

Our Catholic Heritage in English Literature of Pre-Conquest Days eBook

Our Catholic Heritage in English Literature of Pre-Conquest Days

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FOREWORDS

This little book makes no claim to be a history of pre-Conquest Literature. It is an attempt to increase the interest which Catholics may well feel in this part of the great 'inheritance of their fathers.' It is not meant to be a formal course of reading, but a sort of talk, as it were, about beautiful things said and sung in old days: things which to have learned to love is to have incurred a great and living debt. I have tried to clothe some of these in the nearest approach I could find to the native garb in which their makers had sent them forth, with the humblest acknowledgement that nothing comes up to that native garb itself. In writing the book I have naturally incurred debt in various directions; debt of which the source would be difficult always to trace. I may mention my obligations to the work of Professor Morley, Professor Earle, Professor Ten Brink, and Professor Albert S. Cook: also to the writers of Chapters I-vii of "The Cambridge History of English Literature," vol. i.

If this little book in any way fulfils the wishes of those Catholic teachers who have asked me to print some thoughts of mine about English Literature, I shall be glad indeed.

Emily Hickey.

CHAPTER I

The beginnings of Literature in England. Two poets of the best period of our old poetry, Caedmon and Cynewulf. The language they wrote in. The monastery at Whitby. The story of Caedmon's gift of song.

How many of us I wonder, realise in anything like its full extent the beauty and the glory of our Catholic heritage. Do we think how the Great Mother, the keeper of truth, the guardian of beauty, the muse of learning, the fosterer of progress, has given us gifts in munificent generosity, gifts that sprang from her holy bosom, to enlighten, to cheer, to guide and to help; gifts that she, large, liberal, glorious, could not but give, for she, like her Lord, is giver and bestower; and to be of her children is to be of the givers and bestowers. The Catholic Church is the source of fine literature, of true art, as of noble speech and noble deed.

We are going to look at a small portion of that part of our Catholic heritage which consists of our early literature; we are going to think about the beginning of Christian work of this kind in the form of poetry and prose in England. When I say Christian poetry and prose, I am using the word Christian as opposed to pagan, and inclusive of secular as well as religious verse, though the amount of secular verse is, in the earliest time, comparatively very small. Some of the pagan work was retouched by Christians who cared for the truth and strength and beauty of it. The ideal of the English heathen



poet was, in many respects, a fine one. He loved valour and generosity and loyalty, and all these things are found, for instance,

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in the poem “Beowulf,” a poem full of interest of various kinds; full, too, as Professor Harrison says, “of evidences of having been fumigated here and there by a Christian incense-bearer.” But “the poem is a heathen poem, just ‘fumigated’ here and there by its editor.” There is a vast difference between “fumigating” a heathen work and adapting it to blessedly changed belief, seeing in old story the potential vessel of Christian thought and Christian teaching. To fumigate with incense is one thing—to use that incense in the work of dedication and consecration is another. For instance, the old story of the “Quest of the Graal,” best known to modern readers through Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King,” has been Christianised and consecrated. And so it was with some fine old English (or Anglo-Saxon) poetry. But, just now, we are going to listen to Catholic poets and teachers only.

We begin with the work of poets. Out of all those who wrote in what was the best period of our old poetry, a period that lasted some hundred and fifty or seventy-five years, we know the names of two only, Caedmon and Cynewulf.

And here may I say that scholars agree that the names are to be pronounced *Kadmon* and *Kun-e-wolf*; in the second name we sound the *y* like a French *u*, make a syllable of the *e*, not sounding it as *ee*, but short, and make the last syllable just what we now pronounce as *wolf*.

Both of these poets deserve our love and our praise, as singers and inspirers of other singers, but we know much more about Caedmon’s life than we know about his share in the poetry that has been attributed to him; that is the poetry which has gone under his name. That he did write much fine verse we know. On the other hand, we know a good deal as to the authenticity of Cynewulf’s poetry, and nothing about his life.

Both of these poets wrote in the language spoken in England before the period of French influence. That influence upon English at first seemed to be disastrous; the language became broken up and spoilt: but this was only for a time; and by and by, out of roughness and chaotic grammar there grew up a beautiful and stately speech meet for great poets to sing in, and great men and women to use. So it is that what for a time seems to be disastrous may one day be realised as benign and beautiful.

This pre-Conquest language has to be learned as we learn a foreign tongue. It is much easier to learn than Latin or German, but still it has to be learned; so we shall have to listen to the thought of these poets in the language of our own day, allowing ourselves now and then the use of words or expressions which it is fair to employ in rendering old poetry or prose, though we do not use them in ordinary speech or writing.

We shall sometimes use translations, and sometimes I will tell you about the poetry, giving the gist of it as best I can.

[Illustration: WHITBY ABBEY]



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At Whitby you may see the ruins of what must have been a very beautiful monastery, built high on a hill, swept by brisk and health-giving winds with the strength and freshness of moorland and sea. This monastery, part of which was for monks, and part for nuns, was ruled by Abbess Hild.[A] This seems strange to us, but it was because the Celtic usage prevailed in the government of the Abbey.

[Footnote A: Hilda is the Latinised form, which it is a pity to use instead of the English one.]

We must never forget the work of the Celtic missionaries who brought Christianity from the Western Islands to the North of England: and, of course, their “ways” as well as their message were impressed on the converts. Later on, as we know, the Roman usage was established all over the country.

Among the monks of Streoneshalh, as Whitby was then called, the Danes having given it its present name, there was, as St Bede the Venerable tells us, “a brother specially renowned and honoured by Divine grace, because it was his wont to make fitting songs appertaining to piety and virtue; so that whatever he learned from scholars about the Divine Writings, that did he, in a short time, with the greatest sweetness and fervour, adorn with the language of poetry, and bring forth in the English speech. And because of his poems the hearts of many men were brought to despise the world, and were inspired with desire for the fellowship of the heavenly life.... He was a layman until he was far advanced in years, and he had never learnt any songs. It was then the custom that, when there was a feast on some occasion of rejoicing, all present should sing to the harp in turn. And when Caedmon saw the harp coming near him, he would get up, feeling ashamed, and go home to his house. Now once upon a time he had done this and had left the house where they were feasting, and gone to the stall where the cattle were, which it was his duty that night to attend to. There, when his work was done, he lay down and slept, and in a dream he saw a man standing by him, who hailed him and greeted him and called him by his name, saying: ‘Caedmon, sing me something.’ And Caedmon answered and said, ‘I can sing nothing, and therefore did I go from this feast, and depart hither, because I could not.’ And again he that was speaking with him, said: ‘Nevertheless, thou must sing for me.’”

Then Caedmon understood, and he said in the same spirit that prompted Our Lady’s “Be it done unto me according to thy word,” “What shall I sing?” And the guest of his dream said, “Sing the Creation for me.”

As soon as Caedmon had received this answer, he at once began to sing to the praise of God the Creator verses and words which he had never heard. St Bede quotes a few lines in the Northern dialect, which may be rendered thus:

“Now shall we praise the Guardian of the Kingdom of Heaven, the might of the Creator and the thought of His mind, the works of the Father of glory; how He made the



beginning of all wonders, the everlasting Lord. First did He shape for the children of men Heaven for a roof, the holy Shaper. Then the mid-world the Guardian of Mankind, the Eternal Lord, the King Almighty, created thereafter, the earth for men.”

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When Caedmon awoke the gift remained with him, and he went on composing more poetry. He told the town-reeve about the gift he had received, and the town-reeve took him to the Abbess and showed her all the matter. Abbess Hild called together all the most learned men and the students, and by her desire the dream was told to them, and the songs sung to them that they might all judge what this might be and whence the gift had come. And they were all sure that a divine gift had been bestowed on Caedmon by God Himself. They gave him a holy story and words of divine lore, and bad him sing them if he could, putting them into the measure of verse. In the morning he came back, having set them in most beautiful poetry. And after that the Abbess had him instructed, and he left the life in the world for the religious life. We are told by St Bede that he made much beautiful verse, being taught much holy lore and making songs so winsome to hear that his teachers themselves learned at his mouth.

“He sang of the creation of earth and the making of man, and the history of Genesis, and the going out of the Israelites from the land of the Egyptians, and their entering into the Land of Promise, and many other stories told in the Books of the Canon. He also sang concerning the Humanity of Christ and about His Passion and His Ascension, and about the coming of the Holy Ghost, and the teaching of the Apostles. And he sang also of the Judgement to come and of the sweetness of the Kingdom of Heaven. About these things he made many songs, as well as about the Divine goodness and judgment. And this poet always had before him the desire to draw men away from the love of sin and of evil doing, and to make them earnestly desire to do good deeds.”

At last a fair end was set upon his life when, glad of heart, full of love to those around him, he received Holy Viaticum, and prayed and signed himself with the Holy Sign, and entered sweetly into his rest.

This is the story told for the most part, as it is best to tell it in the way in which St Bede recorded it; and Alfred rendered it into the English of his day, from which English I have now taken it.

CHAPTER II

Caedmon and his influence. Poem, “Genesis.” “The Fall of The Angels.” “Exodus,” English a war-loving race. Destruction of the Egyptians, Fate and the Lord of Fate.

We possess poems on the subjects which St Bede tells us that Caedmon wrote upon, but we cannot be sure that any of these are actually that poet’s work. St Bede tells us that many others after him wrote noble songs, but he sets Caedmon’s work above that of all those others as having been the product of a gift direct from God. In any case he must have influenced those who wrote later than he. All our work whether we are poets,

thinkers, fighters, craftsmen, servants, tradesfolk, teachers, must be only partly in what we do directly. This can to

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some extent be measured. We can tell how many hours' work we have done in a day; how many books we have written in a life's working-time; how much faithful service we have consciously offered. But by far the larger part of our work we cannot know. We cannot know how much we may have influenced others for good, we cannot calculate the effect that we have had upon them, and, through them, upon others. And to apply this thought specially to a poet, we may say that what he has done for others by suggesting, by stimulating, by inspiring, is not only a most valuable part of his work, but also an immeasurable part. A poet may inspire another poet simply to sing; or he may inspire him to sing on subjects akin to those dearest to himself; and the second poet, or the third or fourth, as it may be, may sing better than the first. But all the same, he owes it to the first poet, and, in a sense, the work of the latter poet is a part of the work of the earlier.

The poem "Genesis" is known to be the work of at least two people: part of it is a version of an old Saxon paraphrase of the Old Testament, and must have been written later than Caedmon's time. It is always interesting to know who it was that wrote work we care for, but it is a more important matter to possess the work itself. People in old times did not seem to care much whether their names were known or not. The author, for example, of the book which for so long has been read and studied and cherished as one of the Church's most treasured possessions, the "Imitation of Christ," remained for a long time unknown; and this is by no means a solitary instance. The interest in literary fame is mostly a modern thing. Besides in these old times people worked in a different sort of way from now. We must remember that the art of song went hand in hand with the art of verse-making. All sorts of people sang the words they had heard, changing, adding, as it might be; adding to, or taking from the beauty and force of what they were dealing with, in proportion to the strength of their memory, or the quality of their imagination.

The story of the "Fall of the Angels" forms part of the "Genesis," and it is well worth while to consider whether a very great poet of much later days, John Milton, may not have owed something when writing "Paradise Lost" to his early forerunner.

"Ten angel-tribes had the Guardian of all, the Holy Lord, created by the might of His hand, whom He well trusted to work His will in full allegiance to Him, for He had given them understanding and made them with His hands, the Lord Most Holy.

"He had set them in such blessedness. One thereof had He made so strong, so mighty in his intellect; to him did He grant great sway, next to Himself in the Kingdom of Heaven. So bright had He made him, so beautiful was his form in Heaven that was given him by the Lord of Hosts. He was like unto the stars of light. His duty was to praise the Lord, to laud Him because of his share of the gift of light. Dear was he to our Lord."



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But it could not be hidden from God how pride had taken hold of His angel. And Satan resolves in that pride not to serve God. Bright and beautiful in his form, he will not obey the Almighty. He thinks within himself that he has more might and strength than the Holy God could find among his fellows. "Why should I toil, seeing there is no need that I should have a lord? With my hands I can work marvels as many as He. Great power have I to make ready a goodlier throne, a higher one in Heaven. Why must I serve Him in liegdom, bow to Him in service? I am able to be God even as He. Strong comrades stand by me, who will not fail me in the strife; stout-hearted heroes."

