

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

THE AGE OF CHAUCER, GOWER, AND MANDEVILLE.

A.D. 1350 to 1400.

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION.

I. GLANCES AT THE BRITISH HISTORY OF THIS PERIOD.—The latter half of the fourteenth century we call the *Age of Chaucer, Gower, and Mandeville*, because these were its representative literary names. That brief age was the real beginning of English letters. It was the springtime of English literature.

The civil history of this period covers the greater part of the reign of Edward III. and the entire reign of Richard II. That of Edward III. was long and brilliant. The victories of Crécy and Poitiers filled Europe with the fame of English arms and the military skill of the Black Prince.* In him English chivalry reached the pinnacle of glory and greatness.

There are certain periods of history in which, by a mysterious combination of circumstances, the genius, energy, and greatness of a nation are suddenly developed and exhibited to the world. Such was the reign of Edward III. In the Black Prince it pro-

* So named on account of the color of his armor.

duced the flower of English chivalry; to all time it gave Chaucer, "the Father of English Poetry." Then it was that an English nationality, an English language, and an English literature fairly began. The victories gained over a French foe by combined Norman and Saxon valor welded the two races more firmly than ever together. Three hundred years of commingling, of intermarriages, and the possession of common interests nearly completed the work of race-consolidation in this reign. The victories of Crécy and Poitiers led to the gradual disuse of the French language and the downfall of French influence. The tongue of the vanquished foe could no longer maintain its former power and prestige in England.

The last years, however, of the reign of Edward III. were rendered gloomy by the sickness and death of the Black Prince, and the consequent loss of nearly all territory in France. But there was one gain. With the loss of French possessions foreign ties were broken. Every man from the English sovereign down found his common country bounded by the coasts of England. We hear no more of Norman and Saxon. The two races and the two languages—as by a chemical process—became one.

Edward III. was the most accomplished English sovereign since the Conquest. He was the first king of England who, for three hundred years, could speak the language of the people he ruled. English was made the speech of the courts of law and the schools. An act passed in 1362 decrees that all cases "shall be pleaded, showed, defended, answered, debated, and judged in the English tongue."

The reign of Richard II. witnessed the beginning of that agitation among the lower classes for their just

rights and privileges which ceases not even to-day. The people were little better than serfs and bondsmen. But soon they began to feel their own power, and, headed by bold and lawless leaders like *Wat Tyler*, the restless multitude were treated to discourses on such curious questions as,

“When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?”

In treating the English history of this period, many Protestant writers appear to take pleasure in misrepresenting the Catholic Church and her institutions. They would have us believe that much of the miseries of the people could be traced to the Church. The charge is false and malicious. The Catholic Church was then—as she has ever been—the faithful friend and comforter of the people, the loving mother of the orphan, the poor, the afflicted; but, unhappily, she has not always been able to prevent the tyranny of kings and nobles, to destroy corruption in high places, or to cure all the ills of humanity. This is the testimony of true history.

The story of Scotland during this period (1350–1400) is filled with accounts of disastrous wars with England and struggles between the Scottish monarch and his turbulent nobles. *David II.* was taken prisoner by the English, and remained in captivity for eleven years; but he was finally ransomed by his subjects, and died in 1370. He was succeeded by his nephew, *Robert Stuart*, the first of that name that swayed the sceptre of Scotland. The Stuart family is, perhaps, the most unfortunate in the annals of history.

2. INFLUENCING AGENCIES ON THE LITERATURE OF THIS PERIOD.—The age of Chaucer, Gower, and Man-

deville, as we have said, may be regarded as the Maytime of English letters. And as the months of the year and their products are influenced by various physical agencies, so the literary productions of different ages bear upon them the impressions not alone of the genius which conceived them, but also of the times in which they were given to the world. Various were the causes which had a bearing, a directing influence, on the English letters of this period. In the history of the reigns of Edward III. and Richard II. must be sought the *home* influences. The chivalry of that period and the brilliant military achievements of the Black Prince have their literary counterpart in the masterpieces of Chaucer, the poems of Gower, and the travels of old Sir John Mandeville.

But other influences were also at work. Chief amongst these may be named (1) the *Italian*, (2) the *French*, (3) the *Latin*.

