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FROM CHAUCER TO TENNYSON.

CHAPTER I.

FROM THE CONQUEST TO CHAUCER.

1066-1400.

THE Norman conquest of England, in the 11th century, made a break in the natural growth of the English language and literature. The Old English or Anglo-Saxon had been a purely Germanic speech, with a complicated grammar and a full set of inflections. For three hundred years following the battle of Hastings this native tongue was driven from the king's court and the courts of law, from Parliament, school, and university. During all this time there were two languages spoken in England. Norman French was the birth-tongue of the upper classes and English of the lower. When the latter got the better of the struggle, and became, about the middle of the 14th century, the national speech of all England, it was no longer the English of King Alfred. It was a new language, a grammarless tongue, almost wholly stripped of its inflections. It had lost half of its old words, and had filled their places with French equivalents. The Norman lawyers had introduced legal terms; the ladies and courtiers words of dress and courtesy. The knight had imported the vocabulary of war and of the chase. The master-builders of the Norman castles and cathedrals contributed technical expressions proper to the architect and the mason. The art of cooking was French. The naming of the living animals,

ox, swine, sheep, deer, was left to the Saxon churl who had the herding of them, while the dressed meats, *beef, pork, mutton, venison*, received their baptism from the table-talk of his Norman master. The four orders of begging friars, and especially the Franciscans or Gray Friars, introduced into England in 1224, became intermediaries between the high and the low. They went about preaching to the poor, and in their sermons they intermingled French with English. In their hands, too, was almost all the science of the day; their *medicine, botany, and astronomy* displaced the old nomenclature of *leechdom, wort-cunning* and *star-craft*. And, finally, the translators of French poems often found it easier to transfer a foreign word bodily than to seek out a native synonym, particularly when the former supplied them with a rhyme. But the innovation reached even to the commonest words in every-day use, so that *voice* drove out *seven*, *poor* drove out *earn*, and *color, use, and place* made good their footing beside *hue, wont, and stead*. A great part of the English words that were left were so changed in spelling and pronunciation as to be practically new. Chaucer stands, in date, midway between King Alfred and Alfred Tennyson, but his English differs vastly more from the former's than from the latter's. To Chaucer, Anglo-Saxon was as much a dead language as it is to us.

The classical Anglo-Saxon, moreover, had been the Wessex dialect, spoken and written at Alfred's capital, Winchester. When the French had displaced this as the language of culture, there was no longer a "king's English" or any literary standard. The sources of modern standard English are to be found in the East Midland, spoken in Lincoln, Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridge, and neighboring shires. Here the old Anglian had been corrupted by the Danish settlers, and rapidly threw off its inflections when it became a spoken and no longer a written language, after the Conquest. The West Saxon, clinging more tenaciously to ancient forms,

sank into the position of a local dialect; while the East Midland, spreading to London, Oxford, and Cambridge, became the literary English in which Chaucer wrote.

The Normans brought in also new intellectual influences and new forms of literature. They were a cosmopolitan people, and they connected England with the Continent. Lanfranc and Anselm, the first two Norman archbishops of Canterbury, were learned and splendid prelates of a type quite unknown to the Anglo-Saxons. They introduced the scholastic philosophy taught at the University of Paris, and the reformed discipline of the Norman abbeys. They bound the English Church more closely to Rome, and officered it with Normans. English bishops were deprived of their sees for illiteracy, and French abbots were set over monasteries of Saxon monks. Down to the middle of the 14th century the learned literature of England was mostly in Latin, and the polite literature in French. English did not at any time altogether cease to be a written language, but the extant remains of the period from 1066 to 1200 are few and, with one exception, unimportant. After 1200 English came more and more into written use, but mainly in translations, paraphrases, and imitations of French works. The native genius was at school, and followed awkwardly the copy set by its master.

The Anglo-Saxon poetry, for example, had been rhythmical and alliterative. It was commonly written in lines containing four rhythmical accents and with three of the accented syllables alliterating.

*Reste hine thā rúm-heort; réced hlifade
Geáp and góld-fáh, gäst inne swäf.*

Rested him then the great-hearted; the hall towered
Roomy and gold-bright, the guest slept within.