And so does Satan resolve to be the foe of God.

Surely we must be reminded of Milton's great poem when we read how Satan, ruined and cast into hell, speaks to his comrades, lost with him. He compares the "narrow place" with the seat he had once known in Heaven, and denies the right doing of the Almighty in casting him down. He says too that the chief of his sorrows is that Adam, made out of earth, shall possess the strong throne that once was his; Adam, made after God's likeness, from whom Heaven will be peopled with pure souls. And he plans revenge on God by striving to destroy Adam and his offspring.

All this, and the appeal to one of his followers to go upward where Adam and Eve are, and bring about that they should forsake God's teaching and break His Commandments, so that weal might depart from them and punishment await them, may be compared with "Paradise Lost," Books I, II.

It is needless to say that the English were a war-like race. They loved the clash of swords, the whizzing of the arrow in its flight, the fierce combat, the struggle to keep the battle-stead, as they phrased the gaining of a victory. We shall see more of this by and by. And this spirit comes out in their poetry written after they had received Christianity. They delight in the story of struggle, of brave combat, of victory. They saw in the hosts of Pharaoh the old Teuton warriors, with the bright-shining bucklers, and the voice of the trumpets and the waving of banners. Over the doomed host the poet of "Exodus" saw the vultures soaring in circles, hungry for the fight, when the doomed warriors should be their prey, and heard the wolves howling their direful evensong, deeming their food nigh them. Here is the description of the Destruction of the Egyptians. The translation is by Henry S. Canby:—

Then with blood-clots was the blue sky blotted;
Then the resounding ocean, that road of seamen,
Threatened bloody horror, till by Moses' hand
The great Lord of Fate freed the mad waters.
Wide the sea drove, swept with its death-grip,
Foamed all the deluge, the doomed ones yielded,
Seas fell on that track, all the sky was troubled,
Fell those steadfast ramparts, down crashed the floods.

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Melted were these sea-towers, when the mighty One,
Lord of Heaven's realm, smote with holy hand
These heroes strong as pines, that people proud....
The yawning sea was mad,
Up it drew, down swirled; dread stood about them,
Forth welled the sea-wounds. On those war-troops fell,
As from the heaven high, that handiwork of God.
Thus swept He down the sea-wall, foamy-billowed,
The sea that never shelters, struck by His ancient sword,
Till, by its dint[B] of death, slept the doughty ones;
An army of sinners, fast surrounded there,
The sea-pale, sodden warriors their souls up-yielded
Then the dark upsweltering, of haughty waves the greatest,
Over them spread; all the host sank deep.
And thus were drowned the doughtiest of Egypt,
Pharaoh with his folk. That foe to God,
Full soon he saw, yea, e'en as he sank,
That mightier than he was the Master of the waters,
With His death-grip, determined to end the battle,
Angered and awful.

[Footnote B: blow.]

How fine a conception it is. Let us notice how far had been travelled from the old pagan "Fate goeth even as it will" to "the Lord of Fate." How great is the thought of the vision of God's might, the power of the Master of the waves, brought before the eyes of Pharaoh before he sinks in the death-grip that will not let him go!

CHAPTER III

Allegory. Principle of comparison important in life, language, literature. Early use of symbolism; suggested reasons for this. Poem of the Phoenix. Allegorical interpretation of the story. Celtic influence on English poetry. Gifts of colour, fervour, glow. Various gifts of various nations enriching one another.

In these papers we are not going through anything like a course of older English literature. We are looking at some of the work which our early writers have left, from the point of view of its being our Catholic Heritage, and we want to pay special attention to special works, not to go through a long list of names. It is hoped that the bringing



forward of what is so good and strong in interest may be found really helpful by those who have little or no time to go to the originals. That it may be so is alike the desire of writer and publisher.

To-day we are going to consider a poem of a different kind from what we have had before, an old poem called "The Phoenix."

Literature is full of allusions to the fable of the phoenix; it is one of those stories which have caught hold of people and fired their imagination; and the reason is, we may well suppose, because it has suggested so many comparisons, some of them great and beautiful and holy. There are some stories which lend themselves easily to an allegorical interpretation; stories quite true, and yet suggesting things beyond their own actual



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scope. I dwell on this before passing on to the poem, because I want to bring before you the remembrance of what a tremendous factor in literature, as in thought and in the whole of life is the principle of comparison, or, as we might put it, the principle of similitude or likeness. We learn about a thing we do not know through its likeness, as a whole or in some parts, to a thing we do know. Our little children can understand most easily something of the love of Our Father who is in Heaven through the love of their father on earth: they learn of their Redeemer's Mother, their own dear Mother of Grace, through their earthly mother, who is ever ready to supply their wants and give them joy and comfort.

In devotion what do we most need to pray for? Is it not for likeness to the holy ones and to the holiest of all creatures, Our Lady; and highest of all, to the Lord, Our Saviour and Example? And is it not the fairest of promises that one day "we shall be like to Him, for we shall see Him as He is"? (St John iii.)

So in literature we have, springing from this principle of comparison, the forms fable, parable, and allegory; and in language the figures of speech which we know as simile and metaphor.

Ovid, a Roman poet who lived before the Incarnation, tells the old Eastern fable thus:

"There is a bird that restores and reproduces itself; the Assyrians call it the Phoenix. It feeds on no common food, but on the choicest of gums and spices; and after a life of secular length (*i.e.*, a hundred years) it builds in a high tree with cassia, spikenard, cinnamon, and myrrh, and on this nest it expires in sweetest odours. A young Phoenix rises and grows, and when strong enough it takes up the nest with its deposit and bears it to the City of the Sun, and lays it down there in front of the sacred portals."

It was a much later and a much longer version of the story that our English poet was debtor to. It was written in Latin by Lactantius, and the fable there, Professor Earle says, "is so curiously and, as it were, significantly elaborated, that we hardly know whether we are reading a Christian allegory or no."

He goes on to say that Allegory has always been a favourite form with Christian writers, and finds more than one reason for it. There was a tendency towards symbolism in literature outside Christianity when the Christian literature arose. Another reason was that the early Christians used it to convey what it would probably have endangered their lives to set in plain words; besides this—here I must give the Professor's own beautiful words—"Christian thought had in its own nature something which invited allegory, partly by its own hidden sympathies with nature, and partly by its very immensity, for which all direct speech was felt to be inadequate." One more reason he suggests, and that is "the all-pervading and unspeakable sweetness of Christ's teaching by parables."

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The Romans used the representation of the phoenix on coins to signify the desire for fresh life and vigour, and Christian writers used the phoenix as an emblem of the Resurrection.

Many scholars think that it was Cynewulf who wrote the Anglo-Saxon poem of “The Phoenix.” We are, however, uncertain as to its authorship and as to its date. Whoever wrote it probably took some hints as to the allegorical interpretation of the story from both St Ambrose and St Bede. And this poet, too, gives us much more brightness and colour than we find in Caedmonic poetry. I use the word “Caedmonic” to cover the poetry which used to be attributed to Caedmon, and which was probably written under his influence. That he did write much I have shown in Chapter I.

I cannot give the poem at full length, but in parts quote from it, and in part give the gist of it. It begins with a description of the Happy Land which is the home of the Phoenix. Far away in the East it lies, that noblest of lands, renowned among men. Not to many of the earth-owners is it given to have access to that country. God’s power sets it far from the workers of evil. Beautiful is that plain, with joys endowed and with the sweetest smells of earth. Peerless is the island, set there by its noble Maker. Oft is the door of Heaven opened for the blessed ones and the joy of its music known of them. Winsome is the plain with its wide green woods. And there is neither rain nor snow, nor breath of frost nor flame of fire, nor the rush of hail, nor the falling of rime, nor burning heat of the sun, nor everlasting cold, but blessed and wholesome standeth the plain, and full is the noble country of the blowing of blossoms.

The glorious land is higher than earth’s highest towering mountain, lying serene in its sunny wooded fairness. Ever and always the trees are hung with fruits, and never comes the withering of the leaf. No foes may enter that land, and there is no weeping nor any sorrow, nor losing of life, nor sin, nor strife, nor age, nor care, nor poverty. When the Flood covered the earth, this Paradise was shielded from the rush of angry waters, happy through God’s grace and inviolate; and so shall it remain even to the day of the coming of the Judgement of the Lord.

In this fair country there abides a bird of wondrous beauty and strong of wing. For him there shall be no death while the world shall last. Ever he watches the course of the sun, eagerly looks for the radiant rising over ocean of the noblest of stars, the first work of the Father, the glowing token of God. At the coming of the sun he flies swift-winged toward it, singing more wondrously than any son of man hath heard since the making of heaven and earth. Never was human voice nor sound of any instrument of music like unto the song. And so twelve times by day he marks the hours, as twelve times by night he has marked them by his bath in the glorious fountain, and his drink of its cool clear water.



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A thousand years go on, and the burden of years is upon him, and he flies to a spacious lonely realm and there abides alone. He is lord over all the birds, and dwells with them in the wilderness. He flies westward, attended by a great throng, till he gains the country of the Syrians. Then he sends away his retinue, and stays alone in a grove, hidden from human eyes. Here is a lofty tree, blossoming bright above all other trees, and on this tree the Phoenix builds his nest, on a windless day, when the holy jewel of heaven shines clear. For he is fain by the activity of his mind to convert old age into life, and thus renew his youth. He gathers from far and near the sweetest and most delightful plants and leaves, and the sweetest perfumes that the Father of all beginnings has made. On the lofty top of the tree he builds his house fair and winsome, and sets round his body holy spices and noble boughs. Then, in the great sheen of mid-day, the Phoenix sits, looking out on the world and enduring his fate. Suddenly his house is set on fire by the radiant sun, and amid the glowing spices and sweet odours, bird and nest burn together in the fierce heat. The life of him, the soul, escapes when the flame of the funeral pile sears flesh and bone.

Then comes the resurrection of the Phoenix, who rises from the ashes of his old body, young and wondrously beautiful. Fed on the honey-dew that oft descends at midnight, he remains a while before his return to his own dwelling-place, his home of yore.

When he goes he is accompanied by a great retinue of the bird-folk, who proclaim him their leader. Ere he reaches his own country he outstrips them all, and comes home alone in his splendour and his might. And the next thousand years go on, and again comes the change to this creature who has no dread of death, since he is ever assured of new life after the fury of the flame.

And so it is that every blessed soul will choose for himself to enter into everlasting life through the dark portals of death. Much of a like kind does this bird's nature shadow forth concerning the chosen followers of Christ, how they may possess pure happiness here, and secure exalted bliss hereafter.

The allegorical significance is explained by the old poet at considerable length. The main thought is, of course, the great Resurrection in which, day by day, we all profess our belief; the Resurrection through the fire that "shall be astir, and shall consume iniquities"; the Resurrection at the Day of Judgement, when the just shall be once more young and comely in the glory of joy and praise, singing in adoration of the peerless King: "Peace and wisdom and blessing for these Thy gifts, and for every good, be unto Thee, the true God, throned in majesty. Infinite, high, and holy is the power of Thy might. The heavens on high with the angels, are full of the glory, O Father Almighty, Lord of all gods, and the earth also. Defend us, Author of Creation. Thou art the Father Almighty in the highest, the Lord of Heaven."



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How familiarly these words ring! For our heritage of praise has come to us from afar and from of old.

And again rises the chant triumphant, to the endless honour of the Eternal Son, whose coming into the world and birth and death are all typified by the mystical Phoenix.