3. ITALIAN INFLUENCE.—“As was to be expected,” writes Bascom, “Italy was the first division of Europe after the barbaric overflow to regain the arts of civilization. In commerce, in freedom, in the industrial and fine arts, in literature and science, she took the lead.” In truth, the intellectual brightness of Italy illumined Europe in the fourteenth century. The world is indebted to that age for three illustrious poets, *Dante*,* *Petrarch*,† and *Chaucer*—two Italians, and one Englishman. Of all the Christian poets, Dante is the grandest, the most sublime. He was the great Catholic bard of these remote times. His

* Dante, born at Florence, 1265; died 1321. He was the father of Italian literature.

† Petrarch, born at Arezzo, 1304; died 1374. He is a poet of great purity.

Divina Commedia is the poetic and religious expression of the Ages of Faith. Dante died a few years before the birth of Chaucer. Petrarch taught modern Europe how to write lyric poetry. *Boccaccio** was another Italian writer of the same age. The genius of Chaucer was doubtless quickened by his renowned foreign contemporaries. It is generally admitted that the infamous *Decameron*† of Boccaccio suggested the plot of the *Canterbury Tales*, and furnished the most beautiful of them all—the *Knight's Tale*. “Indeed, it is here worthy of remark,” says Coppée, writing of the age of Chaucer, “that from that early time to a later period many of the greatest products of English poetry have been watered by silver rills of imaginative genius from a remote Italian source. Chaucer’s indebtedness has just been noticed. *Spenser* borrowed his versification and not a little of his poetic handling in the *Fairy Queen* from *Ariosto*. Milton owes to Dante some of his conceptions of heaven and hell in his *Paradise Lost*, while his *Lycidas*, *Arcades*, *Allegro*, and *Penseroso* may be called Italian poems done into English.”

4. FRENCH INFLUENCE.—The influence of French taste, although much lessened, still continued to make some impression on English letters. Translations

* Boccaccio, born 1313; died 1375.

† The *Decameron* is a collection of one hundred tales written during the period when the plague desolated the south of Europe. The plot is simple. It is assumed that a party of ten retired to one of the villas near Naples to escape the danger of contagion. Each person was to tell a new story on each of the ten days; hence one hundred stories, and the title *Decameron*. Many of these tales, however, are not only immoral but grossly obscene. No beauty of language can hide or make amends for such a heap of moral rottenness and literary filth. This miserable but much-lauded book was freely circulated in Italy until it was condemned by the Council of Trent. Had Chaucer a better model before him, it is very probable the *Canterbury Tales* would have been more moral.

from the French were numerous. The English poets drew freely from the *Fabliaux*, or tales in verse. Chaucer’s most masterly translation—*The Romance of the Rose*—is but an elegant English rendering of one of the poetic gems of early French literature.

5. LATIN INFLUENCE.—We have already glanced at some of the literary storehouses which were built up in the Latin of the Middle Ages. For hundreds of years those ancient collections have furnished an almost inexhaustible source of material for the poets and story-tellers of all lands. Chaucer drew liberally from the *Gesta Romanorum** and other Latin collections. Two, if not more, of his *Canterbury Tales* can be traced to the *Gesta*. From the same abundant source Gower borrowed even more largely.†

6. REMARKS ON SOME OF THE WRITERS OF THIS PERIOD.—The principal British writers of this age were CHAUCER, GOWER, MANDEVILLE, BARBOUR, WICKLIFF, LANGLAND, and MINOT. The little we really know of Chaucer’s personal history leaves wide scope for speculation; and, as a consequence, few men have been more misrepresented. It is said “a lie has no legs,” but that does not prevent lies from travelling. A disgraceful anecdote about Chaucer’s having been “fined two shillings for beating a Franciscan friar in Fleet Street” has made the rounds of nearly every text-book on English literature. The care with which this silly item has been hawked about is painfully suggestive. It has no foundation. Sir

* A celebrated collection of fictions written in the Latin of the Middle Ages.

† Shakspeare, Scott, Tennyson, and others owe not a little to the vast literary storehouses of the Middle Ages. For instance, the story of the *Merchant of Venice*, on which Shakspeare founded his famous play, is borrowed from the *Gesta Romanorum*.

