

It always seems to me that in the many books written on reciting, the great teacher, Nature, is too much overlooked. Rules are laid down for attitude, gestures, pitch of the voice, etc., the workings of which, according to rules, contract liberty of action and expression, fix the heart and mind in the mechanical to the exclusion of the intellectual faculties, and tend to make the reciter self-conscious, and therefore unnatural. It is a profound truth, and one which, my young readers, you would do well in your youth to lay to heart—that you can never do anything worth doing, however trivial, without forgetting yourself. As a contemporary writer beautifully expresses it, "It is the same now as of old; we can

only really touch another human soul when virtue or strength goes out of ourselves."

But nothing can be done without effort. Exertion is the necessary price for the attainment of any object; and before being able to recite, the most gifted among you will have to go through steady work.

In all intellectual pursuits, though, the greater the exertion the greater the pleasure, and in reciting specially the result will reward your exertions a thousandfold. You will be able to sweeten life for those whose frames are exhausted with a hard day's toil, to feed their higher nature by giving them a taste for intellectual pursuits, and to awaken in them that sympathy which tells us that we all depend

upon each other for help, amidst the "briars of this working-day world." And you will not only give them pleasure, but yourself profit. You will receive into your own heart and mind the best and purest thoughts expressed in the best and purest words, which cannot fail to leave their impress on you; and in after years, when cares and sorrows cloud your life, as they must *sometimes* cloud the most prosperous of lives, you will find the power of holding converse with the "mighty dead" a sure and steadfast consolation, and you will learn from these never-failing friends how

"Sublime a thing it is to suffer and be strong."

## OUR "POET'S CORNER."

GEOFFREY CHAUCER (1328).

THERE is a secluded corner in the grand old Abbey of Westminster through which one is apt to wander with a thoughtful mind, as here and there he spells out familiar names engraved on the time-worn monuments and stones. These are not the names of victorious kings, or of conquerors, but, more illustrious still, they are the names of those who have made the realms of imagination their own, and have achieved vast exploits in the regions of poetic lore. With clear mental insight they have discovered the secret of beauty in nature and art, and have given forth the splendid creations of their genius as a boon to all generations.

Amongst these old monuments to the poets of the past one very ancient tomb may be seen, crumbled and dim, and only the keenest eyes can spell out the nearly effaced name of "Geoffrey Chaucer," the first poet whose dust rests within the Abbey walls.

Chaucer was the very ideal of what a poet should be. Not only was he accomplished, brilliant, proficient in scientific learning, in divinity, law, and philosophy; but he had a splendid physique. When he was thirty years of age he is described as having been of a "fair and beautiful complexion, his lips full and red, his size of a just medium, and his port and air graceful and majestic."

Some obscurity rests on his early days, as historians do not agree either about the place of his birth, the rank of his parents, or the name of the college where he matriculated. But it is probable his father was a wealthy citizen of London; equally probable Oxford was his Alma Mater, for in the reign of Edward III. that College was in high popularity, having at one time *thirty thousand* students belonging to it.\*

Chaucer first comes into notice as a soldier, serving under King Edward in an expedition against France; and the fortunes of war proved unfavourable to him, for he was taken prisoner by the French, and remained several years in durance. But on his return to England a brilliant career lay before him; he lived in the Royal Court, and married Philippa, one of the maids of honour to the Queen, and sister to the third wife of the King's son, John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster.

Brother-in-law to a duke, Chaucer enjoyed much favour at Court; the King made him one of the valets of his chamber, and gave him a pension of twenty marks a year. The sum appears small to us, but we must remember money in those far-away days was more than three times the value it is at present. Besides, we do not find kings remarkably generous to those who enjoyed their patronage. It is

recorded that Henry III. gave his poet, "Master Henry," "one hundred shillings," and in the same year, "ten pounds."

