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INTRODUCING CHAUCER

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"THE GROWTH OF STUART LONDON"
"WALKING IN THE WELSH BORDERS"
ETC.

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Chapter One

CHAUCER AND HIS TIMES

CHAUCER, says Alexander Smith,

> is like a cardinal virtue, talked about and admired, but not much practised. Patience is needed to melt the frost of his orthography. He is not lyrical and does not go well in extracts. But he writes evenly and pleasantly, with many glances from his humorous eyes, and is a very prince of story tellers.

In his earlier poems he felt the influence of French, Italian, and Latin poetry. But in the *Canterbury Tales* he allows rein to the English element in him and gives us a definitely native product, one of the earliest and most important, and not really very difficult to read.

It is always a matter of surprise that Anglo-Saxon managed to survive the long period of French domination of court, ecclesiastical, and judicial circles. The peasants among whom it would tend to persist must have been so illiterate, and their vocabulary so small and monotonous, that it is evident that other classes spoke English too. Probably the merchant classes of London, with whom Chaucer was evidently on terms of some intimacy, used English more than we have been inclined to think, but there was little use of the language among the court circles and more educated classes of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. A curious medley of three languages occurs in a Westminster Abbey survey of the Manor of Hampstead,

1320, where the compiler explains that a certain object is to be found " ultra le trap-dore."

Chaucer was born at a most interesting time in English history, when nationalism was beginning to make itself felt.

He was

> . . . born in days when wits were fresh and clear, and life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames.

The date usually given for his birth is 1340, and the place of his birth was probably Thames Street, one of the busiest commercial streets of medieval London. His father, Thomas Chaucer, was a vintner and a Government official concerned with the collection of duties on wine at ports on the south coast, while his mother was Agnes, niece of Hamo de Compton.

It was in the year 1340 that the law of Englishry was abolished, and the age-long custom of assuming that every dead man was Norman, unless proved to the contrary, came to an end, since it was no longer deemed necessary thus to safeguard the Norman invaders.

In the same year the English won an early naval victory over the French at Sluys, then an important sea town on a wide arc of the sea ; to-day a tiny Dutch village resting peacefully on its canal, and only waking up on Thursdays in the summer when the crowds of Belgian tourists rush through it on their way to the market at Middleburgh. When Chaucer was nine years old there came that devastating scourge which spread over Europe from the insanitary river valleys of Asia, started in England in a village in Dorset, and spread so rapidly over the country that it stopped war and marketing and commerce of all kinds, and destroyed perhaps from a third to half the population.

Hundreds and thousands of families died out, and the Black Death, as Mrs Markham has taught us to call it, became a watershed in the history of Western Europe, probably more definite than even the two great World Wars. How many potential Chaucers were wiped out by this plague it is not possible to say. We may well be thankful that one was spared us.

We can assume that Chaucer was educated in London, perhaps at St Mary le Bow, old St Paul's, or St Martin le Grand, and his schooldays may well have been like those described by Fitzstephen in an earlier age—cock fighting, contests in boats, quintain, skating on the ice over Moorfields, as well as the more serious studies of the trivia. He may even have learned his lessons in English, because in his childhood English was used in the school of Merton College, at Oxford. In 1356 cases in the Sheriff's Courts in London were pleaded in English, while seven years later English was permitted also in the King's Law Courts and in Parliament. It was not, however, until 1385, when Chaucer was well on into middle life, that the vernacular was generally used in schools. In 1404 it was actually possible to appoint two English Ambassadors to France who knew no French, so vast had been the change in fifty years.

The fusion of English and Norman had certainly begun by the reign of Henry II, when Richard, Bishop of London, wrote his *Dialogus de Scaccario.* He makes it clear that

> already the English and Normans, dwelling together and intermarrying, are so mixed that among freemen at least it can scarcely be determined to-day who is of English or who of Norman birth.

John's loss of Normandy was another vital step, and in 1244, when Henry III was King of England, Louis IX summoned English nobles to decide whether they wished to keep their English or their French possessions. Henry retaliated, and the division became complete and final.

The Baronial Wars in Henry's reign were not fought on national lines, for native English and Norman invaders were grouped indiscriminately on either side. Though the two races were becoming united, the two languages took longer to coalesce, and the joining has well been compared to " the milk-white Arve and the dark blue Rhone, flowing together for many a mile without commixture."

It seems probable that the French of the Court had become anglicized, though it was still a kind of Anglo-Norman-French. Well-educated men were beginning to realize the defects in their French conversation and writing, and it is clear that by the end of the reign of Edward II the Anglo-Norman language was losing ground. In 1320 the author of *Cursor Mundi* writes his book of Bible stories in English.

> This ilk bok it is translate
> Into Inglis tong to rede,
> For the love of Inglis lide,
> Inglis lide of Ingland,
> For the commun at understand.
> Franks rimes here I ridd
> Communlik in ilka stid.

I translate this same book into the English language for love of the English people, so that the common people may understand it. I have read French rhymes in this country generally in every place. Most is done for

> Frenchmen; what for him that knows no French? The nation of the English consists mainly of Englishmen. The speech that one may best get on with one should for the most part speak. Seldom by any chance has the English tongue been praised in France. Let us give each one his own language; methinks we do no harm so. I address myself to the unlearned and to Englishmen who understand what I say.

Other authors, too, realized that there was growing up a big population of "lewed men of England, that can nought but Inglise understand"; and that in order to reach the populace one must realize that "al men can noht I wis, understand Latin and Frankis," but that nowadays "both Klerk and larned man Englis understand Kan, that was born in Ingeland."

So when Chaucer was a boy, English was displacing French as the language into which schoolboys translated their Latin authors. Ralph Higden, a monk of Chester, who lived from about 1300 to 1363, and wrote his *Polychronicon* in Latin, would have welcomed such a development, seeing that he has to complain that children at school

> against the usage and manner of all other nations be compelled for to leave their own language and for to construe their lessons and their things in French, and so have they since the Normans came first into England.

He also grumbles that the

> impairing of the birth-tongue

is caused by

> gentlemen's children being taught to speak French from the time that they be rocked in their cradle . . . and uplandish men will liken themselves to gentlemen, and striven with great business for to speak French for to be well thought of.

By 1385,

> of the Second King Richard after the Conquest nine, in all the Grammar Schools of England, children leaveth French and construeth and learneth in English. . . . Also gentlemen have now much left for to teach their children French.

And this statement is confirmed by John de Trevisa, who says " children of the Grammar Schools now know no more French than their left heel."

It is another indication of the development of English that Ralph Higden's *Polychronicon*—a universal history down to his own times—should have been translated into English by John of Trevisa (1326-1412) a native of Cornwall, as his name suggests, and a Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford. He was a contemporary of Chaucer, Langland, and Wycliffe, a priest with more sense of vocation than some, at least, of his contemporaries, and chaplain to Lord Berkeley. His patron encouraged him to translate Higden's Latin into " comynlich prose." His style was vigorous:

> As Fraunce passeth Bretayne, so Bretayne passeth Irlond faire weder and nobilte, but nought in helthe. For this ilond is best and bringeth forth trees, fruit and retheren [oxen] and other Bestes, and wyn groweth there in some place.
>
> The lond hath plente of foules and of bestes of dyvers manere kynde ; the lond is plentevous and the see also. The lond is noble, copious and riche of nobil ryveres with plente of fische ; there is grete plente of small fische, of samon, and of elys. So that cherles [churls] in som place fedith sowes with fische. There beeth schepe that bereth good wolle, there beeth many hertes and wylde bestes and fewe wolves, therefore the schepe beeth the more sikerliche [safe] without kepynge in the folde.

> In this ilond also beeth many cities and townes, faire and noble and riche, many grete ryvers and stremes with grete plente of fische, may faire wodes and grete, with wel many bestes, tame and wylde. The erthe of that land is copious of metal ore and of salt welles, of quarers of marbel, of dyveres manere stones; of reed, of whyte, of nesche, of hard; of chalk and of whyte lyme. There is also white clay and reed forts make of crokkes and stenes and other vessal, and brent tyle to hele [roof] with hous and cherches. . . . Flaundres loveth the woke of this lond, and Normandie the skynnes and the velles; Gasqvyn the iren and the leed; Irlond the ore and the salt, Europa loveth and desireth the white metal of this lond.

Trevisa also tried his hand with Bartholomew's encyclopædia of natural history, entitled *Of the Nature of Things.*

These translations helped in the development of a national language, stimulated, no doubt, by the national sentiment aroused by Edward III's French wars. In the home, at school, and in the law courts, English was gaining the mastery, and Trevisa summed up the progress made, and gave an explanation of the victory of the English tongue over both French and Latin:

> John Cornwaile, a maister of grammer, chaunged the lore in gramer scole and construccion of Frensche in to Englische, and Richard Pencriche lerned that manere of techynge of hym, and othere men of Pencrich, so that now, the yere of our Lorde a thousande thre hundred and foure score and fyve, in all the gramere scoles of Englond children leveth Frensche and construeth and lerneth in Englische, and haveth thereby avauntage in oon side and disavauntage in another side; here avauntage is that they lerneth the gramer in lesse tyme than children were i-woned to do; disavauntage in that now children of

gramer scole, conneth no more Frensche than can their left heele, and that is harme for him if they shoulde passe the see and travaille in strange lands and in many other places. Also gentilmen haveth now moche i-left for to teche their children Frensche.

Ralph Higden realized the importance of the growth of the English tongue, and explains the various dialects and their growth. He speaks of the talk of Southern Scots, of Welsh, many of whom served Edward III and the Black Prince as archers, and of the Flemings who were settled in Pembrokeshire—little England beyond Wales.

Also Englyschmen hadde from the bggynnynge three maner of speche, Southeron, Northerin, and Myddle speche in the myddle of the lond, as they came of three maner of people of Germania [perhaps Angles, Saxons, and Jutes]. Natheless, by commyxtion and mellyng first with Danes and afterward with Normans, in many the country langage is apeyred. This apeyring of the birth-tongue is of twey thinges. One ye for children in Schole, since the wage and maner of al other nacions beeth compelled for to leve there own langage and for to construe lessons and things in Frensch, and have been sith the Normans first came into England. Also gentilmen children beeth if-taught for to speke Freynsh from tyme that they be y-rokked in their cradel, and uplandish man will lyken himself to gentilmen and fondeth with gret busynes for to speke Freynsch, for to be more y-told of.

Thus English had grown in importance and was gradually challenging French as the common tongue. The poorer folk must always have used it; but gradually the lord of the manor, the franklin, the priest, the lawyer, the merchant, and the prioress did so too. In 1363, the thirty-eighth year of Edward III's reign, " hit

vas ordeyned in the parliment, that men of lawe, bothe of the temporal and of holy chirche lawe, fro that tyme orth shold plede in her moder tonge." So English vas established as the language for pleadings in the law courts :

> Because it is often showed to the King by the prelates, dukes, earls, barons, and all the commonalty of the great mischiefs which have happened to divers of the realm, because the laws, customs, and statutes of the realm be not commonly holden and kept in the same realm, for that they be pleaded, showed, and judged in the French tongue, which is much unknown in the said realm, so that the people which do implead or be impleaded in the King's Courts and in the Courts of other have no knowledge nor understanding of that which is said for them or against them by their serjeants and other pleaders ; and that reasonably the said laws and customs the rather shall be perceived and known and better understood in the tongue used in the said realm, and by so much every man of the said realm may the better govern himself without offending of the law, and the better keep, save, and defend his heritage and possessions, and in divers regions and countries, where the King, the nobles and others of the said realm have been, good governance and full right is done to every person, because that their laws and customs be learned and used in the tongue of the country ; the King desiring the good governance of his people, and to put out and eschew the harms and mischiefs which do or may happen in this behalf by the occasions aforesaid, hath ordained and established by the assent aforesaid that all pleas which shall be pleaded in any Court whatsoever, before any of his justices whatsoever, or in his other places, or before any of his other ministers whatsoever, or in the courts and places of any other lords whatsoever within the realm, shall be pleaded, showed, defended,

answered, debated, and judged in the English tongue, and that they be entered and enrolled in Latin.

During Chaucer's early days, or thereabouts, besides the naval battle of Sluys and the great land victory of Crécy, there was the capture of Calais—immortalized by Rodin's group, in bronze, near the Houses of Parliament—the first fruits of a colonial overseas Empire, destined in rather less than six centuries to spread into every continent, including several then unknown, and to cover more than a quarter of the earth's surface; from such small beginnings do great enterprises grow.

England was becoming a united realm, and had already absorbed Wales, partly absorbed Ireland, and made a temporarily successful effort to complete the United Kingdom by a short-lived conquest of Scotland. Her laws were being amplified and codified, her universities were growing in importance, and both they and her law schools were becoming more lay-controlled. Her progress struck foreigners as unusual, and in the pages of Froissart we have a wonderful picture of English life from the standpoint of the wealthy classes, and an equally fascinating though less known summary of London life, laws, and customs in that marvellous compendium of John Carpenter, town clerk of London, 1417-38, the monumental *Liber Albus*.

"England," wrote a contemporary of Chaucer's youth,

> is a strong land and a sturdy, and the plenteousest corner of the world; so rich a land that unneth it needeth help of nay land, and every other land needeth the help of England. England is full of mirth and of game . . . of freemen of heart and with merry tongue.

Here perhaps is the origin and first occasion of her reputation as Merry England.

The Great War of Edward III's reign was probably as epoch-making in its way as others which we have studied with even keener interest since those days, and Chaucer, like many another of comfortable situation, played his small part therein.

Our knowledge of his share in the war is almost accidental and has a special interest for those concerned with family history. There was a dispute between Henry, Lord Scrope of Masham, and his brother Richard, a Scrope of Bolton, on the one side, and Sir Robert Grosvenor, on the other, as to their respective rights to bear the arms *azure, a bend argent.* The two Scropes were considerable landowners in Hendon, and Chaucer was one of their witnesses. He said that he had seen Sir Richard and Sir Henry so armed in France before the town of Retters, near Rheims, during the whole expedition until he (Chaucer) was taken. He had heard from old knights and esquires that these arms belonged to the Scrope family, that they used them in banners, glass paintings, and vestments, that they came of ancient ancestry and of old gentry. He had once seen in Friday Street, in London, a new sign of these arms outside an inn, and had asked what inn that was that had hung out these arms of Scrope.

One answered that they were not hung out for Scrope but for Grosvenor, which was the first time he ever heard of anyone bearing the name of Grosvenor. This sounds strange reading in our day, when the seventeenth century marriage of a Grosvenor from Cheshire with a farmer's daughter named Davies from Knightsbridge has made the Dukes of Westminster some of the richest landowners in the kingdom.

The expedition in which Chaucer took part was

clearly that one of Edward III's which, perhaps above all others, was calculated to test his qualities of fortitude. It was a large force that left England to invade France, comprising a hundred thousand men, filling a thousand ships, if we may believe the reports. From Calais Edward marched into Picardy, and thence to Rheims, intending to be crowned there as King of France. But the garrison was brave, and in the cold of winter he could make no headway with the siege. His force advanced to Paris but could effect no entrance, and his troops began to fail. Supplies gave out, and the King began to retreat towards Brittany. It was a Moscow disaster on a small scale. Every step of the way was marked by falling horses and collapsed men, dying from hunger or from intolerable fatigue. Of most of the horrors of this disastrous venture Chaucer was an eye-witness, but he does not seem to have witnessed the superstitious collapse of Edward, who was so terror-stricken by a storm, that at Bretigny, near the incomparable Chartres, he agreed to a peace which neither the miseries of his own subjects, nor the wretchedness of the French had wrung from him. Chaucer had been captured by the enemy, and, as his movements during the next few years were wrapped in mystery, it was thought that they might have been spent in a foreign prison. But we find from a subsequently discovered document that in the following year the King paid £16 towards his ransom. He was well known at Court, having held a post in the household of the King's son, Lionel of Clarence, from whose wife, the Countess of Ulster, he received a cloak, red and black breeches, and shoes of the value of seven shillings, and a Christmas present of two shillings and sixpence.

Was he the Chaucer who was fined two shillings by the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple for striking a Franciscan friar in Fleet Street? If so, it might well explain and supplement the bad opinion which he had of friars.

CHAUCER'S LONDON

THE London to which Chaucer returned from his year's imprisonment in France was just recovering from the Black Death, and was shortly to be visited by the disaster of the Peasants' Revolt. It was not the enormous sprawling web of human splendour and misery that we know to-day, clouded at times with smoke and fog, but a city of gardens, streams, fields, and trees, almost deserving William Morris's adjectives " small, and white, and clean." There are few more delightful pen pictures of medieval London than the one in which Morris invites us to

> Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
> Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
> Forget the spreading of the hideous town ;
> Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,
> And dream of London small, and white, and clean,
> The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green ;
> Think that below bridge the green and lapping waves
> Smite some few keels that bear Levantine staves,
> Cut from the yew wood on the burnt up hill,
> And pointed jars that great hands toiled to fill,
> And treasured scanty spice from some far sea,
> Florence gold cloth, and Ypres napery,
> And cloth of Bruges, and hogsheads of Guienne
> While nigh the thronged wharf Geoffrey Chaucer's pen
> Moves over bills of lading.

The probable population of London in Chaucer's day was 50,000, while the other large towns in England contained less than 10,000 apiece. All over England

there were hundreds of small hamlets, centred round a manor house and an old church, and many abbeys with their group of monastic buildings. If Chaucer and his friends could return, London itself would be completely unrecognizable to them; but much of the countryside, even one and a half centuries after the start of the Industrial Revolution, is but little changed, save that it is far better drained and cultivated, more regular, tidy, and organized.

