CHAUCER'S GRISILDIS.

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VII.

DOLORES.—AN ITALIAN MAID LEARNS ENGLISH.—A ROMANTIC ADVENTURE.—A MASQUERADE, AND WHAT BEFELL THE SENATOR.—A CHARMING DOMINO.—A MOONLIGHT WALK, AND AN ASTOUNDING DISCOVERY.

THE lodgings of Buttons and Dick were in a remarkably central part of Naples. The landlord was a true Neapolitan; a handsome, gay, witty, noisy, lively, rascally, covetous, ungrateful, deceitful, cunning, good-hearted old scoundrel, who took advantage of his guests in a thousand ways, and never spoke to them without trying to humbug them. He was the father of a pretty daughter who had all her parent's nature somewhat toned down, and expanded in a feminine mould.

Buttons had a chivalrous soul, and so had Dick; the vivacity of this very friendly young lady was like an oasis in the wilderness of travel. In the evening they loved to sit in the sunshine of her smile. She was singularly unconventional, this landlord's daughter, and made many informal calls on her two lodgers in their apartment.

An innocent, sprightly little maid—name Dolores—age seventeen—complexion olive—hair jet black—eyes like stars, large, luminous, and at the same time twinkling—was anxious to learn English, especially to sing English songs; and so used to bring her guitar and sing for the Americans. Would they teach her their national song? "Oh yes! happy beyond expression to do so." The result, after ten lessons, was something like this:

"Anty Dooda tumma towna
By his sef a po-ne
Sinca fadda luna sat
Kalla Maccaróni."

She used to sing this in the most charming manner, especially the last word in the last line. Not the least charm in her manner was her evident conviction that she had mastered the English language.

"Was it not an astonishing thing for so young a Signorina to know English?"

"Oh, it was indeed!" said Buttons, who knew Italian very well, and had the lion's share of the conversation always.

"And they said her accent was fine?"

"Oh, most beautiful!"

"Bellissima! Bellissima!" repeated little Dolores, and she would laugh until her eyes overflowed with delighted vanity.

"Could any Signorina Americana learn Italian in so short a time?"

"No, not one. They had not the spirit. They could never equal her most beautiful accent."

"Ah! you say all the time that my accent is most beautiful."

One day she picked up a likeness of a young lady which was lying on the table.

"Who is this?" she asked, abruptly, of Buttons.

CHAUCER'S GRISILDIS.

IN the gallery of English poesy stands many a fair and noble statue, fashioned with that extremest care men use when they would speak their gentlest thought of womanhood. Crowned with the highest grace of all, touching the heart to tears forever, behold Grisildis, wrought in most reverent mood by England's father-poet —Geoffrey Chaucer.

There is a cant of conventionalism that decries the present and sickens the soul with a vague and childish clamor for the return of mediaeval art and feeling. Now the mind that thinks and the heart that acts upon the thought will declare always the present to be the grandest time of any. It holds ourselves, our destiny, and itself contains the pith and marrow of the past.

Believing this—and it is the creed of the best schools every where—the literature that holds us fast to-day must be the reflex of the lives we are all living, must dissect the questions that beset us, must strive with those problems which clamor for solution — mighty angels all, with which the Jacobs among us contend, and verily will not let them go without the blessing!

It were well enough—since that was the best they either knew—for Greece and Rome to find physical perfection, and rest content; but the To-day—eager,

inquisitive, penetrating, demanding the pith of the emotion, the core of the idea—laughs to scorn such puny complacency.

It is not, I suppose, that the mystery of living has become more intricate with the centuries, but it is ourselves that, by the grace of God, have won the advance in comprehending it; the voices are not more manifold than in the ages past, but it is we who listen more thoughtfully; the ear has grown finer to catch the rhythm, the heart more eager to demand the explanation.