I have dwelt at considerable length upon this poem for various reasons. One is that it is of a special kind, the allegorical; another is that, as I have pointed out, it is full of a richness and colour and love of nature, which is not found in the earlier poetry. Where does it come from? It is most probably part of the Celtic influence which has set its magic touch upon English poetry and given to it that "light that never was on sea or land." It has done far more than give a sense of colour and beauty and nature-love. More than the love of nature in its beauty is the sense of fellowship between man and nature, the sense that makes man see his own joy and sorrow reflected in the mighty heart of Nature. This is a very big subject, and can only be touched on here. The beginning of this influence, which came also from Wales and France, is due to Ireland. We must never forget how great a debt England owes to Ireland. May we say that it was from the Irish missionaries whose feet hallowed the soil of Iona that the English north country caught that intense glowing love of the Holy Faith, which even still, in a measure, differentiates the north of England from the south?[C] We must value very greatly the solid foundation of strength, sincerity, what we call *grit*, directness of expression, simplicity, to be found in early English work; all these being great things, yet capable of receiving into their fellowship and above it and beyond it, that which should give what we look for in a great literature; the power of appeal to various kinds of people, to "all sorts and conditions of men." And to Celtic influence, Irish, British, French, we look for that which turns grey, however fair a grey, to green, and purest pallor to the glory of whiteness. It is beautiful, is it not, to think how various kinds of men and women can help to complete one another by giving and taking what each has to give, and each needs to take? It is the same with nations: each has its own gifts, its own needs; and for a great and noble world-literature we need the gifts of all.

[Footnote C: I have not, of course, forgotten the mission of St Paulinus; but, as history shows, this does not affect the question here. Glow and fervour permeate life, and literature being its outcome could not but keep the mark of what had been set upon that life.]

CHAPTER IV

Prose-writing. St Bede the Venerable. His love of truth. His industry and carefulness. Cuthbert's account of his last days. "Bede whom God loved."

We leave our poets now for a time, and go to the writers of prose in early days. We want first to think about a beautiful-souled religious, who gave us the first great historical

work done in England. We know him as St Bede, the Venerable Bede, as he has been called from the epithet inscribed on his tomb in Durham Cathedral, which bears the words

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Hac sunt in fossa
Bedae Venerabilis ossa.

“In this grave are the bones of Venerable Bede.” We know the old story how the pupil who was writing his dear master’s epitaph could not find the right word, as it has happened to many a one for the time being; and how he slept and awoke to find the word supplied by the gracious angel hand.

In his Benedictine cell at Jarrow, St Bede read and thought and wrote; and all that he wrote was done in noble sincerity of purpose, springing from the dedication of his whole soul to Him who is truth itself. He told as history what he believed to be true, and collected his materials from sources acknowledged to be trustworthy; and he is always careful to tell us when he gives a story on evidence only hearsay.

St Bede refused to be Abbot of Jarrow, because “the office demands household care, and household care brings with it distraction of mind, which hinders the pursuit of learning.”

He wrote many things, and it has been said that his writings form nearly a complete encyclopaedia of the knowledge of his day; but the work of St Bede by which he is best known is the “Church History of the English Race.” It is of greater value than we can tell, and has been used for many generations for knowledge and help.

The history of England was in St Bede’s time inseparable from the history of her Church, as we pray that one day it may again come to be.

The book begins with a short account of Britain before the coming of St Augustine. St Bede used old writers for this, and he was much helped by two of his friends, Albinus and Northelm. Northelm used to make researches for him at Rome, and brought him copies of letters written by St Gregory the Great, and other Popes, bearing on the Church history of Britain. From other sources also he took the information which has come down through him to us, a heritage for which we cannot be too grateful. Our two great early histories are the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,” and Bede’s “Church History of the English Race.” Without these, what could our historians have done?

This great book of St Bede’s was, like almost all his work, written in Latin; the grand old tongue in which our priests say their daily Office and minister at God’s altar. It was King Alfred who gave us a free translation of it in English. But although it was written in Latin, it belongs absolutely to our Catholic Heritage in English Literature.

Bede was the first historian to date from the Incarnation of Our Lord, the form which we have always used. The History comes down to A.D. 731, a short time before its author went to his rest. We can never think of St Bede as a mere bookman, a purely “literary man.” His own character, truth-loving, wise, devoted, cheerful, has been felt through his

work; a character that has made people love him and stretch out hands of affection to him across the heaping-up of the years. How glad are we to say, we, students, workers, all of us, “St Bede, pray for us.”



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There is a lovely account of St Bede's last days handed down to us in a letter written by his pupil Cuthbert, to another of his pupils, Cuthwin. Cuthwin had written, telling Cuthbert how he was diligently saying Masses, and praying for their "father and master, Bede, whom God loved," and Cuthbert is glad to answer his fellow-student's enquiries as to the departure of that "dear father and master."

His death-illness began "a fortnight before the day of Our Lord's Resurrection," and lasted till Holy Thursday. All the time he was full of joy and thanksgiving. Cuthbert says he has never seen any man "so earnest in giving thanks to the living God."

He made a little poem in English about the absolute importance of everybody considering, before his departure, what good or ill he has done, and how his soul is to be judged after death. "He also sang antiphons," says Cuthbert, "according to our custom and use." Cuthbert gives one of them, which is the lovely antiphon to the "Magnificat" at second Vespers on Ascension Day.

His work went on during his illness. He was making a translation of part of St John's Gospel into English, "for the benefit of the Church," and was working at "Some collections out of the 'Book of Notes' of Bishop Isidorus, saying, 'I will not have my pupils read a falsehood, nor labour therein without profit after my death.'" As the time went on his difficulty of breathing increased, and last symptoms began to appear; but he dictated cheerfully, anxious to do all that he could. On the Wednesday he ordered them to write with all speed what he had begun; and then "we walked till the third hour with the relics of saints, according to the custom of that day."

Then one of them said, "Most dear Master, there is still one chapter wanting: do you think it troublesome to be asked any more questions?" He answered, "It is no trouble. Take your pen, and make ready, and write fast."

After this he distributed little gifts to the priests, and spoke to all, asking that Masses and prayers might be said for him. His desire was, like St Paul's, to die and be with Christ: Christ Whom he had so loved, and at Whose feet he had laid all his gifts and all his learning.

"One sentence more," said the boy, was yet to be written. The Master bad him write quickly. "The sentence is now written," said the boy. And the dear Saint knew that the end was come, and asked them to receive his head into their hands. And there sitting, facing the holy place where he had been used to pray, he sang his last song of praise, "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost," and "when he named the Holy Ghost he breathed his last and so departed to the Heavenly Kingdom."

St Bede was buried at Jarrow, but his relics were afterwards taken to Durham by a priest named Elfrid, and laid by St Cuthbert's side. In the twelfth century a glorious shrine was built over these relics by the Bishop of Durham, Hugh Pudsey: a shrine that,

like many another, was destroyed in the sixteenth century uprising of the king of the country against the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ.



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CHAPTER V

King Alfred, first layman to be a great power in literature; man of action; of thought; of endurance. Freedom first great possession; afterwards learning and culture. Alfred a loyal Son of the Church. Founder of English prose. Earliest literature of a nation in verse; why. Influence of Rome on Alfred.

“Let us praise the men of renown,” says Holy Scripture (Ecclesiasticus, 44), “and our fathers in their generations.... Such as have borne rule in their dominions, men of great power and endued with their wisdom ... ruling over the present people, and by the strength of wisdom instructing the people in most holy words.”

We have to think now of a man of renown who bore rule in his dominions; a man of great power, and endued with wisdom; who by strength and wisdom instructed his people in most holy words. We have hitherto spoken of work done in the dedicated life of religion: to-day we direct our attention to the work of a great layman; the first English layman whom we know to have been a great power in literature; less as a “maker,” poet or proseman, than as an opener out to “makers” of precious store; a helper and encourager; a fellow-student; a learner and a teacher of whom it could be said, as Chaucer says of his Clerk of Oxford, “gladly would he learn and gladly teach.”

[Illustration: STATUE OF KING ALFRED, BY H. THORNEYCROFT, R.A. [Page 48]

It would not, I think, be possible for English people to over-estimate the value of the gift God gave them in KING AELFRED. That is really the right way to spell his name, but as to most people it looks unfamiliar, we will adopt the more usual spelling and write of him as Alfred.

We think of him in various aspects: first as the strong, brave man who did so much toward making noble history for time to come, by his own action, guided by his piety and devotion. His earliest work was to fight for the gaining of freedom and unity for his people, and this work went over many years. When there was an interval of peace, and when a more settled peace had been won, he worked hard to gain for them the freedom of the mind which can never exist where ignorance is reigning. Freedom is the first great possession; afterwards we seek for learning and culture. People who may be called away at any moment to fight for life or liberty cannot do much in the way of quiet study; and while the Danes were not yet finally repulsed or bound by treaty, the great work of Alfred in civilizing England had to remain in suspense.

We love to think that Alfred's wars were not to greatness himself, but to set his country free. Then, as later on, if I may quote what I have elsewhere said, the English

Had fought for their God-given birthright, their country to have and to hold,
And not for the lust of conquest, and not for the hunger of gold.



There is another aspect in which we may look at this great King; we think of him not only as a doer but as a sufferer; and not only as an endurer of disappointment, a bearer of toil, difficulty, trouble, but as one who bore in his body a “white martyrdom” of great pain, perhaps even anguish; and this for some twenty years.



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Alfred was always a loyal son of the Church. His father, Aethelwulf, sent him to Rome when he was quite a little boy, and Pope Leo IV was godfather to him at his Confirmation, and, on hearing the report of Aethelwulf's death, consecrated him as king, as he had been asked to do. But Aethelwulf did not die for a little time after, and took Alfred for a second visit to Rome. Each of Alfred's three brothers reigned a short time before he became King of Wessex in 871. In that same year he fought no fewer than nine battles against the Danes, besides making sundry raids upon them. It is well to be a good fighting man where need is, and it is well to use the qualities that go to the making up of the good fighting man to meet the difficulties that beset the path of duty and the way of progress. Courage, strength, generosity, perseverance, these are needed for all work alike in peace and war.

Alfred was familiar in his youth with English songs, and most probably knew the old Norse sagas; but he had to learn Latin in his later life. We must remember that most of the literature which Alfred could get at was locked up in Latin; even the invaluable Church History of St Bede needed a translator's key; and it was Alfred who first applied this key to it.

When we think of the prose written in England in early days, we are thinking of the work of scholars, in a grand language that had done growing; a language that was to be in Western Christendom the language of religion, the language of the altar, for how long a time who can know? the language that gave birth to other languages, as its literature so powerfully influenced both theirs and that of others not descended from it. Not yet was the time for a great prose literature in England, such as grew up many a year ago, and is going on in our own days.

The earliest literature of a people is almost invariably in verse: the literature that comes from the heart of a people, and is not the production of a few learned folk. In early days, there was little reading or writing, except in the shelter of the great monasteries. The common folk-literature, which is a very precious thing, is preserved, in such times as we are thinking of, in people's memories, and circulated by recitation, this recitation being accompanied by music or by rhythmical movements of the body. We all know how much easier it is to remember a page of verse than a page of prose. Thus, the form that could most easily be carried in the memory and recited, would naturally be the first to flourish.

We have seen something of early English religious poetry in Caedmon's work and that of his followers; and next we shall come back to poetry with Cynewulf, who made great and holy verse.

But beside such work as these poems which were written by cultivated men, many poems and fragments of verse were floating about the land, come over from the old native country with the first Angles and Saxons who made their home in Britain. These were dear to the people and dear, as we shall see, to the greatest among their kings,



Alfred, who was, we may say, the founder of English prose. It was not English prose as we know English prose, because the language was then more like German than anything else; but it was prose in the native tongue, and this was a good and great thing to begin.



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In our gratitude to Alfred, we must not forget our gratitude to the English scholars of older days, none of whom had put us under so great a debt as our dear old Benedictine of Jarrow.

A later writer than St Bede, though not so great as he, was Alcuin of York, who was invited by no less a man than Charlemagne to teach his children, and who became, as it has been phrased, a sort of Minister of Public Education in his empire.

Alcuin was good as well as great, and I will give you a little instance of the rightness of his thought. In a Dialogue which he wrote, in his teaching days, he supposes Prince Pepin to ask the question, "What is the liberty of man?" and the answer is, "Innocence."

But the evil days of invasion and war and trouble had swept learning from its northern home; and Alfred's work was to bring it back to another part of England.

CHAPTER VI

Decay of learning in England. Revival under Alfred. His translations. Edits English Chronicle. His helpers. Some of his sayings. Missionary spirit. "Alfred commanded to make me."