In the London of Chaucer's day there were all sorts and conditions of men—beggars, hucksters, 'prentices, craftsmen, priests, monks, and friars, and over all the mayor, aldermen, and common councillors, among them three famous merchant princes who helped Richard II against John of Gaunt, and were associates of Chaucer—Philpott, Brembre, and Walworth—all rich sellers of *vitaille*. The small, once-walled city, with its adjacent liberties, is now indistinguishable from the ever-growing suburbs, save that its circumference is marked by the names of the gates still given to its streets—Aldgate, Bishopsgate, Moorgate, Cripplegate, Aldersgate, Newgate, and Ludgate. Few are left of the medieval churches that Chaucer used to see, and most of these have suffered from German bombs—St Helen's, Bishopsgate, St Bartholomew-the-Great, West Smithfield, All Hallows, Barking, and a few more; there is the Tower, and there are a few Tudor houses, such as Staple Inn and Middle Temple Lane—not, of course, contemporary with Chaucer, but indicating the style of medieval building.

There were in his day over one hundred churches, most, if not all, with church towers and spires rising high above the red-roofed, two-storeyed houses,

against a background of the green hills of Hampstead, Highgate, Islington, Hoxton, and Hackney.

Over the Thames was the one bridge built in John's reign by Peter of Colechurch, almost exactly on the site of the Roman crossing, and not far from the site of the modern bridge erected under William IV, and sanctioned by the casting vote of one Samuel Favell. Old London Bridge was thought of by loyal Londoners to be one of the wonders of the medieval world, starting from near St Saviour's Cathedral in Southwark—then St Mary Overy, the resting-place of Chaucer's friend, John Gower, and, two centuries later, of Shakespeare's brother Edmund. Through the many narrow arches of the bridge ran a swift current, and to shoot the bridge was for many centuries a hazardous project. Houses were built almost all along the actual bridge, like the Rialto at Venice, and the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, and in the centre was the Chapel of St Thomas of Canterbury, an appropriate reminder for all Canterbury pilgrims as they passed over the bridge to the starting place in Southwark. Genoese, Flemish, and French ships crowded the Pool, or anchored in the small docks on either side of the Thames. They formed a serious rivalry for the English merchantmen to face, and the Hanseatic League was famous in all the narrow seas. The Thames was known all over Europe, and many poets sang its praises. Thus, for example, wrote William Dunbar, a Scottish poet, who flourished a century and more after Chaucer:

Above all ryvers thy Ryver hath renowne,
Whose beryall stremys, pleasant and preclare
Under thy lusty wallys runneth down,
Where many a swanne doth swymme with wingis fare;

Where many a barge doth saile, and row with care,
Where many a ship doth rest with toppe-royall,
O toune of tounes, patrone and not compare,
London, thou art the Flour of Cities all.

Upon thy lusty Brigge of pylers white
Been merchauntís full royall to behold;
Upon thy stretis go'th many a semely Knyght
In velvet gownés and in cheynes of gold.
By Julyus Cesar thy Tour founded of old
May be the hous of Mars victoryak
Whose artillary with tonge may not be told;
London, thou art the Flour of Cities all.

Strong by thy wallís that about thee standís,
Wise be thy people that within thee dwellís,
Fresh is thy ryver, with his lusty strandis,
Blith be thy churches, well sownyng be thy bellís,
Rich be thy merchants in substance that excellís,
Fair be their wives, right lovesom, white and small,
Clere be thy virgyns, lusty under Kellís,
London, thou art the Flour of Cities all.

Thy famous Maire, by pryncely governaunce
With sword of justice there ruleth prudently,
No Lord of Parys, Venyce or Floraunce,
In dignitye or honour go'th to hym nigh
He is exempler, lodestar and guyl
Principall patrone and rose orygynalle,
Above all Maires as maister most worthy,
London, thou art the flour of cities all.

In and around the city were a dozen splendid monasteries and nunneries, for monks and friars, for men and women; they encircled the walls and thus hampered expansion. The streets were cobbled, and the City was trisected by the Fleet and the Walbrook streams.

There were two main east-and-west streets, one from

the Tower to Blackfriars, called Thames Street, one from Aldgate to Newgate, through Leadenhall, Cornhill, and Cheapside. There was quite a fair water-supply, served at conduits. Each ward was partly self-governed. Every tradesman lived over his shop, and many streets were devoted to separate industries, a fact which is still indicated by the street names—Milk Street, Bread Street, Honey Lane, Iremonger Lane. Money was beginning to be well coined, but its relative value was very different from modern standards. The mark was never an English coin, but the term was in common use in monetary relations and its value was computed at 13*s.* 4*d.* The noble (6*s.* 8*d.*) and the groat (4*d.*) were then common coins, but are now no longer in use—though lawyers' fees and the fines imposed by the Proctors on Cambridge undergraduates recall the noble. In the attempt to establish a comparison of values with those of our own day, it was usual in the early years of this century to agree that 15 must be the multiple. Between the two World Wars perhaps 20 or 25 would be a nearer estimate ; to-day 60, or even more.

A few samples of pay will serve to indicate the difference between medieval and modern times. Chaucer as Clerk of the King's Works was paid 2*s.* per day ; a gardener received 3*d.* ; a plumber, tiler, or plaster 6*d.* ; a ditcher 4*d.* The average daily pay of a Knight was 2*s.*, of a squire 1*s.*, of an archer 6*d.*, the master of a ship 6*d.*, a sailor 3*d.* A children's nurse employed by the Earl of Derby received only 5 marks a year. Farm land rent varied from 4*d.* to 1*s.* per acre ; a horse cost from 13*s.* to £1, an ox 15*s.*, sheep 1*s.* 6*d.* Hens could be purchased for 2*d.*, eggs were no more than one half-penny a dozen, while a pair of shoes cost 6*d.*

Chapter Three

CHAUCER AT HOME AND ABROAD

We left Chaucer in London, on his return from prison in France, and in 1367 the King gave him a pension of 20 marks, worth to-day perhaps £500, as a yeoman of the Chamber. Two years later, in spite of the treaty of Bretigny, we hear of him in Picardy with John of Gaunt's army of pillage. Renewal of pestilence in 1369 led to the deaths of two of his patrons, Queen Phillipa of Hainault, and Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster. But in spite of this he still remained in favour with the Court. From 1370 to 1378 he was a member of several diplomatic missions, and during these years he visited Genoa and Florence, and may well have met Petrarch, the poet, and Boccaccio, poet and story-teller. Landor, in his *Imaginary Conversations*, takes it for granted that he did. He discovered that Chaucer almost certainly saw Petrarch at Arqua, and agrees that he probably met Boccaccio at Arezzo. In the dialogue that Landor wrote, the *Decameron* is discussed, and Chaucer compares Rome and Pisa, speaks of his love of the colleges of Oxford, but dislikes the lath and plaster of the houses. He prefers the English churches and monasteries but is delighted with the scenery of Italy, especially the hill country from Arezzo towards Rome, including all the beauties of Perugia, Terni, and Narni. In this connexion he quotes Virgil, and claims to be raising poetry from the fog and marsh of England, and

to be bringing merriment into the life of the people. In the Cathedral of Arezzo he tells a tale about Crécy to recompense Boccaccio for the many tales of his *Decameron.* Boccaccio in return asks Petrarch's permission to relate a story most unsuited to the sacred nature of his surroundings.

In 1376 and 1377 Chaucer was employed on missions to Flanders and France, and in 1378 returned to Italy, where he met Barrabo de Visconti, Lord of Milan, and the famous English soldier of fortune, Sir John Hawkwood. During part of the period of his foreign travel and for some years afterwards, from 1374 to 1386, he was Controller of Customs at London. At the outset he was fortunate enough to secure from Adam de Bury, Mayor of London, the Aldermen and the Commonalty of the City of London, a lease of the " dwelling house above the gate of Aldgate with the rooms built over and a certain cellar beneath." He guaranteed not to sublet, but to keep the place in good repair ; and the City Fathers promised on their part not to employ the gatehouse as a prison, and only resume possession of the gate " in time of defence of the City aforesaid, so often as it shall be necessary." It was during this time that he became associated with the most influential of the London City merchants, one of whom, the Mayor already mentioned, had to flee to Flanders to avoid severe punishment for appropriating money subscribed for the ransom of the French King. Sir John Philpot, another mayoral friend, was seaman as well as merchant and successfully broke up a nest of pirates who had made the coast impossible from Scarborough to London. Chaucer's friend, Sir Nicholas Brembre, shared the popular opposition to John of Gaunt, Duke

of Lancaster, Chaucer's patron, so that Chaucer's position may at times have been a little uneasy, except that during the chief years of dispute he was abroad.

Chaucer's post as Controller of the Customs of the Port of London was itself lucrative, and there were extra perquisites in the form of confiscation. The Controller was expected to be perpetually on duty and to write his records personally, but we know of journeys abroad while Chaucer drew his salary, and the surviving records of his years of office are not in his handwriting. His duties took him down the river as far as Gravesend to watch for smuggling; his visits to the 'Saracen's Head' enabled him to hear broad tales of adventure from reeves, millers, and shipmen; and if the wool of Flanders seemed of little interest he had compensation in the wines of Italy.

John of Northampton became Mayor after the Peasants' Revolt, which threatened to bring the whole political and economic structure to the ground in red ruin. Northampton favoured the religious and moral teachings of Wycliffe and the Lollards, though perhaps not their political aims; and Chaucer, who was in London during Wat Tyler's rebellion and for five years afterwards, must have watched with interest his ecclesiastical reforms. The Mayor, supported by a majority of the citizens, undertook reforms which the clergy refused to effect.

> The fees for baptism were not to exceed 40 pence whilst that for marriage was not to be more than half a mark. One farthing was all that could be demanded for a mass for the dead, and the priest was bound to give change for a half penny when requested, or forgo his fee. Steps were taken at the same time to improve the morality of

> the city by ridding the streets of lewd women and licentious men. On the occasion of a first offence, culprits of either sex were subjected to the ignominy of having their hair cropt for future identification, and then being conducted with rough music through the public thoroughfares, the men to the pillory and the women to the Thewe.

This attempt on the part of a layman to cleanse the Augean stables, which should have been the task of the Church, was not lost on the observant Chaucer.

It was one of Chaucer's associates in the Customs, Walworth, afterwards Mayor, who killed Wat Tyler, and thus helped to scotch the rebellion ; but the disorganization of London did not cease with Tyler's death.

The years of Chaucer's life were crowded, and were filled with both joy and sorrow, success and failure. His work as a poet must have been hindered by his need to make a living, but he managed to produce four poems of great merit before he undertook his greatest work of all, the *Canterbury Tales*. When in January 1382 the young King Richard was married to Anne of Bohemia, Chaucer, as the " Poet Laureate " of the day, wrote a delightful poem, *The Parliament of Fowls*, perhaps to celebrate the occasion, though this cannot be proved. At all events, the poem pays many well-chosen compliments to both King and Queen. No doubt both of them were well pleased with Chaucer's tribute ; and his next poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*, was undertaken to interest his patron, John of Gaunt. Oddly enough, it was not dedicated to him, but to his friend and his fellow-poet, Gower. Next came the *Hous of Fame*, in which he very clearly indicates his wish for a little leisure from his exacting work at the Custom

House of London. King Richard read it sympathetically, and in 1385 granted him permission to employ a deputy controller to assist him. These three poems had been produced, if not entirely written, in three years, and it seems probable that it was Queen Anne who persuaded her husband to grant Chaucer some more leisure for his poetry. She very clearly hinted to Chaucer that his view of women was mean and unworthy, and asked for a nobler picture, doing more justice to the fair sex than his previous poems had done. He listened to her queenly plea, and employed some of his newly found leisure in writing the *Legend of Good Women* which we may suppose satisfied the demands of his royal patron.

Some of Chaucer's London friends got themselves involved in the intrigues of the Court, and several of them suffered distant imprisonment and even death. Chaucer, by contrast, was honoured by a poem, written by a French poet, Deschamps ; and took a prominent part in the funeral of the King's mother, Joan of Kent.

Yet Chaucer was soon to experience the harshness of fortune and to lose the position of affluence which he had so long enjoyed. In 1386 his patron, " old John of Gaunt, time-honoured Lancaster," went abroad to revive his fortune by putting forward a claim to the crown of Castile, and later in the year Chaucer became a Knight of the Shire for Kent, a post which he held for twelve years. He tried to steer a middle course, took no active share in politics, carried out his duties quickly, and lived in comfort on an income equivalent to £3000 a year to-day. There was nothing to suggest forthcoming disaster, but then followed the Duke of Gloucester's attack on Richard's friends, and in the

general débâcle Chaucer lost both his controllerships towards the end of 1386. Early next year he lost his wife, and—what had been even more important—her pension. She had recently been admitted into the distinguished fraternity of Lincoln Cathedral.

He lost his home in Aldgate, and had to commute his two pensions for a lump sum, so hard put was he to make both ends meet. For nearly three years he was in serious financial difficulties, until Gaunt returned from Castile, Gloucester was dismissed, and Chaucer was appointed Clerk of the King's Works. The duties were congenial and could sometimes be deputed to subordinates; they gave him wide powers, and put him in charge of royal palaces and manors and castles. He also arranged for the building of seats in Smithfield to watch the joust so graphically described by Froissart. He also had to arrange for the repair of dykes and land drains and sewers between Greenwich and Woolwich, and repairs of a different kind to St George's Chapel, Windsor. But the good fortune was not to last, for in 1391 it would seem that his neglect of duties, which he so readily detailed to his assistant, led to his dismissal. His office had suffered some serious thefts which he found difficult to make good. It is a curious feature of his life that during these ensuing years of exiguous fortune he wrote some of his gayest verse.

It is clear, therefore, that, though Chaucer may have been a good Government official when he could concentrate on the work and forget his poems and his art of characterization, he certainly did not manage his own financial affairs with much discretion. Quite close to the end of his life there was the violent changeover from the artistic Richard to the matter-of-fact Henry,

and Chaucer realized that John of Gaunt's son would be sure to be a friend and patron to the impecunious poet, just as his father had been. He therefore wrote almost his last poem as an appeal to King Henry IV for pecuniary help :

THE COMPLEYNT OF CHAUCER
TO HIS EMPTY PURSE

To you, my purse, and to non other wyght
Compleyne I, for you be my lady dere !
I am so sory now that ye been light ;
For certės, but ye make me hevy chere,
Me were as leef be leyd upon my bere,
For whiche unto your mercy thus I crye—
Beth hevy ageyn, or ellės mot I dye !

Now voucheth sauf this day, or hit be nyght,
That I of you the blisful soun may here,
Or see your colour lyk the sonnė bright,
That of yelownesse haddė never pere.
Ye be my lyf ! Ye be myn hertės stere !
Quene of comfort and of good companye !
Beth hevy ageyn, or ellės mot I dye.

Now, purse, that be to me my lyvės light
And savėour, as down in this worlde here,
Out of this toun help me throgh your myght,
Syn that ye wole not been my tresorére,
For I am shave as nye as is a frere,
But yet I pray unto your curtesye,
Beth hevy ageyn, or ellės mot I dye !

LENVOY DE CHAUCER

O Conquerour of Brutės Albion ;
Which that by lyne and free eleccioun
Ben verray Kyng, this song to you I sende,
And ye that mowen al myn harm amende,
Have mynde upon my supplicacioun !

One must suppose that Chaucer was desperately in need of money, or he would not so readily have changed sides. Only a few months before King Richard had helped him out of a financial muddle by staying the execution of a seizure for debt. To call Henry Bolingbroke " verray Kyng by lyne," when there were the Mortimers, Earls of March, in the offing ; and to speak of " free eleccioun," when Henry had really usurped the crown, was to strain truth much too far, and one's respect for Chaucer's integrity is not increased. This is all the more noteworthy, because in 1398, through the influence of the Mortimers, Chaucer was appointed by Sir Peter Courtenay as Substitutionary Forester for North Petherton, Somersetshire.

"That incomparable Boniface," the Host, is a magnificent example of a brow-beaten husband, and it seems more than likely that Geoffrey Chaucer, like Harry Bailly, was also unhappily married. Yet, it is not always wise to assume that experiences mentioned in any book represent the actual happenings to the author. Many writers speak objectively and Chaucer may have been doing so when he speaks of the love and sorrows of marriage. The Wife of Bath may be founded on fact or she may be sheer fiction ; or an assemblage of all the bad characteristics of women that Chaucer had come across in his time ; but it is difficult to believe that Chaucer's depiction is entirely objective. He seems to be speaking out of the fullness of his heart, and one feels that there must be some personal recollections and grievances amongst others stored up in this inimitable portrait. This conviction is supported by a poem which he wrote on the subject of marriage quite late in life. A young friend of his was proposing to get

married, and Chaucer in four verses anticipates the advice given on a similar occasion in the pages of *Punch*. "Don't," he says, but wraps up his advice in thirty-two lines of verse :

LENVOY DE CHAUCER A BUKTON

THE COUNSEIL OF CHAUCER TOUCHING MARIAGE, WHICH WAS SENT TO BUKTON

My maister Bukton, whan of Criste our Kyng
Was axėd, what is trouthe or sothfastnesse ?
He not a word answerde to that axyng,
As who saith, "No man is al trewe," I gesse.
And therfor, thogh I hightė to expresse
The sorwe and wo that is in mariage,
I dar not wryte of hit no wikkednesse,
Lest I myself falle eft in swich dotage.

I wol not seyn how that hit is the cheyne
Of Sathanas, on which he gnaweth ever ;
But I dar seyn, were he out of his peyne,
As by his wille, he wolde be boundė never.
But thilke dotėd fool that eft hath lever
Y-cheynėd be than out of prison crepe,
God lete him never fro his wo dissever,
Ne no man him bewaylė, thogh he wepe !

But yit, lest thou do worsė, tak a wyf ;
Bet is to weddė than brenne in worsė wyse.
But thou shalt have sorwe on thy flesh, thy lyf,
And ben thy wyvės thral, as seyn these wyse;
And if that holy writ may not suffyse,
Experience shal thee techė, so may happe,
That thee were lever to be take in Fryse
Than eft to falle of weddyng in the trappe.

ENVOY

This litel writ, proverbės, or figure
I sendė you, tak kepe of hit, I rede ;
Unwys is he that can no wele endure.
If thou be siker, put thee nat in drede.
The Wyf of Bathe I pray yow that ye rede
Of this materė that we have on honde.
God grauntė you your lyf frely to lede
In fredom ; for ful hard is to be bonde.