Harris Nicholas has proved its utter falsehood. Other bigoted writers assert that Chaucer was a disciple of the heretical Wickliff. This is also untrue. In his life or works there is nothing to prove that the "Father of English Poetry" was anything but a Catholic. His last days were spent within the precincts of a religious house. A record is still extant in the office of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster from which we see that on the 24th of November, 1399—the year before his death—Chaucer took a lease for fifty years, from the abbot, prior, and convent of Westminster, of a house situated in the garden of their chapel. Here the venerable poet's dying moments were, doubtless, soothed by having conferred upon him those mysterious blessings which the Catholic religion alone can bestow. He was devoted to the Most Blessed Virgin. This his works prove. An exquisite little poem, *The Prayer to Our Lady*, was composed by him for Lady Blanche, wife of John of Gaunt. In the opening lines of his *Canterbury Tales*, after referring to the "sweet showers of April," he continues:

"So nature stirs all energies and ages
That folks are bent to go on pilgrimages,
And palmers* for to wander through strange strands
To sing the Holy Mass in sundry lands.
And more especially from each shire's end
Of England they to Canterbury wend,
The holy blissful martyr† for to seek,
That hath upheld them when that they were weak."‡

7. WICKLIFF—HIS RELIGIOUS AND LITERARY POSITION.—So many things have been written about Wickliff that it is quite proper, just here, to glance at the man's religious and literary position. He was a secular priest, doctor of divinity, and for some time

* Pilgrims to the Holy Land.

† St. Thomas of Canterbury.

‡ Chaucer modernized.

a professor in Oxford University. We first hear of him about 1360, in the reign of Edward III. He was a violent enemy of the Franciscan and Dominican Fathers. Their poverty, above all, aroused his wrath. Those apostolic men had been established in England for more than a century; "and," says Lingard, "by their zeal, learning, and piety had deservedly earned the esteem of the public." But Wickliff did not stop at the monks. Soon his coarse invectives were levelled at the whole body of the clergy, the bishops, and even the Pope. His followers were known as *Lollards*—a fanatical sect of revolutionists. Wickliff was several times commanded to appear before his ecclesiastical superiors. When summoned for the last time by order of Gregory XI. to explain his opinions, he "professed his readiness to submit to the correction of the Church, and revoked whatever he might have taught contrary to the doctrine of Christ." Some years after, he suddenly died while celebrating mass. His English translation of the Bible is from the Catholic *Vulgate*, and, from a literary point of view, merits little praise. Wickliff's writings are in every respect a counterpart of the man—coarse, unpolished productions.*

* The pronunciation of English in the days of Chaucer differed in many respects from our present system. The letter A was called *ah*, as in *hal* or *father*. E had the sound of *a* in *dare*, or *ai* in *hair*. It was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century that the present sounds of A and E were established. I had almost the sound of *ee*, or the lengthened sound of *i* in *still*. Long *i*, as in *pine*, is a modern invention. See Ellis's *Early English Pronunciation*.

LESSON I.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER. DIED 1400.

Chief works: (1) *The Canterbury Tales*.
 (2) *The House of Fame*.
 (3) *The Flower and the Leaf*.
 (4) *The Romance of the Rose*.

1. Who was Geoffrey Chaucer?

Geoffrey Chaucer was the "Father of English Poetry" and the "Founder of English Literature." He takes rank with Shakspeare and Milton.

2. Is his personal history well known?

No; it is shrouded in much obscurity. He was born at London of a good family, in the early part of the fourteenth century, and received an excellent education. Both Oxford and Cambridge claim him as a student. It is thought that he finished his studies at the University of Paris.

3. Relate his early career.

In early life Chaucer was a courtier and soldier. The favor of John of Gaunt introduced him to the brilliant court of Edward III. Having gone to France with the English forces, we learn that he was made prisoner at the siege of Retters in 1359, but was enabled to return to England the year following.

4. How did Edward III. treat the "Father of English Poetry"?

The king showered favors on the bold genius who could wield both sword and pen. Chaucer received an annual pension of twenty marks.* He was employed on various foreign missions. During one of

* About \$1000.

these to Italy it is supposed that he met the celebrated Petrarch. He also held the office of Comptroller of the Port of London.

5. Whom did Chaucer marry?

A lady named *Philippa Picard*, sister-in-law of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. A marked feature in his life was his devoted attachment to his wife and family.

6. How did Chaucer fall into disfavor with Richard III.?

For some years after the old king's death prosperity continued to cheer and brighten the poet's path. Richard was his friend. But the Duke of Lancaster, Chaucer's patron and brother-in-law, was not a favorite with the king. During a riot in London the poet sided with the friends of Lancaster. This cost him the king's friendship, and he was obliged to fly to France.