This rude, energetic verse the Saxon *scóp* had sung to his harp or *glee-beam*, dwelling on the emphatic syllables,

passing swiftly over the others, which were of undetermined number and position in the line. It was now displaced by the smooth metrical verse with rhymed endings, which the French introduced and which our modern poets use, a verse fitted to be recited rather than sung. The old English alliterative verse continued, indeed, in occasional use to the 16th century. But it was linked to a forgotten literature and an obsolete dialect, and was doomed to give way. Chaucer lent his great authority to the more modern verse system, and his own literary models and inspirers were all foreign, French or Italian. Literature in England began to be once more English and truly national in the hands of Chaucer and his contemporaries, but it was the literature of a nation cut off from its own past by three centuries of foreign rule.

The most noteworthy English document of the 11th and 12th centuries was the continuation of the Anglo-Saxon chronicle. Copies of these annals, differing somewhat among themselves, had been kept at the monasteries in Winchester, Abingdon, Worcester, and elsewhere. The yearly entries are mostly brief, dry records of passing events, though occasionally they become full and animated. The fen country of Cambridge and Lincolnshire was a region of monasteries. Here were the great abbeys of Peterborough and Croyland and Ely minster. One of the earliest English songs tells how the savage heart of the Danish king Cnut was softened by the singing of the monks in Ely.

Merie sungen muneches binnen Ely
Tha Cnut chyning reu ther by;
Roweth, cnihtes, noer the land.
And here we thes muneches sang.

Merrily sung the monks in Ely
When King Canute rowed by.
'Row boys, nearer the land,
And let us hear these monks' song.'

It was among the dikes and marshes of this fen country that the bold outlaw Hereward, "the last of the English," held out for some years against the conqueror. And it was here, in the rich abbey of Burgh or Peterborough, the ancient Medeshamstede (meadow-homestead), that the chronicle was continued nearly a century after the Conquest, breaking off abruptly in 1154, the date of King Stephen's death. Peterborough had received a new Norman abbot, Turolde, "a very stern man," and the entry in the chronicle for 1070 tells how Hereward and his gang, with his Danish backers, thereupon plundered the abbey of its treasures, which were first removed to Ely, and then carried off by the Danish fleet and sunk, lost, or squandered. The English in the later portions of this Peterborough chronicle becomes gradually more modern, and falls away more and more from the strict grammatical standards of the classical Anglo-Saxon. It is a most valuable historical monument, and some passages of it are written with great vividness, notably the sketch of William the Conqueror put down in the year of his death (1086) by one who had "looked upon him and at another time dwelt in his court." "He who was before a rich king, and lord of many a land, he had not then of all his land but a piece of seven feet. . . . Likewise he was a very stark man and a terrible, so that one durst do nothing against his will. . . . Among other things is not to be forgotten the good peace that he made in this land, so that a man might fare over his kingdom with his bosom full of gold unhurt. He set up a great deer preserve, and he laid laws therewith that whoso should slay hart or hind, he should be blinded. As greatly did he love the tall deer as if he were their father."

With the discontinuance of the Peterborough annals, English history written in English prose ceased for three hundred years. The thread of the nation's story was kept up in Latin chronicles, compiled by writers partly of English

and partly of Norman descent. The earliest of these, such as Ordericus Vitalis, Simeon of Durham, Henry of Huntingdon, and William of Malmesbury, were contemporary with the later entries of the Saxon chronicle. The last of them, Matthew of Westminster, finished his work in 1273. About 1300, Robert, a monk of Gloucester, composed a chronicle in English verse, following in the main the authority of the Latin chronicles, and he was succeeded by other rhyming chroniclers in the 14th century. In the hands of these the true history of the Saxon times was overlaid with an ever-increasing mass of fable and legend. All real knowledge of the period dwindled away until in Capgraves's *Chronicle of England*, written in prose in 1463-1464, hardly any thing of it is left. In history as in literature the English had forgotten their past, and had turned to foreign sources. It is noteworthy that Shakspeare, who borrowed his subjects and his heroes sometimes from authentic English history, sometimes from the legendary history of ancient Britain, Denmark, and Scotland—as in *Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*, respectively—ignores the Saxon period altogether. And Spenser, who gives in the second book of his *Faerie Queene* a *resumé* of the reigns of fabulous British kings—the supposed ancestors of Queen Elizabeth, his royal patron—has nothing to say of the real kings of early England. So completely had the true record faded away that it made no appeal to the imaginations of our most patriotic poets. The Saxon Alfred had been dethroned by the British Arthur, and the conquered Welsh had imposed their fictitious genealogies upon the dynasty of the conquerors.

