FIRST PERIOD—INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

BEFORE entering upon the study of English literature proper, it will be necessary to speak of the English people; for English literature did not begin in England at all. Nor did the English begin in the island now called England, but called by the Romans Britannia, the country of the Britons (whom some writers of to-day prefer to call Brythons). Before the English came to England they lived in those parts of Northern Europe about the mouth of the great river Elbe. If you look at the map you will see that to the east and to the north there is the peninsula of Jutland; and in the more southern portion of the peninsula, now called Schleswig-Holstein, the Angles (afterwards called English) lived. But in the same peninsula of Jutland lived a people called Jutes, very close in blood to the English, who afterwards mixed with them. To the west of the river Elbe are the low countries now called Holland and Belgium: and you will see on the map near by the name of a province called Saxony. To-day the limits of Saxony or the country of the Saxons is very different from what it was in former times. The Saxons of old history filled the low countries, or at least a great part of them with their settlements. Now these three peoples—Angles, Jutes and Saxons—all combined to make the conquering race called English. So you will see that the original English people were very much more close in blood to the Danes, the Scandinavians and the Dutch than to other peoples. Of the more northern strain in the race we shall speak later on.

But why should the English have been called English rather than Jutish or Saxons? They were indeed and are still called Anglo-Saxons; but we do not hear anything about the Jutes. The reason is of course that the Anglian element predominated after the races had mixed; but there is a very in-

teresting fact to remember in this connection. The original Angles, or English people, *all* left their own country in a body to settle in England; whereas only a part of the Saxons and a part of the Jutes left their original homes. As for the Jutes they settled chiefly in what is now called Kent: there were very few of them. The Saxons settled mostly in the southern parts of the country. The Angles settled in the northern and middle districts. Of course this resulted in the establishment of three different languages in the country. But really, these languages were very much like each other; they were rather dialects than languages. The three peoples had no more difficulty in understanding each other than a modern inhabitant of Japan would have in understanding the speech of a man of Kyushiu—perhaps not even so much. The three dialects nevertheless had a long struggle for supremacy. At last it was the language of the original Angle or true English that won; but it had been so much influenced in the meantime by Saxons, that it is quite correct to call it Anglo-Saxon.

I do not think that it would serve any good purpose to go further into the history of the English race. There are so many details given now on the subject that only a trained ethnologist could keep them all in his head. But it is very easy to remember about the mixture of Angles, Jutes and Saxons; and if you look at the map you will be able to memorize the essential part of the question very well.

Next we must say something about the character and beliefs of the old English and of their neighbours. You understand that they belong to the great northern family called German, Teutonic, Scandinavian, etc., according to position in time and history. Goths was another general and vague name for them. But I should advise you not to think about names too much in this connection — about the difference between Goths and Teutons, High German, or Low German; only remember that all the races called by these names represent really one great Northern family. The southern part of Europe was peopled by many kindred races—much more civilized—and we still speak of the southern nations of Europe as the Latin races,

a name that indicates the Romanization of their countries, and the diffusion among them of the Latin tongue.

I have said that the Northern races were much less civilized. But they had certain great qualities which, in the end, made them more than a match for the power of Rome. The Romans were able to conquer most of the world: they had the greater part of Central Asia and Northern Africa under their rule. But they never were able to really conquer the North. I may tell you a funny story here about one of their expeditions against the Northmen. The Romans could not frighten those people by ordinary means; but one of their military leaders thought that they might be frightened by lions. It is said that a number of lions were taken in cages to a part of the coast where the German or Gothic barbarians were waiting to resist the Romans. When the soldiers had been landed the lions' cages were opened and the animals driven towards the enemy. But the Northern men took the lions to be only big dogs; and they beat them to death with sticks. The story may not be altogether trustworthy; but the telling of it gives us a good idea of what the Romans thought about their great enemies. You know that Germany and the North eventually broke the Roman Empire into pieces. The conquest of Britain, a Roman colony, was really only a part of the great Northern conquest of all Europe.

Before the Roman Empire was broken up it had been christianized. Those German peoples who came most under the influence of Roman laws and manners had also been christianized. But the tribes more far away from Rome remained "heathen" as those became called who kept to the older religion and the men of the most northern part of Europe were the very last to accept either Christianity or civilization. In Scandinavia Christianity is not even a thousand years old: the people were not converted before the 11th century and perhaps it took at least another century to complete the conversion. Now the English and the other peoples who conquered Britain were not Christians;—and they soon destroyed whatever civilization or Christianity the Romans had left in the island.

It is good to remember these things before beginning the study of English literature. The old Northern character as expressed in and by the old Northern religion is still a part of English character—some of the best of it as well as some of the worst. The old Northern beliefs have not entirely died out of men's lives and language: customs relating to them may still be traced in the folk-lore of the country people and in various festivities and superstitions. I need scarcely tell you that the Northern religion has left its mark upon English geography,—that many and many an English town or village or place still keeps a name derived from Northern mythology;—and you know that the names of the days of the week in English have names of Northern gods,—with the exception of Saturday.

I will only say a few words about their religion. The religion of the Greeks has been called the Religion of Beauty;—we might call the old Northern faith the Religion of War. But the name would not be altogether just; for the Northern creed was not a belief in destruction as the end and object of effort. These men of the North were builders as well as destroyers. I think a better name for their faith would be the Religion of Courage. If I should attempt an outline of the different Northern mythologies it would take very long, and I do not think it is necessary. But I may make some general remarks.

The Gods represented, perhaps, powers of nature; but they certainly represented also great human ideals. Though we may be most impressed by the character of the God Thor—god of battle and of force—because of the wonderful stories preserved about him, we should not forget that Odin, the All-Father, was also the divinity of wisdom and that he is said to have taken out one of his eyes and given it away, for the privilege of one drink of the water that makes men wise. Nor should we forget certain beautiful figures in this mythology—proving that the barbarian North was not without aesthetic sentiment. As Odin gave his name to Wednesday, and as Thor gave his name to Thursday, so does Friday preserve the memory of the beautiful Goddess Frigg to whom prayers were made by lovers. And even the name Sunday suggests the legend of Balder, the god

of light, about whom the most charming poems and songs were written. So you see that these were not all war-gods and that the religion was not altogether for soldiers only, but I think that the character of it is most nobly shown in the conception of the god who gave his name to Tuesday—Týr (sometimes written Tiw).

When the great wolf, the enemy of the Gods, whose mouth opened as wide as the space between heaven and earth, asked for a pledge before allowing himself to be bound, this was the only god who was not afraid. For the wolf had said, "Let one of you first put his hand into my mouth." Týr put his hand into the wolf's mouth; and then the monster was bound with the magic chain. But the god lost his hand. Now it was not to the thunder god of battle, Thor, that men prayed for the higher courage — the courage that asks the sacrifice of self. They would pray Thor for strength, but for noble courage they prayed to Týr. This shows us something noble in their fierce creed.

How fierce it was you can best imagine from the fact that it was considered, in some parts of the North, the greatest shame for a man to die of sickness or to die of old age. To die fighting was a kind of sacred duty: so when men felt themselves getting old they would leave their homes and try to find some chance of getting killed in battle. Even after the English became converted to Christianity the horror of a natural death remained with them. I think you remember the story of the great Siward who, on being told that he was going to die, put on his helmet and armour and stood up straight that he might die upon his feet, like a soldier. The great virtue for these people was courage; the great vice was cowardice; and it is significant that in the Northern hell the chief place was for cowards and adulterers. But you see that these men thought of adultery chiefly as a kind of cowardice. For them, sin was weakness and crimes of sense were crimes of weakness—want of moral courage. So, it is not wonderful, that long before these people became Christians their bitterest enemies admired them for their moral ideals. You remember that the Roman

historian Tacitus held up as an example to the Romans the domestic virtue and chastity of the Germans. The English modern ideas in regard to woman, home, and the sacredness of the family tie are very much older than Christianity.

