

clumsy and the style monotonous, but an imaginative touch here and there has furnished a hint to later poets. Thus the legend of St. Brandan's search for the earthly paradise has been treated by Matthew Arnold and William Morris.

About the middle of the 14th century there was a revival of the Old English alliterative verse in romances like *William and the Werewolf*, and *Sir Gawayne*, and in religious pieces such as *Clanresse* (purity), *Patience*, and *The Perle*, the last named a mystical poem of much beauty, in which a bereaved father sees a vision of his daughter among the glorified. Some of these employed rhyme as well as alliteration. They are in the West Midland dialect, although Chaucer implies that alliteration was most common in the north. "I am a sotherne man," says the parson in the *Canterbury Tales*. "I cannot geste rom, ram, ruf, by my letter." But the most important of the alliterative poems was the *Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman*.

In the second half of the 14th century French had ceased to be the mother-tongue of any considerable part of the population of England. By a statute of Edward III., in 1362, it was displaced from the law courts. By 1386 English had taken its place in the schools. The Anglo-Norman dialect had grown corrupt, and Chaucer contrasts the French of Paris with the provincial French spoken by his prioress, "after the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe." The native English genius was also beginning to assert itself, roused in part, perhaps, by the English victories in the wars of Edward III. against the French. It was the bows of the English yeomanry that won the fight at Crecy, fully as much as the prowess of the Norman baronage. But at home the times were bad. Heavy taxes and the repeated visitations of the pestilence, or Black Death, pressed upon the poor and wasted the land. The Church was corrupt; the mendicant orders had grown enormously wealthy, and the country was eaten

up by a swarm of begging friars, pardoners, and apparitors. That social discontent was fermenting among the lower classes which finally issued in the communistic uprising of the peasantry under Wat Tyler and Jack Straw.

This state of things is reflected in the *Vision of Piers Plowman*, written as early as 1362, by William Langland, a tonsured clerk of the west country. It is in form an allegory, and bears some resemblance to the later and more famous allegory of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. The poet falls asleep on the Malvern Hills, in Worcestershire, and has a vision of a "fair field full of folk," representing the world with its various conditions of men. There were pilgrims and palmers; hermits with hooked staves, who went to Walsingham—and their wenches after them—great lubbers and long that were loth to work; friars glossing the Gospel for their own profit; pardoners cheating the people with relics and indulgences; parish priests who forsook their parishes—that had been poor since the pestilence time—and went to London to sing there for simony; bishops, archbishops, and deacons, who got themselves fat clerkships in the Exchequer, or King's Bench; in short, all manner of lazy and corrupt ecclesiastics. A lady, who represents holy Church, then appears to the dreamer, explains to him the meaning of his vision, and reads him a sermon the text of which is, "When all treasure is tried, truth is the best." A number of other allegorical figures are next introduced, Conscience, Reason, Meed, Simony, Falsehood, etc., and after a series of speeches and adventures, a second vision begins in which the seven deadly sins pass before the poet in a succession of graphic impersonations; and finally all the characters set out on a pilgrimage in search of St. Truth, finding no guide to direct them save Piers the Plowman, who stands for the simple, pious laboring man, the sound heart of the English common folk. The poem was originally in eight divisions or "passus," to which was added a continuation in three parts,

*Vita Do Wel, Do Bet, and Do Best.* About 1377 the whole was greatly enlarged by the author.

*Piers Plowman* was the first extended literary work after the Conquest which was purely English in character. It owed nothing to France but the allegorical cast which the *Roman de la Rose* had made fashionable in both countries. But even here such personified abstractions as Langland's Fair-speech and Work-when-time-is, remind us less of the Fraunchise, Bel-amour, and Fals-semblaunt of the French courtly allegories than of Bunyan's Mr. Worldly Wiseman, and even of such Puritan names as Praise-God Barebones, and Zeal-of-the-land Busy. The poem is full of English moral seriousness, of shrewd humor, the hatred of a lie, the homely English love for reality. It has little unity of plan, but is rather a series of episodes, discourses, parables, and scenes. It is all astir with the actual life of the time. We see the gossips gathered in the ale-house of Betun the brewster, and the pastry cooks in the London streets crying "Hote pies, hote! Good gees and grys.<sup>1</sup> Go we dine, go we!" Had Langland not linked his literary fortunes with an uncouth and obsolescent verse, and had he possessed a finer artistic sense and a higher poetic imagination, his book might have been, like Chaucer's, among the lasting glories of our tongue. As it is, it is forgotten by all but professional students of literature and history. Its popularity in its own day is shown by the number of MSS. which are extant, and by imitations, such as *Piers the Plowman's Crede* (1394), and the *Plowman's Tale*, for a long time wrongly inserted in the *Canterbury Tales*. Piers became a kind of typical figure, like the French peasant, *Jacques Bonhomme*, and was appealed to as such by the Protestant reformers of the 16th century.