On October 25, 1400, Chaucer died, and was buried in the South Transept of Westminster Abbey. This transept is made narrower than the corresponding arm on the north side by the intrusion of the old cloister, over which is the monastic Muniment Room, full of old manorial documents relating to Hampstead and Hendon and other manors belonging to the Abbey. In the South Transept there are thus only two bays on the ground floor as compared with three bays above. The burial of our first English poet in this particular spot has started a custom which will not readily be discon tinued ; and Poets' Corner owes its name and character and very existence to the fame of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Chapter Four

COUNTRY LIFE IN CHAUCER'S TIME

A GLANCE at some of the features of medieval country life in Britain will illuminate many chance references to be found in Chaucer's poetry.

The generalizations of the past with regard to conditions in a manor can no longer be maintained, and it is clear that there were very considerable local divergencies. Customs in the North of England differed from those in the South and West, and a recent researcher has shown that in 650 representative Midland villages less than half were identical with manors.

In an outer suburb to the north-west of London a ratepayer recently wrote to complain that instead of settling in a town he seemed to have come to a collection of villages. This was singularly near the truth, because sub-infeudation in the reign of Stephen had split the village up into several manors. Conditions would no doubt remain uniform in a group of manors of this kind, and it might well be that several belonging, say, to Westminster Abbey, and lying within reasonable distance of London, would enjoy the same privileges and suffer the same handicaps.

Much of our knowledge of the working of a manor comes from a study of the rentals, custumals, extents, and surveys that are available in such a store-house as the Muniment Room at Westminster Abbey, close to Poets' Corner. Many such collections are to be found,

and from time to time single extents come to light and tend to modify our previous conclusions. It seemed at one time as if every manor was managed in the main by two officials, the bailiff, or sergeant, or serviens, who looked after the lord's interests, and the reeve or prepositus, who acted as the representative of the villeins. But this plan was never a rule in all manors, and methods changed from time to time as well as from place to place.

The bailiff in the manor of Drokensford, in Hampshire, earned six pounds a year, whereas the ploughman got eight shillings, and the shepherd only four. A reputation for severity and sometimes for sharp practice made the bailiff liable to occasional assault, but the penalty was usually *6d.*, whereas for a villein it was only *2d.*

In the *Black Survey of Hendon*, compiled in 1321, out of eighty-five tenants, thirty hold more than ten acres, and only two of these are bound to be reeve, "*et erit prepositus, si dominus voluerit*" (and he shall be reeve, if the lord of the manor wishes it). The reeve was the linch-pin or pivot of the manor, and it must often have happened that, instead of changing from year to year, a reeve would use his experience to continue in his office for a number of years. Chaucer's Reeve of Bawdeswell, who had held his position "syn that his lord was twenty yeer of age," can be matched in the records of Hendon, where five reeves in succession held office from 1335-99.

A contemporary writer says:

> All those who hold in villeinage or a manor must elect as reeve such an one as they will answer for if the Lord suffer any loss by the faul of the reeve, and he shall not

have of his own goods the wherewithal to make it good, they shall pay for him the surplus which he cannot pay.

The reeve had little time to spare on his own plots, seeing that it was up to him to get the farm servants to work early, and supervise sowing, marling, ploughing, and carting. He had to make sure that the various work-people were honest, he had to supervise the live-stock, issue rations when food was due from the Lord to his villeins, arrange for the "dry-bed-rip"—the reaping to which food was allotted—and later on for the "wed-bed-rip," for which drink was available.

In the Westminster Abbey accounts one can see a very difficult aspect of the reeve's activities—the annual audit. Sometimes the Abbey authorities would send officials round to the various manors to investigate the accounts, sometimes all the reeves would have to attend at the Abbey. The reeve had all kinds of opportunities and lots of privileges. He was excused rent, he had an actual payment for his services, and there were many perquisites. Some reeves were invited regularly to meals at the manor house, some only during the harvest and the boon-days of reaping.. The reeve, or farmer, of the demesne in Hendon, after the Black Death, "*Tunc erit quietus de operibus consultis preter redditum suum in denariis frumentum et braseum*" (and then he shall be quit of all customs and works after his rent in money, the wheat and malt).

A recent writer on manorial history says,

> as a result of a century of discussion we know all . . . about the many varieties of peasant status and title to land, but only very little about the peasant as a person, the village as a social group, and the manor as an economic organization.

All this, of course, is perfectly true, but he adds rather unkindly, "The customary behaviour of the villagers, their work and play, their birth, education, courtship, and marriage, are left in the incompetent care of antiquaries."

Nevertheless, a good deal of information as to life in the typical medieval manor, if such a thing is ever typical, can be gleaned from pictures and law pamphlets of the time, provided that one realizes that customs die hard and may remain almost unchanged for several centuries, and that it is unwise to assume that the notions in one manor are of general application.

The pictorial *Old English Calendar* (Ms. Jul. A. VI) which dates from before 1100, and is reproduced both in J. R. Green's *Short History of the English People* and in H. D. Traill's *Social England*, shows the typical occupation for each month. For January the work is ploughing with four oxen, not the eight of later times. One man drives the plough, a second uses a very long goad to stimulate the oxen, while a third in the rear seems to be scattering seed. In February three men are pruning trees with large curved knives furnished with stout handles. March sees four men breaking up the soil, digging, sowing, or harrowing. The tools employed are a long-handled axe, a spade, a rake, and strung round the sower's waist is a bag from which to scatter the seed. April is the time for feasting, but this seems to apply more to the master and his friends than to the farmers and farm servants. Six folk are depicted, three seated drinking on a raised settle with high back and two carved animals as supporters. Two others are pouring out drink, while the sixth has a large, round shield and a huge spear. May is the month for watching and

tending sheep, and five of them are depicted, four being horned, with three folk to look after them. There is an older man by himself at one side of the picture and a man and woman gossiping at the other. For June the standard occupation is cutting wood, and there is a two-wheeled cart with long pole for the cattle resting on the ground. Three men are cutting down, cutting up, and carting the logs, while the two patient cattle, with the yoke across their shoulders, are nibbling the leaves of the tree that is being felled by means of a long-handled axe. In July there is hay-making, and six men are engaged in the task, five with long-handled scythes and one with a pitchfork.

August is the month of harvesting, with a cart ready to receive the corn which is being reaped and gathered. September provides boar-hunting, two men pursuing the boars with horn and long hunting spears. October sees two men out hawking, one mounted and one on foot. There are two hawks held in the hand, two ducks swimming in a pond, and a huge bird standing on the edge. November is depicted as a month of bonfires, long lengths of timber are neatly stacked, and the odd-ments are being burned up, to be used, no doubt, as ashes to fertilize the soil. The year ends with a busy December; threshing with long flails, winnowing with a large sieve, and carrying grain in a big basket fastened on to a pole slung across men's shoulders, to be stored for the winter.

We get two pictures of home life on two different scales; the elaborate country house of the Franklin, and the tiny sooty cottage of the poor widow in the Nuns' priest's tale of Chanticleer.

There is little justification for idealizing the cottage

of the average medieval peasant. We cannot accept the picture given by Sir Walter Scott in his story of *Ivanhoe*, nor the account which we get in Thorold Rogers' more serious *The Economic Interpretation of History*.

Let us look at a typical medieval village. Suppose that Bawdeswell in Norfolk is the place; we shall find many details of our picture in the *Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*. There is the young lord of the manor, assisted by the reeve, who knows all the details of his master's stock—his sheep, cattle, dairy, pigs, horses, farm stock, and poultry. The reeve is expert in his knowledge of the weather and of the right time to plough or sow, reap or mow. He knows how to look after his granary, and is up to all the tricks of herdsman, bailiff, or other servant. He has built himself a good house on the heath, with trees all round to screen it. No man can ever prove him wrong in his reckoning, and he can always get the better of the auditors at the annual audit.

In the village there are a number of villein tenant-farmers. The ploughman is one of them and he has only a small holding—not perhaps a virgate[1] or even half, but perhaps, say, five acres or some of the Lammas lands,[2] let out each year. He was a good worker, ploughing, scattering manure, threshing, digging, and ditching, and helping his neighbours too. He paid his tithe in good time and in kind—some of his sheaves of corn and perhaps a small pig.

The village parson described by Chaucer has a wide

[1] A varying measure of land, but usually averaging thirty acres.
[2] Lands which were private property till August 1st (Lammas Day) but were then open to common grazing till the spring.

parish, and is a real Christian, severe on himself, but lenient to others, unless he finds them unrepentant. He visits all his folk when they are ill, and is never tempted to leave them for preferment. He must have many difficulties, because his parish is often invaded by friars, pardoners, and summoners, all offering absolution and seeking to make money in various questionable ways.

The lord of the manor might, of course, be such a man as Chaucer's Franklin, who kept open house, had a good estate, all in excellent order, and was himself a J.P., a sheriff, an auditor, and an M.P.

Most manors had a mill, which was a source of profit to the lord, and to the miller, who was well known as a traditionally dishonest fellow.

The chief excitements of the village were the occasional visits of clergy or laity, coming to see what they could get out of the villagers, or to stay with the hospitable lord of the manor.

On Sundays and saints' days there were services, and on other days as well, and from time to time sermons from resident or visiting clergy, advocating perhaps clean living, or the purchase and worship of relics ; or else threatening the people with the Archdeacon's court or with the terror of Hell, which they saw depicted in the church's pictures or in its stained glass.

Even if idyllic pictures of medieval peasant life cannot be fully endorsed, there were happenings to modify the dull routine. From Books of Hours we discover some sports and amusements which would be welcomed by the villagers. A performing horse, a dancing bear, or a performing monkey would be a welcome visitor, but we have no idea how often such a thing

might occur. Dog- and cock-fighting added to occasional gaiety, and we find pictures of more serious games, both indoor and outdoor, such as tops, bowls, and chess. Each village may well have had an inn and a blacksmith's forge ; and some slight relaxation would be provided by a travelling bird-cage seller, by all sorts and conditions dropping in for meals or for lodging, and by the sight of cooking going on outside the inn. All these, and the shoeing of horses are depicted in the Books of Hours. It would be interesting to discover not only when the term " Merrie England " first occurred, but, even more important, to feel sure how far it was justified in medieval times.

The origin of the manor is much disputed, and there are at least two rival theories : one of a group of freemen losing many of their rights ; the other of a group of non-freemen little by little acquiring freedom. Probably both these theories have some basis of truth, and there is certainly to be seen more variety in the origin of the manor than was formerly admitted.

In many cases the manor and the village are identical, but not universally so. If one takes any particular manor and traces its history one can usually find some peculiarity of location or experience which explains the points of difference between it and other manors.

The Domesday survey is incomplete, but it gives a very clear view of many if not most of the manors of South-east England. For nearly two centuries this survey sufficed, and then, when Edward I began a series of legal enactments and economic developments, based probably on the reforms of Simon de Montfort, other landowners on a big scale followed his example, and the Abbots of Peterborough and Westminster, to

mention only two, organized extents and surveys of the manors under their jurisdiction. These enable us to get a shrewd idea of manorial progress not long before the Black Death.

A very attractive picture is given by a writer who flourished just twenty-five years after Chaucer's death, and whose poem has been simplified in its spelling :

I turned me twice and peered about,
Beholding hedges and woods so green,
The mansions and meadows mown all new,
For such was the season of the same year.

I lifted up my eyelids and looked further
And saw many sweet sights, God help me,
The moors and the waters and the well-springs
And trees trailed from top to the earth,
Curiously covered with curtain of green,
The flowers on fields smelling sweet
The corn of the crofts cropped full fair,
The running river rushing fast
Full of fish and fry of manifold kind
The briars with their berries bent over the ways
As honeysuckles hanging upon each half.

Chestnuts and cherries that children desire
Were lodged under leaves full lusty to see.
The hawthorn so wholesome I too beheld
And how the beans blowed and the broom flower.
Pears and plums and green peascods,
That ladies very much yearn after,
Were gathered for men ere they became ripe.

The rabbits from cover leapt along the banks
And went out at random and returned again,
Played forth on the plain ; and then to the plain
But any hand caught them, and the hedge
The sheep shadowed themselves from the sun,

While the lambs lay along by the hedge,
The cow with her calf, and colts full fair
And stallions in haras hurtled together.

Chaucer's ploughman reaches such a high standard of honesty that it is a great disappointment to find a different story told by Langland. A dishonest ploughman in his poem, *Piers Plowman*, says :

> If I went to the plough I pinched so narrowly that I would steal a foot of land or a furrow, or gnaw the half-acre of my neighbour, and if I reaped I would over-reap or give counsel to them that reaped to seize for me with their sickles that which I never sowed.

And another contemporary writes of

> false husbandmen who falsely plough away men's lands and take and plough away a furrow through and through.

This lack of honesty made it difficult to employ co-operative ploughing by joining teams together, and the threefold system, where it was in vogue, was highly wasteful.

A careless neighbour might send you broadcast weeds, and it was necessary to prevent damage to a neighbour's property by forbidding too much right of way. " No one shall have egress from his own close over another man's land, and no one shall make paths to his neighbour's damage." The tremendous loss of life through the Black Death left many allotments unowned, and while many families in each manor must have died out, a number of others date their prosperity from the time when they were able to incorporate their dead neighbour's holding with their own.

Chaucer's account of the poor widow in *Chaunticleer* is matched by Langland's story of the poor man in

Piers Plowman's Crede, which can be rendered thus in modern prose :

And as I went by the way weeping for sorrow, I saw a poor man by me hanging upon the plough. His coat was of a stuff that was called cary, his hood was full of holes, and his hair stuck out, his well-worn shoes were thickly soled, his toes peeped out as he trod the land ; his hose hung about his hock-shins on every side, all bespattered with fen mud as he followed the plough. Two mittens he had roughly made of poor cloth, with ragged fingers made of mud. This fellow walked in mud almost up to his ankles, and drove before him fair heifers that had grown so feeble that man might count each rib, so skinny were they. His wife walked with him, with a long goad, in a short coat cut full high, wrapped in a winding sheet to protect her from the weather. She walked barefoot on the bare ice so that the blood flowed. And at the end of the furrow lay a little crumb-bowl and thereon lay a little child lapped in rags, and twins of two years old on another side ; and they all sang a song that was a sorrow to hear ; they all cried the same cry full of sadness. The poor fellow sighed and said, " Children, be still."

Chapter Five

THE BLACK DEATH AND THE PEASANTS' REVOLT

BEFORE the Black Death, so we learn from John Trevisa,

> A bonde servaunt woman is bought and solde lyke a beeste, and if a bonde servaunt man or woman be made free, and afterwards be unkynde, he shall be callyd and brought again into charge of bondage and of thraldom. Also a bond servaunt suffereth many wronges, and is bete with roddes, and constreyned and holde lowe with diverse and contrarye charges and travayles amonges wretchydnes and woo. Oneth he is suffered to reste or to take brethe. And therefore amonge all wretchydnesse and woo the condicion of bondage and thraldom is moost wretchid.

It was not surprising that the poor resented the many hardships which they had to undergo, and took quick advantage of the change of fortune which the Black Death afforded them. Everything was scarce, especially labour, and there was in some parts, though not everywhere, the inflation that follows plague and war. Crops rotted in the fields, cattle and sheep strayed with no one to tend them, and wages mounted. Knighton, a canon of Leicester, gives us a vivid local picture, which may well have been generally a true one:

> There died at Leicester in the small parish of St Leonard more than 380, and in the parish of the Holy Cross more

than 400, and so in every parish a great number. In the same year there was a great plague of sheep everywhere in the realm, so that in one place there died in one pasturage more than five thousand sheep, and so rotted that neither beast nor bird would touch them. And there were small prices for everything on account of the fear of death. For there were very few who cared about riches or anything else.

For a time it would seem that there was a slump in prices instead of the soaring that might have been expected. Knighton continues:

A man could have a horse which before was worth 40*s.* for 6*s.* 8*d.*, a fat ox for 4*s.* a cow for 12*d.*, a heifer for 6*d.*, a fat wether for 4*d.*, a sheep for 3*d.*, a lamb for 2*d.*, a big pig for 5*d.*, a stone of wool for 9*d.* Sheep and cattle went wandering over fields and through crops, and there was no one to go and drive or father them, so that the number cannot be reckoned which perished in the ditches in every district for lack of herdsmen, for there was such a lack of servants that no one knew what he ought to do.

We get the story from a different angle as told by Chaucer's contemporary and fellow poet, Gower. Gower had been a country squire, and in his *Vox Clamantis* he complains of the demands of the labourers. Landlords had a grim time, and would lurk in the woods like wild beasts, feeding on acorns, or, like Nebuchadnezzar, on grass, wishing that they could shrink within the very bark of the trees. The King heard of the wages demanded by labourers when the plague had abated.

No one could get a reaper for less than eightpence with his food, a mower for less than twelve pence with his food. Wherefore, many crops perished in the fields for want of someone to gather them.

And so royal orders were sent into all the counties that reapers and other labourers were not to take wages higher than before. But they were now aware of their importance, and those who wanted crops saved had to " satisfy the lofty and covetous desire of the workmen."

Gower continues :

> Three things, all of the same sort are merciless when they get the upper hand ; a water flood, a wasting fire, and the common multitude of small folk. For these will never be checked by reason or discipline, and therefore, to speak in brief, the present world is so troubled by them that it is well to set a remedy thereunto. Ha ! age of ours, whither turnest thou ? For the poor and small folk, who should cleave to their labour, demand to be better fed than their masters. Moreover, they bedeck themselves in fine colours and fine attire, whereas (were it not for their pride and their privy conspiracies) they would be clad in sackcloth as of old. . . . Ha ! age of ours, I know not what to say, but of all the estates that I see, from the highest to the lowest, each decayeth in its own degree. Poor man or lord, all alike are full of vanity ; I see the poor folk more haughty than their lords ; each draweth whither he pleaseth.