All the foregoing implies certain possibilities of tenderness. Fierce as these men were, they could not have been only fierce and crafty. They had two directions in which their affections could be cultivated; and they cultivated them well. One was love of family; another was love of their lords—loyalty. There is something to be said here that is worth remembering. The conditions which prevailed in the North of the old pagan times were very much like certain conditions in feudal Japan. Every chief—and all the country was divided into chieftaincies—surrounded himself with the best men of war that he could find. The chief held a relation to his men very much like that of the relation between a *Daimyō* and his *Samurai*. It was less refined than the Japanese relation; but it was not less strong and sincere. And there was a curious freedom about it. Though the chief had power of life and death over his men, he did not keep them at a great distance; he was familiar with them,—would eat and drink with them, would join their amusements and their songs. Birth was not an important consideration so long as a man was free. The great qualities were courage, intelligence, skill in arms and loyalty. With these qualities any man might fight to become a chief. He might even hope to become a king. Only certain faults would never be forgiven and a stupid man had very little chance of improving his condition. There was yet no European feudalism; but the conditions very much resembled some things in Japanese feudalism. This was a system of society introduced into England.

And now for the subject of this lecture. Just as much of the literature of Japan in olden times was made by court poets, or by a *Samurai* in houses of great lords, the old literature of the North took its origin in the palaces of kings and chiefs. It was made mostly by warriors: the poets were soldiers. Later on they might be only poets; but at first the poet was also a fighter; and his poems were chronicles of battles,—songs about

great deeds. Gradually different schools of poetry came to exist. Gradually a particular class of singers, minstrels, gleemen came into existence. But the art remained connected in some way with the military profession: even the professional singer was attached as warrior or attendant to the train of some chief; and the form of poetry remained substantially the same. It is interesting to remember that the oldest form of this poetry in existence is English. It is not German or Scandinavian. Very much older than any other modern poetry is the old English of the pagan period.

THE OLD HEATHEN POETRY

We may divide the old heathen poetry, as it has been called, into two classes, first, that which was written before the English came to England; and second, what was written after they came to England, before they changed their religion. Of the first class we have only five poems—but one of these is an epic of more than 3,000 lines in length. Before we speak of these five of most ancient poems, it will be necessary to say something about the form of the verse.

Northern poetry was totally unlike the poetry of the Greeks and the Romans; and the construction everywhere had a certain family likeness. At first it may have been everywhere the same; at a later date the Scandinavians in Iceland and Norway, as well as the Germans beyond the Roman boundary, elaborated their runes or verses into many forms; but I think that the distinguishing character of Northern verse always remained. Now English verse represents the earliest form of this rough poetry. It has no rhyme. It has no fixed number of syllables—a line might be 10 syllables long or it might be 13 or 15 syllables long. Many books have been written about an imaginary law of construction; but impartial critics will prove to you that these laws of construction really do not deserve the name of law. The most correct statement that we can make is that the average number of "beats" to a line was eight; and that four of the syllables were strongly accented;—that the line was divided by the pause, which had no fixed place; and that, of the four accents, two were in the first half of the line and two in the second. Remember, however, that these are only loose statement. The great characteristic of Northern verse was *alliteration;* and even about alliteration the rule is not easily fixed. You know that alliteration means the recurrence in a line of words beginning with the same sound. In

the Northern line there were generally two alliterative syllables in the first half and one in the second half; and the alliteration was effected either by the repetition of the same consonants at the beginning of certain words or by the repetition of vowels. But when vowels were used they were not always the same vowels. So that the alliteration was not wholly carried out in all cases. However, the best way to illustrate the matter is to give you examples of the Northern verse, turned into English with corresponding alliterations. We shall mark the alliterations by the use of big black letters.

(Example)

In his **G**rimness wrathful (*PAUSE*)
Gripped he on his foes
With **C**ruel **C**lutch (*PAUSE*)
Crushed them in his **G**rasp.

(Example)

Growling is the **G**rey Wolf (*PAUSE*)
Grim the war-wood rattles.

[By "war-wood" I need scarcely say are meant the shafts of many spears.]

Of the two examples just given, the second is the better—because here we have the triple alliteration only; whereas, in the first example, one line has only two alliterations. But I have chosen the deficient line on purpose: it will help you to remember that in Anglo-Saxon poetry, and in Northern poetry generally the rule is not strict. Only in general way can it be said that in each line there should be three words in alliteration—two in the first half of the line, and one in the second half. You see that the line is divided by a pause.

The pause was not properly understood in the last century; and many persons imagined that the Northern runes, as such verses are called, were very short. The truth is that they appear to be short only because one verse was written in two lines instead of in one. Really the line is quite long, sometimes

extremely long; for there is no strict rule about the number of syllables. I believe that Professor Brooke was the first to try to translate these long lines and print them without cutting them in two; and though his page is wide the line will sometimes run over. Of course you can print them in either way, quite correctly; but, if you cut the line, it would be better to begin the second line with a small letter instead of a capital, that is, for teaching purposes. English poets do not do this when imitating Anglo-Saxon verse; but they are not teaching. For example:—

> Crieth then, so Care-worn,
> With Cold utterance,
> And speaketh Grimly,
> The Ghost to the dust:
> 'Dry Dust! thou Dreary one!
> How Little didst thou Labour for me!'

This imitation by Longfellow of a part of the *Discourse of the Soul to the Body* really reproduces the irregular alliteration of the original, and is really good. But each of the two lines, as he writes them, is but one line of Anglo-Saxon verse. The same thing may be said in regard to Tennyson's magnificent translation of the *Battle of Brunanburh* with such lines as—

> Never Had Huger
> Slaughter of Heroes
> Slain by the Sword-edge.

The short strong verse is obtained only by cutting the ancient verse in two. But Tennyson does not always do this. In some parts of the poem he preserves the original length of the line, thereby producing a splendid effect of contrast,—for example:

> Many a Carcass they gave to the Carrion.

Here is the whole line: the original pause would fall after the word "carcass"; the Anglo-Saxon pause has no fixed place—we know where it is only through the accentuation of the verse. I may also call your attention to a fine modern imita-

tion of Northern poetry by Kingsley in his *Longbeards' Saga* containing such fine reproductions of Northern expressions as the alliterated line—

Girding Gray iron on.

But we need not more than mention it. I prefer to speak to you of the influence of the Northern form on our original English poetry. Our great masters — especially Tennyson and Swinburne — learned a great deal from the Anglo-Saxon poets on the subject of alliteration; and both of them have admirably imitated Anglo-Saxon forms. But the original metre is now very seldom attempted. I know of but one recent example worth mentioning; and I am going to quote a little of it, because it will show you that fine effects can be produced even to-day by simply following the rules of the Northern poets:—

England my mother,
Wardress of waters,
Builder of peoples,
    Maker of men,—

Hast thou yet leisure
Left for the muses?
Heed'st thou the songsmith
    Forging the rhyme?

* * *

Yet do the songsmiths
Quit not their forges;
Still on life's anvil
    Forge they the rhyme.

* * *

Trees in their blooming,
Tides in their flowing,
Stars in their circling,
    Tremble with song.

God on His throne is
Eldest of poets:
Unto his measures
Moveth the Whole.

These verses are by William Watson, a living poet; the measure looks very different at sight from the old Anglo-Saxon. But if you analyze it a little, you will find that it is only different from rune verse in being more regularly accented, and that it consists only of rune verses broken up. I think that this is enough to say about the structure of ancient English poetry. Only remember that nearly all Northern verse was of a similar kind. The strongest examples of what can be done with such verse are Scandinavian rather than English: the Icelandic poets did better than the English. If you are interested in learning for yourselves what strange and terrible poetry they could write, you will find all that is left of their poetry in *Corpus Poeticum Boreale.*

As I said, before the English came to England, they had made poetry of this sort; and we have pieces of such continental poets. These five are *Widsith*, *Beowulf*, *The Fight at Finnsburh*, *Waldhere* and *The Complaint of Deor*. Of these the oldest is the first mentioned — probably it is older than any poetry in any modern language of Europe. It may have been written as early as the 4th century, but its date is uncertain. It consists of little more than a rhymed catalogue of names of places and persons visited by a wandering minstrel. Except that it gives us some idea of the life of these times, the customs of professional singers, and the methods of rewarding them, it has but little interest outside of philological interest. It can scarcely be called poetry. But it is very different in the case of *Beowulf*.