In the *Roman de Rou*, a verse chronicle of the dukes of Normandy, written by the Norman Wace, it is related that at the battle of Hastings the French *jongleur*, Taillefer, spurred out before the van of William's army, tossing his lance in the air and chanting of "Charlemagne and of

Roland, of Oliver and the peers who died at Roncesvals." This incident is prophetic of the victory which Norman song, no less than Norman arms, was to win over England. The lines which Taillefer sang were from the *Chanson de Roland*, the oldest and best of the French hero sagas. The heathen Northmen, who had ravaged the coasts of France in the 10th century, had become in the course of one hundred and fifty years completely identified with the French. They had accepted Christianity, intermarried with the native women, and forgotten their own Norse tongue. The race thus formed was the most brilliant in Europe. The warlike, adventurous spirit of the vikings mingled in its blood with the French nimbleness of wit and fondness for display. The Normans were a nation of knights-errant, with a passion for prowess and for courtesy. Their architecture was at once strong and graceful. Their women were skilled in embroidery, a splendid sample of which is preserved in the famous Bayeux tapestry, in which the conqueror's wife, Matilda, and the ladies of her court wrought the history of the Conquest.

This national taste for decoration expressed itself not only in the ceremonious pomp of feast and chase and tourney, but likewise in literature. The most characteristic contribution of the Normans to English poetry were the metrical romances or chivalry tales. These were sung or recited by the minstrels, who were among the retainers of every great feudal baron, or by the *jongleurs*, who wandered from court to castle. There is a whole literature of these *romans d'aventure* in the Anglo-Norman dialect of French. Many of them are very long—often thirty, forty, or fifty thousand lines—written sometimes in a strophic form, sometimes in long Alexandrines, but commonly in the short, eight-syllabled rhyming couplet. Numbers of them were turned into English verse in the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries. The translations were usually inferior to the originals. The French

trouwere (finder or poet) told his story in a straightforward, prosaic fashion, omitting no details in the action and unrolling endless descriptions of dresses, trappings, gardens, etc. He invented plots and situations full of fine possibilities by which later poets have profited, but his own handling of them was feeble and prolix. Yet there was a simplicity about the old French language and a certain elegance and delicacy in the diction of the *trouweres* which the rude, unformed English failed to catch.

The heroes of these romances were of various climes: Guy of Warwick, and Richard the Lion Heart of England, Havelok the Dane, Sir Troilus of Troy, Charlemagne, and Alexander. But, strangely enough, the favorite hero of English romance was that mythical Arthur of Britain, whom Welsh legend had celebrated as the most formidable enemy of the Sassenach invaders and their victor in twelve great battles. The language and literature of the ancient Cymry or Welsh had made no impression on their Anglo-Saxon conquerors. There are a few Welsh borrowings in the English speech, such as *bard* and *druid*; but in the old Anglo-Saxon literature there are no more traces of British song and story than if the two races had been sundered by the ocean instead of being borderers for over six hundred years. But the Welsh had their own national traditions, and after the Norman Conquest these were set free from the isolation of their Celtic tongue and, in an indirect form, entered into the general literature of Europe. The French came into contact with the old British literature in two places: in the Welsh marches in England and in the province of Brittany in France, where the population is of Cymric race, and spoke, and still to some extent speaks, a Cymric dialect akin to the Welsh.