The attack upon the growing corruptions of the Church was made more systematically, and from the stand-point of

<sup>1</sup> Pigs.

a theologian rather than of a popular moralist and satirist, by John Wiclif, the rector of Lutterworth and professor of divinity in Baliol College, Oxford. In a series of Latin and English tracts he made war against indulgences, pilgrimages, images, oblations, the friars, the pope, and the doctrine of transubstantiation. But his greatest service to England was his translation of the Bible, the first complete version in the mother-tongue. This he made about 1380, with the help of Nicholas Hereford, and a revision of it was made by another disciple, Purvey, some ten years later. There was no knowledge of Hebrew or Greek in England at that time, and the Wiclifite versions were made not from the original tongues but from the Latin Vulgate. In his anxiety to make his rendering close, and mindful, perhaps, of the warning in the Apocalypse, "If any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life," Wiclif followed the Latin order of construction so literally as to make rather awkward English, translating, for example, *Quib sibi vult hoc somnium?* by *What to itself wole<sup>1</sup> this sweven?*<sup>2</sup> Purvey's revision was somewhat freer and more idiomatic. In the reigns of Henry IV. and V. it was forbidden to read or to have any of Wiclif's writings. Such of them as could be seized were publicly burned. In spite of this, copies of his Bible circulated secretly in great numbers. Forshall and Madden, in their great edition (1850), enumerate one hundred and fifty MSS. which had been consulted by them. Later translators, like Tyndale and the makers of the Authorized Version, or "King James's Bible" (1611), followed Wiclif's language in many instances; so that he was, in truth, the first author of our biblical dialect and the founder of that great monument of noble English which has been the main conservative influence in the mother-tongue, holding it fast to many strong, pithy words and idioms that would else have been lost. In

<sup>1</sup> Will.

<sup>2</sup> Dream.

1415, some thirty years after Wiclif's death, by decree of the Council of Constance, his bones were dug up from the soil of Lutterworth chancel and burned, and the ashes cast into the Swift. "The brook," says Thomas Fuller, in his *Church History*, "did convey his ashes into Avon; Avon into Severn; Severn into the narrow seas; they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wiclif are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed all the world over."

Although the writings thus far mentioned are of very high interest to the student of the English language and the historian of English manners and culture, they cannot be said to have much importance as mere literature. But in Geoffrey Chaucer (died 1400) we meet with a poet of the first rank, whose works are increasingly read and will always continue to be a source of delight and refreshment to the general reader as well as a "well of English undefiled" to the professional man of letters. With the exception of Dante, Chaucer was the greatest of the poets of mediæval Europe, and he remains one of the greatest of English poets, and certainly the foremost of English story tellers in verse. He was the son of a London vintner, and was in his youth in the service of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, one of the sons of Edward III. He made a campaign in France in 1359-60, when he was taken prisoner. Afterward he was attached to the court and received numerous favors and appointments. He was sent on several diplomatic missions by the king, three of them to Italy, where, in all probability, he made the acquaintance of the new Italian literature, the writings of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. He was appointed at different times comptroller of the wool customs, comptroller of petty customs, and clerk of the works. He sat for Kent in Parliament, and he received pensions from three successive kings. He was a man of business as well as books, and he loved men and nature no less than study. He knew his world; he "saw life steadily and saw it whole." Living

at the center of English social and political life, and resorting to the court of Edward III., then the most brilliant in Europe, Chaucer was an eye-witness of those feudal pomps which fill the high-colored pages of his contemporary, the French chronicler, Froissart. His description of a tournament in the *Knigh's Tale* is unexcelled for spirit and detail. He was familiar with dances, feasts, state ceremonies, and all the life of the baronial castle, in bower and hall: the "trompes with the loude minstralcie," the heralds, the ladies, and the squires. He knew—

What hawkës sitten on the perch above,  
What houndës ligger<sup>1</sup> on the floor adown.

But his sympathy reached no less the life of the lowly; the poor widow in her narrow cottage, and that "trewe swynkere<sup>2</sup> and a good," the plowman whom Langland had made the hero of his vision. He is, more than all English poets, the poet of the lusty spring, of "Aprillë with her showrës sweet" and the "foulës song;" of "May with all her flourës and her green;" of the new leaves in the wood, and the meadows new powdered with the daisy, the mystic Marguerite of his *Legend of Good Women*. A fresh vernal air blows through all his pages.