7. What befell Chaucer on his return to England?

He was seized and cast into the Tower; but, by the efforts of his friends, he was once more restored to royal favor, and received the lucrative position of Clerk of Works at Westminster.

8. What did the Father of English Poetry do in 1391?

Wearied of public life, he retired to his country-house at Woodstock, and at the advanced age of over threescore years began to write the famous *Canterbury Tales*.*

9. Where did he take up his residence in 1399?

In 1399 Chaucer rented from the Abbot of Westminster a house in the garden of the convent chapel. Here, in the quiet of religious seclusion, the great

* At the advanced age of sixty-three he commenced his masterpiece, the *Canterbury Tales*, which will be an everlasting source of enjoyment to mankind.—*Horne*.

poet breathed his soul to God in the year 1400. He was buried in what is known as the "Poets' Corner" of the renowned Abbey—the *first* in that long line of English geniuses whose remains are there interred.

10. What may be said of Chaucer's checkered career as a preparation for his literary labors?

His career was such that he had every means to study the great volume of life in men, things, and books. He was a scholar, courtier, traveller, soldier, ambassador, and, above all, a diligent, good-tempered student of human nature.*

LESSON II.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER, CONTINUED.

11. Name Chaucer's principal works.

See page 80.

12. Which is his masterpiece?

The Canterbury Tales.

13. Describe the *Canterbury Tales*.

The *Canterbury Tales* consist of *twenty-four* tales or stories preceded by a prologue or introduction; and, except two of the stories, they are all *in verse*.

14. How long are these *Tales*?

The metrical part extends to over 17,000 lines, being longer than Homer's *Iliad* and nearly twice as long as Milton's *Paradise Lost*.†

* "He seems," says Lowell, "incapable of indignation. He muses good-naturedly over the vices and follies of men, and, never forgetting that he was fashioned of the same clay, is rather apt to pity than condemn. There is no touch of cynicism in all he wrote."
—*My Study Windows*.

† Some idea of the size of each story may be formed by stating that the *Prologue* contains 860 lines, and the *Knight's Tale*, which is the first, contains 2250 lines.

15. State the plot of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The plot is very simple. Thirty persons arrive at the Tabard Inn, on the outskirts of London. They are all on a pilgrimage to the celebrated shrine of St. Thomas à Becket at Canterbury, some fifty miles distant. Chaucer, likewise at the inn, is on the same journey, and determines to accompany the band of pilgrims. Harry Bailey, the host, is to act as guide. Before starting, in order to relieve the tedium of the road, each one agrees to relate two stories going and two returning. When the pilgrimage is over, the teller of the best story is to get a grand supper at the expense of the others.

16. What is the nature of the *Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*?

It is a minute and somewhat lengthy description of the person, dress, manners, and accomplishments of each of the pilgrims. The first described is a *Knight*, "a worthy man," who had fought for the true faith in fifteen "mortal battles."*

17. Mention some other persons in Chaucer's portrait-gallery.

There are the *Knight's son* with his *yeoman attendant*; a *Franklin*, or country gentleman; † a good parish *Priest*, ‡ and his *brother*, an honest Ploughman;

* "And of his port as meek as is a maid,
He never yet a word uncourteous said,
In all his life, to any mortal wight—
He was a very perfect gentle knight."

† "With sanguine hues did his complexion shine;
Well loved he in the morn a sop of wine."

‡ "Wide was his parish—houses far asunder,
Yet he neglected naught for rain or thunder;
But Jesus' lore, which owns no pride or pelf,
He taught—but first he followed it himself."

a *Miller*; a *Reeve*, or *Bailiff*; * a *Prioress*; several *monks*; the *Wife of Bath*; † a *Merchant*; a *Doctor*; a *Sea-captain*; and many others.

18. Which are perhaps the best-drawn characters?
The *Knight* and the *Parish Priest*.

19. Into how many classes may the stories composing the *Canterbury Tales* be divided?

Into two classes, according to their nature—the *pathetic* or tragic, and the *comic* or humorous.

20. Which is the most beautiful of the pathetic Tales?

The *Knight's Tale*, or the story of *Aracite* and *Palamon*, which Chaucer borrowed from the Italian of *Boccaccio*. †

21. Mention another of the pathetic Tales which is very striking.

The *Tale of the Prioress*, or the touching legend of how "little Hugh of Lincoln" was murdered for perseveringly singing his hymn to the Most Blessed Virgin.

