationary as of

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old to be attacked, but advancing . . . and turning, *creak, creak, clang* . . . and then a roar from them, and a shouting of his name: *Don Quixote de La Mancha! Por Dios y Don Quixote!*—and the windmills, behold, they were giants; all in white and silver armour; and they advanced upon those who were slaying Don Quixote, and with a great roar drove them off; so that my knight had breathing time again; and then that great host of giants passed like a sighing of the wind; and anew Don Quixote used his regained strength to advance.

And now he drove them across the plain in confusion, and helter-skelter in at the gates of their stronghold; and rode on pell-mell pursuing them; and had the standard at last at the gates; and thundered with his mace—but how the mace came in his hand he knew not—upon the portcullis as it fell clanging and locked, so that it shook and was loosened, and was within a little of breaking. Then Don Quixote heard from the far hills a bugle calling; and suddenly the air was loud with a rushing of myriad wings behind. Then rose up one before him flammivorous and horrible, vast and grim as the mountains, bearing a club whose fall should powder the granite mountains where they are firmest, and a brand that shed midnight and ghastly flame and stench; and between his attack and Don Quixote, a sudden sword flashed like the day-break, and a splendour broke like the noonday sun; and the portcullis was shattered, the gate was down; and the dark lord driven out, and a host swept in with Don Quixote

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all golden armoured and golden aureoled, and their armour strangely and beautifully adorned with pinions; and so that stronghold was taken.

But at Don Quixote's side stood the one whose sword but now had saved him; and it was the man who had squired him on his journey.

'Señor,' said Don Quixote, 'to whom am I honoured to owe my deliverance?'

'*Caballero*,' said the other, 'let your grace make nothing of the deliverance. I am, in truth, the Captain-general of the war hosts of my sovereign; and hence qualified to appreciate the greatness of your feat. I am styled, Michael of the Flaming Sword.'

Side by side in pleasant converse they rode forward then to the palace gates of their sovereign: Don Quixote of La Mancha and Don Michael Archangel: each wondrously pleased with the nobility and high bearing of his companion.