We cannot forget the impression that must have been made upon Alfred by his stay in Rome, young as he was at the time, he being in the centre of royal state while there, and also being himself a royal child to whom much would be told and under whose notice much would be brought; and who, from his position, would be expected to mark and remember much. Long afterwards, he would recall the magnificence he had seen, and associate it with the glories of the double history of Rome; Rome pagan and Rome Christian: Rome, the great conqueror and law-giver, spiritual as well as temporal. Very often, after Alfred was king, he sent over embassies and gifts to Rome, loving her, and reverencing her as it was meet he should. The Holy Father granted him certain privileges for the English school at Rome, and sent him a piece of the wood of the Holy Cross.

There is a pretty story told of Alfred's early learning to read English verse. Even if it is not true, it points to his love of English, as well as learning; a love which never left him. He wanted English to be taught in schools, and he loved the old poems. We owe to him the translation of the account of the first English poet, Caedmon, from which I have quoted in my first chapter. But rightly, he felt the very great importance of learning Latin, and so he learned it himself, and made others learn it too.

When Alfred came to the throne, he tells us, learning had fallen away so utterly in England that there were very few of the clergy, on the south side of the Humber, who could understand the Latin of their Mass-books, and he thinks not many beyond the



Humber. This state of things was very different from that of old times when the clergy were “so keen about both teaching and learning and all the services they owed to God”: very different from St Bede’s time, and the days when Northumbria was a centre of learning and culture. Alfred was to create a new centre, not in the North but in Wessex. Later on, the centre of learning and cultivation was shifted to the East Midlands, whose dialect became the language of England, and whose great poet, Chaucer, was the greatest English poet before Spenser and Shakespere.

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In his studies Alfred was helped by various friends, the chief of whom was a Welsh Bishop, named Asser. So greatly did Alfred value Asser that he wanted him to live altogether at Court; but Asser felt, it is to be supposed, that this would not be right, and arranged to spend half his time in Wales and half with the King. From him we learn a great deal about Alfred.

One of the Latin books translated by Alfred—perhaps the first—was called the “Pastoral Care” (“Cura Pastoralis”). It was written by St Gregory the Great, and was intended for the clergy as a guide to their duties. The king had a copy sent to every bishopric. He called it the Herdsman’s Book, or Shepherd’s Book. Sending all these copies made of course a great deal of work for scribes or “bookers,” as we may render the old “boceras,” the copyists who had to write out all their books by hand.

As various books had been turned into the “own tongue” of various nations, so would Alfred give to his people in their “own tongue” books of help, of knowledge, of wisdom. This is how Alfred tells us he worked.

“I began to turn into English the book which in Latin is named ‘Pastoralis,’ and in English ‘Shepherd’s Book’; sometimes word for word, sometimes meaning for meaning, as I had learned it from Plegmund, my Archbishop, and Asser my Bishop, and from Grimbold, my Mass-priest, and from John, my Mass-priest.”

At the end of the translation, Alfred put some little verses of his own.

Alfred as we have seen, translated St Bede’s History, omitting many chapters which contained things he may be supposed to have thought were not of general interest. He also edited the English, usually called the Anglo-Saxon, Chronicle, which begins with the invasion of Julius Caesar, and ends with the accession of Henry II. There are a good many MSS. of it, the earliest of which ends with the year 855. We owe this work, as we owe so much beside, to the care of the monks who wrote it, adding to it probably, year by year, sometimes giving poetry as well as prose. It contains several poems, among them the vigorous lay of the Battle of Brunanburh, fought in 937 by Athelstane against the Scots and Danes. You will find a rendering of it among Tennyson’s poems, made by him from a prose translation of his son’s. This editing of the A.S. Chronicle was very important work, work that has helped generations of history-writers and students. Where should we be without these Histories? How much of it Alfred actually did himself we do not know: we may suppose he had a good deal to do with the chronicling of the events of his own reign. I wonder whether it was he that wrote how three bold Irishmen came over from Ireland in a boat without any rudder, having stolen away from their country, “because they desired for the love of God to be in a state of pilgrimage, they recked not where.” They had a boat made of “two hides and a half,” and provisions for a week. They got to Cornwall on the seventh



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day, and soon after went to Alfred. We have no account of their visit to the King, but I think he would have welcomed them right warmly, and loved to hear how big souls ride in little cockleshells. We know their names at least: Dubslane, Macbeth, and Maclinnuim. And immediately after this record we are told something that must also in a different way have greatly interested Alfred. "And Swifneh, the best teacher among the Scots (Irish) died."

Another book that Alfred translated was the History written by a Spanish priest called Orosius, a disciple of St Augustine's (of Hippo), which "was looked upon as a standard book of universal history." Alfred by no means gave a literal translation, but used great freedom, and omitted some things and put in others which he judged of greater interest and importance for Englishmen. Alfred enlarged the account of Northern Europe, which he knew a great deal of. He also added the accounts of the voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan, the former of whom got round the north of Scandinavia and explored the White Sea. Wulfstan's voyage also was of importance. Both these men told Alfred their stories, and he incorporated them in the History. They came to see him, and Ohthere gave him teeth of the walrus, and no doubt Alfred listened to all they told him, with the keenest interest.

"The account of Ohthere's voyage holds a unique position as the first attempt to give expression to the spirit of discovery."

Alfred knew how to use helpers. All who understand the "ought to be" take help as well as give it. The good King encouraged others, and the office of encourager is no mean part of the office of helper. We cannot do our work in the world alone: God meant us to work with others, and man's best work as an individual can never be independent of the work of others, those who are living or those who have gone before.

Another of the books translated by Alfred was the "Consolations of Philosophy," by a good and thoughtful Consul of Rome, who was put to death by Theodoric, the Arian King of the East Goths. He wrote the book in prison, and there was so much in it that was felt to be in accord with Christian teaching that some people thought Boethius must have belonged to the body of Holy Church.

A Christian writer, finding a book seeming to possess much of the spirit of Christianity, would naturally study it and frequently use it; and Boethius's book, with more or less adaptation, grew to be a great favourite with Christians. Its influence can be traced in the work of the greatest Catholic poet, Dante, and in that of the great English poet, Chaucer, who rendered it into the English of his day.

Alfred made the translation definitely Christian. For instance, he writes of “God” and “Christ” where Boethius says “love” or “the good”; and he writes of “angels” instead of “divine substance.”

I will give you one or two specimens of the additions to Boethius with which Alfred is credited.



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“He that will have eternal riches, let him build the house of his mind on the footstone of lowliness; not on the highest hill where the raging wind of trouble blows, or the rain of measureless anxiety.”

“Power is never a good unless he be good who has it.”

Here is what he has to say of being well-born:

“Art thou more fair for other men’s fairness? A man will not be the better because he had a well-born father, if he himself is nought. The only thing which is good in noble descent is this, that it makes men ashamed of being worse than their elders, and strive to do better than they.”

And here is his standard of self-respect:

“We under-worth ourselves when we love that which is lower than ourselves.”[D]

[Footnote D: Translation by Miss Kate Warren.]

These sayings are worth copying into a little book such as Alfred kept to note down things he wanted to keep track of. Asser tells us this, and he tells us of the “Handbook” which grew to a great size, from this collecting habit of Alfred’s. The book was unfortunately lost.

By no means have we exhausted the interest of Alfred’s story. It would be indeed difficult to do so; but we must now bid him good-bye.

We love to think how, amidst all his cares and work for his kingdom, he had the true Catholic Missionary spirit; for he sent embassies to India, with alms for “the Christians of St Thomas and St Bartholomew.”

There is a valuable thing which we possess, known as the “Alfred Jewel”: it has on it an inscription which we can truly say applies to far more than this work of art. Its application to Alfred’s work is indeed a very wide one:

Alfred commanded to make me.

CHAPTER VII

Some of greatest pre-Conquest poetry associated with name of Cynewulf. Guesses about him. Little known. Probably North-countryman, eighth century, an educated man. Finding of the Cross. Elene, story of St Helena’s mission. Constantine goes to fight invaders. Vision of the Cross. Victory. Journey of St Helena, and search for the Cross. The Finding.



We are going now to consider some of the greatest poetry written before the Conquest. It associates itself with the name of Cynewulf, a name with which certain poems are signed in runes. By-and-by we shall hear something about runes and the old writing; and something also about where our old treasures of literature, part of our dear Catholic heritage, are found in their original form.

As I have said, certain poems are signed with Cynewulf's name; and there are others which are with more or less probability of rightness attributed to him on grounds of likeness of subject, likeness of style, similar greatness of treatment.



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About Cynewulf himself we know, I may say, nothing except what we gather from his work. Various guesses have been made, and various theories formed, identifying him with one or other of the men about whom we know something; but for the present, at all events, we must be content to think that he probably lived in the eighth century, and that he probably was a North-countryman. All his writings have come to us in the dialect of Wessex, except some parts of a poem known as the "Dream of the Holy Rood." These are carved on an old cross, which I will speak of by-and-by, and they are in the Northumbrian dialect; but the manuscript of the entire poem is in West Saxon.

Scholars are working upon old materials and discoveries are being made and theories formed which are at variance with what used to be set down as certainty. The main thing is that we have these poems, and that we want to know about them and learn to prize them. If we want to know them thoroughly and prize them as they deserve, we must take the trouble to learn the language they are written in. But many of us have not time for this, and so must be content, for the present, at least, with making their acquaintance through translations.

Perhaps Cynewulf was a poet who lived as one of the household of some great lord, and wrote more at his ease than if he had been merely an itinerant singer, a "gleeman," who sang his songs as he went about. He appears, at any rate, to have been an educated man, and I think no one can read his poetry without feeling that he was a man of deep and fervent piety.

There are four poems signed by Cynewulf, and these are named "Christ," "Juliana," "The Fates of the Apostles," and "Elene." Certain "Riddles" have also been attributed to him.

The poems I am going to bring before you now are the "Elene" and a poem on the Holy Cross, which has been attributed to Cynewulf, and which I for one—and I am not by any means alone in this—love to believe that he must have written. The "Phoenix," about which we thought in a former chapter, has by some been supposed to be his. Then there is the "Judith," of which we possess enough to make us recognise it as indeed one of our great possessions; but to-day the two poems I have named will give us enough to think of. To adapt a lovely Scriptural phrase (Judith vii, 7), there are springs whereof we refresh ourselves a little rather than drink our fill. Let us drink, if not our fill, at least a draught long and deep.

We have a church festival, instituted many hundred years ago, the Festival of the Finding of the Cross. Let us hear something of what our old poet sings concerning this in the poem named after the heroine of the finding, St Helena; the poem known as "Elene."

Cynewulf is one of the poets of the Cross. His poetry is literally stamped with the mark of the Holy Rood. Read over the grand Church hymns, the "Vexilla Regis," the "Pange



lingua gloriosi lauream certaminis,” or recall them in your memory—their Passiontide echoes sound under the triumphant pealing of the bells of Easter—and then be glad that one of your own poets has also sent down the ages the song of his love and his reverence.



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Cynewulf knew well the story of Constantine's vision of the Cross of Victory whereby he was to conquer. He would also have had in mind the story, not so far remote from his own day, of the English King, St Oswald, who reared a cross to God's honour before he fought with Cadwalla, the pagan Welsh king. He would remember how the Saint had called upon his comrades at Heavenfield to fall down with him before the Cross and pray Almighty God for salvation from the mighty foe. He would recall the great victory and the cross-shaped church built to commemorate it. He knew well the honour of the Cross. He had often knelt to adore what it symbolised, when he saw it raised on high, lifted up on the Church's Festival. And he loved the Cross with a great and fervid love.

The poem of his making tells us how the great army of the Huns and Goths[E] came against Constantine; how the warriors marched on, having raised the standard of war with shoutings and the clashing of shields. Bright shone their darts and their coats of linked mail. The wolf in the wood howled out the song of war; he kept not the secret of the slaughter. The dewy-feathered eagle raised a song on the track of the foe.

[Footnote E: This, of course, is unhistorical.]