About 1140 Geoffrey of Monmouth, a Benedictine monk, seemingly of Welsh descent, who lived at the court of Henry the First and became afterward bishop of St. Asaph, pro-

duced in Latin a so-called *Historia Britonum*, in which it was told how Brutus, the great grandson of Æneas, came to Britain, and founded there his kingdom called after him, and his city of New Troy (Troynovant) on the site of the later London. An air of historic gravity was given to this tissue of Welsh legends by an exact chronology and the genealogy of the British kings, and the author referred, as his authority, to an imaginary Welsh book given him, as he said, by a certain Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford. Here appeared that line of fabulous British princes which has become so familiar to modern readers in the plays of Shakspeare and the poems of Tennyson: Lear and his three daughters; Cymbeline; Gorboduc, the subject of the earliest regular English tragedy, composed by Sackville and acted in 1562; Lochrine and his Queen Gwendolen and his daughter Sabrina, who gave her name to the river Severn, was made immortal by an exquisite song in Milton's *Comus* and became the heroine of the tragedy of *Lochrine*, once attributed to Shakspeare; and above all, Arthur, the son of Uther Pendragon, and the founder of the Table Round. In 1155 Wace, the author of the *Roman de Rou*, turned Geoffrey's work into a French poem entitled *Brut d' Angleterre*, "brut" being a Welsh word meaning chronicle. About the year 1200 Wace's poem was Englished by Layamon, a priest of Arley Regis, on the border stream of Severn. Layamon's *Brut* is in thirty thousand lines, partly alliterative and partly rhymed, but written in pure Saxon English with hardly any French words. The style is rude but vigorous, and, at times, highly imaginative. Wace had amplified Geoffrey's chronicle somewhat, but Layamon made much larger additions, derived, no doubt, from legends current on the Welsh border. In particular, the story of Arthur grew in his hands into something like fullness. He tells of the enchantments of Merlin, the wizard; of the unfaithfulness of Arthur's queen, Guenever, and the treachery of his nephew, Modred. His narration of the last

great battle between Arthur and Modred ; of the wounding of the king — “fifteen fiendly wounds he had, one might in the least three gloves thrust” — ; and of the little boat with “two women therein, wonderly dight,” which came to bear him away to Avalun and the Queen Argante, “sheenest of all elves,” whence he shall come again, according to Merlin’s prophecy, to rule the Britons ; all this left little, in essentials, for Tennyson to add in his *Passing of Arthur*.

This new material for fiction was eagerly seized upon by the Norman romancers. The story of Arthur drew to itself other stories which were afloat. Walter Map, a gentleman of the court of Henry II., in two French prose romances connected with it the church legend of the Sangreal, or holy cup, from which Christ had drunk at his last supper, and which Joseph of Arimathea had afterward brought to England. Then it miraculously disappeared and became thenceforth the occasion of knightly quest, the mystic symbol of the object of the soul’s desire, an adventure only to be achieved by the maiden knight, Galahad, the son of that Launcelot who in the romances had taken the place of Modred in Geoffrey’s history as the paramour of Queen Guenever. In like manner the love-story of Tristan and Isolde, which came probably from Brittany or Cornwall, was joined by other romancers to the Arthur-saga.

Thus there grew up a great epic cycle of Arthurian romance, with a fixed shape and a unity and vitality which have prolonged it to our own day and rendered it capable of a deeper and more spiritual treatment and a more artistic handling by such modern English poets as Tennyson in his *Idyls of the King*, Matthew Arnold, Swinburne, and many others. There were innumerable Arthur romances in prose and verse, in Anglo-Norman and continental French dialects, in English, in German, and in other tongues. But the final form which the saga took in mediæ-

val England was the prose *Morte Dartur* of Sir Thomas Malory, composed at the close of the 15th century. This was a digest of the earlier romances, and is Tennyson’s main authority.