In the *Prologue* and in the *Tales* there seems to be hardly any reference at all obvious to the two great catastrophies of Plague and Revolt which had upset the normal course of events not so very long before. The Black Death

> visited with the scourge of sudded death every spot in all the kingdoms that stretch as far as Scotland ; immediately spreading from place to place with great rapidity it smote between morning and noon a very great number of people in perfect health, and rid them of this mortal life.

None of those whom it willed to die did it suffer to live more than three or four days at the most, without any regarding of persons, with the exception perhaps of a few rich. (HENRY KNIGHTON. *c.* 1360.)

Finding that, because of the plague, people were betaking themselves to foreign parts with their money, the King sent to the Mayor and Sheriffs of Sandwich to stop this exodus.

If it be suffered, our nation will soon be as void of men as of treasure, and thus from this there might arise great danger to us and our realm, unless some suitable remedy be quickly found therefor. . . . We hereby charge you, under the strictest injunctions, on no account to allow to pass over sea from your port, either openly or secretly, except with our special orders, any men at arms, even foreigners, of what rank or condition soever, unless they be merchants, notaries, or accredited ambassadors ; and we bid you show such care in this matter that by your evil conduct, you be not deserving of punishment at our hands hereafter. Westminster, December 1, 1349. (Rymer's *Foedera.*)

It is clear that the Black Death and the attempts made by landowners to lessen the labour problem which that scourge produced had a very definite influence on the Peasants' Revolt, though it may not have been the only cause or even the chief one.

Langland again comes to our aid and gives us a picture of discontent :

Labourers with no land, but only their hands work,
Deign not to dine on day-old vegetables,
No penny ale for them, nor a piece of bacon,
But pork, fish, or fresh meat, fried or baked,
And that *chaud*, plus *chaud*, lest it chin their maw.

If he has not high wages he will chide and moan
And bewail the day that he was born a workman
Gentle Cato's counsel he begins to rail on
Paupertatis onus patienter ferre memento.

He curses the King with a will, and all his justices,
For making such laws to keep the labourers down,
But while hunger here was lord none then would chide
Nor strive against the statute, so stern did hunger look.
But I warn all you workmen, work while you can,
Hunger is fast coming. Hitherward again
Hunger shall wake and come with floods to chasten the
wastrel
Ere few years are fulfilled famine shall arise.

Although it has been claimed that *Piers Plowman* played an important part in causing the Peasants' Revolt, yet it displayed no sign of sympathy with the demand for higher wages. John Ball wanted to help the poor to better themselves, and in the process was prepared to burn charters and manor-rolls and hunt lawyers to death. Here is his summons, written in 1381:

John Schep, some time Saint Mary's priest of York, and now of Colchester, greeteth well John Nameless and John the Miller and John Carter, and biddeth them that they beware of guile in borough, and stand together in God's name, and biddeth Piers Plowman go to his work, and chastise well Hob the Robber, and take with you John Trueman and all fellows and no more, and look sharp you to union and no more.

John the Miller hath yground small, small, small,
The King's son of heaven shall pay for all.
Be ware or ye be woe
Know your friend from your foe.
Have enough and say " Ho ! "

And do well and better and flee sin,
And seek peace and hold therein
And so bid John Trueman and all his fellows.

Parliament had to face the difficult problem of wages for the workingmen and attempt to deal with the spiral that so often follows war or plague. Here are some ordinances:

Carters, ploughmen, drivers of the plough, shepherds, swineherds, and all other servants shall take liveries and wages, accustomed in the twentieth year of the present King's reign, or four years before, so that in the country where wheat was wont to be given, they shall take for the bushel ten pence, or wheat at the will of the giver, till it be otherwise ordained. And they shall be hired to serve for a whole year, or by other usual terms, and not by the day; and none shall pay in the time of hay-making but a penny the day; and a mower of meadows for the acre five pence, or by the day five pence; and reapers of corn in the first week of August two pence, and in the second, three pence, and so till the end of August, and less in the country where less was wont to be given, without meat or drink or other courtesy to be demanded, given or taken, and all workmen shall bring openly in their hands to the merchant towns their instruments, and there shall be hired in a common place and not private.

None shall take for the threshing of a quarter of wheat or rye over two pence, and the quarter of barley, beans, peas, and oats over one penny if so much were wont to be given; and the said servants shall be sworn two times in the year to hold and do these ordinances; and none of them shall go out of the town where he dwelleth in the winter to serve the summer, if he may serve in the same town. . . .

Carpenters, masons, and tilers, and other workmen of houses, shall not take by the day for their work, but in

manner as they were wont, that is to say: A master carpenter three pence and another two pence; a master mason four pence and other masons three pence; and their servants a penny.

Tilers three pence and their knaves one penny, and other coverers of fern and straw three pence and their knaves one penny. Plasterers and other workers of mud walls, and their knaves, by the same manner, without meat or drink; that is from Easter to Michaelmas, and from that time less, according to the rate and discretion of the justices, which shall be thereto assigned.

Chapter Six

PRELUDE TO REFORMS

THE beginnings of the Renaissance in England are usually traced to about the middle of the fifteenth century; they might easily be found a hundred years before. In the early part of the fourteenth century there was a most significant re-awakening of art and letters in Italy. The city states of Northern Italy—Florence, Genoa, Milan, Parma, Pisa—were rivalling the Greek city states of many centuries earlier. Painting was breaking the chains of out-of-date conventions, and preparing for the triumphs of Giotto and Massaccio and the still more glorious achievements of Raphael and Michelangelo.

Dante had reached heights and plumbed depths undreamed of since Vergil, and, half a century after him, Petrarch and Boccaccio had advanced from what the poet calls "the roseate hues of early dawn" to what might easily become a noontide splendour of the day.

Now, Chaucer owed much of his success as a poet and a story-teller to these three great poets. His *Hous of Fame* is an allegory based to a great degree on Dante's *Divine Comedy*; in his *Legend of Good Women*, as in his *Canterbury Tales*, he borrows ideas and methods, if not actual stories, from Boccacio; while to Petrarch he owned his delightful poem, the *Clerk's Tale*, a debt which he acknowledges in his prologue to the tale:

I wol yow telle a talė which that I
Lernėd at Padowe of a worthy clerk,
As prevėd by his wordės and his werk;
He is now deed and naylėd in his chestė,
I prey to God so yeve his soulė restė!
  Fraunceys Petrark, the laureat poete,
Hightė this clerk whos rethorikė sweete
Enlumyned al ytaille of poetrie.

While the influence of Italian poets on English writers is very noticeable, it is a remarkable and almost unexplained fact that, until the eighteenth century, painting in England never reached the heights achieved on the continent. Design and sculpture are to be found in the abbeys and cathedrals, there is a grand Renaissance style in church and manor house, but only very third-rate performance is seen in portraiture and landscape.

Contemporary with Chaucer are Langland and Wycliffe, the former a countryman, who shows in a rough and somewhat inartistic style the same dislike of dishonest and immoral friars and pardoners and summoners, and has the same gift of satire and the same skill in characterization as Chaucer; the latter a scholar and a divine, who abandoned his high position at Oxford to translate the Bible into manly and vigorous English.

Wycliffe's great idea in attempting a translation of the Bible into the common tongue was to enable the people to use its teaching and guidance to work out their own salvation. "Every man that shall be saved is a real priest made of God, and every man is bound to be such a very priest." It was from St Jerome's Vulgate that this version was translated—the Old Testament and

part of the Apocrypha by Nicholas de Hereford, the rest of it and the New Testament by Wycliffe himself, the whole of it revised soon after Wycliffe's death by his friend, John Purvey.

It is clear that Purvey's emendations into Midland English added greatly to the accuracy and effectiveness of Wycliffe's translation. The earlier version aimed at literal fidelity, in accordance with Wycliffe's notion that "christian men ought much to travail night and day about text of Holy Writ, and especially the gospel in their mother tongue."

Seventy years, therefore, before Gutenberg set up his printing press at Mainz, and Coster his press at Haarlem, Wycliffe gave an English Bible "in laborious manuscript to the common man who listened to his teaching." There was naturally clerical opposition to the idea of a version which men could hear and interpret for themselves, for Wycliffe "appealed," as G. M. Trevelyan writes, "for the direct relation of the individual to God without mediators."

It is not easy to feel sure how far Wycliffe's influence extended. Had his Bible been available in print, as were those of Tyndale and Coverdale, it would have left a deeper impression on contemporary thought; but the influence it extended may well have contributed something to the later Reformation. Fuller, writing two hundred years after the event, tells us about the fate of Wycliffe's bones. For forty years his grave was left alone, but the Council of Constance had other ideas.

> The spleen of the Council . . . ordered his bones to be taken out of the ground, and thrown farre off from any christian buriall. In' obedience hereunto Richard

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> Fleming, Bishop of Lincolne, Diocesan of Lutterworth, sent his Officers . . . to ungrave him accordingly. To Lutterworth they come, Summoner, Commissaries, Official, Chancellor and Proctors, Doctors, and the Servants (so that the Remnant of the body would not hold a bone among so many hands) take what was left out of the grave, and burnt them to ashes, and cast them into the Swift, a Neighbouring Brook running hard by. Thus this Brook hath convey'd his Ashes into Avon; Avon into Severn; Severn into the narrow Seas; they, into the main Ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the Emblem of his Doctrine, which now is dispersed all the world over.

The English peasant secured his freedom centuries sooner than his counterpart on the Continent. There were various ways of gaining such freedom and the desire to shake off fixed services was widespread. True it is that personal service gradually changed to the duty of providing a labourer to help the lord; then this system gave place to payment in kind—wheat and barley, fruit and vegetables—in place of service, and finally to the paying of rent instead of goods. But it was a long process, and a far quicker way, where possible, was for villeins to escape into a town and contrive to stay there for a year and a day. The law sometimes came to their rescue and Justice Hale in 1309 declared that, "He who is once found free and of free estate in a court of record shall be holded free for ever, unless it be that some later act of his make him villein."

By the fourteenth century the villeins in many manors were commuting their services, and the lords were farming their demesnes or letting it to prosperous small holders.

In addition to a re-awakening in letters, other ideas were in the air in England towards the close of the fourteenth century, not least the questions of reform in the Church, and the emancipation of the peasant from his feudal overlord. Of these nascent reforms it was perhaps emancipation of the peasant that alarmed people the most, especially as the demand for freedom chose to come at that moment of exceptional danger to a state, when the king was a child. Langland compares the Commons with mice and rats wanting to kill the old cat, King Edward III, almost in his dotage. They are warned that things may well be far worse when a kitten is king (in the person of Edward's grandson) ; there is no one to keep order, and all the hounds of anarchy are let loose. It seems certain that the excesses of the Jacquerie in France, following on the devastation brought about by the Hundred Years War, had a somewhat similar effect in England to the horrors of the French Revolution four centuries later, and postponed any social and economic reform for a long while.

There had been proposals for a certain amount of disendowment of the Church due to the prevalent discontent with its wealth and abuses ; and John Wycliffe saw in disendowment a means of relieving the poor of a certain amount of taxation. His charitable aims, which might have resulted in an extension of lower class education, were as uncongenial to his patron, John of Gaunt, as were the educational schemes of John Knox in Scotland, several centuries later, to the Regent Murray, who regarded the Utopian schemes as " devout imagination." Fortunately Knox succeeded where Wycliffe did not. Even as early as the end of the four-

teenth century the rulers had good reason to fear the London mob. The disorder which came to a head in the Wars of the Roses, and which is the theme of many of the Paston Letters, certainly began towards the end of the reign of Edward III. Wycliffe complains bitterly of the tyrannical landlords—" Proud Lucifer's children, extortioners and robbers, who destroy their poor neighbours, and make their house a den of thieves." Their habits were copied by men of lowlier station and we read that, " Now cometh examples of pride, gluttony, and harlotry from lords' courts to the commons."

To deal with this disorder the power of the Sheriffs was being increased, and the Justices of the Peace, who were to play so big a part in Tudor times, were beginning to exercise some restraining influence. It was thought advisable to change the Sheriff in each county from year to year, as it was feared that a permanent official might develop tyrannical methods. The office itself was an expensive one to maintain, and few landowners would want to be burdened with so much cost and such irksome responsibility.

Chapter Seven

THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

OF the thirty-one pilgrims of the *Canterbury Tales*, twelve were attached to religion in some way or other, and the manner in which Chaucer depicts them gives us some idea of the slack condition of many Church officials at the time and the poor opinion which the average man of education had of them. The writings of Professor G. M. Trevelyan and Professor G. G. Coulton give a cumulative picture of the failings of the Church which the contemporary writings of Wycliffe, Langland, and Chaucer had made clear.

The bishops of the day were mainly shrewd men of business, quite respectable and hard working, all of them English, owing their position to the joint efforts of King and Pope, but their energies were often devoted to public affairs rather than to the interests of their dioceses. This was no new thing, but Wycliffe spoke and wrote fiercely against the *Cæsarean* clergy. The Clerical Law Courts were frequently not fair and just, their officials using their power to inflict severe penalties for refusal of tithe. Chaucer's Archdeacon :

> For smale tithes and for smal offringe
> He made the peple pitously to singe.

The state of morality, as evidenced, *inter alia*, by Chaucer's tales, was bad in all classes. Rich and poor alike were immoral, and had to submit to conviction,

but the former paid, sometimes regularly, while the latter submitted to penance.

Absentee clergy and the practice of giving the great tithes to an abbot or lay rector, while the vicar had inadequate pay, were of common occurrence. Many parsons abandoned their ignorant or half-savage peasantry to flock to London or elsewhere as chantry priests.

The ecclesiastical courts were perhaps as powerful as ever, but they were losing their reputation, and often becoming places of extortion. Chaucer comments on the Archdeacon that he was more anxious to extort money from the people than to help them to a godly life.

Many officials of the Church tended to regard sin, not as a wickedness to be cured, but as an opportunity of filling the Church's coffers.

It is interesting to note the reaction of Langland, Wycliffe, and Chaucer to the problem of penance. Langland believed in it when it was supported by genuine penitence; Wycliffe disliked intensely the Church's claim to grant pardon and absolution; while Chaucer simply "recorded what he saw, or what the man in the street saw. So he gibbetted the summoner, who hangs in the sight of all to this day." But the Church courts were no worse than the lay courts, and Wycliffe and Langland denounced all lawyers as instruments of oppression to the poor. The clergy were also punishers of moral offences, and they used these as a means of money making. Friars especially earned money for their orders by the granting of absolution. Langland and Wycliffe, as well as Chaucer, derided the practices of summoners, pardoners, and friar con-

fessors, who were persecuting blackmailers protected by the law courts.

Dean Milman, in his *History of Latin Christianity* writes of the remarkable outburst of the English language, and of a serious dissatisfaction with the economic and religious systems, that are manifest during the latter half of the fourteenth century. He writes that

> throughout its institutions, language, sentiment, Teutonism is now holding its first initiatory struggle with Latin Christianity. In Chaucer is heard a voice from the Court, from the castle, from the City, from universal England. . . His is a voice of freedom, of more or less covert hostility to the hierarchial system, though more playful and with a poet's genial appreciation of all which was true, healthful and beautiful in the old faith. In Wycliffe is heard the voice from the University, from the seat of theology and scholastic philosophy, from the centre and stronghold of the hierarchy a voice of revolt and defiance, taken up and echoed in the pulpit throughout the land against the sacredotal domination. In the *Vision of Piers Plowman* is heard a voice from the wild Malvern Hills, the voice, it should seem, of a humble parson or secular priest.
>
> Langland is no precursor of Wycliffe ; he is no dreamy, speculative theologian ; he acquiesces seemingly with unquestioning faith in the Creed and in the usages of the Church. . . . Pilgrimages, penances, oblations on the altar, absolution he does not reject, though they are all nought in comparision with holiness and charity. . . . It is in his intense absorbing moral feeling that he is beyond his age ; with him outward observances are but hollow shows, mockeries, hypocrisies without the inward power of religion. The sad serious Satirist, in his contemplation of the world around him . . . sees no hope, but in a new order of things . . . he asserts the right, the duty, the obligation of the temporal Sovereign to despoil the hierarchy of their

corrupting and fatal riches. . . . He almost adores poverty, but it is industrious downtrodded rustic poverty. . . . Langland is anti-papal, yet he can admire an ideal Pope, a general pacificator, reconciling the sovereigns of the world to universal amity. It is the actual Pope, the Pope of Avignon or of Rome, levying the wealth of the world to slay mankind, who is the subject of his bitter invective.

The friars at the beginning of the thirteenth century had started a real Church revival, and few men, if any, have ever followed the example and teaching of Christ more faithfully than St Francis of Assisi. But a century and a half had brought a sad change, and from all sides one finds a condemnation so universal as to demand belief. A contemporary poem condemns the greed of the friars :

Guile they know and many a gape ;
Full some can with a pound of sape
Get a kirtle and a cape
And somewhat else thereto.

Why sould I ought else declare ?
Never a pedlar pack doth bear
That have so dear can sell his fare
As a friar can.

For if he give a wife a knife
That cost but pennies two,
Ten pennies' worth he'll get, I vow,
Ere he his road pursue.

which exactly bears out what Chaucer says of his Friar :

His typet was ay farsed full of knyves
And pynnės, for to yeven yonge wyves.

and later in the story :

For thogh a wydwe haddė noght a sho,
So pleasaunt was his " *In principio*,"

Yet wolde he have a ferthyng er he wente.
His purchas was wel bettre than his rente.