22. By whom are the two prose Tales related?

By Chaucer himself and the *Parish Priest*.

23. What is the nature of the Tale related by the *Parish Priest*?

It is a somewhat elaborate sermon on the seven deadly sins, and their causes and remedies. There breathes throughout it a spirit of sincere piety. §

* "Full long were both his spindle legs, and lean;
Just like a walking-stick—no calf was seen."

† "She was a worthy woman to the core;
Five husbands had she brought from the church door."

‡ It tells how two brave young knights, *Aracite* and *Palamon*, both fell in love with the beautiful *Emily*. *Aracite*, victorious in tournament, falls, and dying bequeaths *Emily* to his rival.

§ It is the opinion of some eminent critics that this sermon was added by Chaucer to his *Canterbury Tales* at the advice of his con-

24. Do the *Canterbury Tales* contain any account of the visit of the pilgrims to the shrine of *St. Thomas*, and of their return?

No; as the *Canterbury Tales* now exist they are incomplete—a fragment of what Chaucer designed them to be. His death prevented their completion.*

25. For what is the *Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* especially admired?

For its pen-pictures. It is an unrivalled collection of humorous and masterly descriptions of men and manners. In descriptive power, in humor and pathos, Chaucer is unsurpassed by any writer in English literature.

26. In what other way does Chaucer exhibit the most exquisite taste?

With the nicest art, each story is suited to the character of the person who relates it. The rude miller's tales is very different from that of the polished, courteous knight.

27. What may be said of Chaucer's power over language?

His verse forces a music out of our language which few poets have equalled. After the plays of *Shakespeare* there are few productions in our literature that display more masterly genius than the *Canterbury Tales*.

fessor, as a sort of reparation for the light and immoral tone of portions of his *Tales* and other writings.

* Had each of the 31 pilgrims told two stories going and two returning—as was agreed upon—there would be 124 stories in all, with an account of their devotions at *Canterbury*, adventures by the way, and the grand supper to the victorious story-teller. As they now stand, the *Canterbury Tales* are only 24 in number.

LESSON III.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER, CONTINUED.

28. While the *Canterbury Tales* are the fruit of Chaucer's old age, it may be interesting to inquire if he began to write early in life, and what were his first works?

The "Father of English Poetry" began his literary career early in life. His first productions, however, were all translations or imitations of the French poetry of the time.

29. Which is the most remarkable of his poetical translations?

The *Romance of the Rose*, a beautiful allegory, the original of which is one of the masterpieces of early French literature. Chaucer's translation even surpasses the original, and bears upon it the seal of his genius.

30. In point of time, which is regarded as the first of Chaucer's original productions?

The *House of Fame*, a long allegorical poem. Pope's *Temple of Fame* is a somewhat elaborate rendering of the same into modern English.

31. Give, in brief, the plan of the *House of Fame*?

The poem is a curious description of the Temple of Glory and its famous inhabitants, the great authors and heroes of ancient times. Chaucer tells us that in a dream he was carried by an eagle to an immense building, the materials of which were bright as polished brass. It stood upon a rock of ice. The illustrious inmates were standing upon columns of various kinds of metal—iron, copper, and so on—according to their rank. There, seated on a rich throne, Fame ruled. The sight of a venerable personage

awakes the poet, which brings his poem to a somewhat abrupt termination.

32. What are the chief merits of this poem?

It excites our admiration by its wealth of imagination, its beautiful imagery, and the richness and splendor of its ornaments. Pope's imitation falls short of its model.

33. Of Chaucer's shorter poems which is considered the most exquisite?

The *Flower and the Leaf*, an inimitable little tale with a happy moral.

34. Repeat Chaucer's description of the knights in the *Flower and the Leaf*, as they rode forth?

After picturing their countenances and "lofty brows which glittered with noble thoughts," he adds:

"And they rode forth so glorious in array,
So mannerly and full of gentle grace,
That every tongue would be compelled to say,
They were the noblest of a noble race." *

"Greet well Chaucer when you meet
As my disciple and my poet."

Gower.

"Since he of English in rhyming was the best,
Pray unto God to give his soul good rest."

Lydgate.

"Great Chaucer—well of English undefied,
On Fame's eternal bead-roll worthy to be filed."

Spenser.