The King of the Romans was sorrow-smitten when he saw the countless host of the foreign men upon the river-bank. In his sleep that night came the vision of one in the likeness of a man, white and bright of hue. The messenger named him by his name. The helmet of night glided apart. The behest was given to look up to Heaven to find help, a token of victory. The Emperor's heart was opened and he looked up as the angel, the lovely weaver of peace, had bidden him. Above the roof of clouds he saw the Tree of Glory with its words of promise. The great battle came, when the Holy Sign was borne forth. Loud sang the trumpets. The raven was glad thereof, and the dewy-feathered eagle looked on at the march, and the wolf lifted up his howling. The terror of war was there, the clash of shields and the mingling of men, and the heavy sword-swing and the felling of warriors.

When the standard was raised, the Holy Tree, the foe was scattered far and wide. From break of day till eventide the flying foe was pursued; his number was indeed made small. It was but a few of the best of the Huns that went home again.

How the old fighting spirit delights in the "pomp and circumstance of glorious war"! How it loves to have the clash of spear and shield strike upon the ear, and to hear how the voice of the eagle and the raven, and the howl of the wolf, proclaim the place of slaughter, the reek of battle!

Cynewulf calls the angel who stood by Constantine in his vision a "weaver of peace"; but the peace was to be woven after conflict, and the wearer of the victor's palm had first to wield the fighter's sword.



When Constantine had learned about the Cross from the few Christians he could find, he believed and was baptized, says the poet. (In reality his baptism took place just before his death, several years later.)



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The thought of the Tree was ever with Constantine, and when he had returned he sent his mother with a multitude of warriors to Jerusalem, on the quest of the Holy Rood that was hidden underground. Helena was soon ready for her willing journey, and set forth with her escort.

The steeds of the sea
Round the shore of the ocean ready were standing,
Cabled sea-horses, at rest on the water.
Then they let o'er the billows the foamy ones go,
The high wave-rushers. The hull oft received
O'er the mingling of waters the blows of the waves.
The sea resounded.

What delight there is to the poet in the sea and its ships!

When they come to Jerusalem, after much enquiry of the wisest men, and great difficulty, the Queen is conducted to the Mount of Crucifixion, by one Judas who knows the story of Redemption, and who the Queen insists shall point out the resting place of the Holy Rood. It is found by the winsome smoke that rises at the prayer of Judas, who forthwith makes full confession of his belief in Him who hung upon that Cross. The three crosses are together, buried far down in the earth, and Judas digs deep and brings them up, and they are laid before the knees of the Queen. Glad of heart she asks on which of them the Son of the Ruling One had suffered. The Lord's Cross is revealed by its power to raise a dead man who is brought to the place.

Satan assaults Judas, angry and bitter, for again his power has been brought low. One Judas has made him joyful: the second Judas has humbled him. He is boldly answered when he pours out threats and foretells that another king than Constantine will arise to persecute. (Probably the allusion is to Julian the Apostate.) But Judas answers boldly, and Helena rejoices at the wisdom with which in so short a time he has been gifted.

Far and near the glorious news is spread, and word is sent the Emperor how the Victorious Token has been found. Then comes the building of a church by his mother, at his desire; and the adorning of the Rood with gold and jewels fair and splendid, and its enclosure in a silver chest. Judas is baptized, and becomes Bishop of Jerusalem under the new name of Cyriacus.

The holy nails of the Passion have yet to be found, and again the earth yields up her treasure. A man great in wisdom tells Elene to bid the noblest of the kings of the earth to put them on his bridle, make thereof his horse's bit. This shall bring him good speed in war, and blessing and honour and greatness.



CHAPTER VIII

The Poet's love of the Cross: how he saw it in a double aspect. The dream of the Holy Rood. The Ruthwell Cross.

Now let us read what our poet says about the Festival of the Finding of the Cross.[F]

[Footnote F: The phrase "Invention of the Cross" means the finding of it; the word invention in English does not now translate the Latin "inventio."]



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To each of these men
Be hell's door shut, heaven's unclosed,
Eternally opened the kingdom of angels,
Joy without end, and their portion appointed
Along with Mary, who takes into mind
The one most dear of festal days
Of that rood under heaven.

The poet wrote about the Holy Cross, not just because it was a picturesque subject, capable of picturesque treatment, one that would make a fine poem; but because, as he tells us, Holy Wisdom had revealed to him "wider knowledge through her glorious power over the thoughts of the mind." He tells us how the fetters of sin had bound him in their bitter bondage, and how, stained and sorrowful, light came to him, and the Mighty King bestowed on him His bountiful grace, and gave him light and liberty, opening his heart and setting free for him the gift of song, that gift which, he says, he has used in the world joyfully and with a good will.

Not once alone, he says, did he meditate upon the Tree of Glory, but over and over again. He thought upon it until all his soul was saturated with it, and hallowed and consecrated for ever.

He may have venerated the Cross in public on the anniversary of the Lord's Crucifixion. Certainly, many a time he had venerated it in private. Perhaps, like Alcuin, his habit was to bow toward the Cross whenever he saw it, and whisper the prayer "Tuam crucem adoramus, Domine, et Tuam gloriosam recolimus passionem." [G]

[Footnote G: The Veneration of the Cross, or Creeping to the Cross, was known in Anglo-Saxon times, but whether as early as Cynewulf's day, seems uncertain.]

He was old, he tells us, when he "wove word-craft, made his poem, framing it wondrously, pondering and sifting his thoughts in the night-time."

The Cross had brought him light and healing, and at the foot of the Cross he laid his gift of song.

It is a moot point whether the "Elene" or the "Dream of the Holy Rood" came first. The poetry of the "Dream" is as fine as the conception is grand, and, at whatever time it was written, it must be classed as being at the high-water mark of the poet's work.

Wonderful things have been given to us "under the similitude of a dream"; things beautiful and terrible, things wise and strange. There have been Dreamers of Dreams into whose souls have sunk the sight and the hearing of deep things, high things and precious, of comfort and of warning, of sweetest help and of gravest and most earnest exhortation.

The speech of these Dreamers has sounded in our ears, and has left the vibrations to go on and on for our lifetime: this we call remembering.



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In English literature we have some great tellings “under the similitude of a dream.” We have the nineteenth-century “Dream of Gerontius,” our great Cardinal’s drama of the soul in its parting and after. We have the seventeenth-century dream from the darkness of Bedford Gaol, whence John Bunyan saw the pilgrims on their way, through dangers and trials, on to the river that must be crossed before they could come to the Celestial City. We have the fourteenth-century dream of the gaunt, sad-souled William Langley, the dreamer of the Malvern Hills. And, earlier by many a century, we have the dream of the dreamer at the depth of midnight, the midnight whose heart was bright with the splendour of the glorious vesting and gem-adorning of the Cross of Jesus Christ, and dark with the moisture of the Sacred Blood that oozed therefrom.

We have first the simple, quiet prelude.

Lo, I will tell of the best of dreams, I dreamed at the deep midnight,
When all men lay at rest.

Then comes the description of the Cross in its glory. It is uplift and girt with light, flooded with gold and set with precious gems. This is followed by the seeing through the glory, the seeing of the anguish. The hues are shifted from dark to bright; the light of gold lights it, and yet anon it is wet, defiled with Blood. Here are the two sides of the Passion: the veiled glory, and the illumined anguish: the supreme might, and the absolute weakness: the darkness of the grave, and the light of the Resurrection.

While time shall be, the Cross is to us all the Book where we may read all we choose to read, all God sends us grace to read. Cynewulf chose to read, and with Cynewulf was the grace of God.

The poet lies beholding the wondrous sight: the sight that all God’s fair angels beheld, and all the universe, and men of mortal breath.

The Rood speaks to Cynewulf. To us, with every look upon the Cross, should come, would come, were we alive all through with keen, sweet, spiritual life, the voice telling of the Passion, of the victory, of the glory. Cynewulf heard the Rood tell how long ago it was hewn down, ordained to lift up the evil-doers, to bear the law-breakers.

They bore me on their shoulders then, on hill they set me high,
And made me fast, a many foes. Then mankind’s Lord drew nigh,
With Mighty courage hasting Him to mount on me and die.
Though all earth shook, I durst not bend or break without His word;
Firm I must stand, nor fall and crush the gazing foes abhorred.
Then the young Hero dighted Him: Almighty God was He:
Steadfast and very stout of heart mounted the shameful tree,
Brave in the sight of many there, when man He fain would free.



I trembled when He clasped me round, yet groundward durst not bend,
I must not fall to lap of earth, but stand fast to the end.

We notice the obedience of the Cross. In its absolute sympathy with its Creator's agony, its indignation at the horrible crime of His enemies, it would fain have fallen and crushed the gazing foes abhorred. But this was not to be, any more than fire was to come down from heaven at the Boanerges' call when they were fain to avenge the insult put upon their Master, whom the people of the Samaritan city would not receive (Luke ix, 52, *etc.*).

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The Great King is lifted up, and the Rood dare not even stoop: the dark nails pierce the Cross, and it stands, companion of its Maker's agony and shame.

Oh, many were the grievous things upon that hill I bare:
I saw the God of Hosts Himself stretched in His anguish there:
The darkness veiled its Maker's corpse with clouds; the shades did weigh
The bright light down with evil weight, wan under sky that day.
Then did the whole creation weep and the King's death bemoan;
Christ was upon the Rood.

How great is the poet's insight! How deeply must he have entered into the fellowship of that supreme suffering! He knows that throughout creation that cup is being drunk from, as even yet it is in the groaning and travailing of every creature, waiting for the adoption of the sons of God, to wit, the redemption of the body (Romans viii, 22, 3).

The Descent from the Cross and the Burial come next. Tenderly, after the telling of the anguish, comes the telling of the rest.

They lifted down Almighty God, after that torment dread,
They left me standing, drenched with blood, with arrows sore wounded;
They laid Him down, limb-weary One, and stood about His head;
Gazed on Heaven's Lord, who, weary now, after that mighty fight,
Rested Him there a little while. Then in the murderer's sight,
The brave ones made a tomb for Him, of white stone carved it fair,
And laid the Lord of Victory within the sepulchre.

The bitter weeping goes up. The fair Body waxes chill. Then, in a very few words the story told in "Elene" is condensed.

Then did they fell us to the ground....
In the deep pit they sank us down; yet the Lord's servants, they,
His friends did hear of me and seek, and find me on a day,
And decked with silver and with gold, in beautiful array.

The glory comes after the shame, and we hear of the healing power of the Cross, and the honour given to it. Even as Almighty God honoured His Mother above all womankind, the poet says, so this tree is set high above all trees of the forest.

The command is laid upon the poet to make known his vision. There is a compulsion whereby a poet as it were has to send abroad the fair thought and knowledge wherewith he has been graced. To this poet is the task assigned to tell of the Crucifixion, of the Resurrection, and the Ascension, and of the Second Coming to judge the world.



Where is the man, the Lord will ask before that multitude,
Would for His name taste bitter death, as He upon the Rood?

By the love of His name, by the love that means martyrdom in will if not in deed also,
shall men be judged.

The comfort of his life has come to the poet. The greatest of all great things is his.

The Rood my trust shall be.



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I cannot close this chapter without saying something about the great stone rood known as the Ruthwell Cross, because it bears upon it part of this poem engraved in runes. The cross is at Ruthwell, in Dumfriesshire. It is very old, probably dating from the tenth or eleventh century. There are carvings upon it of various events in the life of Our Lord, on the north and south sides. On the top-stone, north, is a representation of St John with the eagle, and on the top-stone, south, is St John with the Agnus Dei. On the east and west is carved a vine in fruit, with animals feeding, and at each side of the vine-tracery the runes are carved, which give the words taken from the poem, in the Northumbrian dialect.

[Illustration: RUTHWELL CROSS [Page 80]]

This cross used to stand in the church at Ruthwell; it escaped injury at the time of general destruction in the sixteenth century, but the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland ordered the "many idolatrous monuments erected and made for religious worship" to be "taken down, demolished, and destroyed." It was not till two years later, however, that the cross was taken down when an Act was passed "anent the Idolatrous Monuments in Ruthwell." It was shattered, and some of the carved emblems were nearly obliterated, and in this state the rood was left where it had fallen, in the altarless church, and was used, it appears, as a bench to sit upon. Later on it was removed from the church and left out in the churchyard. But after many years, a good old minister (God rest his soul!) collected all the pieces he could find, and put them together, adding two new crossbeams (the original ones were lost), and having gaps filled in with little pieces of stone.