Another criticism of the friars was made by John Wycliffe in his *Fifty Heresies and Errors of Friars* (1384). Here it is, in somewhat modernized spelling:

Also friars say that it is needful to leave the commandment of Christ, of giving of alms to poor feeble men, to poor crooked men, to poor blind men and to bedridden men, and give this alms to hypocrites that feign them holy and needy when they be strong in body and have overmuch riches, both in great houses and precious clothes, in great feasts and many jewels and treasure; and thus they stay poor men with their false begging, since they take falsely from them their worldly goods, by which they should sustain their bodily life; and deceive rich men in their alms and maintain or comfort them to live in falseness against Jesus Christ. For since there were poor men enough to take men's alms, before friars came in, and the earth is now more barren than it was, our friars or our men had to go without this alms; but friars by subtle hypocrisy get to themselves and prevent poor men from having this alms. . . . Also friars feign themselves as hypocrites, to keep straightly the Gospel and poverty of Christ and His Apostles; and yet they are most contrary to Christ and His Apostles in hypocrisy, pride and covetousness. . . . they can never made an end, but by begging, by crying, by burying, by salaries and rentals and by strivings, by absolutions and other false means cry ever after worldly goods, where Christ used none of all these; and thus for this stinking covetousness they worship the field as their God. . . . Also friars be thieves, both night thieves and day thieves. . . . Also friars be wasters of treasure of our land by many blind and unskilful manners . . . and many times bring vain pardons and other vain privileges, and in all this the gold

of our land goes out, and simony and curse and boldness in sin come again. . . . Friars also be most privy and subtle procurators of simony and foul winning and begging of benefices, of indulgences and travels, and pardons and vain privileges. Of these fifty heresies and errors, and many more if men will seek them well out, they may know that friars be cause, beginning and maintaining of perturbation in Christendom, and of all evils of this world, and these errors shall never be amended till friars be brought to freedom of the Gospel and clean religion of Jesus Christ.

The picture of the friars in the pages of Langland's *Piers Plowman*, tells the same unhappy story :

Do we see them on Sundays, the service to hear,
At matins, in the morning? Till Mass begin
Or even till even-song, see we right few !
Or work they for their bread, as the law bids?
No ; but at mid-day meal time I meet with them often
Coming in a cope as if they were clerks ;
And for the cloth that covereth them called is he a friar,
Washeth and wipeth and with the first sitteth.
But while he worked in the world and won his meal with truth
He sat at the side bench and second table.
Came no wine to his lips all the week long,
Nor blanket to his bed, nor white bread before him.
The cause of all this mischief cameth of many Bishops
That suffer such sots and other sins to reign.

Obviously, therefore, since the thirteenth century a serious change had come over the friars and they preferred to sojourn with the rich rather than help the poor. Chaucer tells us that his Friar was well beloved and familiar with franklyns and worthy women, with rich folk and sellers of vitaille, and avoided the poor and

the sick, "it is not honeste, it may not avaunce."

There was no very great harm in Chaucer's Monk, save that he was entirely unsuited to his vocation and made no bones about it. He preferred hunting, horses, and greyhounds, fur-lined sleeves, gold pins, and love-knots to chapel services, study, and strict rules of the cloister. He was fat and flourishing, well-mannered, a man of the world, and well suited to be made an Abbot, with his taste for roast swan.

The Pardoner was a thorough-going cheat who played on the credulity of the common people. He had a wallet full of pardons hot from Rome, and his bag of relics earned him more money in a parish in a day than the local parson in a month or longer. Chaucer has a poor opinion of the relics, by which he made his living. Langland's picture of a pardoner does not differ greatly from that which Chaucer gives us.

> There preached a pardoner, as though he were a priest,
> And brought forth a bull, with bishop's seals,
> And said that he himself might all absolve
> From fasts ill-kept and vows that they had broke.

The Summoner is a most unattractive figure, with his red spotted face which no quicksilver or brimstone, borax, white lead, oil of tartar, or ointment could cure. He loved garlic, onions, leeks, and red wine. His narrow eyes and black eyebrows and close-cropped beard, and his blustering, bullying manner made him the terror of all children—his greatest condemnation. He earned a reputation for learning by means of a few Latin tags, which he spoke best when he was drunk. He frightened simpletons and quiet men, blackmailed young folk in the diocese, and, in return for a quart of wine, would tolerate the keeping of a mistress by a good

fellow for twelve months. If he was at all typical of his class, no wonder that the Church was unpopular.

These itinerant clergy did far better for themselves than the resident parsons. They were often popular because they brought some freshness into village life; one sermon could be repeated in a dozen scattered churches; and misdemeanours of which they were told would be forgotten by the time they paid their next visit. We read that knowing folk went to a travelling friar rather than to a parish priest, because, as Wycliffe says,

> A cursed jurour or extortioner or adulterer will not be shrived by his own curate, but will go to a flattering friar, who will give him false absolution, for a little money, and will not make him give restitution and leave his cursed sin.

As a pleasant contrast to the Friar, Monk, Pardoner, and Summoner—four seemingly typical men of various aspects of Church life—we have Chaucer's delightful picture of the Poor Parson, a shepherd who protects his flock from the wolf and was not a hireling. He taught and practised the gospel, was sympathetic to the simple, severe with the stubborn, endeavouring to draw men to goodness by fairness and good example. So enthusiastic is Chaucer's description of the Parson that many have thought of Chaucer as a Lollard who was depicting his *beau ideal* of what a parish priest should be. But Chaucer, though admiring virtue when he met it, was no Puritan, and is simply paying the tribute of an ordinary man to transcendent merit.

He finds much to admire, also, in the Ploughman, the humblest of the pilgrims, and brother to the Poor Parson. It is of topical interest to note that, while the

parson is lenient in the matter of tithe, the Ploughman always pays his regularly. When he has completed the strenuous labours on his lord's demesne and on his own allotment, he is then ready to thresh or dig or ditch for any other poor man, without hire—for Christ's sake. As a sign of the Ploughman's poverty we are told that he rode in a tabard, and on a mare—a sign of great humility.

The Ploughman of Chaucer is perhaps, in rights and duties, a typical peasant. We may hope that his sterling qualities do not make him in any way unique in medieval life. What his rights amounted to must have varied from district to district, and we must not assume that all Abbots were as stern as the Abbot of Burton, who told his serfs that they owned " nothing of their own save their bellies."

A truly virtuous couple were these brothers, and they help to redeem the company from a wholesale charge of utter selfishness and almost completely lax morals. Their goodness shines out all the brighter in the naughty world of their environment.

So many parish clergy were of villein stock, and Chaucer's Poor Parson—brother to a ploughman—was not unique. Often they had a very limited training even at the university and their pay was about twice that earned by a ploughman or carter.

Gregory the Great had something to answer for when he advised the Church to adopt to Christian usage heathen festivals, myths, and legends. Too much of the cruder elements often remained in the transfer, and the parish clergy were able to do but little to stimulate the Christian virtues. But the average peasant had as little inclination to challenge the Church

as he had to leave the security of his native village. The Church meant security, beauty, and peace; and the fact that he could not read the Mass Book or Primer did not worry him a great deal. All the vital incidents of life and death were linked with the Church; the payment of tithe, mortuary, Mass pennies, and Peter's pence promised him a certain security in this life, and as much chance of happiness in the next as he could hope for. The devil was a very real person to a medieval peasant, and the picture of medieval hell which we see in the west window of Fairford Parish Church was sufficiently realistic to frighten him. It was a very real personal devil of whom the villagers were afraid, and the average parish priest could not help them much either by teaching or comfort.

It must be remembered that the Church played a more important part in the lives of the peasantry in the fourteenth century than at any period since. They were all christened, married, and buried there; they heard "the blessed mutter of the Mass," they saw part of the Bible story illustrated by wall paintings, and stained-glass windows, and all that they could learn about the "four last things" came from the Church. A century and a half later it was the Bible in the vernacular that inspired the minds and lives of all and sundry, and the English nation became, in the words of John Richard Green, "the people of one book."

Each parish church was a centre for the villagers, to whom the fear of death was a haunting terror. *Timor mortis conturbat me* was the feeling at the back of their minds—though it may be doubtful whether a majority of parsons, monks, friars, summoners, and pardoners could have translated the Latin tag.

Chaucer's satirical account of the various churchmen receives somewhat unexpected and entirely corroborative support from many items entered in routine manner in the ecclesiastical Register of John de Drokensford, Bishop of Bath and Wells 1309-1329.

The clergy of the various parishes in Somerset, as elsewhere, left something to be desired, and were beginning to justify the severe criticisms of Wycliffe, John Ball, and Piers Plowman, as well as the gentle sarcasm of Chaucer.

Bishop Hobhouse points out in his introduction to Drokensford's *Register*, that recruits for the ministry were frequently serfs, who on the day of their manumission were granted the tonsure, and were then frequently, if not generally, left to pick up what education they could in minor orders. Another source of candidature was found in the sons of well-to-do folk, who were frequently granted benefices, the funds of which were often used to keep the boy-rector at the university. For one Somerset rector the sum of ten marks was granted annually towards his expenses at Oxford, the balance being kept back to provide a curate.

Pope Boniface in 1237 had attempted to stem the tide of these careless methods, often savouring of nepotism or favour; but Drokensford, who had an over-indulgent regard for his nephews, frequently evaded the restraints which had been made. He earned a well-merited censure from Archbishop Reynolds for collating to a prebendal stall in Wells the son of Sir Maurice de Berkeley, a mere boy, Ivo, who was not even tonsured. The Archbishop appointed his own Dean of Arches to the stall and ordered obedience under pain of suppression. This occurred in 1311 and 1312 when

the Bishop was new to his post, but he carried on his nepotism all through his episcopal career.

This system of non-resident vicars and rectors led, as has been indicated, to the appointment of curates with slender qualifications and small pay, sometimes quite unable to fulfil the duties entrusted to them especially for " the guidance of the conscience through the confessional." They were not expected to preach, and in many cases their lack of education would make it impossible for them to do so.

On the whole Drokensford did make some effort to satisfy himself as to the qualifications of these curates and sometimes examined them before licensing them to their cures. G. G. Coulton, in *The Black Death*, writes of the diocese of Bath and Wells, that

> the large majority of livings in lay presentation before the plague went to men who were not yet in priest's orders, in fact, a considerable proportion . . . were not even in Holy Orders at all . . . They could not administer any valid sacrament except that of baptism . . . only 36 per cent. . . . were actually qualified to celebrate Mass or to rehearse the Marriage Service or to administer the last rites to a dying man. Evidently, therefore, there existed a large class of rectors who took the money but did not do the parish work, side by side with a class of curates or ' chaplains ' as they were called whom the rectors hired to do their work and whom they naturally preferred to hire in the cheapest market.

As a result of the complaints of the inefficiency of many of the parochial clergy, there was the famous papal decree of 1274 insisting that rectors must take priest's orders within two years of their institution. The bull, *Super Cathedram*, sanctioned the appointment of a limited number of specially selected friars to travel

round a diocese, and to preach and hear confessions independently of the parish priest. Drokensford, in addition to this and other similar arrangements, licensed temporary confessors within given areas, and even granted to certain families the right to choose their own confessor. It is easy to see how Chaucer obtained his impression of a friar, who "had power of confession (as said himself) more than a curate." Chaucer's Friar sweetly heard confession, and gave easy and pleasant absolutions, and his Pardoner was able to preach so effectively as to "winne silver" from his congregation. These points are effectively confirmed by numerous entries in Drokensford's Register.

Drokensford granted in 1315 to six friars minor of Bridgwater licenses to preach and hear confession throughout his diocese for one year, and in 1321 and 1325 he licensed the Prior and certain friars of the Carmelite order at Bristol in a similar way. On several occasions Drokensford granted permission to wealthy residents in the diocese to hear Mass in their own houses, so long as the illness from which they suffered should continue.

Drokensford had many complaints to make of the disorder and mismanagement of the smaller monasteries of Somerset. There was one alien priory at Stoke Curry, which seemed to justify much of the criticism levelled against monasteries. He found the Priory in 1326 "impoverished and neglected, containing the Prior and one Monk, some servants and useless folks sojourning there by your leave the other monks living lecherously abroad. . . ."

In 1317 Drokensford decreed a penance against Brother Thomas le Taverner, a rebel canon of Wor-

spring Priory, between Clevedon and Weston. The offender was to be incarcerated, reduced to the lowest rank, to fast, have devotions, silence, and scourging. Canon Lundrais was punished in the same way for a similar offence.

An Augustinian canon of Taunton was convicted of incontinence and was punished. Two entries in the *Register* give us an interesting side light on medieval relics and pilgrimages. Drokensford gave Papal Messengers permission to beg money for Roman hospitals, but not to exhibit relics or other *frivola*. He also gave permission to William de Bathe to spend four months on pilgrimage to St James of Compostella.

The parish priests were not in a position to produce regular sermons, and if this incapacity was at all general after the Reformation it was not surprising that Books of Homilies were published to ensure satisfactory teaching from the pulpit. The average priest of the fourteenth century had a very limited knowledge of the Latin Bible, and his sermons would deal with the Creed and the Ten Commandments, the *Ave Maria*, the *Pater Noster*, the Seven works of Mercy, the Seven Virtues, and the Seven Deadly Sins.

Langland is more severe than Chaucer in his criticisms of the worst aspects of medieval Church life. In his *Vision of Reasons Sermon* he tells us of a sermon preached before the King and all the clergy, which we may compare with those preached more than a century and a half later by John Colet before Henry VIII.

He warned the people of the punishment for sin—plague, pestilence and famine—instancing the Black Death and other pestilences, and the South-west Hurricane of Saturday, January 15, 1362, during the

second visit of the Plague. It blew down pear-trees and plum-trees, beeches and broad oaks, and it actually brought down Norwich spire. Langland warned the women against luxury and overspending, advising the men to punish their wives and their children.

To the Bishops, he said, " Do what you preach, live as you teach," and he bade the monks to give their wealth to the King and the Commons—an ominous foreshadowing of the Dissolution of the Monasteries ; only then it was the courtiers and not the commons who shared in the spoil.

Chapter Eight

A COLLECTION OF TALES

THE idea of a collection such as *The Canterbury Tales* was no new one, and there was a good example before Chaucer's eyes in the *Decameron* of Boccaccio. In Florence the plague was every bit as deadly as in England, and it spread

> no less rapidly than a fire will spread to dry and oily things that lie close at hand. . . . In scattered villages and homesteads the wretched labourers with their families died without any help of physician or succour of servants, breathing their last by the roadside or among their crops or in their cottages, by day and by night alike, not like men, but almost like beasts.

It was a selfish motive that prompted Boccaccio's lords and ladies to seek shelter in a hillside villa and keep up one another's spirits by telling tales. Chaucer's pilgrims had at least a partly religious object in going to Canterbury, though no doubt they meant to combine business with pleasure.

With the exception of those whose poverty compelled them to travel on foot, almost everyone who went on pilgrimage hired a horse. A prisoner of war or a sick man might be placed in a springless cart, and we read that King Edward I, on his last advance towards Scotland, was carried in a covered-in litter, whose poles were supported on two horses. Ladies usually rode side-saddle, save when speed was required, such

as in hunting or when in some danger. When the Empress Maud, during Stephen's reign, was retreating from Winchester, she was persuaded to ride astride as the only way to make sure of her escape. In a well-known fifteenth-century drawing of the Canterbury Pilgrimage to illustrate Chaucer, the respectable Prioress rides side-saddle, while the merry Wife of Bath sits astride.

It was perhaps the death of Chaucer's wife in 1387 that prompted him to go on pilgrimage to Canterbury, and if we accept the date which his *Prologue* suggests, it was on April 16, 1387 that the pilgrimage began. Pilgrimages to Canterbury had been popular ever since the date of Thomas à Becket's murder. The story of that event, which horrified all Christendom and brought a powerful king to an ignominious penance, has often been told. Becket's tomb became more and more popular as a place of pilgrimage, and when, fifty years after his death, the choir where he had been buried rose more glorious than ever from the flames, it was a wonderful ceremony at which the archbishop, the Papal Legate, the Primate of France, the Justiciar of England, and the King himself were present. One hundred thousand pilgrims journeyed to Canterbury on that unique occasion, but every year and almost every day came pilgrims to the shrine of their dead hero. All through the Middle Ages the cult of St Thomas grew, and a visit to his shrine became so usual a thing that the pace of the average pilgrim on horseback gave rise to the expression "Canterbury gallop." Offerings at St Thomas's shrine became so numerous and so splendid that the high altar and the altar in the Lady Chapel became almost neglected. To such an extent

did St Thomas dominate at least one aspect of the religious life of the times that G. K. Chesterton regards him as the outstanding figure in medieval England.

It is difficult to be sure how far from his native parish the average man would have travelled in the Middle Ages. There seem to have been many wayfarers wandering from place to place; pedlars, offering their wares, strolling musicians, players and acrobats, out-of-work soldiers and sailors, and escaping criminals. Merchants would travel from time to time; landowners who had several manors would travel from one to another, staying for a few days at each, and thus necessitating a good deal of travel on the part of servants, carrying food and drink, or driving in sheep or cattle.

When the County Court was held it was the duty of the reeve and four men from each village to be present, and in time of war there would be musters of men on a very large scale to come to some headquarters, and go campaigning towards the Welsh Border or to Scotland, or overseas to France or to Flanders. The constant flow of traffic produced by the journeys of King, barons, churchmen, manor-lords, soldiers, and peasants kept the roads busy and utilized the elaborate network of well-metalled trackways which the Romans had left behind them.

The roads along which bands of pilgrims regularly travelled were still in fair order from Roman times, and landowners, monks, and villagers did something to keep them and the bridges efficient. There were bridges built in medieval times which are still performing their function today, Sir Hugh Clopton's at Stratford-on-Avon, northern bridges such as Catterick,

Wakefield, and Warkworth, with Bradford-on-Avon, in Wilts, and Croyland, with its three ways, in the Fen Country.

Jusserand's *Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages* gives us a vivid picture of the different types of men who used the highways and byways. The *Trimoda Necessitas* compelled people to repair roads and bridges, and a law of Edward III ordered that brushwood and undergrowth should be cut down far back on either side of the road to prevent highway robbery.

The King was often on the march, and for some centuries his law courts and rolls followed him round, until they were fixed at Westminster, where they still remain. In the pages of Froissart's *Chronicles* and in the *Paston Letters* we get incidents of journeys recorded, and these are illustrated and portrayed in such gems of medieval painting as the Luttrell Psalter.