"I take unceasing delight in Chaucer. His manly cheerfulness is especially delicious to me in my old age."—Coleridge.

* Chaucer's *Astrolobie*, a prose treatise on astronomy, composed in 1391 for his son Louis, is the *oldest* work in our language now known to exist on any scientific subject. It opens thus: "Lytel Lowys my sonne, I perceive well by certain evidences thine abylytè to lerne sciences touching nombres and prporcions." "Lityl Lowys" (little Louis) was at that time ten years old.

LESSON IV.

SIR JOHN GOWER. DIED 1408.

Chief works: (1) *Confessio Amantis* (The Confessions of a Lover);
 (2) *Speculum Meditantis* (The Mirror of Meditation).
 (3) *Vox Clamantis** (The Voice of one Crying in the Wilderness).

35. What author ranks next to Chaucer in the literature of the fourteenth century?

Sir John Gower, styled by Chaucer the "moral Gower" on account of the pure moral tone of his writings.

36. What may be said of his personal history?

It is not well known. Gower was the friend and contemporary of Chaucer, whom, in one of his poems, he calls his "disciple." He was a man of rank, wealth, virtue, and literary tastes, and spent his life chiefly in the pursuit of knowledge and in the performance of good works.

37. What may be said of his learning?

He was a man of extensive learning, and wrote in Latin, French, and English.

38. How was Gower afflicted a few years before his death?

He lost his eyesight.

39. What monument of his charity and love of art yet remains?

A beautiful convent-church in London, for the

* Though all have Latin titles, the first of these works was written in English, the second in French verse, and the third in Latin. "The *Speculum Meditantis*," says Dr. Hart, "has not been seen in modern times, and has probably perished. The *Vox Clamantis* remained in manuscript until 1850, when it was printed for the Roxburghe Club. The *Confessio Amantis* has been frequently printed." Dr. Hart is mistaken in regard to the *Speculum Meditantis*. Taylor, in his *Annals of St. Mary Overy*, states that there are two copies in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

erection of which, at his death, he left the bulk of his property. His monument can still be seen there.

40. What are Gower's chief writings?

Three large works, one in Latin, one in French, and a third—the *Confessio Amantis*—in English.

41. What is the *Confessio Amantis*?

It is a long poem of over 30,000 lines, divided into a prologue and eight books. One book is devoted to each of the seven deadly sins, and the remaining one to philosophy.*

42. What are the characters in this production?

The characters are but two—a *Lover*, and *Genius*, his confessor. The former confesses his sins to the latter, who before absolving his penitent relates an immense number of tales, each having some reference to *Lover's* moral shortcomings.

43. Are the stories told by *Genius* original with Gower?

Not by any means; in the composition of his poem Gower laid under contribution all the learning of his age. For the tales he ransacked the *Bible*, *Ovid*, the *Gesta Romanorum*, French literature, and other sources.

44. What are the weak points and good qualities of the *Confessio Amantis*?

Its weak points are its length and general tediousness. Gower seems to have aimed less at pleasing the imagination of his readers than at astonishing them by his vast array of learning. On the other hand, the language is easy and smooth, and many of the descriptions are exceedingly agreeable.

* The *Confessio* was written at the request of King Richard II., who, one day meeting Gower, told him to "book some new thing."
8*

45. How does Gower compare with Chaucer?

His genius was less brilliant. He lacked the exquisite humor and rich imagination of "the Father of English Poetry"; but he divides with him the glory of polishing the English language, and of being one of the founders of English literature.

"Gower first garnished our English rude." *Skelton.*

"Those of the first age were Gower and Chaucer." *Sir Philip Sidney.*

"He is always sensible and polished." *Hallam.*

"Gower mainly helped to polish and refine the language of his country."—*Shaw.*

LESSON V.

SIR JOHN MANDEVILLE. DIED 1372. ✓

Chief work: *Travels.*

46. Who was Sir John Mandeville?

He is sometimes styled "the Father of English Prose," and is considered the most renowned English traveller of the Middle Ages.

47. Where was he born, and for what profession was he educated?

Mandeville was born in the south of England, and was educated for the medical profession. He was a good linguist, and was well read in philosophy and theology.

48. Where did he travel, and why?

He travelled over the then known world. In his twenty-second year the young physician, from some unknown motive, started on his singular career. He

spent thirty-four years in roving through every country from England to China, and his friends gave him up for lost. When he came home he found that but few of his old acquaintances were alive to greet him.