By-and-by there was a waking up to the importance of preserving ancient monuments (idolatrous! or not), and so the dear, beautiful old rood that had been so near to destruction, and been indeed so greatly injured, was brought into the church again, and set up near its old place. But, alas! for its old surroundings!

It is a sad story, is it not?

Shall we not pray that, one day, our old crosses may be, to all, more than "ancient monuments"?

"This stone which I have set up ... shall be called the house of God" (Gen. xxviii, 22).

CHAPTER IX

"Judith," a great poem founded on Scripture story. Authorship uncertain. Part of it lost. Quotations from it. Description of Holofernes' banquet as of a Saxon feast. Story of Judith dwelt on to encourage resistance to Danes and Northmen.



To-day we shall think about some more of the great poetry that was made before the Norman Conquest, and we shall first take one of the finest and most characteristic poems which remain to us, a poem founded on Bible story; the great poem, of which we have unfortunately only a part, the "Judith."

It is not certain who wrote this poem: it may have been Cynewulf; but we do not know.



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The story of Judith is a well-known one; the story of the Hebrew lady who is described in the foreword to the Book of Judith as “that illustrious woman, by whose virtue and fortitude, and armed with prayer, the children of Israel were preserved from the destruction threatened them by Holofernes and his great army.”

The earlier part of the poem is lost, so we can only guess how the poet told of the ravage wrought by the general of King Nabuchodonosor in the countries close to Palestine, and how submission was as vain as resistance to a power which, for the time being, was allowed to be so terribly great.

The poem, as we have it, begins where Judith has come, in the splendour of her beauty, and the might of her purity, and the power of her faith, to destroy the destroyer and set her people free.

The Prince of Glory gave her the shield of His hand in the place
Where she stood in her uttermost need of the highest Doomer's grace
To save her in peril extreme; and the Ruler of all things made,
The glorious Father in Heaven, He granted the prayer she prayed,
And, because of the might of her faith, He gave His help and His aid.
I have heard how his word went forth, how Holofernes bad
His men to the drinking of wine, and the splendid feast he had.
The prince he called his thanes and the shielded warriors best,
And the folk-leaders came to the mighty, all fain for the doing his best.
And now, since the coming of Judith, three days and three nights had been,
The woman wise in her heart, and fair as the elf-folk sheen.

We have the description of the banquet, with the deep bowls and well-filled cups and pitchers borne to the sitters along the floor—just the description of the old Saxon banquet which the poet knew of. We have the drunken glee of Holofernes, his right noisy laughter and the stormy mirth that could be heard from afar; and his call to the henchmen to quit them as warriors ought, till at last they lie in their drunken sleep, powerless, and as though stricken of death.

Then comes the night, and the sending for Judith, the wise-hearted one, to Holofernes' tent. Holofernes lies in his drunken sleep, and the Lord's handmaid draws from the sheath the keen-edged glittering sword, and prays,

O God of all created, I pray my prayer to Thee!
O Spirit of Comfort! O Son Almighty! I bow my knee,
For Thy mercy to me who need Thee, most glorious Trinity!
Now is my heart waxed hot, exceeding hot in me,
And my soul afflicted sore, and sorrowful grievously.
Give victory, Prince of Heaven, to me, and steadfast faith,
That so with this sword I slay this dealer of wrong and death.



O, grant me Thy salvation, most mighty Folk-prince, Thou,
For ne'er have I needed Thy mercy with greater need than now.
Avenge, O mighty Lord, the thing whereof I wot,
Which is anger in my soul, and in my breast burns hot.
Then the Judge most high He gave her the courage she prayed Him for,
As yet to each He giveth, who seeketh Him, as of yore,
With faith and understanding, his help for evermore.



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And then,

Enlarged was the woman's soul, the holy one's hope sprang new.

And she smites the evil general with the strength she had prayed for, and goes forth victorious with her handmaiden, to bear the tidings to her people of the deliverance wrought for them, ascribing the glory to God and His might. Judith leaves the camp of the Assyrians, with her waiting-woman, who carries the head of Holofernes in a bag. Men and women in great multitudes flock to the fortress-gate, pressing and running to meet God's handmaid, glad of heart to know of her home-coming. They let her in reverently, and the trophy she has brought is shown them. Judith beseeches them to go forth to the fight, as soon as the Maker of the beginning of all things, the King of high honour, hath sent the bright light from the East; to go forth bearing shield and buckler and the bright helmet, to meet the thronging foemen, and fell the folk-leaders, the doomed spear-bearers. Their foes are doomed to death, and they shall have glory and honour in battle. Then follows a great battle, with full victory to Israel.

The poet has varied from the Biblical story, in representing the officers of Holofernes' army as drunk; and also in telling of a battle after the return of Judith to Bethulia. It also may seem strange that Judith should address the Holy Trinity and each separate Person thereof. The old Christian poet carried his belief along with him, and the handmaid of God, the brave Judith, was to him a follower of Our Lord. The brave Judith, yes! St Dominic's Third Order was at first, as we know, called "The militia of Jesus Christ." How Judith would have loved the name! And we may think, may we not? how, looking from her place among the glorified, she smiled on the great warrior Maiden Saint who went in the might of the Lord, to deliver her country from the rule of the stranger.

The story of Judith would especially appeal to people living at a time when incursions of foreigners were well known, and later on, still unforgotten. Abbot AElfric, about whose work I have to tell you something presently, in writing a short account of the Old Testament with its various books, says that the Book of Judith "is put into English in our manner as an example to you men, that you should defend your country with weapons against an invading army"—the word which he uses, "here," always meaning in old English the army of the Danes. AElfric also wrote "a homily on Judith to teach the English the virtues of resistance to the Danes."

It is interesting likewise to think that the poet of "Judith" may have had in his mind some great Englishwoman concerning whom he wished in a veiled way to convey well-deserved praise. Perhaps he was inspired to tell of Judith, by the deeds of King Alfred's daughter, AElthelflaed, known as the Lady of the Mercians, and sought to do honour to her as well as to the great Hebrew lady.



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AEthelflaed fortified Chester and other towns, and, along with King Edward, built fortresses, “chiefly along the line of frontier exposed to the Danes, as at Bridgenorth, Tamworth, Warwick, Hertford, Witham in Essex, and other places.” Of course it is uncertain whether our poet was thinking of AEthelflaed. We should be able to say whether it were impossible if we knew the date of “Judith,” as, if the poem were composed before AEthelflaed’s time, she could not have entered into the poet’s mind.

The Church has paid a splendid tribute to Judith by applying to her who is pre-eminently the strong or valiant woman (*mulier fortis*) full of the strength that always wore the exquisite veil of humility, the words spoken to this valiant woman of the Hebrews by her countrymen, as they adored the Lord, who had given her the victory. See the lesson read on the Feast of Our Lady’s Seven Sorrows.

CHAPTER X

Byrthnoth, the leader of the East Angles against Anlaf the Dane. Refusal to pay unjust tribute. Heroic fight.

We have in the “Battle of Maldon” a great patriotic poem, written about the “ealdorman”^[H] of the East Angles, Byrthnoth, or Brihtnoth, who stood so valiantly against the Danes. It was he who was so good to the monks, helping to defend them against the “ealdorman” of the Mercians, and others who were turning them out: he also helped to found the Abbey of Ely. He was buried there, we are glad to know. Anlaf, known as Olaf Tryggvesson, afterwards King of Norway, came with two other Northmen, and harried Ipswich and other places, and then sailed up the Pant or Blackwater to Maldon, where the river divides into two parts. The beginning and end of the poem have been lost, and, as we have it now, it opens with the command of Byrthnoth that every man should let his horse go, and march afoot to meet the enemy and strive with him hand to hand.

[Footnote H: “Alderman” is the modern form, but it does not mean the same thing.]

Then Byrthnoth ’gan array his men; he rode and gave the rede,
He shewed the fighters how to stand and keep the place at need,
Fast with their hands to hold the shields, nor be afraid indeed.

He took his place among his own bodymen, his immediate followers. On the other side of the stream the herald of the vikings (or pirates) stood, and with a loud voice gave the scornful message of the sea-folk to the English leader. If Byrthnoth would be in safety he must quickly send treasure to the foe.

“And better ’tis for you buy off this onset of the spear
With tribute than that we should deal so sore a combat here;



We need not spill each other's lives if ye make fast aright
A peace with us; if thou agree, thou, here the most of might,
Thy folk to ransom, and to give the seamen what shall be
Right in our eyes, and take our peace, make peace with told money.
We'll haste to ship, we'll keep that peace, and go upon the sea."



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This was Brythnoth's answer:

Dost hear, thou dweller on the sea, what this my people saith!
Their tribute is the spear, the sword, the arrow tipt with death;
War-harness that for you in fight full little profiteth.

Not he. He stood for his own soil, his prince's earth, the people and the land. We may compare with this St AElfeah's (Alphege) splendid stand even to death against unjust payment of tribute.

Byrhtnoth ordered his men to march on till they all stood on the bank of the river. The flood flowed in after the ebb, and the hostile armies could not reach each other, and it seemed too long to wait for the water to let them meet. Wulfstan, by race a warrior bold, held the bridge for his chief, and AElfhre and Maccus with him, the undaunted mighty twain. The Danes begged to be allowed to overpass the ford, and Byrhtnoth in his scorn allowed this.

Too much the earl in his disdain to that ill folk gave heed.
The wolves of slaughter strode along, nor for the water cared;
The host of vikings westward there across the Pante fared.

Byrhtnoth was awaiting them, and the fight began.

Then rose a cry as round and round the ravens wheeled in air,
The erne all greedy for his prey. A mighty din was there.
Oh, bitter was the battle-rush, the rush of war that day,
Then fell the men; on either hand the gallant young men lay.

The battle-rage grew stronger and keener; the din of war grew louder and louder. Byrhtnoth fought hand to hand with a strong viking, and with yet another, dealing death to both.

The blither was the earl for that, out laughed the warrior grim,
Thanked God because of that day's work which God had given to him.

But the brave man's time was come, and a dart pierced him, and he fell; and as he lay on the ground a young lad, a boy who stood beside him, drew the spear from his lord's body and cast it back to pierce the foe who had sorely hit his lord. An armed man came to the death-stricken leader of the English to rob him of his jewels and his warrior's gear and fretted sword of fame. The dying man struck him on the corslet, but

Too soon a seaman hindered him; that good arm's strength he marred.



The leader drops his gold hilted sword, no longer able to wield the weapon, powerless to hold the keen-edged falchion. No more deeds of valour for him; only to urge on his men, and to commend his soul to God.

Yet spake the word that warrior hoar, the young men's hearts he cheered,
Bad the good comrades forward go, nor ever be afeard.
No longer could he firmly stand on's feet; to heaven looked he—
“Thanks, Lord of hosts, for these world-joys Thou here didst give to me.
Now, merciful Creator, now, I stand in deepest need
That Thou shouldst grant my spirit good, that thus my soul indeed
Fare forth to Thee, travel with peace, O King of Angels, so:
I pray Thee that the hell-spoilers nor work her hurt nor woe.”
The heathen varlets smote him down, and those that stood him by,
AElfnoth and Wulfmaer, by the side of him in death did lie.



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Then, alas! came the shameful flight of some whom he had loved and trusted, and graced with noble gifts. One Godric, to whom he had given many a goodly steed, leapt upon the horse in his trappings which his lord had owned, and his two brothers fled with him.

And with them more than had behoved if these had thought upon
The gifts and goods so free bestowed by him, their mighty one.

But there were but few cowards and mean. Of his own hearth-comrades there went forth men, hasting eagerly,

One of two things their heart's desire, to avenge their lord or die.

Young AElfwine heartened them with noble words, and gave them the example of noble deeds. And Offa, and Leofsunu, and Dungere, the old man, fought stubbornly. And a hostage from among the Northumbrian folk, a man come of gallant kin, helped them; and Edward the Long, and many another.