Nobles travelled from one manor to another, the Abbot on his ambling pad with a train of servants helped to tread down the road, and large crowds were attracted to the markets and fairs that occurred at regular intervals. Students, merchants, old soldiers, pilgrims, escaped villeins, and poor priests travelled about, both at home and abroad.

For the well-to-do there were the monasteries at which to stay, and the expense of putting up a large train was sometimes a very heavy burden on the abbot or prior. An instance of rather a different charact[illegible] afforded in the promise of Gilbert le Rous in 1226 to entertain, at his manor house in Hendon, the Abbot of Westminster and his train every year for two days and part of a third. Rous was to supply, during the visit, food, drink, and candles for the Abbot, for seven chief

servants and not more than thirty followers. Thirty-five horses were to receive a bushel of oats each; and two wax candles, each weighing one pound, were to be burned before the Abbot. Thirty-five candles, each ten fingers long, were to be provided for his servants. Each of the chief servants—the steward, chamberlain, pantler, butler, usher, cook, and master of the horse—was to receive, on leaving Hendon, one shilling. In any year, when the Abbot did not visit Hendon, Rous was to pay him six marks.

For the poor there were the inns, with their alestakes, and their rough hospitality, their drink and their verminous conditions, making a penny an expensive matter for a night's lodging. Besides the classes already mentioned there were charlatans and herbalists, gleemen, jugglers, dancers, pedlars, merchants, and messengers, both genuine and fraudulent.

But the roads, in spite of the many users, were slowly deteriorating, and before two centuries had elapsed after Chaucer's pilgrimage something had to be done to ensure their repair. On the roads there were perils of all kinds, including flood and robbers, the latter being sometimes of high rank, who found money came easily on the adventurous road. The hue and cry had sometimes to be raised to protect those who fell among thieves, who stripped them of the raiment and money and left them half dead. On the roads, too, there were fugitives from justice, and a kindly church had provided a means of escape for some of these. Several churches in London provided sanctuary for escaped criminals, who were often merely the victims of oppression: while in the North of England there are still extant two famous means of safety, the Sanc-

tuary Knocker at Durham Cathedral and the Sanctuary Chair at Hexham Abbey.

There were folks going to the fairs, such as St Giles outside Oxford, Chesterford outside Cambridge, and St Bartholomew's in the northern suburbs of London. For such casual fluctuating foregatherings swift justice was needful, and so there were established Courts of Piepowder where cases might be dealt with summarily while the feet were still dusty.

As we shall see from Chaucer's *Prologue*, there were beggars of all kinds, outlaws and out-of-works, wander-preachers and friars, pardoners and summoners, as well as simple pilgrims.

The religious fervour which inspired the Crusades was almost spent, but there was sufficient enthusiasm to encourage pilgrimages, and in a company destined to travel to Canterbury and seek the "holy blissful martyr" Chaucer found himself on that memorable April morning. That it was a real pilgrimage, and not a mere fiction of Chaucer's imagination, seems certain.

In a pilgrimage from London to Canterbury there was obvious need of weapons. The roads were lonely, and, in spite of Edward's order, were frequently lined with woods and undergrowth. Sturdy beggars and soldiers out of work might well make the roads dangerous, and so we find that some of the pilgrims were armed, whether normally or not.

The Knight had a habergeon, the Squire is not mentioned as having any weapon, but the yeoman had arrows bright and keen, a mighty bow, a gay bracer, a sword and a buckler, not to mention a gay dagger, and sharp pointed spear. The craftsmen had knives with

silver handles, but these may have been for their craft and not for defence. The Shipman had a dagger hung round his neck, the Reeve, a rusty sword, and the Miller a sword and buckler. The Franklin had an anlas (dagger) and a gipser of silk.

In the Ellesmere MS. the artist, in allotting weapons, seems to have followed the list accurately. The sum total of weapons is not a large one, but perhaps the size of the party made defence an easy matter. In any case we read of no adventures by the way, and the party seems to have got to and fro without any attack. In the story of Chanticleer, told by the Nonnes Priest, we hear of a traveller who was murdered at a wayside for his money, and the culprit was detected by a vivid dream which his friend dreamed twice. It is clear that there were dangers in travelling, and that it was safer to travel in a large company.

No doubt the simple peasant relied entirely on home-made garments. The sheep provided wool, and the cattle, when slaughtered, gave him leather. Various items grown in his small-holding completed the toll of raw materials and it only remained to arrange for their manufacture. Lord Ernle, in his *English Farming, Past and Present*, has summarized the various activities by which the clothing and furniture of the average villein's family were provided.

Women spun and wove wool into coarse cloth, and hemp or nettles into linen ; men tanned their leather. The rough tools required for the cultivation of the soil, and the rude household utensils needed for the comforts of daily life, were made at home. In the long winter evenings, farmers, their sons, and their servants carved the wooden spoons, the platters, and the beechen

bowls. They fitted and riveted the bottoms to the horn mugs, or closed, in coarse fashion, the links in the leathern jugs.

They plaited the osiers and reeds into baskets and into 'weeles' for catching fish; they fixed handles to the scythes, rakes, and other tools; cut the flails from holly or thorn, and fastened them with thongs to the staves; shaped the teeth for rakes and harrows from ash or willow, and hardened them in the fire; cut out the wooden shovels for casting in the corn in the granary; fashioned ox-yokes and bows, forks, racks, and rack-staves, twisted willows into scythe-cradles, or into traces and other harvest gear. Travelling carpenters, twisters, and tinkers visited detached farmhouses and smaller villages at rare intervals, to perform those parts of the work which needed their professional skill. Meanwhile, the women plaited straw or reed for neck-collars, stitched and stuffed sheepskin bags for cart saddles, peeled rushes for wicks, and made candles. Thread was often made from nettles. Spinning-wheels, distaff, and needles were never idle. Home-made cloth and linen supplied all wants. Flaxen linen —for board-cloths, sheets, shirts, smocks, or skirts, and towels, as the napkins were called, on which, before the introduction of forks, the hands were wiped—was only found in wealthy households and on special occasions.

Hemp, in ordinary households, supplied the same necessary articles, and others, such as candle-wicks, in coarser form. Shoe-threads, halters, stirrup-thongs, girths, bridles, and ropes were woven from the "carle" hemp; the finer kind, or "fimble" hemp, supplied the coarse linen for domestic use, and "hempen home-

spun," the phrase used by Puck, passed into a proverb for a countryman.

Of the pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, some were elaborately dressed, others just in homespun. The Knight had only just returned from his active service and was not gaily dressed. He wore a coat of fustian and it was all spotted from his habergeon. His son, the curly-haired Squire, was a lady's man; his clothes were embroidered like a meadow, with flowers white and red, and his short, fashionable gown had long wide sleeves. Their attendant, the Yeoman, was thoroughly business-like in his get-up; he was clad in coat and hood of green, had a Christopher of silver sheen as a fastener and ornament, and carried a horn on a green baldric.

Chaucer had time to take note of the ladies of the party. The Prioress was fashionable in her manner of talking, in her accent, and in her style of dress; her wimple was "ful semyly pynched, . . ." her cloak was "ful fetys," and she wore coral beads and a golden brooch with the inscription *Amor vincit omnia.* The Wife of Bath was herself a maker of popular materials and so could afford to be well dressed. "Her covershiefs ful fine weren of ground" and very probably weighed ten pounds. She wore hose of fine scarlet red, and her shoes were moist and new.

> Ywymplėd wel and on hir head a hat,
> As brood as is a bokeler or a targe,
> A foot mantel aboute hir hippės large,
> And on hire feet a paire of sporės sharpe.

The various clerics were appropriately bedecked, not to suit their function, but to suit their taste. The very undesirable Summoner, with his coarse red face, wore

a garland on his head as great as it were for an alestake. This was a good advertisement of his taste in liquor, and his greed in foodstuffs is perhaps advertised by the fact that he carried a buckler made out of a cake. His friend, the Pardoner, did not wear his hood, but kept it trussed up in his wallet. He was dishevelled save for his cap, and carried a most important wallet brimful of pardons. He had a vernicle, or sacred Christian image, sewn on to his cap.

The Monk had the cuffs of his sleeves trimmed with fur, the finest in the land, supple boots, and a gold pin with a love-knot to fasten his hood. The Friar, who had completely forgotten his vows of poverty, did not wear a threadbare cape, like the Oxford Scholar and Poor Parson, but

> of double worsted was his semycope
> That rounded as a bette out of a press.

The Ploughman wore a tabard, the Reeve a long surcoat of perse tucked up, and the Miller a white coat, a blue hood, and carried bagpipes.

Some of the more serious-minded of the pilgrims were soberly clad, the Merchant dressed in motley, with a Flaunderysh beaver hat upon his head, and his boots neatly fastened—no show, but suitable clothing. The Sergeant of the Law was not extravagant in his apparel, as, although when on duty he wore rich robes, for the journey to Canterbury

> he rood but hoomly in a medlecote
> Girt with ceint of silk with barris smale.

The Shipman had a gown of coarse serge, knee length; the Doctor of Physic was clad in "sangwyn and pers . . . lyned with taffata and with sendal." The

five competent craftsmen from London, whose wives clamoured for precedence and liked to have their *mantels* royally borne, were themselves clothed in the livery of a " solempne and greet fraternity " ; their clothes were freshly trimmed, their knives had silver handles ; and it seemed that

> Everich for the wisdom that he kan
> Was shaply for to been an alderman.

Chapter Nine

TOWN LIFE, COUNTRY LIFE, AND FOOD IN THE PROLOGUE

IN spite of Chaucer's long residence in London and his attachment to the Royal Court, he tells us comparatively little about life and customs of towns in the series of pictures which he sketches for us in the *Canterbury Tales*. London, in his day, was a small metropolis, hardly extending beyond the Roman and medieval wall and the extra-mural wards, and other towns, too, whether business centres such as Bristol and Norwich or cathedral and monastic centres, were extremely small.

The *Tales* open at the Tabard Inn in Southwark with the Host and twenty-nine guests. These included quite a number of townsfolk—the Friar, who knows all the taverns in the towns he visits ; a Merchant, who is a shrewd man of business ; a Serjeant of the Law, attached to one of the Inns of Court of Chancery, well known at St. Paul's Porch, in the City, and at the law courts in Westminster ; the Manciple, who managed the commissariat for one of the groups of lawyers, and was astute enough to get the better of all the benchers of his Inn, though, as lawyers, they were unrivalled.

The group of craftsmen must have been Londoners, and they cover most of the manufacturing groups in the City—Haberdasher, Weaver, Dyer, Carpenter, and Tapestry-maker. They all seemed prosperous, well

dressed, suitable folk to be prominent at the Guildhall, marked out to be aldermen and blessed with ambitious wives.

The Cook was evidently a Londoner, and may have been employed either by the Host at his inn, by the Manciple to cook for the lawyers, or by one of the City companies. We are not told so, and he may just have been a casual pilgrim, anxious for a holiday to try to cure his blood-poisoning. The Doctor of Physic would have found more patients and more enjoyment in town-life, while the Wife of Bath would certainly have disliked the extreme quiet of the countryside. The Host and Chaucer were both confirmed Londoners, the former apparently, like Chaucer, a member of Parliament. Chaucer was a distinguished civil servant and lived much of his later life either in Aldgate or in Westminster.

London attracted many priests, who came to the metropolis to get themselves a chauntry for souls instead of looking after the poor and ignorant in their parishes. It is pleasant to find that the one priest mentioned by Chaucer, unlike the other churchmen, stuck to his country living and did his duty by his parishioners.

Chaucer seems to have been a townsman by tradition, taste, and instinct, and his references to country life and the beauties of nature are those of a dweller in cities. There is little in his make-up or writings to match the love of land and furrow, and of woodland or down that characterize the writings of Richard Jeffries or W. H. Hudson. We find nothing of that love of the sea which is so inherent a feature of almost everything written by Joseph Conrad. He was speaking to a simpler

age, an age which knew only the narrow seas by habit, and the warmer Mediterranean mainly by hearsay. The great days of discovery were still to come, though there was not very long to wait.

The tillers of the soil were too much engrossed in the all-important task of wringing a livelihood from the woods and the pastures and the furrows to spend much time in admiring what they saw. Chaucer himself does record some of the sensations which a glimpse of the open country in the springtime brought to his mind. Spring was in the air and the arrival of the midmost day of April inspired men's hearts to want to go on pilgrimages. March's drought is moistened by the sweet showers of April, and every vein is bathed in such liquor, by whose vitalizing power the flowers are begotten. Zephyr with his sweet breath has inspired in every holt and heath the tender tree-tops, and the young sun has half run his course in the constellation of the Ram. Small birds make melody. March winds and April showers will soon bring forth May flowers. Glimpses of the countryside are given us in the description of the pilgrims. The Squire's clothes were embroidered like a meadow full of fresh flowers, white and red; he was himself as fresh as May, and had the same difficulty as the birds, the nightingales, in sleeping during the fresh nights of spring.

The Franklin, a typical country squire, loved his house in the country where partridges were preserved in cages, and bream and pike in the fishponds. His pouch was as fresh as morning milk. Rain and thunder did not hinder the Parson from visiting the poor, and his brother, the Ploughman, was busy with his own or his neighbour's country jobs. The affluent, compe-

tent, obsequious Reeve had spent all his life in the country and all his interests were rustic, but most of the other pilgrims were townsmen with the country not too far away.

We get a series of actual pictures of a peasant's life from the Luttrell Psalter or the Duke of Bedford's Hours, and the impression is that it was a strenuous struggle to feed one's family, but that with really hard work it could be done. Each month had its proper occupation, the crops had to be sown, weeding was done by the women and girls, manure was usually only available for the lord's fields, the harvesting was urgent; and, when the crops were gathered in and the bulk of the cattle killed off and salted down, it was a grim time till the spring came round again. The larder could sometimes be helped by the snaring of birds or rabbits, or by fishing in the streams. Some of the days, when the lord had to ask for help in his fields, were specially blessed with extra food. There was for the labourer a "dry-bed-rip," when the lord could demand a full day's work for reaping, but had to serve his helpers with food; or a "wed-bed-rip" when he had to add ale to the rest of the provender.

It must have been a relief to get away from the cares and anxieties of home, and start off on a pilgrimage of ten days duration; but the problem of food still remained. No doubt, it might be possible to carry with one some simple essentials for the journey, but it would be necessary to rely for the bulk of provisions on the wayside inn. Bread, meat, fruit, fish, cheese, and ale were the chief items for an average man's meals.

Langland writes of "peny-ale," which cost one penny per gallon, the best costing fourpence. There

was even a cheaper kind at half the price, and it was all a question of the thickness of the brew—pudding ale being much thicker. Here there was plenty of chance for dishonesty, as a fraudulent brewer would draw thick ale and thin from the same cask, and would boast of it.

An illustration of the types and prices of foodstuffs is given by Langland, when, in the person of Piers Plowman, he writes :

> I have no penny to buy pullets nor geese, nor little pigs ; but two green cheeses, a few curds and cream, and an oaten cake and two loaves of beans and bran baked for my infants. I have no salt bacon, no eggs to make collops. I have parsley and leeks and many cabbages, and a cow and a calf, and a cart mare to draw my dung to the field.

He hopes " to have harvest in my croft, and then I may make ready my dinner as I like." All the folk fetched peascods, beans and baked apples, onions and chervils, and many ripe cherries, and offered them to Piers to appease his hunger. There seems to have been as much variety of bread in medieval times as there was between the two World Wars. Of white bread there were simnel, wastel, coket, clere malyn, and manchet ; and of brown there were tourte, trete, and bis.

A labourer at an average manor in Suffolk in Chaucer's time received during harvest time two herrings a day (caught, no doubt somewhere between Middleburgh and Orewelle), milk from the manor dairy to make cheese, and a loaf of bread, and sometimes pottage.

One gets from Chaucer in the *Prologue* the reactions of some of the various travellers towards food and

drink. When the twenty-nine pilgrims arrived at the Inn the Host supplied them with " vitaille at the beste " and strong wine to wash it down ; and then in order to bring more custom to the Inn he proposed a competition in story-telling to be carried on during the outward and homeward journeys. On the return to Southwark there was to be a " supper at oure aller coste," the prize-winner to be entertained free. Before the pilgrims went to bed they again drank wine.

Chaucer's descriptions of the pilgrims and their food varies a great deal ; we only hear that the Knight on his campaigns had often " the bord bigonne," that the Squire " carf before his fader " at the table, and that the Prioress had elegant table manners, never slobbered, and liked to feed her little dogs on bread and milk ; the Monk loved hunting, and presumably ate venison and game. His special dish was a roast fat swan, a delicacy usually eaten only by kings, abbots, and such folk.

We are not told that the Friar had any specially favourite dish, but instead of consorting with the poor, like St Francis, he loved taverns and tapsters, and all " sellers of vitaille." The Summoner loved garlic, onions, leeks, and strong blood-red wine. This exuberant taste no doubt accounted for his bad, incurable complexion. The Clerk of Oxford quite frankly preferred books to food, and economized in order to add to his library ; but the Franklin was a real epicure. His bread and ale were always first class, and his house was never without baked meats, both fish and flesh. It snowed meat and drink in his house, and he had all seasonable dainties provided, partridges, bream, pike, with suitable sauces. He kept practically open house,

and was severe with his cook if the flavouring of his dishes was not absolutely to his taste.

The Cook who accompanied the party was the sort of man employed by a City company or at an Inn of Court or by an innkeeper. He was an expert, and could boil chickens and marrow bones, and cook well-flavoured tarts. He appreciated London ale, and could roast, seethe, boil, and fry and was a successful maker of meat-pies and blanc-mange.

This list of the Cook's capabilities gives us a good idea of the scope of entertainment possible for people of comfortable means, and a good deal of this variety could be obtained at biggish inns on well-known highways and in large towns.

The Manciple would have been another useful expert to have on the journey, as he was the steward at one of the Inns of Court, and was skilful in " Byynge of vitaille."

