

FRENCH INFLUENCE ON ENGLISH.

THE influence of the French language, not only on our vocabulary, but on our Grammar and our Literature, has been so great that it has changed the entire character of English, and it now stands alone among the languages of Europe as the singular example of a union between the Northern and the Southern, the Gothic and Romance tongues, essentially Gothic, but imbued with Romance culture and Romance sentiments.

The beginning of this extensive influence dates from the time of Edward the Confessor, who, owing to his residence and education in France, had acquired French tastes and French habits, and who on ascending the throne of England made his Court the home of his French friends.

But the Norman Conquest was the great event which overthrew the ancient language, with its perfect system of inflections and its extensive literature, and made it the despised language of serfs and villains, whilst the leading men of the State spoke Norman French.

The noblesse and the common people, however, could not avoid coming into contact with one another in their everyday transactions, and some compromise was necessary for mutual understanding. Hence arose that remarkable bilingualism which lasted till the middle of the fourteenth century, when the true English language made its appearance. Up to this time there were two distinct languages in the country—the language of the consumer had been one, and the language of the producer another. Saxon had been suppressed till there was danger of its entire extinction, until now Saxon and French were thoroughly coalesced.

But the bilingualism which had

existed before this condition was still present. We may detect it even at the present day in the number of *pairs* of words which seem inseparably connected in certain places, as “watch and ward,” “ways and means,” etc. If we examine the poetry of Chaucer, we shall find many of these couples, in which one word is Saxon and the other French. A striking example occurs in his description of the Knight in the Prologue to his Canterbury Tales.

“A Knight ther was, and that a worthy man,
That fro the tyme that he first bigan
To ryden out, he lovede chyvalrye
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisye.”

In the last line, ‘Trouthe’ and ‘honour’ express one idea, as do also ‘fredom’ and ‘curteisye.’

We see the same thing in the use of two adjectives with one noun, a Saxon adjective placed before the noun and the equivalent Norman adjective after it. We still meet with examples in poetry, as in Gray—

“Full many a gem of purest ray serene.”

but the old distinction of one adjective being Saxon and the other Norman is lost. We even see two adjectives of entirely different signification.

Another effect of French influence on our phraseology is seen in the use of phrasal adjectives, for example, ‘laws of nature’—equivalent to ‘natural laws.’ They are nearly all composed of the preposition ‘of’ with some noun, and are imitations of the French form. Other examples are found in the words with prefix ‘a,’ as afoot, ashore, adoring. They are simply the French preposition prefixed to English words, thus ‘afoot’ represents ‘à pied.’ ‘Adoring’ admits of a somewhat different explanation. Many French infinitives take ‘à’ before them, and ‘adoring’ may be the old Saxon