In Chaucer's earlier works, such as the translation of the *Romaunt of the Rose* (if that be his), the *Boke of the Duchesse*, the *Parlament of Foules*, the *Hous of Fame*, as well as in the *Legend of Good Women*, which was later, the inspiration of the French court poetry of the 13th and 14th centuries is manifest. He retains in them the mediæval machinery of allegories and dreams, the elaborate descriptions of palaces, temples, portraitures, etc., which had been made fashionable in France by such poems as Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*, and Jean Machault's *La Fontaine Amoureuse*. In some of these the influence of Italian

<sup>1</sup> Lie.

<sup>2</sup> Laborer.

poetry is also perceptible. There are suggestions from Dante, for example, in the *Parlament of Foules* and the *Hous of Fame*, and *Troilus and Cresseide* is a free handling rather than a translation of Boccaccio's *Filostrato*. In all of these there are passages of great beauty and force. Had Chaucer written nothing else, he would still have been remembered as the most accomplished English poet of his time, but he would not have risen to the rank which he now occupies, as one of the greatest English poets of all time. This position he owes to his masterpiece, the *Canterbury Tales*. Here he abandoned the imitation of foreign models and the artificial literary fashions of his age, and wrote of real life from his own ripe knowledge of men and things.

The *Canterbury Tales* are a collection of stories written at different times, but put together, probably, toward the close of his life. The frame-work into which they are fitted is one of the happiest ever devised. A number of pilgrims who are going on horseback to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket, at Canterbury, meet at the Tabard Inn, in Southwark, a suburb of London. The jolly host of the Tabard, Harry Bailey, proposes that on their way to Canterbury, each of the company shall tell two tales, and two more on their way back, and that the one who tells the best shall have a supper at the cost of the rest when they return to the inn. He himself accompanies them as judge and "reporter." In the setting of the stories there is thus a constant feeling of movement and the air of all outdoors. The little "head-links" and "end-links" which bind them together give incidents of the journey and glimpses of the talk of the pilgrims, sometimes amounting, as in the prologue of the *Wife of Bath*, to full and almost dramatic character-sketches. The stories, too, are dramatically suited to the narrators. The general prologue is a series of such character-sketches, the most perfect in English poetry. The portraits of the pilgrims are illuminated with the soft brilliancy and

the minute loving fidelity of the miniatures in the old missals, and with the same quaint precision in traits of expression and in costume. The pilgrims are not all such as one would meet nowadays at an English inn. The presence of a knight, a squire, a yeoman archer, and especially of so many kinds of ecclesiastics, a nun, a friar, a monk, a pardoner, and a somp-nour or apparitor, reminds us that the England of that day must have been less like Protestant England, as we know it, than like the Italy of some fifty years ago. But however the outward face of society may have changed, the Canterbury pilgrims remain, in Chaucer's descriptions, living and universal types of human nature. The *Canterbury Tales* are twenty-four in number. There were thirty-two pilgrims, so that if finished as designed the whole collection would have numbered one hundred and twenty-eight stories.

Chaucer is the bright consummate flower of the English Middle Age. Like many another great poet he put the final touch to the various literary forms that he found in cultivation. Thus his *Knight's Tale*, based upon Boccaccio's *Teseide*, is the best of English mediæval romances. And yet the *Rime of Sir Thopas*, who goes seeking an elf queen for his mate, and is encountered by the giant Sir Olifaunt, burlesques these same romances with their impossible adventures and their tedious rambling descriptions. The tales of the prioress and the second nun are saints' legends. The *Monk's Tale* is a set of dry, moral apologues in the manner of his contemporary, the "moral Gower." The stories told by the reeve, miller, friar, somp-nour, shipman, and merchant belong to the class of *fabliaux*, a few of which existed in English, such as *Dame Siriz*, the *Lay of the Ash*, and the *Land of Cokaygne*, already mentioned. The *Nonne Prestre's Tale*, likewise, which Dryden modernized with admirable humor, was of the class of *fabliaux*, and was suggested by a little poem in forty lines, *Dou Coc et Werpil*, by Marie de France, a Norman poetess of the 13th century. It

belonged, like the early English poem of *The Fox and the Wolf*, to the popular animal saga of *Reynard the Fox*. The *Franklin's Tale*, whose scene is Brittany, and the *Wife of Bath's Tale* which is laid in the time of the British Arthur, belong to the class of French *lais*, serious metrical tales shorter than the romance and of Breton origin, the best representatives of which are the elegant and graceful *lais* of Marie de France.