Then Bryhtwold spake, that comrade old, he raised the shield on high
He shook the ashwood spear, he taught the men unfearingly:
"The braver must our spirit be, our hearts the stronger far,
The greater must our courage wax, the fewer that we are.
Here lies our prince all pierced and hewn, the good one in the clay;
Aye may he mourn who thinketh now to leave this battle-play.
I am old in life; I will not hence; I think to lay me here,
The rather by my chieftain's side, a man so lief and dear."

And the men grew bold in heart at his words and fought on. Godric full often sent the spear flying among the vikings, and fought till he too was laid low in the battle.

'Twas not that Godric who had turned his back upon the fight,

says the poet—and the end is lost! It will help us in appreciating this poem to remember that the battle of Maldon took place in the reign of that poor weak king Aethelred, known as the "Unready," or the Man of no Counsel. As Freeman the historian says, "No doubt he had to struggle with very hard times, but the times now were no harder than the times which AElfred had to struggle against, and we know how much he could do."

CHAPTER XI

The literature of one people owes a debt to that of others. Help-bringers. Great work of Benedictine monks. Our debt to Ireland. The English Chronicle's account of the Martyrdom of St AElfeah.



The literature of a country is not merely what the men and women born in it have written. The thought of one people is fed, or enlarged, or in some way strengthened by the thought of other peoples; and the literature of the times we are speaking of could not have been what it was, had it not had other sources than these purely English to draw from. And, of all kinds of help-bringers, we owe much to the monks, and chiefly the great Benedictine order. King Alfred had to do his work at a time when things were

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at a low ebb in the English monasteries. You will remember how he bewailed the poor state of learning in England, and the ignorance of the clergy; a state very different indeed from that of the old days of St Bede and Alcuin. After Alfred's time there came a revival—and revival in life means revival in work. So we get much good prose literature, and, through the monks, note well, we have it, fed from whatever old lore was then to be got at.

I have reminded you of England's great debt to Ireland through St Aidan and others. I must tell you of a record of St Bede's, which shows how gladly Ireland in old days, as ever, shared the priceless gift which she of all countries, received with the most passionate entireness and held with the most unswerving steadfastness. It was in the year 664 that there was a great pestilence, raging both in England and Ireland. At the time there were many Englishmen in Ireland who had gone there, "either for the sake of divine studies, or of a more continent life"; some of them, he says, became monks, and others devoted themselves to study, "going about from one master's cell to another." "The Scots (that is the Irish) willingly received them all, and took care to supply them with food, as also to furnish them with books to read, and their teaching, gratis."

Where should we be but for the work done in the monasteries? How can we be grateful enough for what went on there in the way of thought, research and the collecting of materials, in addition to the work of teaching: all fed by the life of prayer and praise and self-denial? Let us try to think about the quiet, patient work of scholars and students; about their noting of so many facts and detailing of them. Let us think of the beginnings of English history and literature; of the writing of precious manuscripts; the careful copying of them; each of them taking so much time to complete and being so costly in production, especially when there was added to care and skill the artistic beauty of decoration and illumination.

From these quiet abodes of the piety that transfused itself through loving toil and discipline, light streamed forth to go on shining and shining, on through the long centuries to come.

We must now have a look into the pages of the great English Chronicle which we should not possess had it not been for these good monks, and we will take the account of the martyrdom of Archbishop AElfeah, whom you know best under the Latinized form of his name, Alphege. His heavenly birthday was the 19th of April. The king who is spoken of was AElthelred who was called the Unready, which word means without counsel, and then of ill-counsel. You know how we talk of "ill-advised" conduct or speech. There is a fourteenth century poem which speaks of Richard the Second as "redeless." And, because there is no such thing as being neutral; because, if we are not good, we are bad, the word got the meaning of foolish or worse. Freeman, the great historian says that AElthelred "was perhaps the only thoroughly bad king among all the



Kings of the English of the West Saxon line; he seems to have been weak, cowardly, cruel, and bad altogether.”



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As long as St Dunstan lived, AElthelred was not so bad as he afterwards became. We must remember what a bad mother AElthelred had in AElfthryth, or Elfrida, who was an evil wife to her first husband, and most probably caused the murder of the king her stepson, the son of King Edgar, who was her second husband. This was the Edward known as St Edward the Martyr.

The story of AElfeah comes under the year A.D. 1011. "In this year sent the king and his witan to the (Danish) army, and desired peace, and promised them tribute and food on condition that they ceased from their harrying. They had then overrun East Anglia, and Essex, and Middlesex, and Oxfordshire, and Cambridgeshire, and Hertfordshire; and south of Thames, all Kent and Sussex, and Hastings, and Surrey, and Berkshire, and Hampshire, and much of Wiltshire. All these misfortunes befell us through ill counsel, that they were not in time (either) offered tribute or fought against, but when they had done the greatest ill, then peace and truce were made with them. And nevertheless for all the truce and tribute, they went flockmeal everywhere and harried and robbed and slew our poor folk. And then, in this year, between the nativity of St Mary and St Michael's Mass, they sat round Canterbury and came into it through treachery, because AElfmaer betrayed it, whose life the Archbishop AElfeah had before saved. And there they took the Archbishop AElfeah, and AElfweard, the king's reeve, and Abbot AElfmaer, and Bishop Godwin. And Abbot AElfmaer they let go away. And they took there within all the clergy, and men and women: it was untellable to any man how much of the folk there was. And they were afterwards in the town as long as they would. And when they had thoroughly surveyed the city then went they to their ships and led the Archbishop with them. Then was he a captive who erewhile had been the head of the English race and of Christendom.[1] There might then be seen misery there where oft erewhile men had seen bliss, in that wretched city whence had first come to us Christendom and bliss before God and before the world.

[Footnote 1: *i.e.* of English Christianity.]

"And they kept the archbishop with them as long as to the time when they martyred him.

"A.D. 1012. In this year came Eadric the ealdorman, and all the chief witan, religious and lay, of the English folk of London, before Easter: Easterday was then on the date of the Ides of April (13th April). And they were there then so long as until all the tribute was paid, after Easter; that was eight and forty thousand pounds. Then on the Saturday (19th April) was the (Danish) army greatly stirred up against the bishop, because he would not promise them any money; but he forbad that anything should be given for him. They were also very drunken, because wine had been brought there from the south. Then took they the bishop, led him to their husting on the eve of Sunday, the octave of the Pasch; and there they then shamefully killed him: they pelted him with bones and the heads of oxen, and then one of them struck him with an axe-iron on the head, so that with the blow he sank down; and his holy blood fell on the earth, and that his holy soul be sent to God's kingdom."



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A sorrowful story of evil folly and treachery: a splendid story of steadfastness to the end: of glorious martyrdom. The refusal to allow himself to be ransomed at his pillaged people's cost; the greed of the Danes; the death-stroke given him, we are told, in another chronicle, in mercy, to put an end to his sufferings, given him by a newly-made convert of his. And see how the Church has shown us, in her canonisation as a martyr saint, of this man, who died not directly to testify to the truth of the religion of Jesus, but for the sake of justice, that justice is the outcome of Christianity, and that he who dies for justice sake dies for God.

It was said by Lanfrane that AEfeah was not a martyr, because he had not died for the Faith; but St Anselm said he was a true martyr, because he died for justice and charity.

CHAPTER XII

Abbot AElfric, writer of Homilies, Lives of Saints, and other works. Wulfstan, Archbishop of Canterbury.

The greatest of English prose-writers before the Conquest was AElfric, who was educated at the school at Winchester which AEthelwold, a pupil of St Dunstan, had founded. His works are very numerous. He wrote Homilies, or Sermons, on Scriptural subjects, and Lives of the Saints. I have quoted a passage about "Judith," which occurs in the summary of the books of the Old Testament, written for a friend of his, one Sigeward, who had often asked him for English writings, which he had delayed giving him until after he had, at Sigeward's earnest request, come to his house, and then Sigeward had complained to him that he could not get at his writings. This little incident reminds us how differently from now people had to arrange about books and writings, and how much more dependent they were on teaching through the ear and the eye.

I must give you a little specimen of AElfric's writing, a piece taken from his beautiful homily on Holy Innocents' Day. It is in very simple, direct language, and I think you will say it is not without a touch of that lovely thing which it is easy to feel and hard to define—poetry. I should like to have heard the sermon, and I hope you will feel somewhat as I do!

"Christ despised not His young soldiers, although he was not present in body at their slaughter. Blessed were they born that they might for His sake suffer death. Happy is that their (tender) age, which was not yet able to confess Christ, and was allowed to suffer for Christ. They were the Saviour's witnesses, although as yet they knew Him not. They were not ripe for the slaughter, but yet did they blessedly die to live! Blessed was their birth, for they found eternal life on the threshold of this present life. They were snatched from mother-breasts, but they were straightway given into the keeping of

angel-bosoms. The cruel persecutor (Herod) could with no service benefit those little ones so greatly as he benefited them with the hatred



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of his cruel persecution. They are called martyrs' blossoms because they were as blossoms upspringing in the cold of earth's unbelief, thus withered with the frost of persecution. Blessed are the wombs that bare them, and the breasts which suckled such as these. The mothers indeed suffered in the martyrdom of their children; the sword which pierced the children's limbs pierced to the mothers' hearts: and it must needs be that they be sharers of the eternal reward, when they were companions in the suffering."

I will now tell you about a very different kind of sermon from AElfric's—one of the sermons preached by Wulfstan, Archbishop of York, who was not, like AElfric, leading a quiet life in an abbey, but throwing himself into the struggles and needs of a most disastrous time. He saw how the Danish inroads had terribly demoralised the English people, and he spoke out as God's preacher, who comes face to face with wrong, must speak.

He begins by telling his "beloved men" how evil will go on increasing till Antichrist's coming; and then will it be awful, and terrible all through the world. "Too greatly has the devil for many years led this folk astray, and little faithfulness has there been among men, albeit they spake well; and wrongs too many have ruled in the land; and not always were there many who thought earnestly about the remedy as they should; but day by day they added one evil upon another and they reared up wrong, and many evil laws all throughout this nation. And therefore have we suffered many losses and shames: and if we shall await any cure then must we deserve it from God better than heretofore have we done. For with great earning have we earned the miseries that oppress us, and with great earning must we obtain the remedy from God if from henceforth it is to grow better." He tells them how in heathen lands they dare not withhold what has been devoted to the worship of idols: "and here we withhold the rights of God. And everywhere in heathen lands none dare injure or lessen within or without any of the things offered to idols: and we have robbed God's houses within and without." And so he goes on pouring out from his very soul the fiery words that tell of the warning of God's laws, and the worsening of folk-laws; and how the Sanctuaries are unprotected, and God's houses are robbed and stripped of their property, and holy orders are despised, and widows forced wrongfully to marry, and too many are made poor and humbled, and poor men are sorely betrayed and cruelly plotted against; and far and wide innocent people are given into the power of foreigners, and cradle-children made slaves through cruel evil laws for a little theft: and freeman's right taken away, and thrall's right narrowed, and alms' right diminished. It goes on and on, the terrible list of wrongs that have brought God's wrath on the land. The sermon is not for the building-up of faithful ones, but for the rousing and stirring up of those whose baptismal vow has been terribly and shamefully broken, His words are clashed out as he brings men face to face with their sin.



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And then comes the preaching of the true penance. "Let us do what is needful, bow to the right, and in somewise forsake the wrong, and mend where we have broken." And the preacher's voice now takes the tender tone of entreaty. "Let us creep to Christ and with trembling heart often call upon Him, and deserve His mercy; and let us love God, and obey His laws, and fulfil what we promised when we received baptism; or what those promised who were our sponsors at baptism. And let us rightly order word and work, and earnestly cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, and carefully keep oath and pledge and have honesty among us without weakness, and let us often understand the great judgement which we all must meet, and earnestly protect ourselves against the burning fire of the punishment of hell, and earn for ourselves the glories and the joys which God has prepared for them that do His will in the world. God help us. Amen."

CHAPTER XIII

Love of books is love of part of God's world. In books we commune with the spirit of their writers. The Church the mother of all art and all literature. Catholic literature saturated with Holy Scripture.