The great epic of *Beowulf*, 3,200 lines in length, is really a noble poem; and it has the honour of being the oldest epic in any modern European language. (When I say "modern" in this sense, I mean later than the dead languages of Greece and Rome). Remember that the first great epic that appeared, at least the first of which we have any record, after the death of Greek and Roman literature, was the English epic of *Beowulf*. It may have been written in Sweden or in Denmark—there is no mention in it of England. The hero himself comes from

Sweden; and his great deeds are performed in Denmark. The story of *Beowulf* will remind some of you of a Japanese hero, Watanabe-no Tsuna, who cut off the arm of a demon, and had it afterwards stolen away from him by a trick. Of course there are great differences, but the resemblances of which I speak are very striking. The king of a small province in Denmark, whose palace is called Heorot, is strangely tormented by a man-eating goblin. The king's name is Hrothgar. Every night the goblin enters the king's hall, seizes some of the guards or warriors, and tears them in pieces and devours them—just as a cat might enter a hall and kill the rats at its pleasure. No sword or spear can hurt the goblin: therefore weapons are of no use. Only the king himself cannot be hurt—the sacredness of his kingship preserves him from the power of the monster.

At last Beowulf, a brave retainer in the service of a Swedish king, comes to Denmark to protect King Hrothgar. Beowulf knows that he cannot wound the goblin with sword or spear; but he trusts to overcome him by bodily strength. For Beowulf is the strongest man in the North: in the grip of his hand he has the force of ten men. He lies in the hall and waits for the goblin. When the goblin comes it seizes Beowulf, but Beowulf in the same moment catches it by the arm and twists. The arm breaks at the shoulder and Beowulf twists again "till the bone coverings burst." Off comes the arm, followed by a stream of blood, and the goblin flies away howling to die. Beowulf hangs up the arm in the king's hall, and everybody comes to look at it. It is a dreadful thing to see; for the nails upon the hand are like great spikes of spears.

In the Japanese story to which I referred it is the goblin itself that comes back for the arm, disguised as an old woman, but in the old English epic it is the mother of the goblin. (I forgot to tell you that the name of the monster is Grendel.) When Grendel's mother comes, Beowulf happens to be away; and the female goblin kills and eats many of the king's best warriors. Moreover she takes away the arm. In all haste the king sends for Beowulf. Beowulf follows the female goblin into a cavern under the sea, and there has a terrible fight with

her. By the help of a magical sword, he kills her; but her blood is so poisonous that the steel of the sword melts away.

The third part of the poem tells us of the death of Beowulf. After conquering the goblins he has to fight with a fiery dragon, which guards a great treasure in jewels and gold. His companions become frightened and run away so that he has to fight the dragon almost alone. He kills it; but the fire entered his lungs and the poison entered his blood. After distributing the treasure to his men he died. And the poem ends with a grand description of the burning of the body of the hero. That is the story in short; but it is not the mere story that makes the poem. It is the study of character, the description of incident, the revelation of the custom with which the epic abounds, that delights us in reading it. The character of Beowulf is really very fine: it is explained to us chiefly through his speeches to his men, and to his friends and to his enemies. We have a glimpse of the man of worth in three aspects—first as the loyal retainer, then as the generous hero, able to forgive his enemies —lastly as a just and unselfish ruler, anxious only for the happiness of his people, but stern in regard to the performance of duty. Considered merely as poetry—as strong ringing verse—the epic is grand. We have not got it in the purely heathen form. It was copied in Christian times; and the Christian copyists thought it their duty to interpolate verses here and there about God, hell, and heaven, which had nothing to do with the original. Probably these interpolations took the place of verses containing references to the Northern Gods. But we can never know, because the original is hopelessly lost. However, you must not be deceived by the Christian passages into supposing that this is a Christian poem. It is a thoroughly pagan poem, with some later additions. The date is uncertain, but we have the right to suppose that in its present form it belongs to a period not later than the 6th century. The lost original is probably many hundred years older. We can guess the age of it by its certain references to historic characters.

Very little need be said about *The Fight at Finnsburh* and *Waldhere*—because they are only fragments, one of which is

60 lines long, and the other a little longer. The fragment of *Waldhere* was discovered in the binding of a book. You know that during the Middle Ages and before them, in Europe, books were written upon parchment; and old books were often broken up, and the parchment leaves used for binding. All that need be said of the fragments is that they show qualities of poetry quite equal to these displayed in *Beowulf* and so make us regret the lost originals. But in other languages of the North we have the whole of the stories or epics which these English fragments represent. The story of *Waldhere* is very much the same as the story of Walter of Aquitaine—a story of the time of the Huns. The hero takes his sweetheart, a hostage, away from the camp of the Huns; and, being pursued, he turns alone, and fights against twelve men. In the English fragment it is the girl who makes him turn and encourages him to fight; whereas in later versions of the epic she asks him to kill her and to make good his escape. So the English fragments much better illustrate the real character of the Northern woman, who in all the most ancient Northern poetry as well as in all the Northern history appears to have been quite as fierce and courageous as her mate.

The *Finnsburh* fragment treats of a great family feud—it is a story of blood, treachery, revenge, and heroism; a story so much resembling the great story of *Sigurd the Volsung* about which I gave you a lecture[1] last year that it is not necessary to mark the differences. The fragment tells us only that part of the story where the heroes are surrounded at night in the hall, and their chief cries out to them to play the man, for their time has come to die bravely. And now we may say something about the 5th and last poem.

The Complaint of Deor, brief as it is, must be considered one of the most important documents in the history of the evolution of English poetry—because of its peculiar form. It is the first English poem and perhaps the oldest poem existing, in any *modern* language of Europe, which is regularly divided into stanzas. It is also the oldest poem of the kind possessing a

1. *On Poets*, Ch. VII. "William Morris."

refrain. At the end of each stanza, for refrain or burden, a single line is repeated, of which the meaning may be thus translated.

> That was undergone: this can be so too.

This burden or refrain exactly fits the sense and purpose of every stanza, each stanza being a reference to the great sorrows and misfortunes undergone, and patiently endured by some hero or heroine of the past. And the poet who is singing of his own sorrow says to us: "Since such and such misfortunes have been endured—so can I find strength to bear my sorrow."

The grief is chiefly this:—that he was supplanted in his position as a professional minstrel at some court and his place and property were given to his rival, yet he does not sing like a jealous man, nor does he speak evil of the one who has supplanted him. He only prays that he may have courage, like the heroes of old, to suffer bravely. The stanzas are not quite regular: some are 6 lines long; some only 5—but the average is 6. I think you can see how very important this old poem must be considered, in the history of English form.

When we have once discovered the art of dividing a poem into stanzas and the art of adding a burden to the end of each stanza, the discovery of rhyme is not very far away. If nothing had interrupted the natural growth of English poetry in those years, it is almost certain that rhyme would have followed. There was one rhymed poem written about a century or two later at earliest, possibly much later; this was probably imitated from the Northmen who made rhyming verses about the 9th or 10th century. But English poetry could not develop naturally, owing to the terrible condition of the country and owing also to another potent cause—the introduction of Christianity, which completely changed the whole course of Anglo-Saxon literature. However, do not forget the name of this poem: it is a land-mark in our study.