49. How did Sir John Mandeville end his singular life?

Having completed the work on which his fame rests, he once more set out to travel. His age, however, did not permit him to go far, for he died at Liège, and was buried in the abbey near that city.*

50. What is his chief work?

Travels, which he wrote in Latin, then translated into French, and finally into English.†

51. Of what does his volume treat?

As may easily be supposed, it is a detailed account of his third-of-a-century ramble. He relates everything of interest that he saw or heard; and, without doubt, his book is one of the curiosities of English literature.

52. Is Mandeville, as some assert, a mendacious writer?

The charge of mendacity, sometimes brought against good old Sir John Mandeville, is without foundation. When relating what he saw himself he is entirely worthy of credit, as many modern travellers have proved. But the same cannot be said of his hearsay stories, many of which are laughable in the extreme—stories of men with tails, "of people twenty-eight feet long," and of immense birds which could carry elephants through the air.

* It is said that the inscription on his monument states that he was very *pious*, very *learned*, and very *charitable* to the poor.

† Speaking of his work, Mandeville writes that he has "put this boke out of Latyn into Frensche, and translated it again into Englyssche, that every man of my nacion may undirstonde it." This is a fair specimen of his spelling.

53. In what point of view is Mandeville's *Travels* especially valuable?

It is a remarkable monument of early English prose; but as a work of art or a polished literary production it does not rank very high.

54. Is it difficult for English-speaking people of the present day to read the book?

It may still be perused with but little difficulty.

55. What can you say of Mandeville's style?

It is a manly, unadorned, and straightforward style of composition.*

LESSON VI.

JOHN BARBOUR. DIED 1396.

Chief work: *The Bruce*—an epic poem.

56. Who is considered the greatest Scottish poet of the fourteenth century?

John Barbour, a gifted and learned priest, and a contemporary of Chaucer.

57. Give a brief outline of his life.

John Barbour was born in Aberdeen, and finished his studies at Oxford. He became archdeacon of his native city, and died a few years before Chaucer.

58. What is his chief literary production?

The Bruce, an epic poem of over 12,000 lines, written in eight-syllable verse.†

* "Next to Marco Polo," writes Washington Irving, "the *Travels* of Sir John Mandeville and his account of the territories of the Great Khan along the coast of Asia seem to have been treasured up in the mind of Columbus."—*Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*.

† The following lines are from the often-quoted passage on freedom:

"Fredome all solace to man givis—
He lives at ease that freely livys!"

Fredome, that is freedom; *givis*, gives; *livys*, lives.

59. What is the subject or action of the poem?

It recounts the life, battles, and adventures of Robert Bruce, the heroic victor of Bannockburn.* This is done with a warmth and enthusiastic patriotism, a clearness of narrative, and dramatic vigor in the depiction of scenes, which must forever give the poem an honorable place among the early monuments of English literature.

60. Has *The Bruce* any real historic value?

As an historical document concerning the great Scottish hero it holds a high rank. It was composed soon after Bruce's death, and while the facts of his life were still fresh in the minds of all.

61. What may be said of the style of the poem?

It is clear and vigorous, the verse is smooth and musical, and the descriptions are bold, animated, and picturesque. The battle-scenes are grandly painted, and we hurry through them charmed with the lofty music of martial verse. More than 2000 lines are devoted to the battle of Bannockburn.

62. What is Barbour's rank among the British poets of the age in which he lived?

He is generally considered as superior to Gower, though he is far from being equal to Chaucer.

63. What do you remark of the Scottish poetry of this period?

It belonged to a school different from that of the English. It is believed that the works of Chaucer were unknown to Barbour.

* Robert Bruce, the most heroic of the Scottish kings, was born in 1274. At the battle of Bannockburn, which was fought June 24, 1314, Bruce with only 30,000 men defeated about 100,000 English under Edward II. The English left 30,000 dead upon the field. Bruce died in 1329, and his body was interred in the Abbey Church of Dunfermline.

