

The Father of English Poetry.

* **T**HOSE who have done the most to make their names immortal, have left their lives wrapt in mystery. Homer's history cannot be settled:—

"Seven cities claimed the birth of Homer dead,
Through which the living Homer begged his bread."

Shakespeare's own writings have been attributed to another and his very existence has even been denied. Of Chaucer we know so little that we are forced to leave history and look for internal evidence in his works. He is contemporary with Gower, Wycliffe and Longland. The date of his birth is not known, but we are certain he died in 1400. Possessing great prudence and wisdom, he was employed by Edward III in important diplomatic missions. It is probable that he met Petrarch, on one of his missions to Italy. Chaucer's life was quite chequered; from basking in the sunshine of the king's smile, he was reduced to extreme poverty; but we feel certain that his last days were free from these troubles.

Chaucer laid the foundation of English poetry, but he had very little material to work upon. The language was in an unsettled state, and the fund of knowledge, of ideas, and of images requisite, were not in existence. It was only Chaucer's transcendent genius that could make a work endurable, written in that language, which the English then spoke. In the fifteenth century the people seemed to wake up and a reaction took place. The art of printing opened the gates of knowledge and the nation marched in.

Chaucer had sympathies as large as the nature of man, a soul that could not endure a dead form, and an intellect which arranged the human beings around him according to their qualities—by what they were, rather than by what they were called. He felt as Burns did, that

"The rank is but the guinea stamp;
The man's the gowd for a'that."

And thus, in that wonderful gallery of portraits, the prologue to the "Canterbury Tales," we have the existing aspects

and classes of English society described with a broad and impartial hand. We have the high and the low, the rich and the poor; but the high are not inordinately high and the low are not debased. The cement of religion binds together the whole social fabric, causing the common sympathies of its members to predominate above the grounds of estrangement. Chaucer, like Shakespeare, borrowed most of his stores from the various collections which he found; and the scenes generally, are laid in foreign lands.

"The Canterbury Tales" belong to the last period of Chaucer's life, when his judgement and insight into character, developed by a long and wisely-used experience, were at their height, while his imagination gave no signs of growing dim. Thirty-two persons are going in company as pilgrims to Canterbury; but the Tabard, the Inn in Southwark is the guide of the expedition. They are each to tell two tales going and coming, except the host who is to be judge of those which the other pilgrims tell. But Chaucer only completed twenty-four tales. However, these would have established the fame of any person.

The first in order and importance, is the Prologue, in which we have laid before us the general plan, and the several characters of the whole work. After this brief introduction, the poet gives the tales as the persons were supposed to relate them; and as he says, not refining them, but showing the characteristics of each.

Chaucer's English is quite easily read and not many words are obsolete. The great addition made to the language by the Norman French, confused the grammatical forms. Chaucer made use of these new forms and words and gave them a home in the English tongue, although critics maintain that he only used those spoken by the people generally. The poetry is iambic pentameter written in rhyming couplets. The spelling would drive any modern school-master crazy. One word will be spelled in two or three different forms on one page; the possessive "his" used for "its"; verbs, like