A man who made many a man and woman love literature and helped them to study it, the late Professor Henry Morley, has said that one who thinks that a bookroom is not a part of the world; one who thinks that, in leaving his books and going forth to commune with nature he is, as it were, passing from death to life, is one who has not yet learned to read. The good Professor saw that books have souls in them, so to speak, and that to love a book really and truly is to hold communion with that which is living and is a part of the great, beautiful scheme of God's great, beautiful world. To love one part of what Our Father has given us should never lead us to despise, or even undervalue, other parts. And we must remember, too, must we not? how one thing helps us to understand another; how great painters and great poets help us to understand the beauty of nature as we might not have understood it without them, just as they help us also to know men and women, and help us to know better some of the fair things in our great and glorious religion; things which God can and does teach without their help when He chooses, though He graciously and lovingly often uses their help—the help He has given them the power of giving—to teach others of His children. Our Father, being *Our* Father, not just *your* Father and *my* Father and *his* Father and *her* Father, but *Our* Father, the Father of us all as one big family of His, brothers and sisters in Him, wills that we all help one another with the gifts He has given us; and the more we can realise that all separate gifts are parts of one great harmonious whole, the more fully we shall live and feel and enjoy.

There is, of course, a delight in exquisite typography, and hand-made paper, and binding into which the soul of a true artist has gone. People may be willing to give large sums for these things, independently of the value of what is under them; or people may

value books for their age, or because they are rare, or because they are records of facts which it is well to know and good to be able to verify.

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But there is a better way of love than all of these. One may love the book through which one holds communion with the spirit of its writer, being ready to learn from him by direct learning, or by the learning received through suggestion, or through the rousing of the spirit of enquiry, or the spirit of opposition. Is not this the best kind of love, the love by which the thought of man is used by man, the spirit of man holds communion with the spirit of man?

All through the ages, great things have been handed down by written words, and people of all nations have shared one another's national heritage of written thought, and in that sharing made it larger and greater. We are now considering the earlier story of English Catholic literature, and it is surely well that people should know something of what things were said and sung in the olden time; the time when all art, all literature was fed by the great Mother of all Christian art and all Christian literature, the Holy Catholic Church.

You will find our Catholic literature saturated with sacred lore and knowledge of Holy Scripture. Before printing was invented people could not multiply copies of the Sacred Books as they can now, but they knew them probably much better than many of those who can easily now buy them for a few pence. We have translations of various parts of the Bible in these early times. You will remember how in St Bede's last days he finished his translation of part of St John's Gospel. We have lovely manuscripts, such as that of the Lindisfarne Gospels, written in fine clear writing, which can be seen at the British Museum; and facsimiles of parts of them can be had for a small sum. It is simply an uneducated error to suppose that the heretical editing, as I may call it, of Holy Scripture in the mother-tongue of English people, made by Tyndale and Coverdale, was the first attempt to put the Bible into English. We should have had plenty of printed copies of Holy Scripture in the mother-tongue of English people, had these versions never been made and circulated to attack and injure Holy Church, without whom the originals could never have existed.

CHAPTER XIV

Scattering of our old MSS. in Sixteenth Century. Same now in public libraries. Collections. Exeter Book and Vercelli Book.

Where are all our old manuscripts, our treasures from days of yore, the work of the cunning scribe, the pages whereon so many of our religious spent hour after hour, in patient and loving toil? They were scattered abroad in the sixteenth century by wholesale. Many of them found their way into private collections, and the collectors often generously gave them to college libraries. Matthew Parker, the Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury, was a great book-collector, and gave a good many volumes to Corpus Christi College at Cambridge. Among these is the oldest copy of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. John Bale, once a friar, afterwards, alas! a Protestant Bishop, says

that some of the books from the monasteries were used to scour candlesticks or to rub boots; some were sold to grocers and soap-vendors; and whole ships-full went abroad.



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[Illustrations: SAXON SHIP As used by our Forefathers in the time of King Alfred

THE ALFRED JEWEL

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Robert Bruce Cotton was another great book-collector. His library was sold to the nation about seventy years after his death. Many books and MSS. belonging to it were destroyed or injured by a fire that broke out where it had been placed; among those injured was the only copy of the old poem of Beowulf, which I have not talked about because it is apparently outside our *Catholic* Heritage in literature. The reduced library is now at the British Museum. It includes the beautiful Lindisfarne Gospels, or Durham Book, which once belonged to Durham Cathedral.

There is another collection which was bought for the British Museum, made by Harley, Earl of Oxford.

William Laud, who was Archbishop of Canterbury in Charles the First's time, and, like him, died on the scaffold, was also greatly interested in collecting books. He gave generously to Oxford University, and his books are in the Bodleian Library, with many other valuable literary treasures.

Francis Junius collected Anglo-Saxon literature, and other books. He left them to the Bodleian Library. Among them is the unique "Caedmon" Manuscript, given him by Archbishop Usher, who founded the library of Trinity College, Dublin. People are now alive to the value of these great possessions, and we must be glad that scholars have worked at them, and published many of them, and so made their contents accessible to everyone. But we must never forget our debt to the earliest writers, and chiefly to the monks who wrote and who copied, much and long and well. As we trust, they have their reward.

There are two specially interesting collections of manuscript Anglo-Saxon poems, known respectively as the Exeter Book and the Vercelli Book. The Exeter Book is one of some sixty volumes acquired by Leofric, Bishop of Crediton, when he was making his library for the cathedral of his new bishopric at Exeter. It is described as "a large English book of many things wrought in verse." It is one of the few of Leofric's books that remain at Exeter, where it has been over eight hundred years. It contains various poems by Cynewulf and others. Several leaves are missing, and ink has been spilt over part of one page. This Exeter library was scattered at the "Reformation." Some of its treasures are in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, or at Corpus Christi College, at Cambridge.

The Vercelli Book is so called because it was discovered in its home in the cathedral library at Vercelli in Italy a good many years ago. It contains twenty-two sermons in Anglo-Saxon, and six poems, among which is our beautiful "Dream of the Holy Rood."



Perhaps some English pilgrim or pilgrims, on the way to Rome, left this book as a gift, or through inadvertence, at the hospice where hospitality had been received. Or perhaps Cardinal Guala, who was over here in the days of John and of Henry III, bought the book for his library at Vercelli. Or perhaps it was one of the books of which John Bale tells us whole ships-full went abroad. We have to be very grateful to the scholars whose researches have recovered for us so much of our old heritage, and to those who have made their contents in various ways so easy to get at.



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CHAPTER XV

Runes. An early love-poem

I said I would tell you a little about runes, which I have had more than once occasion to mention. The runes were the alphabet used by the Teutonic tribes, to which the English belonged. This alphabet is very old, and it is not certain where it originally came from. The word "rune" means secret or mystery. To "round" in a person's ear means to whisper, so that what is said is a "secret" or a "mystery." The word comes from "rune." When we use the word to "write" we think of setting down words on paper with a pen or a pencil. But the old meaning of "write" is to incise, or to cut, or engrave. Probably the runes were at first cut in wood. A wooden tablet was called "boc," from beechwood being used for it. When we talk of a book we are away from the first idea of a book a good distance. Runes were also carved, or incised, in metal and in bone. They were associated, not only with secrecy or mystery, but with magic, and were supposed to possess power for good or evil. People thought that "runes could raise the dead from their graves; they could preserve life or take it, they could heal the sick or bring on lingering disease; they could call forth the soft rain or the violent hailstorm; they could break chains and shackles, or bind more closely than bonds or fetters; they could make the warrior invincible and cause his sword to inflict none but mortal wounds; they could produce frenzy and madness, or defend from the deceit of a false friend."

There is a story in an old Norse book telling that Odin, the Scandinavian god, learned them and used them. St Bede tells in his "Church History" a story which proves that the belief in the magic power of runes lingered on in England after Christianity had become the professed religion of the people. It takes a good while to lose superstition that has been with people for a long, long time. Because Christianity condemns anything like magic, the use of the runes, associated with it, gradually went out. The Irish missionaries in the North of England taught the people there a beautiful kind of handwriting from which the English handwriting of later times was formed. The "Lindisfarne Gospels" are written in the earlier Irish rounded characters. In a copy of St Bede's "Church History" written after A.D. 730, a more pointed hand is used. If we want to write fast, we do not write so round as when we write slowly. Afterwards, in the tenth century, the English began to use the French style of writing.

The runes were sometimes used as ordinary letters, without any thought of the old connection with magic. So the great Christian poet, Cynewulf, wrote his name in runes, which is how we know him to be the author of some of the poems we have been considering.

The portions of the "Dream of the Holy Rood" which are on the Ruthwell Cross (see Chapter IV) are carved in runes. There is a small sword in the British Museum with runes on it, which was found in the Thames.



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In connection with the runes I want to tell you of two old poems, which may be related to each other. One is known as "The Wife's Complaint," the other as, "The Husband's Message." The first of them is apparently spoken by a woman who laments her hard fate, her husband having gone over the sea, away from her. She is imprisoned in an old earthen dwelling under an oak; she has no friends near, and she tells how vain were the vows of love exchanged between her and her husband. Now the second poem, "The Husband's Message," may be written for this wife; we do not know; at any rate it conveys a message from an absent husband to a wife; and I will give it to you as an early love-letter. It consists of two parts, one of which has been thought to be a riddle, but they have been put together by a learned Professor, and if they do belong to each other, the arrangement is as interesting as it is beautiful. The message is given by the letter itself—the slip of bark or wood on which it was carved—and this wood speaks. First it tells us about itself. It had dwelt on the beach near the sea-shore: there were few to behold its home in the solitude, but every morning the brown wave encircled it with a watery embrace. Then it little thought that even, though itself mouthless, it should speak among the mead-drinkers and utter words.

A great marvel it is,
Strange in the mouth that knoweth it not,
How the point of the knife and the right hand,
The thought of a man, and his blade therewith,
Shaped me with skill, that boldly I might
So deliver a message to thee
In the presence of us two alone,
That to other men our talk
May not make it more widely known.

The letter then tells how it had come in the keeled vessel, and how the lady would now know how in her heart she may think of the love of her lord. "I dare maintain," says the letter, "that there thou wilt find true loyalty." He that carved the characters on the wood, bad it pray her, the lady decked with jewels, to remember the vows they twain had often made when they dwelt together in their home in the same land.

Force drove him
Out of the land. Now hath he bidden me
Earnestly to urge thee to sail the sea
When thou hast heard on the brow of the hill
The mournful cuckoo call in the wood.
Then let no living man keep thee
From the journey, or hinder thy going.
Betake thee to the sea, the home of the mew,
Seat thee in the boat, that southward from here
Beyond the road of the sea thou mayest find the man
Where waits thy prince in hope of thee.



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We hope the lady betook herself to the sea-mew's home, and found her beloved at the end of the journey! Her beloved had no thought of any greater joy than the granting of Almighty God that together they should be givers of treasure to men. The beloved has enough of beaten gold and wealth, and a fair home among the strangers, the noble warriors that obey him. Banished from home, gone forth a homeless one, in the stranger-land good has come to him; he has no lack of anything but of her, who had with him come under an old threat, and had been parted from him. He vows to fulfil his pledge and love-troth, and he writes in runes some message, which she, as it appears, would understand, and she alone.

The old, old story, written fair and full.

You will have noticed in the literature we have been considering the absence of certain elements which are an integral part of our modern literature. This poem, for instance, is, as far as I know, the only love poem before the Conquest which has come down to us. There is no romance either, and there is, we may say, no humour. Life is a very serious thing, so often lying close to the sword-edge; and the duties of life are simple. There is to be a great, very great enlargement of the borders of English literature later on. Prose and poetry are to have new developments. Romances are to show us heroic ideals. Lyrics of joy, of sorrow, of passion, of emotion natural and spiritual, are to be sung. The sense of beauty is to grow. The drama is to arise from beginnings to be but faintly traced in early days. Epic poetry is to take a great place. Character modified, enriched by foreign strains, is to mould a noble literature—noble through many and many a gift and grace. A great poet is to arise with sympathies large and wide, to show us, in verse most musical, in words full meaning, with that grace of humour which is a fresh light upon life, how men and women lived: and to be the great precursor of a greater than he. Geoffrey Chaucer is to come to us. After him William Shakespere.

THE END

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