It is therefore that we scan with keenest scrutiny the picture, the statue, the book, the poem that comes before us and asks for our decision. If the intention is true—if there is a soul calling out to us, deep unto deep, beneath all phases of expression, the picture, the statue, the book, the poem—the whatever in Art it may be—is for *us;* but if, on the contrary, it bears the stamp, cold and external, of the dead antique, we reject it with disdain, or offer it at best the chilly commendation—for like begets like—of "classical correctness."

Those who are wise in their professions—writers, artists, men of science—all feel that their work must be impregnated with this sympathy, profound and heart-reaching, everywhere touching and corresponding to the incessant demands of the To-day for soul and earnestness above aught else; but the poet comprehends the need the best of any, for to him belongs the extreme expression of emotion and of passion.

Tennyson writes the "Princess"—with its half-jest on the surface, its deep meaning underneath—

and the whole is a response to the modern upheaving of the womanly nature demanding its ultimatum. Its preludes, its tender songs, its delicate and shell-like involutions of descriptive verse, all melt at last into the millennial sweetness wherein the woman

"—sets herself to man,
Like perfect music unto noble words
Then comes the statelier Eden back to men:
Then reign the world's great bridals, chaste and calm:
Then springs the crowning race of humankind.
May these things be!"

If there is a cheat any where, if the conclusion begs the question, we are more than ready to forgive—more than willing to acknowledge the great heart-yearning to soothe the wrong it may not at all redress.

This struggle with modern giants—more potent, more invincible than ever found in fairy figment—is yet more vehement in the intricate poems of the Browvnings. Those who raised any cry of "obscure" here misunderstood the difficulty. The mystery and the doubt lay hidden in the awful truths these poet-souls agonized to utter. Is it easy to make plain those subtle undercurrents that underlie our outside social fictions, and that thrill in every fibre with the fiery ichor that is our real life ? Those were souls fearfully in earnest that found grace to declare beneath the glitter of externals the ghastly substrata of being which, with miserable *dilettanteism*, we are all glad enough to ignore, save when the volcanic eruption threatens our hearth-stones with the seething tide of destructive lava.

In American poetry we have had less of this feeling. The hour has not yet come, or perchance the need has been less pressing. Besides, this is the New World to us still. The landscape is so large, the sky so blue and clear, the air so inspiring, that we can only wonder and enjoy like children.

It is therefore that Bryant and Longfellow and the rest of the goodly company find such a charm in landscape painting that the human element recedes from view, overlaid by the consummate perfection of that which the noblest art must yet proclaim an accessory. This, however, is a fair beginning. Childhood is as absolute a need in poetry as it is in the stages of our mortal progress. First the tender grace, the guileless simplicity, the attentiveness to the world external, that is the heritage of children; thereafter the strength and power and incisive comprehension that belongs to perfected manhood.

By-and-by, when wo have become accustomed to this world of wonders, we shall have unity—single figures, such as Dante's Beatrice, Petrarch's Laura, where the treasures of all time were heaped at the feet of one. We, too, shall show a wondrous vista of men and women struck into being by the divine spark kindled in these mortal souls from on high, and thus match the glory of that wondrous Art shining across the sea, at which we all have lighted our torches. So fur we have " Evangeline" and some remember Judd's "Margaret;"* but the single figures are few. Condensation is the work of centuries. The master-genius that fuses into one burning gem the long experience of many souls belongs not to the blooming of the early year. When many davs of

vernal showers and penetrating sunlight have tempered the earth and wrought all influences into harmony the rose unfurls her manifold corolla. With patience we possess our souls until then. Sure are we that there will be no halting in our national literature any more than in our national destiny. Already, gazing with intent faith toward the horizon, one beholds the dim, sweet outlines of that beautiful procession which shall be the heritage of our children.

You will understand, then, that it is not because our faith in the Future is small, or our perception of the Present feeble, that we would crave your company in a pilgrimage to those simple woodlands swayed by Geoffrey Chaucer. It is thence our modern poets fetch their daisies; it is there, beside the "well of English undefiled," that the delicatest mosses hold a heyday of perpetual greenness.

Hush! it is early spring-time in these woodlands. Listen! overhead the lark is singing from out the dappled clouds of early morning. You will not refuse this violet overbrimming with the first dew of dawn? This, then, is

THE STORY OF GRISILDIS.

A certain lord of Italv, Walter by name, a "Markis" by degree, rules his people to their liking save in respect of too great a fondness for the chase—

"And eke he wo'ld (and that was worst of all)
Wedden no wif for ought that might befall."

His people, laying this last infirmity seriously to heart, at length wait upon him and entreat him to marry, advancing all those moving arguments in favor of wedlock which present themselves in invincible array upon these occasions. With that officious assurance which asserts itself at such crises the people even offer to choose a wife for the Marquis, that there may be no plea of escape for him. Lord Walter gives favorable audience to the marriage proposition, but dissents from the excess of zeal that would deny him the privilege of selecting a wife for himself. He will marry, with the proviso that in no case his people are to reject the lady of his choice.

The Prologue, which contains the business portion of the poem, being disposed of, we arrive at *"Pars Secunda."* And now pictures, framed at random, it would seem, from their artless sweetness, begin to illuminate the onward progress of the ballad. Yet, as you read you feel that here there are no strokes at random. The mood of the poet is too thoughtful,

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* With the exception of these I can not recall any other single figures that are stamped upon our literature. Can the reader?

too religious for careless superfluity. So you look closer, and find that every picture frames a thought, as in mediaeval art the most simple etching, if regarded attentively, displays some saint or angel or apostle enshrining the heart of the painting that grows and grows upon you until the quivering lip confesses the sacred meaning of the perfect whole.

In phrases strung as simply as daisies *"Pars Secunda"* tells us how, not far from the "palais honourable" of my Lord Marquis, stands a "thorpe of sighte delitable," inhabited by the "poure folk of that village." Among them, pourest of all, dwelt Janicola, his only riches a daughter hight Grisildis, "yong" and "faire ynough to sight."

"But though this mayden tendre were of age,
Yet in the brest of hire virginitee
Ther was enclosed sad and ripe corage:
And in gret reverence and charitee
Hire old poure fader fostred she:
A few sheep spinning on the field she kept;
She wolde not ben idel til she slept."

Here slides in a gentle picture of Grisildis coming home from her sheep-tending. Even as she walked she idled not: in the tender twilight she comes gathering herbs with which to strew her bed. And yet above this daily round of duties she prizes best that of keeping her father's "lif on loft."

It was upon this "poure creature," Grisildis, that the Marquis, "as he on hunting rode," had "sette his eye;" for it would seem that, notwithstanding his high lineage, my lord was a sincere republican, since he declares that

"Bonntee cometh al of God, not of the stren."*

So he chooses Grisildis for her womanhood; and feeling sure of her assent—as it was proper a Marquis should—prepares array of "gemmes sette in gold and in asure," "brooches and rings for Grisildis's sake," with all other "ornamentes" which to such a wedding "shulde fall."

And so the wedding-day arrives—the bride unknown; and Grisildis, coming home from the well, sets down her "water pot anon"

"Beside the threshold in an oxes stall,"

finds herself called by the Marquis, and falling on her knees, is asked the question that, in those days, preceded the more important one,

"Wher is your fader, Grisildis?"

With that native courtesy no confusion could put to flight she expresses her father's readiness to come by saying, "Lord, lie is al redy here," and straightway fetches him. My Lord then makes known his purpose of becoming " son in lawe" to the herdsman.

It would seem that a collation then, as now, assisted the ratification of a treaty, and retiring within, Grisildis listening with " ful pale face," receives the marriage offer, closing thus :

"And eke whan I say ya, ye say not nay,
Neither by word, ne frouning countenance?
Swere this, and here I swere our alliance."

"Quaking for drcde," she swears.

The master then slides in another picture, in apposition to that of Grisildis coming home through the twilight from her sheep-tending. It is that of Grisildis being attired by the court- ladies. Full dainty are they of touching her rude peasant-clothes.

Having replaced these with the rich garments of her bridal array, with their "fingres smal," they comb her hair, "that lay untressed ful rudel," put on her crown, and bring her forth to the people. Chaucer— manlike, glad to be rid of toilet-details—disposes of them all by saying,

" **Of hire array what shuld** I **make** a **tale** ?"

And proceeds with his elimination of character. True poet, he strikes for the gold of art at all hazards; he spends none of his precious moments in tampering with dross, allured with that perishable glitter that lasts a day. Why should he, when the centuries were to frame his handiwork?

Chaucer, with a quiet scorn of that judgment whose base is externals, represents the populace — now that the jewel is fitly set—as inclined to doubt the identity of Janicola's daughter, and imagine her to be "another creature." Somewhat as our modern dilettanteism, having no faith in natural endowments and God-given prescience, would discard Shakspeare and adopt a changeling. Grisildis, however, whether herself or "another creature," commends herself to her husband's people in such wise,

"That eche hive loveth that lokelh ou hire face."

Not only does she excel in all feats of " wifly homlinesse," but

"So wise and ripe wordes hadde she,
And jugement of so gret equitee,
That she from Heven sent was, as men wend
Peple to save, and every wrong to amend."

Grisildis still further commends herself by bearing a daughter to the "Markis," and we arrive at "*Pars Tertia*."

Lord Walter, at this point, seems to chafe beneath his republican theory, and determines to put it to the test. He tempts his wife, one imagines, to determine whether it be really true that the lowlv-born may yet hold in fee as noble graces as any. Though some men might praise this assay of character for a "subtil wit," Chaucer, not to be misunderstood, shakes his head over it for a moment, in token of disapprobation, and then proceeds with the temptation :

The " Markis," reminding his wife of her origin, and what he has done for her—(one wonders, in passing, if the husbands of our modem Grisildis twit them also with trousseaus bestowed in the ecstasy of courtship)—then tells her that, to quiet his people, she must yield her little daughter. The woman's reply is— implicit obedience. The man who is to deprive her of her child comes to perform her husband's behest. This is the mother's farewell; it proves that tears belong to superficial emotion:

"Farewel, my child, I shal thee never see,
But sin I have thee marked with the crois,
Of thilke fader yblessed mote thou be,
That for us died upon a crois of tree:
Thy soule, litle child, I him betake,
For this night shal thou dien for my sake."

Do you not see ? The mother-heart would break beneath the heaviness of such a parting, so she slips the weight upon His shoulder who bears the burdens

of the universe—smiling the Christ-smile above it all!

She begs then of the sergeant, knowing the little child's soul to be safe, that the "litle body" be buried in "som place" where the beasts may not disturb it. But making no promise to this effect, the minion of the " Markis" goes on his way.

With jealous eye the husband watches for some change in Grisildis's mien toward him; but her constant mood remains; obedience and servitude are both the same. Nor does she ever speak her daughter's name " for ernest ne for game. "

"Pars Quarto" opens with the birth of a "knave child," "ful gracious and fair for to behold." The "Markis" waits two years—(is it that the trial may be sterner ?)—and then applies his second test, upon which the poet asserts :

"O! nedeless was she tempted in assay,
But wedded men ne conncnne measure
Whan that they finde a patient creature."

At the end of the two years he comes to his wife with the old story of disaffection, the renewed demand for the sacrifice of the second child, that none of the blood of Janicola, the herdsman, may succeed him. The mother yields as before;

"For wist I that my deth might do you ese,
Right gladly wold I dien you to plese."

Then comes the "ugly sergeant." Again the pathos, deeper than tears, of the mother's kiss and blessing and parting prayer:

“ If that he might,
Hire litle sonne he woldc in erthc grave.”

The “Markis” wonders at this patience, and had he not known the love of his wife for her children, would have committed that vile crime the world commits every day, and have mistaken patience—the noblest flower of the soul! —for that weed, accursed of men and angels, called indifference.

The “Markis,”in his cruel test of character, loses the regard of his people, who believe him to be the murderer of both his children. At length he sends for these last to the Erl of Pavia, to -whose guardianship they had been intrusted, with word to send them home,

“In honorable estat al openely:"

and we come to “*Pars Quinta.”* The husband now demands the utterest proof of all. To quiet the people his wife must leave him:

“My new wif is coming by the way,” **says Lord Walter.**

She makes her answer a little longer than heretofore ; he is taking the last from her now, the extremest last, and hearts that have suffered know—hush! it is God only who knows! —what this may be. The soul finds itself searched through and through by an awful wind, so keen, so biting, that it sends up the appalling cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me ?” before it is given grace to respond, in utter submission, “It is finished.”

“Naked out of my fadre’s hous (quod she)
I came, and naked I mote tume again."

But he “could not do so dishonest a thing,” she says, as to leave her altogether bare, so she craves the defense of a smock. That granted, there follows a most piteous picture of Grisildis, clothed on with the sanctity of perfected womanhood, wending her way through the folk weeping, she with “ eyen dry,” back to her poor old father, and he too “sorwefully weeping,” with the “olde cote” of the peasant-girl, seeming ruder than ever now with age, “covereth hire.”

So this “flour of wifly patience” abides with her father, and *“Pars Quinta*” closes with the confession,

“There can no man in humblesse him acquitt
As women can, ne can be half so trewe."

“*Pars Sexta”* finds the “Markis” summoning the discarded wife to prepare the palace for the coming bride who is to take her place. In her peasant clothing she obeys. The “ Erl” arrives with the noble children, and the people, beholding their rich array and the tender beauty of the girl, declare

“That Walter was no fool though that him lest
To change his wif, for it was for the best.”

And Chaucer, with the same poetic wrath at this puerile judgment that forever bases itself on externals that moved him before, denounces,

“O! stormy peple, unead and ever untrewe!"

Grisildis makes all ready, and receives the guests with such discreetness that they wonder at the lofty courtesy which denies the lowly peasant garb.

Last of all, that the most piercing pang may not be wanting, the " Markis" calls the discarded Grisildis to inquire

"How liketh thou my wif, and Her beautee?"

She answers him with praises, and ends with an admonition that reaches back touching all aspects of her own pitiful experience. It is that he is to leave his tests alone for the new wife, since

"She might not adversitee endure,
As coulde a ponre festred creature."

The "Markis" declares this is "ynough," reinstates Grisildis, restores to her her children, and crowns anew the brow already graced with the most beautiful crown of any.

It is not until this ballad-poem is finished almost to the latest page that the meaning reveals itself; scarcely then does the full force of the motive and conception become our own. The figure of Grisildis stands too deeply embayed in shadow; the cross-lights are cruel, and awaken the resentment.

Wait and watch a moment, as if you prayed. Away with veils and screens, and let in the perfect day of the Beyond. Lo! it is the image of "clear-eyed Faith" that stands before us, the face uplifted, the lips forever smiling. Grisildis submits utterly because she trusts implicitly, and by "submission wins at last."

The same deep-hearted devoutness which is the tone of Dante's poem pervades the later one of

Chaucer. The fire and majesty of the Florentine are greater, but the feeling is the same.

The English poet ushered in the dawn of a larger era, but he failed not to retain that impassioned fervor which, consecrating its highest to God, was the touchstone of mediaeval Art, transmuting it—whatever its fault besides—into works forever precious to the sons of men.

So the great child-heart of Dan Chaucer, wisely-simple, reaching one hand back into the past for what was noblest therein, stretches the other down to us moderns, holding aloft this fairest star of womanhood, Grisildis, to shine along the years to his Master's glory.