No doubt the Court of Edward III. was the scene of much pomp and magnificence. Those were the days of chivalry; brilliant tournaments were the fashion; brave knights on their richly-caparisoned horses disported themselves before the eyes of the Queen and her ladies of honour, and performed wonderful deeds of gallantry and valour to win the favour of the fair spectators. But with all King Edward's munificence and grandeur, he seems to have been somewhat arbitrary in his method of arranging affairs. For instance, when he was building the castle of Windsor, instead of employing the workmen by contracts and wages, he assessed every county in England to find him a certain number of masons, tilers, and carpenters; and when he was adorning the palace of Westminster with pictures, he commanded all the painters in the neighbouring counties to be impressed into his service. However, he seems to have allowed his "poet" sufficient toleration. At one period Chaucer was sent to Florence and Genoa on a royal commission, and during this visit abroad is said to have met the poet Petrarch at a wedding-party. Again, he was made Comptroller of Customs at the Port of London, and some time afterwards we find he was sent to Flanders to try to negotiate a marriage between the Prince of Wales and Mary, daughter of the King of France. Ere long he was in Parliament as representative for Kent.

The latter years of Chaucer were more clouded, more indistinct. His beloved wife Philippa died, and with her passed away the pension granted by the Queen. His old patron, King Edward, was dead also, and for a time pecuniary difficulties and debt brooded heavily over the lot of the aged poet. At length King Henry IV. came to the rescue, and granted him another pension of £26 13s. 4d. the year. And so the time came when Chaucer, at seventy-two years of age, composed his last poem: it is called "Gode Counsaile of Chaucer," written "upon his dethe-bed, leying in his gret anguse."

As a writer, Chaucer is called the "father of English poetry," for he built the superstructure of our poetical literature. His genius was versatile in the extreme; and whether he was grave or gay, sublime or grotesque; whether he sang of the Court or the cottage, of the camp or the flower of the field, he was equally true to life, equally vivid in his description.

Chaucer was also the founder and maker of our Anglo-Saxon tongue; his writings are the

very fountain-head from which has ever since rippled the streams of our native language. Up to his time French had been used in pleadings and public deeds. The king and nobility had never forgotten their French extraction; had never become thoroughly English; but after Edward's wars with France the public use of that tongue was abolished.

Latin was also employed in business matters; even farmers had their accounts written in Latin; so the marvel is that Chaucer could have kept his compositions so pure in those days of mixed languages.

His poems are numerous. Amongst them is "The Legende of Good Women," "The Romaunt of the Rose," "The Cockow and the Nightingale," "The Flower and the Leaf." But his chief work, on which rests his imperishable fame, is called "The Canterbury Tales."

The scene of the poem is laid in the Tabard Inn, London, where are met numbers of pilgrims, men and women, all going to visit the shrine of St. Thomas A'Becket, in Canterbury Cathedral. To shorten the way, as they journey on together through Kent each one relates the history of his or her life; and it is remarkable that in their various grades each one gives a characteristic description of the manners and customs of the class to which he belongs, polished or rude, learned or rustic, as the case may be.

Well, it is very improbable unaccustomed readers of the original Anglo-Saxon spelling will, even with the aid of a glossary, attempt to dive into the ancient rendering of Chaucer's poem; so an extract of the Priest character is given; also a translation.

"And though he holy were, and vertuous,  
He was to sinful man naught dispitous,  
Ne of his speche daungerous ne digne,  
But in his teaching discret and benigne,  
To drawe folk to heven by etennesse,  
By good ensample was his busynesse,  
But it were any persone obstinat,  
What-so he were of high or lowe estat,  
Him wolde he anybbe scharly for the  
nonse;  
A better preast I trowe there nowher  
non is."

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"Though holy in himself and virtuous,  
He still to sinful man was mild and piteous;  
Not of reproach imperious or malign  
But in his teaching soothing and benign.  
To draw them on to heaven, by reason fair  
And good example, was his daily care.  
But were there one perverse and obstinate,  
Were he of lofty or of low estate,  
Him would he sharply with reproof astound—  
A better priest is nowhere to be found."

\* Speed's *Chronicle*.