Chaucer was our first great master of laughter and of tears. His serious poetry is full of the tenderest pathos. His loosest tales are delightfully humorous and life-like. He is the kindest of satirists. The knavery, greed, and hypocrisy of the begging friars and the sellers of indulgences are exposed by him as pitilessly as by Langland and Wiclif, though his mood is not, like theirs, one of stern, moral indignation, but rather the good-natured scorn of a man of the world. His charity is broad enough to cover even the corrupt sump-  
charitable

And yet in sooth he was a good felawe.

Whether he shared Wiclif's opinions is unknown, but John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster and father of Henry IV., who was Chaucer's life-long patron, was likewise Wiclif's great upholder against the persecution of the bishops. It is, perhaps, not without significance that the poor parson in the *Canterbury Tales*, the only one of his ecclesiastical pilgrims whom Chaucer treats with respect, is suspected by the host of the Tabard to be a "loller," that is, a Lollard, or disciple of Wiclif, and that, because he objects to the jovial inn-keeper's swearing "by Goddes bones."

Chaucer's English is nearly as easy for a modern reader as Shakspeare's, and few of his words have become obsolete. His verse, when rightly read, is correct and melodious. The early English was, in some respects, "more sweet upon the tongue" than the modern language. The vowels had their

broad Italian sounds, and the speech was full of soft gut-terals and vocalic syllables, like the endings *ën, ës, ë*, which made feminine rhymes and kept the consonants from coming harshly together.

Great poet as Chaucer was, he was not quite free from the literary weakness of his time. He relapses sometimes into the babbling style of the old chroniclers and legend writers; cites "auctours" and gives long catalogues of names and objects with a *naïve* display of learning; and introduces vulgar details in his most exquisite passages. There is something childish about almost all the thought and art of the Middle Ages—at least outside of Italy, where classical models and traditions never quite lost their hold. But Chaucer's artlessness is half the secret of his wonderful ease in story-telling, and is so engaging that, like a child's sweet unconsciousness, one would not wish it otherwise. artless

The *Canterbury Tales* had shown of what high uses the English language was capable, but the curiously trilingual condition of literature still continued. French was spoken in the proceedings of Parliament as late as the reign of Henry VI. (1422-1471). Chaucer's contemporary, John Gower, wrote his *Vox Clamantis* in Latin, his *Speculum Meditantis* (a lost poem), and a number of *ballades* in Parisian French, and his *Confessio Amantis* (1393) in English. The last named is a dreary, pedantic work, in some fifteen thousand smooth, monotonous, eight-syllabled couplets, in which Grande Amour instructs the lover how to get the love of Bel Pucel.

1. Early English Literature. Bernhard ten Brink. Translated from the German by H. M. Kennedy. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1883.

2. Morris and Skeat's Specimens of Early English. (Clarendon Press Series.) Oxford.

3. The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman.  
 Edited by W. W. Skeat. Oxford, 1886.
4. Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Tyrwhitt's Edition. New  
 York: D. Appleton & Co., 1883.
5. The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer. Edited by  
 Richard Morris. London: Bell & Daldy (6 volumes.)

## CHAPTER II.

## FROM CHAUCER TO SPENSER.

1400-1599.

THE 15th century was a barren period in English literary history. It was nearly two hundred years after Chaucer's death before any poet came whose name can be written in the same line with his. He was followed at once by a number of imitators who caught the trick of his language and verse, but lacked the genius to make any fine use of them. The *manner* of a true poet may be learned, but his style, in the high sense of the word, remains his own secret. Some of the poems which have been attributed to Chaucer and printed in editions of his works, as the *Court of Love*, the *Flower and the Leaf*, the *Cuckow and the Nightingale*, are now regarded by many scholars as the work of later writers. If not Chaucer's, they are of Chaucer's school, and the first two, at least, are very pretty poems after the fashion of his minor pieces, such as the *Boke of the Duchesse* and the *Parlament of Foules*.

Among his professed disciples was Thomas Occleve, a dull rhymmer, who, in his *Governail of Princes*, a didactic poem translated from the Latin about 1413, drew, or caused to be drawn, on the margin of his MS. a colored portrait of his "maister dere and fader reverent."

This londés verray tresour and richesse  
 Dethe by thy dethe hath harm irreparable  
 Unto us done; hir vengeable duresse  
 Spoiléd hath this londe of the swetnésse  
 Of Rhetoryk.

Another versifier of this same generation was John Lydgate, a Benedictine monk of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds,