A POET OF THE OLDEN TIME

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A POET OF THE OLDEN TIME. pp 248-250.

GEOFFEY CHAUCER, " the father of English poetry," was born in London in 1828, and after studying at Cambridge, and perhaps at Oxford also, went to the court of King Edward III., and was employed In the public service. He married the sister-in-law of John of Gaunt, the king's son. In the latter part of his life he retired to Woodstock, where he wrote his great work, "The Canterbury Tales." He died in London in 1400, and is buried in the south transept of Westminster Abbey. In consequence, poets and men of letters have ever since been buried, or monuments erected to them, there, and the transept is called Poets' Corner.

The "Canterbury Tales" is one of the greatest poems in our language, but as it was written in the earliest stage of the mother-tongue, it is very difficult to ordinary readers, both on account of its grammar and spelling. We have modernized portions of the prologue, in the belief that they will form a pleasant and interesting reading. The poem contains one of the best accounts which exist of the manners and customs of England in the fourteenth century.

This translation/modernization is probably by Stopford Augustus Brooke. From Jerry Morris comes the following information:

The author may have been Stopford Augustus Brooke. In the Life and Letters of Stopford Brooke, New York, 1917, Lawrence Pearsall Jacks wrote:

"During the whole of this period he was working at a pressure which even his splendid physical constitution hardly sufficed to sustain. He had joined the promoters of The People's Magazine, and though he was not the nominal editor, it is evident from his letters that he was doing the bulk of the work, procuring and criticizing the articles of others, and writing articles of his own on a great variety of subjects: historical, literary, artistic, and scientific... (Vol I P223)"

Brooke refers to a Chaucer article in a letter to his wife dated Sept 5, '71: "...Green is right about Chaucer's Landscape being 'thin,' but what else could it be? I never intended it for more than a pretty article on a pretty little subjject, and its only object is to make people look a little into that part of Chaucer's poetry which introduces landscape...(Vol I P258)."

The poem opens thus:

When gentle April with his showers sweet,
(The-winter past) the cold dry earth does greet,
And bathes in genial moisture every root,
That in its season each may bring forth fruit;
When southern gales fan with their loving breath
Pasture and field, and forest-grove. and heath,
Bringing back life—the white the spring-tide sun,
In joyous strength, his giant course doth run;
When woods re-echo birds' sweet melody,
As day and night they carol happily;
And all rejoice, light youth and hoary age,
Then is the time men go on pilgrimage.
Palmers go forth, to seek on distant strands
The shrines of holy saints in foreign lands.
But specially, from Berwick to Land's End,
The English folk to Canterbury wend,
The holy martyr Thomas* for to seek,
Because he helped them when they were sick.
* i.e., Thomas a Becket, whose shrine was the most popular object of pilgrimage at that period.

Chaucer himself, he goes on to say, started at the proper season, and reached, on, his way, the Tabard Inn at Southwark. Here he found twenty-nine pilgrims like himself. and being much pleased with them determined to go in their company. In order to-lighten the weariness of the journey, mine host of the Tabard proposed that each pilgrim should tell a tale on the way, and that on the return of the party, he who had told the best should be entertained by the rest at a supper. This was agreed to. This is the machinery, the "plot" of the "Canterbury Tales." " But first," says the poet," I must

tell you something about these pilgrims. I will describe them to you one by one."

KNIGHT there was, and that a worthy man,
Who from the period that he first began
To ride on horseback, loved chivalry.
Honour and truth, freedom and courtesy.
Full well approved had he been in war,
Fierce battles had he fought in, no man more,
In Christendom as well as Heatheness,
And still was honoured for his worthiness.
In peaceful times he gained rich meed of praise,
Harmless as dove, and yet as serpent wise.
Brave as a lion, gentle as a maid,
He never evil word to any said;
Never for self, but always strong for right,
He was a very perfect gentle knight.
He wore a fustian frock under his armour, all soiled with the rust of it, for he had but just landed from foreign wars.

His son was with him, acting as his SQUIRE, who is accordingly described next; a young, good-looking fellow, in love, of course, and therefore very particular of his personal appearance.

His locks were curl'd as though they had been in press
Of twenty years of age he was, I guess.
In stature somewhat more than common length,
Of wonderful activity and strength.
He too, though young, had warlike service seen.
In France and Flanders, Italy and Spain;
And borne him bravely for so little space,

In hope to gain in his young lady's grace.
With broidered coat, he looked like meadow bright,
Which spring has decked with flow'rets red and white;
He sang or fluted all the livelong day,
Joyous and merry as the month of May.
Short was his gown, with sleeves full long and wide,
Well could he sit on horse, and well could ride;
Could sing good songs, could even well indite,
Could joust and dance, could paint, could even write.
So deep in love, I e'en must tell the tale,
He slept at night no more than nightingale.
Courteous he was, lowly, and serviceable,
And waited on his father at the table.

The next is a NUN, a Prioress.
In manner very simple, modest, coy,
The strongest oath she used was "Saint Eloy,"
And she was called Madame Eglantine.
Full well she sang the services divine,
Accompanied with tuneful twang of nose.
For finer speech, French words she sometimes chose,
That is to say, the French of Stratford-Bow.
For nought of French of Paris did she know.
So nice and proper when that she did eat,
She never dropp'd a morsel of her meat ;
Nor in the gravy dipp'd her fingers deep,
And as she rais'd it to her mouth, could keep,
The drops from falling on her breast; in short,
She long'd to show the manners of the court.
Her upper lip she always wiped so clean,
That on her cup-edge there was never seen,
Whenever she did drink, a spot of grease;
Of meat she always took "a little piece."

So stately, so complacent was she, hence
She deemed that (all should give her reverence.
And then so tender-hearted ‘She would cry
At sight of mouse entrapp’d, and doom’d to die.
She had of dogs great number, which she fed .
With meat, and chickens, milk, and fine white bread.
Her head was cover’d with a kerchief white,
Her nose was straight, her eyes were large and bright
Her mouth was small, her lips were cherry red,
And smooth as marble was her broad forehead.

A MONK there was, right stout and burly he,
A daring rider, loving venery.*
To be an Abbot fully was he able—
Full many a dainty horse had he in stable.
When out he rode, men could his bridle hear
In th’ whistling wind jingling along so clear,
And loud and cheerful as the chapel bell,
When prime or vesper-hour its tongue doth tell.
Little cared he for rules of Benedict,
He held them all too barbarous and strict ;
With ancient fashions what had he to do ?
Let them be buried—he lived in the new.
Nor cared he aught for any empty prate .
Of those who called a hunter reprobate,
Nor those who thought a monk should stay in cloister
Such fancies, quoth he, are not worth an oyster.
Why should he read, and study day and night’
O’er musty books—why should he spend his might
O’er spade or hammer? If that Benedict
Saw good in labour, let none interdict
Good Benedict from labouring all the day;
Meanwhile our monk would ride, and hunt, and play.

Nor stinted he in dress—I saw his hand
Border'd with finest ermine of the land;
His hood was fasten'd underneath his chin
And at the end a love-knot met my sight.
His head was bald, and shone like mirrour bright;
A well-condition'd man, and well-appointed.
His eyes deep sunk, and rolling in his heart,
Which steam'd and smoked like pot of melted lead.
* Hunting

The Friar is described next, and is drawn in very dark colours, much the same, indeed, as in the prose descriptions of the poet's friend, Wiclif. The Friar is thoroughly venal and corrupt; a smooth-tongued, cringing hypocrite, who will talk of the most sacred things with his tongue in his cheek, to wheedle money from the simple-hearted, but who especially prides himself in robbing the poor things and widows. With this, he is also profligate in life. Passing him by, we come to the Merchant.

A MERCHANT next among the throng appear'd,
In motley coat, wearing a fork'ed beard;
With shining boots and Flanders beaver hat;
And as he solemnly on horseback sat,
He spoke of trade and gains, and thought the sea
From Middleburgh to Orwell wall'd should be,
To guard from foes. Right well he bargains made,
And used his eyes and ears in foreign trade;
And none could ever to his secrets get,
Whether he rich had got, or were in debt.

A CLERK was next, come up from Oxford town,
Who had in logic gotten great renown.
His horse as lean and thin as any rake,
Himself no fatter, I my oath will take.
His cheeks were hollow, and his coat threadbare,
He had no living yet, you might be ware;
Nor cared he for such things, or worldly gain,
Yet there were things which he desired amain.
To have a score of books at his bed's head,
This was his pleasure, and he truly said
That he found Aristotle's logic sweet
Beyond all music which our ear doth greet.
He had but little gold, but sometimes friends
Would make him presents, which he straight-way spends
In buying books, and as he does so, prays
That God will bless the givers all their days.
And as he gave to study earnest heed,
H spoke no single word more than was need;
And this he spoke with formal reverence,
Quietly, calmly, but with all good sense;
Sounding in moral virtue was his speech,
And gladly would he learn and gladly teach.

A FRANKLIN was there in the company,
With snow-white beard, right comely for to see;
And broad red cheeks, which plainly told the tale
That in the morn he loved a sup of ale.
Own son of Epicurus sure was he,
And held good living true felicity;
In his large household, every one could tell,
His patron saint, Saint Julian,* serv'd he well.
His bread, his ale, were always of the best,
A better filled cellar few possess'd;

Fish, flesh, and fowl, in larder, one might think
It snowed in his house of meat and drink.
And as the quarters of the year came round,
sure was each dish in season to abound.
Full many a partridge fat had he in mew,
And many a bream and many a pike in stew.
Woe to his cook, unless the sauces were
Poignant and sharp, and ready all his gear.
His board, which stood fix'd in the hall always,
Was ready cover'd all the livelong day.
At quarter sessions he was lord and sire,
And many times was chosen knight o' th' shire.
* St. Julian was the patron saint of hospitality.

A WIFE came next, of ancient Bath's fair city,
But she was somewhat deaf, which was a pity.
In making cloth much labour had she spent,
And far surpass'd those of Ypress and Ghent.
Whene'er she went to church none must be seen
Approach the offering till that she had been;
and if they did, so very wroth was she,
It took her clean out of all charity.
Her dainty head-dress was so fair of ground,
I could be sworn it weighed full a pound,
At least of Sundays; then her scarlet hose,
So smartly bound, match'd with her fresh new shoes.
She was a buxom woman all her life,
Husbands at church door had she married five;
Not to make mention of her friends in youth,
Which should but little edify in truth.
Thrice had she visited Jerusalem,
And she had cross'ed many a foreign stream;
Had seen great Rome, and Cologne by the Rhine,

And in Galicia, Saint James's shrine;
And so had knowledge good of pilgrim lore.
A front tooth had she lost long time before;
Upon an ambler easily she sat,
Her shoulders mantled, on her head a hat
Broad as a target, while a flowing skirt
Her broad and comely his around engirt.
Sharp spurs upon her feet, yet sharper still
The jest and laughter which her mouth doth fill.
A well-skilled adept in the tender passion,
Of charms and filters knew she all the fashion.

[A POET OF THE OLDEN TIME. 327-8]

IN a recent number we gave a short account of the prologue of Chaucer's " Canterbury Tales." We now conclude our notice of what Mr. Charles Knight well calls " Chaucer's Portrait Gallery;" the versification, as before, sufficiently modernized to be intelligible to our readers.

A humble country Parson next appears,
Pious and gentle, somewhat bowed with years.
Though poor in purse, yet rich in all good work,
And in God's Holy Word a learned clerk.
With earnest zeal Christ's Gospel would he preach,
And all his flock both young and old would teach.
So kind and. gentle, faithful, diligent,
And in adversity so patient.
And e'en the tithes which were by right his own
He would not claim where poverty was known,
But in such case would always rather give,
So simply and so plainly did he live.
His cure was wide, the houses far asunder;

But he was never stayed by rain or thunder,
Ready at all times, day or night, to go
Wherever sickness called, or tale of woe.
With staff in hand, his daily round he trod,
His spirit calmly resting still on God;
And thus example to his folk he brought
To practise first the lessons which he taught,
As Scripture teacheth us, and Reason too,
For if gold rust, what will the iron do ?
If priests be evil livers, whom we trust,
No wonder if the ignorant shall rust.
O, is it not a grievous sight and sad,
When sheep be clean, and shepherd foul and bad?
Ensample always ought a priest to give
Of holy life, whereby his flock should live.
He never set his benefice to hire,
Leaving his sheep neglected in the mire,
Nor running here and there for gain or pleasure;
His fold was all his care, and heaven his treasure.
Strict to himself, to others always kind,
Ruled by the love of God, thus sound of mind,
“The proud he tamed, the penitent he cheered,
Nor to rebuke the rich offender feared."

A PLOWMAN was the next, the Parson's brother,
Who many years had borne of wind and weather.
A faithful labourer and a good was he,
Living in peace and perfect charity.
First loved and served he God with all his heart,
As Christ hath taught us is a Christian's part,
And neighbour as himself; and therefore he,
For Christ's dear sake, would give his labour free
To help his brethren in necessity.

Mighty in brawn and bones a MILLER came,
Never, I ween, was seen more stalwart frame,
Nor did his looks deceive in any wise,
At wrestling bouts he always won the prize.
He was short-shouldered, broad, with mighty fist,
And from its hinge he any door could twist,
Or rush and break it open with his head.
His great broad beard as any fox was red;
A wart upon his nose was decked with hairs,
Red as the bristles on an old sow's ears.
He had fierce eyes, and nostrils black and wide,
A sword and buckler wore he by his side.
His mouth gaped like a furnace; and, for shame!
Coarse jests and oaths too often from it came.
Of corn entrusted to him some he stole,
And three times what he ought he took for toll.
And yet this Miller, if the truth be told,
Among the Millers had a thumb of gold.*
In jerkin white, and hood of blue was he,
Blowing a bagpipe loud and lustily.

* There was a proverbial Saying, " An honest miller has a golden thumb." Our poet therefore implies that this miller was honesty itself compared with millers in general.

We must pass over the Manciple, who was such a rare hand at making bargains, that whether he paid money or received it, always got the best of it; the Reeve (farm bailiff), a native of the town of " Baldes- well" in Norfolk, and the Sompnour (Ecclesiastical Summoner), who is bitterly satirized,--and come to the last portrait drawn by our poet. It is that of the seller of pardons, and is such an important reflex of the

opinions of Chaucer and his friend Wiclif, that it must be given at length:

With him [the Sompnour] there rode a gentle PARDONERE,
Of Roncesvalles, his friend and his compeer;
Who from the court of Rome was on his way,
And now was singing love-songs, blithe and gay,
As pompously he marched along before us;
And in due place the Sompnour sang loud chorus.
This Pardoner had hair as yellow as wax,
But smooth it hung, as doth a strike of flax,
Down on his shoulders; but his head was bare,
'Twas fashionable, he thought, no hood to wear.
A wallet tied before him he had got,
Brimfull of pardon come from Rome all hot,
And wondrous relics; I might safely swear
He had no match from Berwick unto Ware;--
A pillow-case, which was "our Lady's veil;"
A little morsel of the vessel's sail
Wherein Saint Peter went, that time when he
Conveyed our Blessed Lord across the sea.
He had a hollow cross all full of stones,
And in a shrine of glass he had--pig's bones !
And with these relics, whensoe'er he met
A simple parson, he was sure to get
More money in a single morning's work
Than two months' labour brought the learned clerk.
Our Pardoner thus, with his unholy tools,
Parson and people daily made his fools.
Meanwhile the honest truth must be confessed,
He was in Church a grand ecclesiast,
Well could he read a lesson or a story,*
But best of all he sang the offertory;

Knowing, forsooth, that when that song was sung,
He next in pulpit must attune his tongue,
To win the people's gifts of charity,
Therefore he sang full loud and merrily.

* i.e. Legend of a saint.

Thus have I told you shortly in a clause
The estate, the array, the number, and the cause,
Why thus assembled was this company,
In Southwark at the Tabard hostelry.

The prologue concluded, the "Tales" begin. The Knight takes precedence, and tells the beautiful story of " Palamon and Arcite," better known in the modern clothing of Dryden than in the original of the poet. Though Chaucer calls -this a story of ancient times, it is intended as a picture of the court of Edward III. The Squire's tale is incomplete, a tale of wonder and marvellous enchantment, of which Milton has recorded his regret that it was left unfinished.

The Nun Prioress tells just such a tale as might be expected from the description of her, kindly, but sentimental, and rather twaddling; how Hugh of Lincoln, a Christian child, was slain by the Jews and his body thrown into a sewer, because he learned a pretty hymn 'for Christmas-tide. It is an absurd legend believed in the Middle Ages. Wordsworth has modernised this. The Merchant tells the sprightly and pleasant story of "January and May," familiar to modern ears by the elegant paraphrase of Pope. Dryden also has modernised the story of "The Cock and the Fox," and the tale of The Wife of Bath. There are two or three tales, the Miller's, etc., which are utterly foul and corrupt. It is an insufficient excuse for them to say that they are

characteristics of Chaucer's age. His age may have been more immoral than ours, in which case it must have been very bad; but what is one in the world for, but to fight against the evil around us? That he was making a jest of sin, and that this was wicked, Chaucer knew as well as we do; and the last words of the "Canterbury Tales" show this as touchingly as any words ever written. The world was drawing to a close with him; he saw clearly enough then that the words of the wise man are true; "Whatsoever thou takest in hand, remember the end and thou shalt never do amiss." The conclusion of the great work is as follows:--

"Now pray I to you all that hear this little treatise or read it, that if there be anything in it that liketh [pleaseth] them, they thank our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom proceedeth all wit and all goodness; and there be anything that displeaseth them, I pray them that they put it to the fault of my uncunning, and not to my will, that would fain have said better if I had cunning. Wherefore I beseech you meekly, for the mercy of God, that ye pray for me that God may have mercy on me, and forgive me my guilts, and specially my translations and inditings of worldly vanities, as is . . . the 'Tales of Canterbury,' all those which sound unto sin, of the which Christ for his great mercy forgive me. And I pray him that from hence- forth to my life's end he send me grace to bewail my sins, and to study the salvation of my soul; and grant me grace and space of very repentance, penitence, confession, and satisfaction, to do in this present life, through the benign grace of him that is King of all kings and Priest of' all priests, that bought us with the precious blood of his heart, so that I might be one of them at the day of doom that shall be saved. Amen." * i.e. Legend of a saint.