Chapter Ten

THE CHARACTERS

CHAUCER's characters live too really to be mere types. They are drawn with a vivid pen. "Every sly line reveals character. The description of each man's horse, furniture and array, reads like a page from a memoir." He describes them in the most ripe, genial, and humorous manner imaginable. His party truly comprises all sorts and conditions of men, and some at least are portraits, and can be recognized as such. The Tabard Inn, from which they set out, existed in the sixteenth century and is set down in 1598 by London's first chronicler, John Stow. It probably was there in Chaucer's time, and Harry Bailly, the host, was very likely the same who represented Southwark in Parliament in 1376-77 and in 1378-89. His name seems to slip out quite accidentally.

The Reeve, named Oswald, of Bawdeswell in Norfolk, seems to have been a real person. His personal appearance is distinctive. He was slender and choleric (not melancholy, sanguine, or phlegmatic). His beard was shaved close, his hair was shorn by his ears, and in front like a priest's. His legs were long, lean like a staff, and almost without any calf. He was a well-trained carpenter, rode a good horse, dapple-grey, called Scot, wore a long coat of blue, carried a rusty sword, hitched his coat up like a friar and, unlike the Miller, always rode the hindmost of the cavalcade. He is said to have

had his house on a heath, with an avenue of trees, and this personal touch seems genuine. Bawdeswell belonged to the Earl of Pembroke, and a friend of Chaucer's, Sir William de Beauchamp, was trustee for the young Earl, but the trust was transferred to the Countess of Norfolk. Chaucer tells us that the Reeve was really better off than his master, having had many opportunities of feathering his nest. He was an expert in gauging the right quantities of seed and grain for wet and dry weather, and knew all about his lord's sheep, cattle, dairy stock, swine, horses, cattle for fattening, and poultry. He knew all the tricks of farming, and could cope with any bailiff, herdsman, or labourer. No one could persuade him to delay collecting a debt; no bailiff or herdsman or other servant but he knew of his deceit and private agreements, and so they were as afraid of him as of the Black Death.

He lent and gave of his own goods to his lord and received his thanks and sometimes a gown and hood. Although perhaps technically a villein, he had put by a good deal of money and other possessions, his father, perhaps, having had chances of accumulation at the time of the Black Death, owing to the tremendous loss of life and the subsequent rise in wages consequent upon the shortage of labour. Chaucer suggests that the Reeve robbed his master right under his grandmother's nose, thus hoping to whitewash Sir William Beauchamp. It is stated that the Reeve had given his reckoning since the lord was twenty and the young Earl of Pembroke actually went abroad at the age of twenty-one. In the dispute about Beauchamp's alleged mismanagement of the Earl of Pembroke's manor, the Justice of Assize was Thomas Pynchbek,

afterwards Chief Baron of the Exchequer. He spoke severely to Beauchamp, and Chaucer may have used him for his Serjeant of Law, at whose writing "no wight could pynche." It has been suggested that the Franklin, who was his friend, was perhaps Sir John Bussy, who figures in Shakespeare's *Richard II* and was put to death by Henry IV. It is sad to think that this jolly old man with a white beard and ruddy complexion came perhaps to an untimely end. He was a public-spirited citizen, having been president at quarter session, a Knight of the shire, auditor, and sheriff. His house was open to his friends and he kept a good table and cellar, being a perfect St Julian for hospitality. His bread and ale, his baked meats and fish were of the best quality. He kept partridges in pens, bream and pike in his fishponds, and his cook knew better than to allow the sauce to be too piquant.

It is also probable that the Shipman was a real character, John Hawley, a well-known West Country semi-pirate from Dartmouth. Chaucer casually mentions Dartmouth, and says that his barge was called the *Magdalen*, thus giving us two important clues. The Shipman was poorly mounted, with a sailor's seat; he was clad in a gown of coarse cloth, and carried a dagger hanging on a cord. He was not too honest, having often drawn a draught of claret when the Merchant was asleep. Prisoners, whom he captured at sea, he usually compelled to swim home. He was a competent sailor, being the best from Hull to Carthage at estimating tides, currents, dangers, harbours, weather, and cargo-stowing. He knew all the havens from Jutland to Finisterre and every creek in Brittany and Spain. His face was sunburned and his beard had been shaken in many a storm.

Edward III should perhaps be given more credit as the founder of the English Navy than Alfred the Great, who lost all the East Coast to the Danes, and did not learn as much seamanship as he might have done from the Vikings. Edward wished the sea route from Orwell to Middleburgh to be kept free from pirates so that manufactured woollen material might be exported and so encourage home produce. London and Bristol were developing their overseas trade; and the naval victory off Sluys in 1340, and the capture of Calais in 1347 made commerce with the Low Countries far easier and safer. The methods adopted were not too satisfactory. Two admirals were appointed by the Crown, one to control the North Sea, one the Channel, and they were authorized to press ships and men to deal with pirates. This sounds a good plan, but the ships were often kept in port for months together, while the Admirals made bungling efforts to get a fleet together; all this time the enemy swept the seas, burned fishing fleets, attacked villages and port towns, and took a heavy toll of captives and slain men. So bad was the state of affairs at the end of Edward III's reign that Peter de la Mare complained in the Good Parliament that there used to be more ships in a single port than there were then in the whole kingdom. By the end of Edward III's reign French piracy was as bad as it had been under Edward II and the Cornish people asked that lords who owned land on the sea coast should be compelled to live on their estates and share in all the maritime dangers. When the French landed on the Channel coast in the reign of Richard II, beacon fires lit on the hilltops called lords and peasants to combine against the invaders, much as was done in the days of

the Armada or by the Royal Observer Corps in the Second World War.

There is a deal of wisdom in the schoolboy's prayer that God would make the bad people good, and the good people interesting; and we often find those of light character more entertaining than the respectable and worthy. We are probably wrong in finding Falstaff an amusing character. No doubt we ought to frown at his many and obvious failings. But he continues to delight us, in spite of them. And in the same way we find much amusement in the much-married Wife of Bath. She had enjoyed happiness with five husbands, not to mention other companions of her youth, and she was quite prepared for a sixth. This was not her first experience of a pilgrimage. She had been three times to Jerusalem and had ridden past many strange streams, had been to the Shrine of St James of Compostella, in Galicia, and to Rome, Bologna, and Cologne. We seem to see a real portrait in this bold-faced woman, with bright ruddy complexion, wide gaps between her teeth, a heavy well-dyed Sunday kerchief, a big wimple, and a hat as broad as a shield, her new well-spurred shoes, and her straight-tied hose. She claimed precedence when she went to church, and was very peevish if any wife in the parish tried to get in front of her. A commentator writes:

> She is not really a character at all, she is a whole literature—all the sarcasms against women and marriage which the wit of man has accumulated through the ages. Is such a pest, such a combination of conjugal despotism, sensuality, garrulity, and peevishness, possible?

Chaucer succeeds in making her real. Chaucer tells us

that her reputation for cloth was superior to that of Ghent or Ypres, but a modern commentator shows that this is a piece of his satire, seeing that West Country cloth had so bad a reputation that it had to be sold unrolled so as to avoid fraud.

The adventures of the Wife of Bath suggest that she was a real person, whom Chaucer had met, and whose character he has analysed with consummate skill. She loved many fine clothes and good food and these she had usually managed to secure from each of her five husbands. The fifth, a young clerk of Oxford, named Jankyn, was only half her age, and he seems to have proved her master, preaching at her for gadding about, quoting texts from the Bible, and reading to her tales about bad wives from a much treasured volume. The Wife of Bath, whose name slips out as Alison, damaged his book and was stunned by a blow which he gave her in punishment. On her recovery he burned the book, allowed his wife to rule the household and himself, and they lived henceforward in perfect peace and harmony. After some quarrelsome interruptions by the Friar and the Summoner, the Host tells them both to hold their peace and allow the dame to tell her tale. It was the story of a knight who was sent out to discover what it was that women most desire, and after many adventures he found the answer to his query. An ugly old woman told him the answer, and made him marry her for telling him, and it was that a woman loves power and desires to lord it over her lover or her husband. After they were married she became good, young, and beautiful and they lived happily together all their lives. The Wife of Bath concludes her tale with the wish that Heaven will grant to all women loving and obedient

husbands, and send a plague on those men who will not be ruled by their wives.

The Friar and the Summoner were in no way friendly to one another, and they both take every opportunity of mutual abuse. It is by no means easy to decide which of the two is the more to be blamed. Both tell stories full of humour, but they are of a particularly coarse type. The Friar gives a story of a clever, cunning summoner, who went out collecting fines for an archdeacon, extorting more than was just, and handing over to his master less than he collected. This summoner, "another name for a rogue," was riding through a forest to make a false demand on some poor widow, when he overtook a fiend disguised as a yeoman. They made friends and visited the widow, and the summoner made exaggerated demands on her. In her wrath she consigned the summoner to the devil, and the fiend seized him and carried him off to hell, "the true home of all summoners."

The Friar has no time to complete his story of the pains of hell, but he suggests that they should pray heaven to grant all summoners repentance and amendment of life.

This tale naturally aroused the anger of the Summoner, who retorted with an equally coarse and effective story.

> This Somonour in his styropes hye stood.
> Upon this Frere his herte was so wood,
> That lyk an aspen leef he quook for ire.
> "Lordynges," quod he, "but o thyng I desire—
> I yow beseke that of your curteisye,
> Syn ye han herd this false Frere lye,
> As suffereth me I may my tale telle,"

> This Frere bosteth that he knoweth helle,
> And God it woot, that it is litel wonder,
> Freres and feendes been but lyte asonder.

When the Friar was shown Hell in a vision he found it full of his fellows " many a million," and he presently woke, shaking with terror at the thought of his future home.

But this was not the whole of the Summoner's story, which told of a begging Friar from Holderness who used to collect money or meal or cheese or bacon or pieces of cloth, from his victims, writing down their names on an ivory tablet, promising to pray for them, but rubbing them out directly he got away.

Incidentally, the story lasted until the company had almost reached Sittingbourne. The Pilgrims must have had a good deal of patience to listen to some of the longer stories, for instance, the Knight's Tale of Palamon and Arcite, the Clerk of Oxford's Tale of Patient Griselda, and the Man of Law's Tale of Constance.

The traditions of medieval medicine were based on Latin translations of Aristotle, incomplete and inaccurate, and on other pronouncements of early classical times. In spite of the genuine researches of Roger Bacon in the days of Henry III, his study, and his experiments, comparatively little progress had been made by the days in which Chaucer was writing. Among the medieval men whose work was known to Chaucer's Doctor was John of Gaddesden, a fourteenth-century experimenter, who mixed sound teaching derived from the Greeks and Romans with notions acquired in his own practice as well as some relics of the unscientific remedies of the time.

His prescriptions often contain drugs which are still recognized as the correct remedies for particular diseases treated by him, but often they are mere jumbles of all kinds of ingredients, of which most were entirely valueless—medieval medicines often containing twenty or thirty herbs and mineral substances.

Chaucer's Doctor was said to be an expert in physic, surgery, and [illegible]. If his knowledge of the first two services had been at all on modern lines he might have been reasonably efficient, but what astronomy had to do with it all seems hard to explain, especially as it was really astrology in which he specialized. He knew the twelve signs of the Zodiac—the Ram, the Bull, the Twins, the Crab, Lion, Virgin, Scales, Scorpion, Archer, Goat, Water-bearer, and Fishes ; and as we gather from medieval Books of Hours, each of these signs was supposed to govern some part of the human frame. He watched his patients very carefully, so as to know the precise moment at which to apply the correct remedy. He could predict the right talisman, when the special planet would make the remedy more effective, for each planet represented a special metal and colour. He knew the four essential qualities—saturnine, jovial, martial, mercurial—on whose correct proportion so much depended ; and at least he professed to be an experienced practitioner, knowing the cause and cure of every disease. He and the Chemist or Apothecary were old friends and played into each others hands in the matter of drugs and lectuaries. He knew all the old physicians, Greek, Roman, Arabic and Medieval, Aesculapius and the rest, though it is difficult to see much advantage in such specialized knowledge. Two personal touches are added by Chaucer.

The Doctor was temperate in his diet and did not study the Bible very deeply. He was either too busy or too pagan to do so.

The Miller was a drunken boor who tells the worst of all the stories; a miller was an essential inmate of every village, whether the mill was worked by water or by wind. The hamlet of Mill Hill, near London, derives its name from the manorial mill, whose site is indicated by the Mill Field at the northern end of the Ridgeway. Windmills did not come into use until the thirteenth century, and the earliest record of a mill at Mill Hill is just after the Black Death and just before the time of Chaucer's pilgrimage. Stephen Nicol, who figures in the so-called *Black Survey of Hendon* in 1321 as a customary tenant, is mentioned in the Manorial Accounts for 1373—still kept in Westminster Abbey Muniment Room just above Poet's Corner—and is styled the Molindarius.

The Manciple was a shrewd man of business, clever enough to bilk even the lawyers; the Merchant conceals the fact that he was almost bankrupt, while the Clerk of Oxford loves books and study far more than the preferment which he was never likely to obtain. He was in some ways the most remarkable character of them all. The money which his friends gave him he always spent on books, and Chaucer leaves us with the impression that he had twenty volumes of Aristotle and his philosophy, bound in black and red and kept at his bedside, and that he preferred them and the study which they made possible, to a warm overcoat, a rich living, costly robes, a fiddle or psaltery. He was one of the few who really cared for study, an inclination shared only by the Sergeant of Law, who knew all the

cases from the Conquest downwards, the Doctor, who was proficient in astronomy and astrology as well as in the history and practice of medicine, and the Poor Parson, who, unlike the Doctor, was a thorough student of the Bible. The Monk cared for study not at all. He frankly preferred dogs and horses, and had no intention of wasting time on books.

If the Poor Clerk at Oxenford actually had twenty volumes in his possession, it was an extraordinary if not a unique library. Professor Coulton has searched in the Episcopal Registers, and records that the value of a small Bible in those days would be the equivalent of a modern £30, and that the largest library belonging to a bishop was of fourteen books, that sixty priests had only 138 books between them, and, omitting the Church service book, only one each, and among the whole number only two Bibles. The poor parson was a keen Bible student, and applied its teachings to daily life, especially his own. . . . The Summoner spoke Latin when drunk, and this impressed his victims; but it was only a few tags, he didn't seem to be aware of their meaning and was soon at the end of his tether.

The adventures of the Knight had carried him to every part of Europe and even beyond, and he had borne himself with courage and courtesy through it all. He was truthful and honourable, but as modest as a maid. Fifteen battles and three tournaments had been his lot at Alexandria, in Prussia, Lithuania, Russia, Granada, Algeciras, Belmarin, Tramysene, Turkey, Armenia, Attalia, and the Great Sea, and from time to time a share of booty had come his way, which, like a sensible man, he had not refused. He mixed with the crowds with dignity and courtesy, and while accepting

the chief place in the company was quite prepared to obey the Host's demand for a tale. He earns almost the warmest of all Chaucer's encomiums—he never abused anyone, and was a very perfect and gentle knight. And his happy, healthy son, the Squire, with his fine clothes and permanently waved hair, is a very attractive character. Courteous, humble, and obedient, a good soldier who had seen much service though so young, he bade fair to become just such another as his father.

Their servant, the Yeoman, was business-like and well-equipped, skilled in woodcraft and forestry, able to handle sword and dagger, bow and arrow, with equal skill.

It is interesting to analyse the amount of travel necessitated by the Knight's campaigns. Research has suggested that his story is really a composite picture of the adventures of two of the Scrope family, well known warriors from Yorkshire who intermarried with the Mortimers of the Welsh Marches. The complete list of the Knight's wanderings embraces active service in Prussia, Lithuania, and Russia; in Alexandria; in Granada, Algeciras, Belmarin, Armenia, and Attalia, in Tramysene, Palatine, Turkey. How did he come to be present on so many battle fronts? In 1343 Edward III concluded a three years' truce with France, so that our knight may have gone with Henry, Duke of Lancaster, and fought in the siege of Algeciras in Granada, near Gibraltar. The town was not captured till 1344, after which the Knight must have taken part in two raids into the provinces of North-west Africa.

He then presumably went back to England, took part in the battle of Crécy and the siege of Calais, got

through the Black Death, fought at Poitiers in 1356, and was still campaigning with Edward III and Chaucer when peace was signed in Bretigny in 1360.

In 1361 our Knight joined Pierre de Lusigman, King of Cyprus, and fought at Attalia in Asia Minor.

Pierre came over to England in 1363 to ask for aid, and it seems probable that Chaucer met him and heard of his past successes and future plans. During Pierre's absence the Knight went with the Lord of Palatye against the Turks. In 1365 Pierre returned, and the Knight and many other Englishmen helped him to capture Alexandria. Many returned home with booty, but the Knight went on with his master and helped to capture Lyas in Armenia in 1367. On Pierre's assassination in 1369 the Knight fought for the Teutonic Knights in Prussia, Lithuania and Russia. This series of campaigns lasted until 1386, so that the Knight had only just come back from his voyage when he joined Chaucer on his pilgrimage.

The four sieges which Chaucer mentions are placed by him in a curiously muddled order, first Alexandria (really 1365), then Algeciras (1344), next Lyas (1367) and finally Attalia (1361). If the Knight was twenty when his life of active service began in 1343 he must have been sixty-seven years of age when he travelled to Canterbury to seek the holy blissful martyr.

His son the Squire had a more limited experience of campaigning, his active service being confined to France and the Low Countries—Flanders, Artois, Picardy. Others of the pilgrims had travelled abroad for business or pleasure, not for fighting. The Merchant seems to have known the narrow sea across to Middleburg, in Walcheren; the Pardoner had just

returned from the Continent with pardons all hot from Rome, or so he alleged; the Shipman knew the Channel ports and Dartmouth, and Bordeaux with its wine exports; all the ports from Hull to Carthage, from Gothland to Finisterre, or from Brittany to Spain. The Wife of Bath had been on many pilgrimages abroad as well, no doubt, as several at home—three times to Jerusalem, once to Rome, once to Cologne and to Compostella, and either to Bologna on her way back from Rome, or to Boulogne. Chaucer himself could rival most of his fellow-travellers, having seen active service on at least one campaign in France, and having had business or diplomatic missions to the Low Countries, to the Rhineland, and to Italy.