Beside the literature of the knight was the literature of the cloister. There is a considerable body of religious writing in early English, consisting of homilies in prose and verse, books of devotion, like the *Ancren Riwle* (Rule of Anchoresses), 1225, and the *Ayenbite of Inwyrt* (Remorse of Conscience), 1340, in prose ; the *Handlyng Sinne*, 1303, the *Cursor Mundi*, 1320, and the *Pricke of Conscience*, 1340, in verse ; metrical renderings of the Psalter, the Pater Noster, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments ; the Gospels for the Day, such as the *Ormulum*, or Book of Orm, 1205 ; legends and miracles of saints ; poems in praise of virginity, on the contempt of the world, on the five joys of the Virgin, the five wounds of Christ, the eleven pains of hell, the seven deadly sins, the fifteen tokens of the coming judgment ; and dialogues between the soul and the body. These were the work not only of the monks, but also of the begging friars, and in smaller part of the secular or parish clergy. They are full of the ascetic piety and superstition of the Middle Age, the childish belief in the marvelous, the allegorical interpretation of Scripture texts, the grotesque material horrors of hell with its grisly fiends, the vileness of the human body and the loathsome details of its corruption after death. Now and then a single poem rises above the tedious and hideous barbarism of the general level of this monkish literature, either from a more intensely personal feeling in the poet, or from an occasional grace or beauty in his verse. A poem so distinguished is, for example, *A Luve Ron* (A Love Counsel), by the Minorite friar, Thomas de Hales, one stanza of which recalls the French poet Villon’s *Balade of Dead Ladies*, with its refrain—

Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan ?
 "Where are the snows of yester year?"

Where is Paris and Heléyne
 That weren so bright and fair of bles¹
 Amadas, Tristan, and Idéyne
 Yseudé and allé the,²
 Hector with his sharpé main,
 And Cæsar rich in worldés fee?
 They beth ygliden out of the reign³
 As the shaft is of the clec.⁴

A few early English poems on secular subjects are also worthy of mention, among others, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, generally assigned to the reign of Henry III. (1216-1272), an *estrijf*, or dispute, in which the owl represents the ascetic and the nightingale the æsthetic view of life. The debate is conducted with much animation and a spirited use of proverbial wisdom. *The Land of Cokaygne* is an amusing little poem of some two hundred lines, belonging to the class of *fabliaux*, short humorous tales or satirical pieces in verse. It describes a lubber-land, or fool's paradise, where the geese fly down all roasted on the spit, bringing garlic in their bills for their dressing, and where there is a nunnery upon a river of sweet milk, and an abbey of white monks and gray, whose walls, like the hall of little King Pepin, are "of pie-crust and pastry crust," with flouren cakes for the shingles and fat puddings for the pins.

There are a few songs dating from about 1300, and mostly found in a single collection (Harl. MS., 2253), which are almost the only English verse before Chaucer that has any sweetness to a modern ear. They are written in French strophic forms in the southern dialect, and sometimes have an intermixture of French and Latin lines. They are musical, fresh, simple, and many of them very pretty. They celebrate the gladness of spring with its cuckoos and throstle-cocks, its daisies and woodruff.

¹Hue.²Those.³Realm.⁴Bowstring.

When the nightingalé sings the woodés waxen green;
 Leaf and grass and blossom spring in Averil, I ween,
 And love is to my herté gone with a spear so keen,
 Night and day my blood it drinks, my herté doth me tene.¹

Others are love complaints to "Alysoun" or some other lady whose "name is in a note of the nightingale;" whose eyes are as gray as glass, and her skin as "red as rose on ris." Some employ a burden or refrain.

Blow, northern wind,
 Blow thou me my sweeting,
 Blow, northern wind, blow, blow, blow!

Others are touched with a light melancholy at the coming of winter.

Winter wakeneth all my care
 Now these leavés waxeth bare,
 Oft I sigh and mourné sare
 When it cometh in my thought
 Of this worldes joy, how it goeth all to nought.

Some of these poems are love songs to Christ or the Virgin, composed in the warm language of earthly passion. The sentiment of chivalry united with the ecstatic reveries of the cloister had produced Mariolatry, and the imagery of the Song of Solomon, in which Christ woos the soul, had made this feeling of divine love familiar. Toward the end of the 13th century a collection of lives of saints, a sort of English *Golden Legend*, was prepared at the great abbey of Gloucester for use on saints' days. The legends were chosen partly from the hagiology of the Church Catholic, as the lives of Margaret, Christopher, and Michael; partly from the calendar of the English Church, as the lives of St. Thomas of Canterbury, and of the Anglo-Saxons, Dunstan, Swithin—who is mentioned by Shakspeare—and Kenelm, whose life is quoted by Chaucer in the *Nonne Preste's Tale*. The verse was

¹Pain.²Branch.