64. Is there much difference between the English of Barbour and that of Chaucer and Gower?

No; the language of the three is essentially the same, except that Barbour's English is more Saxon, and, of course, more easily read at the present time than that of either Chaucer or Gower. *The Bruce* is the *oldest* monument of the English language in Scotland.*

65. How were Barbour and his poem for a long period honored by the Scottish nation?

Barbour was honored as the Homer of Bruce and Bannockburn; and his poem was treasured as the grand national epic of Scotland until that nation deserted the Catholic faith—the faith of Bruce and Barbour. †

“Fortunate in the choice of a noble theme, Barbour has depicted, in rough but faithful outline, the life, manners, and deeds of a truly heroic time, and given to Scotland not only the first poem in her literature, but the earliest history of her best and greatest king.”—*Chambers*.

LESSON VII. *sh*

WICKLIFF, LANGLAND, AND MINOT.

66. Who was John Wickliff?

He was a learned but coarse and turbulent priest, who occupies a place in English literature because of his translation of the Bible into English.

67. Give a bird's-eye view of his career.

Wickliff was born in the north of England, studied at Oxford, and was afterwards a professor at that uni-

* It was completed about the year 1375.

† The best edition of *The Bruce* was that edited by Dr. Jamieson in 1820. In his *Lord of the Isles*, Sir Walter Scott borrows largely from Barbour's poem.

versity. His insane hatred of the monks soon extended to the whole body of the clergy. He wrote much, and was several times summoned before councils of bishops on the charge of heresy. He died while celebrating Mass. The General Council of Constance condemned *forty-five propositions* in his works.

68. On what is Wickliff's English translation of the Bible founded, and what is its literary value?

His translation is an English rendering of the Latin Vulgate. As a literary production it is a counterpart of the man—rude, unpolished prose.*

69. Who is the author of the somewhat famous poem called *Piers Plowman*?

Tradition—the only authority we have in this case—assigns it to *William Langland*, who was, evidently, a discontented ecclesiastic.

70. State briefly the size and object of the poem.

Piers Plowman is a satirical and allegorical poem of about 15,000 lines in length, composed on the principle of the old Saxon alliteration. It is intended as a scathing denunciation of the real or fancied political and religious abuses of the times, and from beginning to end is little else than versified grumbling.

71. Give the plot and divisions of *Piers Plowman*.

On a morning in May, Peter, a ploughman, goes asleep on the Malvern Hills. He dreams a series of twenty dreams. In these twenty visions the world and its inhabitants, with all their faults and foibles, pass before his eyes. The poem is divided into twenty sections corresponding to his twenty visions;

* In the work of translation Wickliff is known to have had several assistants. It is generally believed, however, that he translated the *New Testament* himself.

but there is little connection between the parts, and this want of unity weakens it as a whole.

72. What is generally given as the date of its composition?
A.D. 1370.

73. Who was Lawrence Minot?

Several eminent critics point him out as the *earliest* writer of English verse who deserves the name of poet.

74. When did he write?

In the early part of the reign of Edward III., or in the first half of the fourteenth century.

75. On what subject did he spend most of his poetic abilities?

War. The best of his productions were stirring war-poems which recounted the victorious achievements of Edward III. and the Black Prince.

76. Mention his two best poems.

That on the battle of *Nevill's Cross*, and another on the battle of *Halidon Hill*. These pieces have a polish and warlike ring that entitles them to much praise.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER I., BOOK II.

1. The works of Chaucer, Gower, and Mandeville mark the real beginning of English letters.
2. Edward III. was the first king of England since the Conquest who could speak English.
3. English was made the language of the law-courts in 1362, and of the schools in 1385.
4. The literature of any age or nation is always an expression of the times in which it is produced.
5. The age of Chaucer, Gower, and Mandeville is

one of the most brilliant in the military annals of England; and this brilliancy is faithfully reflected by the literature of the period.

6. The British authors of this age were much influenced by the works contained in Italian, French, and Latin literatures.

7. The chief British writers of the last half of the fourteenth century were *Chaucer*, *Gower*, *Mandeville*, *Barbour*, *Wickliff*, *Langland*, and *Minot*.

8. Chaucer is styled "the Father of English Poetry," and Mandeville is often called "the Father of English Prose."

9. The *Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's greatest production.

10. Chaucer died A.D. 1400, and was the *first* great literary genius buried in Westminster Abbey.

11. The *Confessio Amantis* is the best known work written in English by Gower.

12. Mandeville's *Travels* is generally considered the first specimen of real English prose; besides, it is the oldest book of travels in the language.

13. *The Bruce*, by Barbour, is the most ancient monument of the English language in Scotland.

14. Wickliff was the first who translated the entire Bible into English; but as a writer he can claim little merit.