It must have occurred to a number of Chaucer lovers that perhaps the most lifelike character in the whole series of stories is the Host. This is brought out in a series of lectures on Chaucer by an American scholar who advises readers to read the *Canterbury Tales* over again, and read only the Host's remarks. In the person of the Host Chaucer has created his chorus Harry Bailly, that incomparable Boniface. "Never did brow-beaten husband unpack his heart with more soul-satisfying words."

To this remark one might add the suggestion that perhaps one reason why the Host was so ready to join the pilgrimage to Canterbury was a desire for a holiday from his wife's tongue. Even the humours of the Wife of Bath would be a change from the rough bullying and angry jealousy of Christian Bailly who urged on her husband and called him, "Milksop" and "Coward-ape."

The Host reveals his character more than most by

his sayings and actions. He lends a unity to the whole poem, breaks into the awkward pauses, calls up a new tale before the listeners have time to become bored, restrains the unruly members, and acts indeed as the real centre of the comedy.

According to Chaucer in the Prologue, the Host of the gentle hostelry called the Tabard, close to the Bell in Southwark, made great cheer and entertainment for everyone, called them to supper, served them with victuals of the best, and strong wine. He was a seemly man, suitable to be a marshal in one of the City's company halls. He was a big man, with bright eyes, as fair a burgess as any in Cheapside—a very high compliment to pay a citizen in Southwark.

This inn, the Tabard, is recorded as a portion of the Southwark property of the Abbot of Hyde, near Winchester. It is mentioned in Stow's *Survey of London* (1598) as one of the most ancient of the many fair inns in Southwark. Speght, who edited Chaucer in 1602, records that the inn in that year was managed by Master G. Preston, who had it newly fitted for the use of travellers. We do not yet know for certain if there was a Tabard Inn in 1388, when Chaucer's Pilgrimage probably took place; but it seems more than likely, and research is increasingly proving that Chaucer's facts are as frequent as are his fictions, and that his characters are real folk and not merely types.

Chaucer also tells us that the Host was bold of speech, and well taught, lacking in no manly qualities. He was merry, and after supper and bill-paying, he talked of enjoyment and proposed a scheme for the morrow. He welcomed them as the best company that he had seen that year at one time in his inn. He would wish

them be happy and thought of a scheme to make them so without any cost. Good speed he wished them on their journey to Canterbury, might the blissful martyr grant them what they deserved. He knew that they wanted to be merry and tell tales on the way and not ride along as dumb as stones.

He would suggest something to amuse them if they would agree to his plan and do what he said. To-morrow as they rose, he promised by the soul of his dead father that they should be merry or they might box his ears. They should hold up their hands if they wanted to hear his plan. All agreed, not taking it too seriously, and bade him outline his scheme.

His scheme was that each of the travellers should, on the journey to Canterbury and back, tell stories of adventures that had befallen him ; and the one who told the best tale should be entertained to supper at the expense of the others at the Tabard on their return from Canterbury. He promised to ride with them at his own cost and be their guide, and anyone who disputed his judgment should pay for all the drinks by the way. Everyone agreed to his plan, and begged him to come and be their governor, and both judge and reporter of the tales. They fixed for a supper at a definite price, which some explain as probably being due to the heavy charge made by the Host for their previous entertainment ! More wine was brought and then everyone went to rest without further delay.

In the morning the Host got up full early and woke them all as a cock might do, gathered them all in a flock, marshalled them at a walking pace two miles along the Canterbury road to a brook where Pilgrims watered their horses, and criminals were hanged, the

watering of St Thomas. Here he halted, reminded the lordings of their promise, hoped that evensong and morning song agreed, and that they were in the same mind as last night. If any disputed his judgment, as he drank wine or ale, they should pay for all drinks on the road.

There they drew lots and the shortest paper decided who would tell the first tale. He politely asked the Knight, the Prioress, and the shamefaced scholar from Oxford to draw first. All drew lots, and whether by luck, fate, or chance, the Knight was chosen, to everyone's delight. He told the story of Palamon and Arcite, a long but splendid story which would probably have won the prize.

The Host was very pleased with the Knight's tale and with the company's reception of it. "This doth right wel, unbokeled is the male for trewely this game is wel bygonne." He asked the Monk, for the next, but, in spite of protests from the Host, the Miller, Robin, insisted on telling a ribald tale about a carpenter who built three tubs to avoid a second flood, and was deceived by his wife and a monk. The Reeve, who was also a Carpenter, took the tale amiss, and proceeded to moralise. "Shall we speak all day of holy writ?" Could the Devil make a reeve to preach, or a shipman or leech out of a cobbler? Here they were already at Deptford, it was already 7.30 in the morning, and they soon would be at Greenwich, famous for shrines. So Oswald, the Reeve from Bawdeswell, told a tale of a dishonest Miller, who lived at Trumpington, and was well paid out by two Cambridge men. This tale, like that of the Miller, is not quite suitable for general company.

The Host saw clearly that Miller and Reeve had both

had too much to drink. The Miller admitted it but blamed the Southwark ale for it. The Cook patted the Reeve on the back and thought the Miller had been well punished. He was ready to tell a tale of a little jape that befell in London.

The Host called him by his name, Roger, and begged that the tale should be a good one. His pasties and his jokes of Dover, that had been twice hot and twice cold, had harmed the digestion of previous pilgrims, who had cursed him for it. They had fared worse on his parsley than if they had eaten a lean goose fed on a bare stubble field. His shop was fly blown. Roger the cook replied that he took the Host's remarks merely in jest, but would make him pay for them later on, by telling the tale of an innkeeper befooled by a rascally London 'prentice of the name of Perkin Revellour.

Here it is that the Host's name slips out, Harry Bailly, and there was a Henricus Bailey, who sat for Southwark in Parliament in 1376-77 and in 1378-79 and in the rolls for 1380-81 figures as " Henri Bayliff, Ostyler," with Christian, his wife, who were assessed at two shillings. During the discussion on the journey, the Host refers to " Goodelief my wyf," so that if he had a wife called Christian in 1378 he must have married again by 1388, the suggested date of the pilgrimage.

On the second day the Host, who seems to have been well educated, reckoned by the height of the sun and other indications that it was getting late, about 10 a.m. So he begged them not to waste time, which, like the water in a stream, would never return. Seneca and other philosophers had warned them that, unlike cattle and other possessions, time can never be regained. He therefore asked the Man of Law for a tale and he

consented. But first he tells them all, that Chaucer has published all the tales there are, though he knew little of metres and skilful rhymes, and he actually gives a list of them. He would do the best he could, and give them a tale in prose, which in practice turns out to be in quite a tolerable system of rhymes. It is the tale of Constance who suffers unknown hardship among the Moslem and Northumbrian heathen, but at last regains her good fortune.

The lengthy tale pleases the Host, who commends it, and then with an oath, calls the Parson for his tale. The Parson reproves the Host for swearing, and is called a Lollard for his pains. The Host is afraid that the Parson will preach them a sermon, to avoid which the Shipman tells a tale about a rascally monk, who married on a discreditable intrigue of deception. The Host again is pleased, and hopes that the Shipman will for many years show his face along the coast, but that all bad monks would come to grief. Then with great politeness befitting her rank the Host calls on the Prioress for her tale.

She tells the well-known tale, which was so popular and so untrue, of the murder by the Jews of a male chorister who went on singing after he was dead, and so gave his friends intimation of his death. The sad story, so like the famous legend of St Hugh of Lincoln, was received by the cavalcade with an appropriate pause, after which the Host became merry once again and called upon Chaucer for a tale. Chaucer, says the Host, is always looking on the ground as though he hoped to find a hare, but he must look up and be cheerful. He has as round a figure as the Host, quite fine enough for a pretty woman to embrace. He looks

absent-minded and talks to no one. Chaucer then tells the dull tale of Sir Thopas, intentionally satirizing some of the poems of the day. The Host stops him, and says "I am weary of your nonsence and trashy doggerel." When Chaucer has told in prose the story of Melibæus and his kind wife, Prudence, the Host wishes that his wife could have heard the tale.

He says he would give a barrel of ale for her to hear it as she had nothing of the patience of Prudence with her husband.

> By goode's bones, When I beat my knaves,
> She bringeth me forth the gretė Clobb'ėd stones,
> And crieth, 'Slay the doggė's everyone,
> And brake them, bothė back and every bone.'
> And if that any neighėbore of mine,
> Will not in churchė to my wife incline,
> Or be so hardy to her to trespace,
> When she cometh home she rampeth in my face,
> And crieth. 'False coward, wreck thy wife,
> By corpus bonės I will have thy knife,
> And thou shalt have my distaff and go spin.'

The Host fears that he may sometime commit manslaughter, incited by his wife, who calls him milksop and coward-ape.

One wonders if there was really such a host and a hostess, and whether anyone who had read Chaucer's poem in manuscript repeated in Southwark what had been written about Harry and Christian Bailly.

But by the time that the Host has finished his gossip it is near Rochester, and time for the Monk to tell his tale. The Host is sure that the Monk, whose name is Sir Peers, is no novice or cloisterer; he is a fine figure fed in a fine pasture, and the Host regrets that such fine

fellows are often lost to society through their vows.

The Monk winced under the Host's patronage but gladly told his tale dealing with tragedy :

> Of him that stood in great prosperity
> And is y-fallen out of high degree,
> Into misery and endeth wretchedly.

and he proceeds to recount the tragic stories of Satan, Adam, Samson, Hercules, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Alexander, Julius Ceasar, Pompey, Nero, Croesus, Pedro, and finally Count Hugolino and his three young children, whose wretched end by starvation is one of the features of the thirty-third canto of Dante's *Inferno*.

The tale was so long and so sad that even the courteous Knight protested, and said that as they were on holiday it would be pleasanter to hear of fun,

> When a man hath been in poor estate,
> And climbeth up, and waxeth fortunate,
> And there abideth in prosperity.

The Host agreed, and said that by the bell of St Paul's the Knight was right. The Monk spoke of tragedies that were past and could not be mended. The company was annoyed and not amused. Such talk was not worth a butterfly. But for the jinglings of the bridle bells of the Monk the Host would have fallen asleep and the story would have been wasted.

" Sir Monk or Dan Piers, tell us a tale of hunting," but the Monk said No. So the Nun's Priest, Sir John, was bidden tell a merry tale, even though he rode a poor horse ; and he told the story of Chanticleer, Dame Partlet, and the Fox. Then followed the Wife of Bath's prologue, which tells in 800 lines the story of her

five husbands. Her words expose the weakness of both sexes and are full of wise saws current at the time. She is specially outspoken and frank, is constantly digressing, and is determined to be master as well as mistress in her own house. Her husband soon realized that if they wanted to lead a quiet life they had better fall in with that idea. When she had finished the prologue she announced her story, and the Friar rather rashly remarked that the prologue had been sufficiently long. The Summoner at once said that friars and flies always meddled where they were not wanted, which led to a further quarrel and threats of damaging stories before Sittingbourne; so the Host had to make peace. The Friar once more attacked the Summoner and told the folk how disliked he was and how he got beaten in every town, so the Host once more interfered, but not before the Summoner threatened to give as good as he got. Then the Friar told a tale about a bad summoner and the Summoner retaliated. The Host, near Sittingbourne, asked for a tale from the Clerk of Oxford, who was shy as a newly wedded maid. He must be thinking hard, but as Solomon says, there is a time for everything. He must keep his bargain and tell a tale of adventure, not a friar's lenten sermon about sin, and not too dull or too learned. The Clerk tells a story learned from Petrarch, about the patient Griselda.

The moral was not to imitate Griselda's patience which was overdone, but to learn how to bear adversity.

The merchant contrasted the patient Griselda with his two-month wedded wife. Never again. The Host agreed and said that women were as busy as bees in plaguing men, but he hoped that no busybody would

tell his wife. He asked the Squire for a love tale, and he replied with that of Cambuskan and the Lady Canace. The story remained unfinished and Edmund Spenser attempted to finish it in cantos two and three of the *Faerie Queen*, trying to follow the metre of his master, whom he calls,

> Dan Chaucer, well of English undefiled,
> On Fame's eternal beadrole worthy to be filed.

Another poet felt the charm of Chaucer's verse and regarded the Squire's tale as the most representative of his genius. In *Il Penseroso*, when speaking of the congenial occupations of the studious man, Milton said that he loved to

> . . . call him up that left half told,
> The story of Cambuscan bold,
> Of Camball and of Algarsyfe
> And who had Canace to wife
> That owned the virtuous ring and glass ;
> And of the wondrous horse of brass,
> On which the Tartar King did ride.

Everyone liked the story, especially the Franklin, who prophesied great things for the Squire ; and complained of the young men of the day, who made pleasure their business instead of their relaxation ; and spent their time in gambling or worse. He wished his own son were as fine a fellow as the Squire, for he would not associate with good companions from whom he might learn gentleness. " Straw for your gentleness," said the Host, " the lad will do well enough." He asked the Franklin to tell a story, and in spite of the Host's slight discourtesy, the Franklin acquiesced.

He told a Breton tale, the motto of which was that " a soft answer turneth away wrath." The Doctor of

Physic next told the tale of Virginia and Appius Claudius, made more popular by Lord Macaulay, and the Host, in commenting on the tragedy, said that the Doctor had given him what it was his business to cure —a heartache—and the only remedy would be a draught of moist, strong ale, or a merry tale of mirth and jape from the mountebank Pardoner. The latter said that he must have some food and drink at the next ale-stake, and think of his story while he drank. The better-minded folk asked that he should tell them no ribald tale but one with a good moral.

He then told them the tale of three revellers trying to slay Death, who killed them all through their covetousness. He prefaces his remarks by describing his methods. His sermons he knew by heart and he spoke them as clearly as a bell. The text was always the same: *Radix malorum est cupiditas.* He told them about his pardons, indulgences, licence from the Pope; he quoted Latin tags, displayed his long glass boxes of rags and bones—his special sheep-bone, which when dipped in water cured snake-bite and other disease in cattle and ensured an increase in men's goods. His mitten was a lucky one, and he got money by warning them that a real criminal would not be able to offer them anything, so all were compelled to be generous in self-defence. He offered absolution to all others, and in this way earned a hundred marks a year. He had a hundred more lying stories, which he told, nodding like a pigeon on a barn roof. He did all he could to get money in such ways, not like the Apostles, who worked for a living. He wanted money, wool, cheese, wheat, and wine.

He then told the people that if they gave nobles,

pounds, brooches, rings, or spoons, or wool, he would write their names on his roll and then they would enter Heaven.

He omitted to say that he usually rubbed the names off the roll between one parish and the next. Having described his methods, he coolly asked the pilgrims to inspect his relics from the Pope, kneel and have absolution and have pardon every mile in case they fell off their horses and broke their necks.

How lucky for them to have so useful a pardoner! He advised the Host, as the most sinful, to kiss all the relics for a groat. When asked to unbuckle his purse, the Host for once lost his temper, swore and abused the Pardoner and his relics, to every one's amusement.

The Knight intervened to make peace, they kissed, and made friends. The Nun attached to the Prioress then relates the story of St Cecilia, a martyr in Rome; and then at Boughton-under-Blee a canon and his yeoman arrived and the Host asked the Canon for a tale. The Yeoman told of his master's skill in turning all baser metals into gold. He could quite easily pave the whole way from where they rode to Canterbury with silver or gold. Why then, cried the Host, did he not dress better, and the Yeoman answered the Host in such a way as to give his master and his alchemy away. The Canon protested, but the Host encouraged the Yeoman to continue, and the Canon fled. Then the Yeoman told the whole story of the Canon's many friends, and of the Yeoman's losses in money and limb. He also told of another canon who tried desperately to find the philospher's stone—a futile effort. The Pilgrims soon reached Bob-up-and-down, probably Harbledown, near Blean, and here the Cook fell off his

horse. The Manciple quite rightly accused him of being drunk, but offered him drink to make him better. The Host warned him not to rebuke vice in the Cook, lest the Cook should retaliate by questioning his accounts. The Manciple would not relish this, as the Cook could easily get him into trouble. The Host praised the wine, the gift of Bacchus, which had restored the Cook, and said that in future they must always carry wine with them in case of emergency.

The Manciple, instead of the Cook, told a tale giving the reason why crows are black. The party were now close to Canterbury, and it was time to be serious. The Host asked Sir Priest, vicar or rector, to tell his tale. But the Parson would tell no fable, nor anything in rhyme, but a discourse in prose to guide them not so much to Canterbury, as to Heaven. The Host asked the Parson to speak briefly, and the Parson gave a series of sermons on the Seven Deadly Sins, of their causes and remedy, and the joys of Heaven.

A recent writer says of the characters in the pilgrimage:

> The Wife of Bath and Harry Bailly and the Miller and the Reeve and the Squire are more vividly alive today than you or I. They are of one blood with Falstaff and Sancho Panza and Tom Jones and Mr Pickwick and Becky Sharp and Mrs Proudie and Captain Ahab.
>
> The tales of Miller and Reeve, with their breaches of decorum, and their occasional frank unseemliness, are not, it is true, milk for babes. But, in Chaucer's hands, bold and vulgar incidents become masterpieces of characterization.

The Prologue gives the storytellers statically, in their potentialities. But as the cavalcade moves on, the

static become dynamic. Antagonisms flame up ; a drunken pilgrim insists on telling his tale out of turn ; the Shipman flatly refuses to hear a sermon from the Parson, and promises to tell a tale that will wake the company up ; a cleric drinks too much corny ale, and his tongue is loosed ; a lively discussion about marriage springs up and tales informative and lively are told in support of divergent views.

Dialogue and action, gesture, costume, as in real life—all are there . . . Long before Balzac, Chaucer conceived and exhibited the Human Comedy. Garb, the manner of sitting a horse, and beards and physiognomy, emerge with salient traits of personality to give a series of glowing portraits, which after five-hundred years remain unrecalled.