OLD ENGLISH POETRY IN ENGLAND

Christian and Profane Literature

There was Christianity in England before the English came; and they destroyed it. But after a time missionaries came from Rome—the most celebrated of whom was Augustine, called the Saint; and Christianity was again introduced into the Island. Progress was somewhat slow; it took about two centuries and a half to convert all England to Christianity—indeed, it was not until the beginning of the 11th century that all traces of the Northern religion had disappeared. But the learned classes rather soon adopted the gentler creed; and it was from monasteries chiefly that the new literature came. On the whole Christianity was not favourable to the growth of original English poetry. On the contrary it almost silenced it and what is really good in the Christian poetry, with some few exceptions, is the heathen part of it. Put into the simplest form of statement, the facts are these:—

Nearly all the old English poetry written in England with the exception of what might be printed in about 30 pages consists of translations or paraphrases of the Bible in verse, or lives of saints and homilies in verse. Consequently the impulse to make original poetry seems to have almost died out. And the best parts of this religious literature are, curiously enough, those parts describing battles and terrible events of war.

The bulk of old English literature, being religious, need not greatly interest us at present: we can dismiss it with a few paragraphs. But there was some profane literature — which would make, as I have said before, about 30 pages in print. And these 30 pages are, from the literary point of view, worth more than all the religious literature of the time. In this brief

summary of profane literature I do not include two splendid war songs—the last great songs sung by the English before they lost their freedom in the 11th century. I am speaking only of the poetical productions up to the time of Alfred.

As the profane poetry is the more important, let us speak of it first. Why should it be important? Because it shows us a good deal of the emotional nature of the English people—the best of it, the tender side and the thoughtful side. There are perhaps a dozen pieces of verses which do this for us. Some are short poems complete in themselves; some are fragments of longer poems that have been lost. You should try to remember the names of at least five:—

The Wife's Complaint,
The Wanderer,
The Seafarer,
The Husband's Message, and
The Ruined Burg.

By the best critics the last named poem is most admired as poetry. But I think that you will be more interested in *The Wife's Complaint* and *The Wanderer,*—which we shall first speak of.

The Wife's Complaint may be a fragment, but that does not matter. The value of the piece is in the fact that it expresses the beautiful character of a woman who has been separated from her husband by slanderers. He has been made to believe her guilty of some wrong which she did not do; and she is not angry with him. On the contrary she not only loves him as before; but she does not even talk about her own pain, so much as about his. What most grieves her is the thought of how much he suffers because he believes the bad things said about her. Now a character capable of such generous and unselfish affection is typical of the perfect woman in every time and country; the woman speaking here is just as much a Japanese woman, as of an English woman. I have no doubt that you could find in many a Japanese romance suggestions of the very same type of woman character as the following lines sug-

gest. This is how she thinks of her absent husband, though he has wronged her so much:—

> For my husband is sitting
> Under the o'erhanging cliff, overfrosted by the storm:
> O my Wooer, so outwearied, by the waters compassed round
> In that dreary dwelling! There endures my dear one;
> Anguish mickle in his mind; far too oft remembers him
> Of a happier home! Woe is his, and woe,
> Who with weary longing, waits for his Beloved!

All the poem is beautiful because of the unselfishness and affection expressed. And there is another poem that might remind you of sad things in old Japanese romance. That poem is *The Wanderer*.

The Wanderer is a man who has lost his lord, his home, everything—through the fortune of war. He is exactly what you would have called in old days a *Rônin*—but he has become such not through any fault of his own; and he remembers his lord with love and gratitude. Now he has to make his living, wandering over the sea, sharing the fierce life of the Vikings. It is a very hard and terrible and cruel life—spent in storm and slaughter. And sometimes on the deck of the ship he falls asleep from weariness even in the time of storm, and dreams. He dreams of his dead lord and the palace of the old times. But when he wakes up he sees only the roaring sea about him, and the hard faces of the terrible men with whom he now must live.

Now, it is not until we come to the time of Campbell that we find exactly the same form of pathos in an English poem—I am referring to *The Soldier's Dream*, of course. But I do not think that *The Soldier's Dream* is even so touching as is the old, old English poem which is not a dream of home in the same sense at all, but a dream of loyalty. I may quote a few lines about the dream on the deck of the ship.

> Both sorrow and sleep bind the poor solitary;
> He dreams he clasps and kisses his lord,
> And lays his hand and head upon his knee,

As when he whilom enjoyed the gift-stool.
Then awakens again the friendless wanderer,
Sees before him the fallow waves,
The sea-birds bathe and spread their feathers;
Sees fall the snow and frost-rime mingled with hail.
Then are to him harsher the wounds of his heart;
In grief for the loved one, sorrow grows anew,
And memories of kindred pass over his mind.

(*Translation by Ten Brink*)

The English retainer was obliged, in taking the oath of fealty, to kiss his lord and embrace him, also to lay his head upon the lord's knee in token of devotion. After that he was given what is called the gift-stool—really signifying the right to sit at the lord's table and to be nourished by him. The translation I have given is rather plain and loose—it is by Ten Brink. A better translation and closer is Brooke's. The poem occupies several pages. I may in this case quote a little from Brooke. It is interesting to compare the two translations:—

Fallen is all that joy!
O too well he wots of this, who must long forego
All the lore-redes of his Lord, of his loved, his trusted friend,
Then when sleep and sorrow, set together at one time,
Often lay their bondage on the lonely wretched man.
And it seemeth him, in spirit, that he seeth his Man-lord,
Clippeth him and kisseth him; on his knees he layeth
Hands and head alike, as when he from hour to hour,
Erewhile, in the older days, did enjoy the gift-stool.
Then the friendless man forthwith doth awaken,
And he sees before him nought but fallow waves,
And sea-birds a-bathing, broadening out their plumes;
And the falling sleet and snow sifted through with hail—
Then the wounds of heart all the heavier are,
Sorely aching for One's-own! Ever anew is pain.

(*Translation by Brooke*)

In the above the Anglo-Saxon is almost exactly reproduced, with all the fine alliterations. I think you should admire especially the hissing lines describing the falling of the sleet and

snow on the sea. And how very strong and true the closing cry, "Ever anew is pain"!

The piece called *The Ruined Burg* is so much admired by Professor Saintsbury that he declares there is nothing more like it to be found in English literature before the days of Thomson. This is extraordinary praise, but it is given for a particular reason. The Professor is not praising the verse merely as verse, but the deep human feeling that the verse contains. That feeling is melancholy and kindly regret for ancient things—things passed away before the time of our own civilization—perhaps I might call it "Retrospective Sympathy." Certainly retrospective sympathy does not appear often in English literature before the time of Thomson. Such a sentiment comes only after great experience of life and men, a wide knowledge of human suffering and a tender interest in all earnest human effort. For these reasons the poem is really almost startling. Startling, because of the strangely modern feeling displayed. For, although I have not hesitated to compare these old English to the old Japanese by their best qualities of courage and loyalty, you must remember that they were not civilized like the Japanese of the same period. They were not by any means savage, but they could not be called a civilized people; —they would not even live in cities, and when they captured a city they always destroyed it. Their trade was fighting and plundering, and yet we find among them evidence of the better feeling which prepared the highest civilization. That is why this poem is so strange.

The story seems to be about as follows:—

When the English conquered Britain they did not think of trying to preserve anything of the Roman civilization; and they destroyed theatres, temples, public gardens, palaces, just as they destroyed fortifications and military walls. Among the cities destroyed by them was Bath,—which was a very beautiful city in Roman days, and is said to have derived its name from the splendid bath the Romans built there. The English destroyed everything except some of the masonry which it would have been too much labour to pull to pieces, stone by

stone. After destroying the city they went away from it, making for themselves huts on the hills and river banks in the neighbourhood. Between two and three hundred years passed away and the ruins remained just as they were. Then some wandering English minstrel went to the place and saw the remains of the grand buildings and composed a poem about them. Here are some of the lines which he wrote translated into corresponding English verse of to-day:—

> Wondrous is its wall of stone; Weirds have shattered it!
> Broken are the burg-steads! Crumbled is the giants' work.
> Fallen are the roof-beams; ruined are the towers;
> All undone the door-pierced towers; frozen dew is on their plaster!
> Shorn away and sunken down are the sheltering battlements,
> Undereaten of Old Age! Earth is holding in its clutch
> These, the power-wielding workers; all forworn are they, forlorn in death are they!
> Hard the grip was of the ground, while a hundred generations
> Move away of men.

