

Lessons in English Literature.—V.

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The Canterbury Tales.

The Canterbury Tales are so called because they are supposed to be told by a number of people who were riding on a pilgrimage from London to Canterbury.

A pilgrimage is a journey made by pious persons to the place where some holy man or woman has lived or died, and in Chaucer's time such journeys were very common. A favourite pilgrimage was to the tomb of St. Thomas—that Thomas Becket who was murdered in the Cathedral at Canterbury by the knights of King Henry II.

Journeys were difficult and dangerous in those days. The roads were very bad and robbers were many. So for safety, as well as for companionship, people would travel in large parties. No doubt they often told stories and sang songs on the way to pass the time; and those who had made many pilgrimages, and been in distant countries, would have interesting adventures and tales to tell. As Scott makes Marmion say:

I love such holy rambles; still
They know to charm a weary hill
With song, romance, or lay;
Some jovial tale, or glee, or jest,
Some lying legend, at the least,
They bring to cheer the way.

So Chaucer, instead of telling his stories in his own person, puts them into the mouths of some of these pilgrims. But first he tells us about the pilgrims themselves, and how he came to know them, in an introduction to the Tales called the Prologue.

This Prologue is perhaps the best thing that Chaucer ever wrote, and the most famous. It begins with a beautiful bit about spring, telling us how everything is stirred to life by the sun and the warm rain and wind, and how then, when the crops are beginning to grow and the birds to sing, people long to travel to new and strange places, and how especially they go from every part of England to Canterbury, to the tomb of the holy, blessed martyr.

Then it goes on: Chaucer was staying at an inn, called the Tabard, in Southwark, which is part of London, on his way to Canterbury, when he found that there were altogether twenty-nine people there that night, who were all going on the same pilgrimage. There was plenty of room for them and their horses at the inn; they were very comfortable and

very merry. Chaucer made friends with every one of them, and they agreed to ride to Canterbury all together, and to start early the next morning.

There were all sorts of people among the pilgrims, and Chaucer describes them so well that it is almost like seeing them for ourselves and hearing them talk. He begins with the knight.

The knight was a truly brave man, and had always loved feats of arms, and honour and truth and courtesy. He had fought stoutly for his lord and had been in war in many countries, heathen as well as Christian. He had fought in fifteen deadly battles, and everywhere had won great honour. But he was not only brave in battle; he was also wise in council. And with all this he was modest and gentle in his manners as a maiden, and had never in all his life said a rude or discourteous word to anyone. He was a very perfect, noble knight. He had just got home from a long journey and was hastening to go on the pilgrimage, with his coat (or gepoun, as it was called) of fustian, all stained by his armour.

The knight's son, who was yet only a squire, and about twenty years old, was very gay in a short gown with wide sleeves all embroidered with red and white flowers, "like a meadow." He was very strong and well made, and had curly hair. He was accomplished, for he could ride, dance, draw pictures, write, and make and sing songs. He had very good manners, too,—

Courteous he was, lowly and serviceable,
And carved before his father at the table.

He was always singing or whistling. Young though he was, he also had "followed knightly deeds of war," and had borne himself nobly in hopes of pleasing the lady whom he loved.

The wife of Bath was a very amusing person to read about, but not so pleasant to know, for she was a great scold. She had a bold red face and wore red stockings, fine new shoes, and a hat as broad as a target. She was so clever at weaving cloth that no one could equal her, and she had a very high opinion of herself. She was a great traveller, and had been at Jerusalem three times, in Italy, Spain and Germany, for she had plenty of money. She had had five husbands, who were all dead; but she was very cheerful and jolly although she was deaf.

The clerk of Oxenford was a great scholar, but very poor. He was very thin, and his horse was "as lean as is a rake." He spent all the money he