Roman architecture, the most solid that the earth has ever known, might well impress the mind of this simple Northern singer as a work of giants. Giants or not, the builders were men—human beings with hearts like his own; and he cannot help feeling for them and grieving to see their beautiful work destroyed—though he knows that the destruction must have been by the will of the gods; for, as he says, only the "Weirds" (i.e. the Destinies) could have shattered it. Then he begins to think how these men lived—how proud and happy they must have been in the days of their strength—how loudly they must have laughed for joy,—how stoutly they must have drunk (for he imagines that they drank mead like his own people).

Now the earth has them; and it never gives back the dead —"hard is the grip of the ground." As we read this poem we feel his sorrow and his sympathy:—he makes us also admire the broken work and grieve for the glory of the past. Very probably a man with such fine feeling, such kindly feeling was in advance of his time; but that he *was*, and that he could

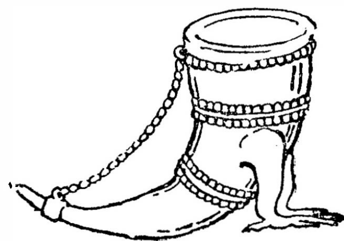
write and think in this way, is proof that the English people were capable of better things than fighting. Still, I must say that I cannot help imagining him to have been very much like a certain Viking whom his followers called the "Baby" for the simple reason that he objected to the Northern custom of throwing babies in the air and catching them as they fell upon the points of spears. The nickname which these men gave him was really a high honour, it marks him in the terrible history of those times as a brave man with a good heart.

The poem called *The Seafarer* is very much praised by various critics; but, inasmuch as scholars are still unable to decide what the poem means, I do not know that it is worth while quoting from. Even ten years ago people were very sure that *The Seafarer* was a dialogue between an old man and a young man about the joy and sorrow of a sea-faring life; and you will find that Professor Brooke has actually tried to arrange the poem according to this idea. But later English philology and German philology and much exact scholarship in England and in Germany opposed this explanation. The poem may be an allegory of human life. Its value is certainly in the descriptions of the sea and of hardships in time of storm. But until we can decide positively what this poem is really about, its actual rank as a literary creation cannot be fixed. Of other profane poetry I need only speak of *The Husband's Message* and of certain short compositions,—called *Riddles* and *Gnomic Poems.*

The Husband's Message shows the same side of human nature from a masculine point of view that *The Wife's Complaint* gives us from the woman's side. It is a letter in poetry from a husband to his wife far away asking her to come to him and assuring her of his trust and love. It is simple, tender and manly; and its interest lies very much in its portrayal of character. But it is not, perhaps, so interesting as is *The Wife's Complaint* even in regard to verse.

The *Riddles* are curious—chiefly curious. We may find reason to quote one or two. But first you should know the history of them. As I told you, it was the custom in the courts

of chiefs and kings to sing at banquets. Professional singers would sing epics like the story of Beowulf or they would recite the great deeds of the chief at whose table they were nourished. But besides professional singing there was much non-professional singing. Every warrior with a voice was expected to be able to sing some tune; and occasionally all the guests at a banquet would sing in turn—the harp being passed round the table from one to the other. It was during this time that the heavy drinking was done. But besides songs of battle and heroic deeds, there were other literary amusements — amusements of which the particular object was to test the intelligence and to exercise the ingenuity of each guest. Riddles served such a purpose well. Some poet or minstrel present would describe a common object in recondite language according to rules of poetry; then anybody present would be asked to guess what the object was. It might be a sword, it might be the sea, the wind, or a cloud, or a horse or a drinking cup. We have a number of these old riddles; and, apart from their value as poetry, they are interesting by reason of their cleverness. I imagine that you will find some amusement or pleasure in the following:—



The subject is the horn of a bull,—but unless you know the old English usage of the horn you will scarcely understand some of the allusions. The drinking cups in which the old English and the Northmen, too, drank their ale and mead were made of a bull's horn—the horn being supported by little feet, shaped much like the feet of a bird. At least this was one form, and the favourite one. The horn was bound and tipped with silver—in the case of a king or a great chief the metal would be gold. Small chains were sometimes attached by which the horn could be hung up. And I need not remind you that the horn was also used for war trumpets, as well as for hunting horns, or hunting trumpets. Even in the days when hunters made use of bugles of brass or silver, the old English phrase "to wind the horn" continued in poetry to the time of Tennyson.

A RIDDLE

I was an armed warrior; now a proud one,
A young hero, decks me with gold and silver,
And with crooked wire-bows. Men sometimes kiss me;
Sometimes I call to battle the willing comrades;
Now a steed doth bear me over the boundaries,
Now a sea-courser carries me, bright with jewels,
Over the floods. And now there fills my bosom
A maiden adorned with rings; or I may be robbed
Of my gems, and hard and headless lie; or hang
Prettily on the wall where warriors drink,
Trimmed with trappings. Sometimes as an ornament brave
Folk-warriors wear me on horseback; wind
From the bosom of a man must I, in gold-hues bright,
Swallow then. Sometimes to the wine
I invite with my voice valiant men;
Or it rescues the stolen from the robbers' grasp,
Drives away enemies. Ask what my name is.

When the horn was on the head of the bull it was, of course, used for fighting: therefore, the poet says or makes *it* say that it used to be a warrior. But now it is decked with silver and gold, and patterned with wire of precious metal, because it has been changed into a drinking cup. Of course it was the custom also for the good soldier to be decked with gold rings by his lord. The reference to the kiss might suggest the use of the cup to drink from; but you must remember that the English fighter kissed his lord and was kissed by him in token of sincere affection. The subject changes in the fourth line where the horn is represented as calling the warriors to battle—here the reference is to the use of the horn as a trumpet. In the next line it is represented as travelling over the sea, decked with jewels,—valuable horns whether trumpets or drinking cups, were carried wherever the chief went. In the seventh and eighth lines you have a phrase about the young girl, "filling my bosom"—a young girl decorated with jewels. There is a double meaning suggested. For an Englishman of that time to say that a young girl fills his bosom would simply

mean that he has taken unto himself a wife. "To sleep in his bosom" was a phrase which often occurred in early poetry and is still used. But the real meaning is that a young girl beautifully dressed, fills the cup with ale and mead for the warrior to drink. It was the custom at banquet that the noblest woman should fill the cups—but the duty especially devolved upon the daughter of the house. All through the old Northern poetry, Scandinavian as well as Teutonic, you will find many references to this custom. When the horn became cracked of course the gold ornaments would be removed—in that sense the cup may speak of itself as being at last "robbed of its gems." The tenth, eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth lines refer to the use of the horn as a trumpet. And the poem closes by telling you to guess what is meant.

Of the *Riddles* there are many. But this one example sufficiently illustrates the character of them all. Other departments of fragmentary pagan poetry we can better speak of later on. Let us now turn to the subject of Christian poetry.

OLD ENGLISH RELIGIOUS POETRY

The Two Great Christian Singers

If you can remember two names only in the history of English religious poetry during the 7th and 8th centuries it will not be necessary for you to remember any more. Indeed, I might almost say that it would be enough for you to remember only one—because somebody might prove to-morrow that the second name is mythical. Those two names are Cædmon[1] and Cynewulf,[2]—both of them Northumbrian singers. We have the best historical evidence for the actual existence of Cædmon; but the figure of Cynewulf continues, year by year, to grow more shadowy and ghostlike under the searchlight of the critical historians. A few years ago English critics of literature—at least some of them—appeared to be very confident about the reality of Cynewulf: they even attempted to write his biography. But in this present year I doubt very much whether his existence can be proved at all. There was somebody who wrote a number of very fine verses; and his name may have been Cynewulf,—but it certainly goes no further than this. It is very different in the matter of Cædmon. This is the story of him—the first great English poet of the Christian period.

In speaking of the *Riddles* I told you about the habit of singing at banquets and the passing round of the harp to every guest. If a man invited to a banquet could not sing, it was better for him not to stay at the drinking table. Now about the end of the 7th century there was a good deal of banqueting in Northumbria, at the settlement which the Danes called Whitby, and which still keeps its Danish name. There was one man who always got up from the drinking table and went away when the harp was passed round—in shame and regret that he

[1] Caedmon (fl. 670). [2] Cynewulf (fl. 800).

could not sing. This man's name was Cædmon—he used to keep cattle for the people of a convent near by. But one day this Cædmon had, or thought he had, an inspiration from Heaven — and he began to sing religious songs. The verses which he composed were not to be ridiculed: good poets were surprised by them. When Cædmon was asked how he had learned to compose poetry and to sing, he said that in his sleep an angel had taught him and that on awakening he found himself able to do so without any trouble. In the neighbouring convent the news of this dream and of Cædmon's suddenly-acquired power soon spread; and the superior of the convent sent for him. In those days all the learning was in the convent and in the monastery; and when Cædmon sang before the Abbess she found his poetry so good that she was sure he had been inspired. She told him that it was his duty to become a monk. He did so. Then, in the convent, as he was no scholar himself, he was taught to learn by heart the stories of Bible history, and the incidents of the New Testament. He had a good head and he was soon able to learn all that was imparted to him. He turned it into verse—paraphrased the greater part of the Bible which then existed only in the learned tongues. You must remember that Cædmon was at no time a scholar; he was simply a rough common man with a natural gift for verse; and the merit of his compositions are altogether natural. He had a rich imagination, strong feeling, and great skill in the use of the strong words to express it. He had been born a pagan, had learned the older poetry, knew how to fight and may have seen some battles in his time. So that he had the experience of a warrior at least to help him in his poems. It helped him a great deal, for his descriptions of battles and of storms and of terrible situations are really fine. How fine they are you may guess from the fact that it is very probable that Milton found inspiration in them long centuries after. The comparison of Milton and of the text of Cædmon does not always even leave Milton with the advantage. All we can say is, Cædmon appears to be the stronger—though he had a very imperfect language at his command, and no scholarship at all.

It is commonly supposed that Cædmon was the author of the following religious poems or paraphrases:—

A Paraphrase of the Book of *Genesis*,
A Paraphrase of the Book of *Exodus*,
A Paraphrase of the Book of *Daniel*,
A Paraphrase of the Book of *Judith*, (this is less certain),
A Poem entitled *Christ and Satan*—and various shorter pieces.

It is quite possible that Cædmon may have paraphrased the whole Bible originally; but we do not know. And we have not even got the original text of the part that has been preserved. For the Danes soon afterwards destroyed all the old English learning in Northumbria: and Cædmon's poetry has been preserved for us only in a West Saxon Dialect, into which it must have been rendered before the monasteries of Northumbria had been destroyed.

This is all that is necessary to know of Cædmon's history. I said before that this Christian literature is not as Christian literature particularly interesting, but the pagan element in it is very interesting; and it was the old pagan poetry in the heart of Cædmon that may have inspired Milton. Let me try to explain *how and why*:—

When the English warriors first began to understand something about the history of the Bible and the traditions of Christ, it was not the didactic part of the Scripture that most impressed their fierce imaginations. It was the great stories of battle, the stories of heroism, the legends of the destruction of great cities and of great armies—this was what particularly impressed them as subject matter for strong poetry. So Cædmon is at his best when he writes of fighting and seafaring, and of the passions of strong men. He was allowed in his convent to write anything almost as he pleased—nobody objected to his describing the enemies of the Jews as Vikings from Scandinavia, or the Jews themselves as English warriors, and nobody objected to his use of old Northern poetry in describing the grim side of war. Here is a little illustration of the way in which Cædmon used Northern poetry in writing Bible history: it is an extract from the story of *Judith*.

> Loud and high they shouted,
> Warriors fierce in fighting.
>
> . . . .
>
> Then rejoiced the gaunt Wolf,
> Rushing from the wood; and the Raven wan,
> Slaughter-greedy fowl! Surely well they knew
> That the war-thegns of the folk thought to win for them
> Fill of feasting on the fated. On their track flew fast the Earn,
> Hungry for his fodder, all his feathers dropping dew;
> Sallow was his garment, and he sang a battle lay;
> Horny-nebbed he was.

Of course this is not in the Bible at all—this description of the bird of prey rushing to the battle-field in order to feast on the dead is particularly characteristic of Norse poetry. But Cædmon had no doubt seen in the Bible, or been told of, such sentences as, "I shall give thy flesh to the fowls of the air": that, he thought, quite justified him in describing those fowls as the Northmen always described them.

But it is a much more curious thing to find him describing the Northmen themselves when he is actually writing about the story of Abraham and the King of Sodom, in his paraphrase of the *Genesis*. If you look at the Bible you will find the story of how Abraham refused to accept any booty from the King of Sodom;—but you will not find either thoughts or words like these:—

> Go, and bear with thee
> Home the gold enchased, and the girls embraceable,
> Women of thy kingdom! For awhile thou needest not
> Fear the fighting rush of the foes we hate—
> *Battle from the Northmen!* For the birds of carrion,
> Splashed with blood, are sitting on the shelving mountains,
> Glutted to the gullet with the gory corpses.

Now you will understand better what I mean about the pagan poetry in these Christian paraphrases; the pagan poetry is the best of them; it is what makes them most valuable from a literary point of view. And this is true even when the subject is a description of nature, as in the following taken from the life of a Saint:—

Lord Eternal, all the river springs
Laud thee, high exalted; often lettest thou
Fall the pleasant waters, for rejoicing of the world,
Clear from the clean cliffs.

Here is a Christian prayer, but the pretty description of the clear waterfall is in the style of the old heathen poetry; and it serves to make the Christian prayer very much more beautiful.

The other great Anglo-Saxon Christian poet did not appear until about a century after Cædmon. He also was a Northumbrian and some people believed that he was in his youth a professional minstrel. We do not know. But, of the poems commonly attributed to him the important ones are chiefly lives of Saints, in all five long compositions.

The Legend or Life of St. Elene,
The Legend or Life of St. Guthlac,
The Legend or Life of St. Juliana,
The Legend or Life of St. Andreas,
Crist.

Besides these there are quite a number of fragments of Christian or half Christian poetry; and there is a later paraphrase of *Genesis.* We do not positively know *when* these were written originally or whether they were written by Cynewulf: so it would be better to speak only of those five compositions before mentioned. As for the four lives of Saints, you can see at a glance that only one of them treats of an Anglo-Saxon Saint—the poem about St. Guthlac, a famous English hermit. It chiefly treats of the Saint tempted by devils. *The Life of St. Elene* (Helen or Helene, mother of the Emperor Constantine) deals with the legends of the finding of the true cross. The story of *St. Juliana* is the story of a Roman martyr. The story of *St. Andreas* is the most interesting for the curious reason that it treats a great deal of seafaring life and explains to us many conditions of the ancient Viking existence. Otherwise I need not stop to tell you more about these poems: they are, all

of them, much inferior to the great poem of *Crist* which deserves more attention.

For, in this poem of Christ, the Northern imagination gives one magnificent example of its poetical power. The poem is divided into three parts:—

1.—*The Nativity or the Birth of Christ.*
2.—*The Ascension of Christ.*
3.—*The Day of Judgment.*

As I have said before, the old English poets were alway at their best in describing terrible things; and it was in describing the Day of Judgment that Cynewulf—or whoever wrote the *Crist*— displayed the qualities of a very great poet. Of course he had the Book of Revelation to help him, and the old Northern beliefs and descriptions concerning the Ragnarock, or the Twilight of the Gods. But even with these helps he did work of which the grim sublimity may well astonish us. First is described the darkening of the sun, the extinction of the moon, the falling of the stars from heaven, and the rising of the dead out of their graves, and the sound of the awful trumpet. (It is a curious fact that in the old *Gospel of St. John* and in the old Norse description of the Twilight of the Gods the sounding of the trumpet announcing the world's end should be described with nearly the same terms;—the Anglo-Saxon poet in his Christian description, seems to have been thinking of the Gjallarhorn sounded by Hindal to summon the Gods to battle.) Next we have a description of the universal darkness, the shaking of the land, the roaring of the sea. But all of a sudden the world is filled again with light—an awful light, red as blood. And this light is made, not by moon or sun, but by a vast cross, reaching from earth to heaven, with the figure of a phantom Christ nailed upon it. Phantom blood pours from its wounds, colouring all the cross crimson, but also making it luminous with a glow like the red light of a setting sun. And then, below this stupendous cross, the real Christ appears, the Judge. He speaks to the living, to the dead, and points to the figure of himself, his other self, raised above them on the sky-touching

cross. This imagination is entirely new — nobody had ever fancied such an awful scene before. There was indeed in Norse mythology the tremendous idea of Yggdrasil; but it is quite probable that this fancy did not help Cynewulf at all. Indeed some high authorities think that the myth of Yggdrasil was later than the poems of Cynewulf in origin. Enough to say that the poem of *Crist* is the only great Christian poem of the 8th century showing the average high order of original imagination. The rest of it is not nearly so good as *The Day of Judgment;* and even *The Day of Judgment* is feeble in part. But we should try to estimate the value of a poem by the best of it; and, bearing this in mind, we may say that *Crist* deserves great respect and praise.

We need not say anything more about the Christian poetry of the 7th and 8th centuries. There only remains to mention the *Gnomic Poems* and two battle songs. I have to mention the *Gnomic Poems* in this place because they have come to us in a semi-Christian form, and perhaps belong, in the present shape, to the Christian period—though we know that some of them had very much older origin. I am sorry to speak of them as gnomic poems—because "gnomic" is such a vague word. It means aphoristic; it means didactic; it means epigrammatic —any, in short, that you please. I can only explain it thus:— the word was originally used by the Greeks to designate a particular kind of didactic verse; and afterwards it came to be used in the present loose way. Short poems or verses which are proverbs, or moral axioms, or aphorisms, may all be classed together as "gnomic" poetry.

The moral or religious qualities of *Gnomic Poetry* need not be illustrated for you; but perhaps the best way to give you some idea of the variety of profane *Gnomic Poetry* will be to quote some modern examples. For instance I remember that on the North Atlantic the sailors had to learn a kind of verse—

July—stand by;
August—look out you must;
September—remember;
October—all over.

That is to say: there is danger during July, August and September; for no storms are likely to occur in October. This is one kind of *Gnomic Verse.* Another is furnished by almost any of the weather verses—such as—

Evening red and morning gray
Likes the traveller on his way;
Evening gray and morning red
Bring the rain upon his head.

So much real weather wisdom is locked up in verses and proverbs of this kind that the United States Government, some years ago, published a book containing all the English gnomic literature of this kind that could be collected together. And here is a little bit of folk-lore verse, belonging to the same category, which is known to every English peasant: it describes the effect of Spring weather upon age:—

March will search you;
April will try;
May will tell you;
Whether you're to live or die.

There are other things, too, belonging to such literature which are certainly very old—probably dating from the time of charms and spells, long before Christianity. Not a few of the nursery songs that English children sing probably represent fragments of incantations to ancient Gods. I might suggest, for example, those little verses about the hiccup—ending with the lines about the three drops of water—or the little songs in which the rain is ordered to go away. Finally, verses of a proverbial character must also be classed under this head.

Now the interest attaching to the old Anglo-Saxon *Gnomic Poetry* is chiefly of the folk-lore kind; but these verses also are historically interesting as showing us the mixture of Christian and pagan ideas. About the last thing that a nation gives up is its folk-lore superstitions; and the early missionaries made a compromise apparently with the peasant. They were left free to sing their charms and spells, providing that they substituted

the name of Christ, or of the Virgin, or of some saints of the church, for the names of Heathen Gods and destinies. But a number of the poems handed down to us, show us that substitution was not always carried out. For example :—

> Wind in air is swiftest,
> Thunder on its path the loudest. Mighty are the powers of Christ!
> Wyrd is strongest!

Here you have a good example; the charm singer acknowledges the power of Christ; but he still thinks Wyrd or Destiny is stronger yet. Probably, in the original poem, as sung before the missionaries came, the name of Odin held the place here occupied by the name of Christ. A fair illustration of the didactic character of some of this verse is furnished in the following:—

> Good shall with evil, youth shall with eld,
> Life shall with death, light shall with darkness,
> Army with army, one foe with another,
> Wrong against wrong—strive o'er the land,
> Fight out their feud; and the wise man shall ever
> Think on the strife of the world.

This is the same thing as to say:—"Never can there be a time of perfect peace or happiness in this imperfect world. The struggle of evil and good, of ignorance and knowledge, of moral beauty and of moral ugliness can cease only when the world itself shall cease. And in the meantime, everyman able to think must think sadly about the misery of existence." But in this rude form of verse, even the simplest minds could learn these truths by heart, and learn to think about them better than if they had been expressed in philosophical language.

One curious thing found among *Gnomic Poems* is a rhyming alphabet. I think that you have seen some of the many rhyming alphabets which all English children learn—such as:—

> A was an Archer, and shot at a frog;
> B was a Butcher, and had a big dog, etc. . . .

The old Anglo-Saxon had almost exactly the same thing; but it was not written for children, but for men first learning

to read,—and there was some poetry in them. The Butcher did not have a big dog, nor did he figure in the composition, but "B" was a bull, "a mighty moor-stepper, a high-mooded creature."

I might here speak of famous "rhyming poems"—the oldest specimens of rhyme in any modern language. It really belongs to *Gnomic Poetry*,—for it is a paraphrase of some religious text. We are not quite sure what, so fragmentary the thing is. But it is not only remarkable as being the first English poem containing rhyme, but containing double rhyme or what we might call, if they were a little more skilfully made, Leonine rhyme. Leonine rhymes, you know, occur in the middle and at the end of the same line—for instance:—

> Once upon a midnight *dreary*, while I pondered, weak and *weary*—

—that line from Poe's *Raven* is a Leonine line. The old Anglo-Saxon poet tried to make verse of that sort—very clumsily indeed—but he tried;—and his attempt is a land-mark in English poetry. Now there is an interesting story about how he got this idea. There was a Scandinavian poet from Norway, called Egill Skallagrímsson, who had greatly offended the powerful Norway chief known in history as Eric Bloody Axe. The chief settled in Northumbria, at the close of a series of fierce fights, and it so happened that when he was at the height of his power, some of his men caught Egill and brought him before Eric. Eric said that he would cut his head off next day. Then Egill was put into prison; but during the night he composed a new poem, in a new kind of verse—Leonine verse—lamenting his own fate, and appealing to the generosity of Eric Bloody Axe. Next morning, when brought before Eric for execution, the poet said that he hoped to be allowed to repeat a new poem before the king before being killed. Eric listened to the poem and forgave the man and that poem became famous under the title, *The Head Ransom*. It was composed in the 10th century, and it is believed that its author taught the English rhyming poets how to make double-rhymes.

You must remember that all this time the English were

having terrible fighting to do, with their further and fiercer kindred of the North, who were not yet Christianized and who threatened to take the whole country. In English history they have been for many years loosely spoken of as "Danes"; but they were really Norwegians, Swedes, Icelanders, and Danes; and they made a very great impression upon the character of the English race by mixing with them. For these men did not come merely to plunder and kill: they preferred to settle in the country. Wherever they landed they would send messengers to the English saying, "If you pay us and let us settle there, we shall fight by your side and marry your daughters. If you will not pay us—then come out to fight." Gradually the greater part of England along the coast was seized by them. They had great settlements in the interior, governed by their own particular laws. In these settlements they did not deal cruelly; but the settlements were a great source of danger to the country, for Norwegian, Swedish and Danish pirates were sure of sympathy with the men in those settlements, for a very simple reason. Nearly all the famous fighting comrades of the North were in some way kindred by marriage and united by tradition. Men in Iceland or Norway or Sweden—all had relatives in England with whom they kept up constant communication. The danger to the country was not from the strange blood—it was the best blood in the world;—the danger was from the uncultivated character of the Northmen. Studying only war and seamanship, and indifferent to all industries except a little agriculture, these invaders were decidedly enemies of learning and progress. At last in the year 1013 they conquered all England; and for about thirty years England was ruled by Scandinavian kings. During that time there was no English literature. The sea-robbers had destroyed all the seats of learning; as the English themselves had destroyed Roman civilization and Roman Christianity, so the Northmen very nearly destroyed English civilization and English Christianity. But, with a mighty effort, the English people at last burst their chains; there was no killing or burning to speak of—there was no hate between the rebels and their former masters, they were too akin in blood

for that, and the races had become welded together by intermarriage. But the English people dominated in this blending; and the English people insisted upon having an English king. But the crown had scarcely returned into English hands, when the Norman invasion in 1066 ended English rule and English literature for centuries.

You must not forget these facts in studying the history of the old Anglo-Saxon poetry. For the story of that poetry is closely connected with all these changes and conquests. The language itself was changed; the dialects were being infused with new tendencies—especially the tendency to drop inflexion. All this can be observed in the course of the older poetry. About the close of the 8th century the Danes began to destroy those centres from which the religious poetry had been issued. Northumbrian literature was the first to perish. And during the remainder of the time, before the great Danish invasion, when Ethelred became King of England, there were only two great poems composed of which mention need be made. Both are splendid battle songs. The first is a song of victory—the victory at Brunanburh, in 937, over the Danes and their allies. As this grand song has been superbly translated by Tennyson, I need not say more about it. The other battle song—sometimes called *The Battle of Maldon*, and sometimes *The Death of Byhrtnoth*—is a song of defeat; but it is not less noble in its way than the other. We have not the whole of it—only about 650 lines. It is a kind of epical narrative regarding a real historical fact; for we find the incidents of the poem chronicled in no less than four of the old monkish records of the time. The English hero, a local chief, or headman, finds his country suddenly invaded by a party of Norwegian Vikings. They send a messenger to him, with the usual alternative; "Buy off this spear-rush, if you are wise; or else, stand up and fight." Byhrtnoth, though an old man, sends back word that he will fight,—then he quickly gets his peasant warriors together and awaits the approach of the enemy. There is a river between and the Northmen find it hard to cross. Then happens what seems to me the most interesting incident of the poem and the

most characteristic. The Vikings call out across the river to the English: "You are very brave on your own side of the river, but you dare not let us cross." At this taunt old Byhrtnoth chivalrously, but very foolishly, orders his men to let the Northmen cross the river undisturbed. Then comes the hard "hand-play"—as the English poets call a battle; and Byhrtnoth and all his people are killed. But they died so grandly that this song was made about them. Another thing to notice about the song is that it contains no bad words about the enemy—except to call them heathens. They are not charged with cowardice or cruelty or deceit; in fact they are treated very respectfully—an early proof of the English proverb that a fight makes a good friend. This was the swan song of Old English poetry, Anglo-Saxon poetry. It belongs to the latter part of the 10th century. There was nothing more after it worth mentioning. Let us now turn to Anglo-Saxon prose.

OLD ENGLISH PROSE

ENGLISH prose began much later than English poetry; and there is a much greater quantity of it in preservation. Unfortunately it is not very interesting—being chiefly religious. Indeed the great mass of it consists of Sermons, or Homilies as they are more often called. This term is of Greek origin,—signifying an address delivered to an assembly; but it is used to-day only in reference to religious discourses. To say that all English prose literature is all composed of sermons would be wrong; but I have remarked upon the proportion of the sermons in order that you may more easily realize how very little original English prose of the Anglo-Saxon period exists.

In fact the student need only remember four or five names; Bæda (known in Church history as "the Venerable Bede"), King Alfred the Great, Ælfric, and Wulfstan. If you remember those four you know the names of all the important prose writers. But really only three out of the four directly concern us. Bæda is a very important literary person, but we have none of his English work—so that he belongs rather to Latin literature, except as an influence.

Bæda[1] was a Northumbrian abbot, a great lover of learning, an exact scholar, in so far as it was possible—exact in that time, and a very sympathetic person. He wrote an ecclesiastical history which is really a great treasure to historians. And he wrote many other things, but he wrote in Latin. We know that he made a translation of the *Gospel of St. John* into English; and there is a pretty story about how he died just after dictating the last verse of this translation. Unfortunately the translation has been lost. Bæda's relation to English literature is chiefly through his writings about it in Latin. It is from him that we have the story of Cædmon, and an account of Cædmon's poetry.

[1] Baeda or Bede, the 'Venerable' (637-735).

The most important figure in prose is, of course, King Alfred;[1] but King Alfred either wrote very little matter of an original kind, or else his original work has been lost. We know him as an English writer chiefly through translations which he made—translations out of Latin into English. Historically he is a delightful acquaintance—certainly one of the most lovable kings that ever existed. He was filled with anxiety about the education of his subjects; and he built schools for them. Any king might have done so much—Charlemagne did even more. But I think that no other king went into his own schools to teach boys, as King Alfred did,—and to teach them not in Latin, but in English. King Alfred's great ambition was to establish a purely English system of education, and to train men to write beautifully in their mother tongue. That was why he made these translations. They are four in number:—

The *Ecclesiastical History* of Bæda.
The *World History* of Orosius.
The *Consolations* of Bœthius.
The *Pastoral Rule* of Pope Gregory the Great.

These four books King Alfred certainly translated himself; and they have been well preserved for us. A word about their history. You must remember that they were the best books that King Alfred could get hold of in that half-barbarous age; and, considering all circumstances, he chose them very well.

Of course Bæda's (or Bede's) *History*[2] was very important in that time: it was the only good history of the English church, and it treated of contemporary events in which the English people were naturally interested. The *World History*[3] of Orosius would not be considered a good book now; but it was the only book which Alfred could then get hold of, in which the different countries of the Eastern Hemisphere were described and their geography attempted. Indeed it was as a geography that the King became interested in the work of Orosius. Orosius was a Spanish priest, a pupil of St. Augustine the Great, and

[1] Alfred or Ælfred, King of the West-Saxons (849-901).
[2] *Bæda's Ecclesiastical history* tr. *c* 900.
[3] *Orosius* tr. *c* 893.

he lived in the latter part of the 5th century. In the time of Orosius the long struggle between Christianity and Paganism had not yet ceased. Romans who believed still in the old religion, thought that the misfortune of the Empire had been caused by the neglect of the ancient gods. It was to confute this idea that Orosius wrote his book, which he called by a Latin name signifying "History as Opposed to Pagan Beliefs." Such a history could be scarcely impartial; but King Alfred wanted a geography, and there was a great deal of geography in Orosius. King Alfred, however, observed that Orosius did not seem to know much about the geography of Norway, Sweden, and all that part of Europe now classed as Northern Russia. He therefore got his friends who had travelled to describe that part of the world for him; and he wrote it down—and that is the only part of the book in which we can study King Alfred's own original style. The *Consolations*[1] of Bœthius was for hundreds of years greatly admired throughout Europe, and translated into most modern languages. After King Alfred, Chaucer translated it and after Chaucer, Queen Elizabeth translated it—so that it has been three times translated in England alone—first into Old English, then into Middle English, then into Tudor English. If to-day the book seems to have lost its literary value, that is partly because we have now a hundred better classical texts. Those texts were not available in King Alfred's day. Bœthius was a philosopher and grammarian of the 5th century, whose great talents won him favour with the Gothic King of Italy, Theodoric. But being slandered by some Roman politicians he was imprisoned and finally put to death upon a false charge. While in prison he wrote this book which is a dialogue between himself and an imaginary divinity of wisdom, who instructs him how to bear his sorrows patiently. King Alfred thought the book a good book for serious reading; and he translated it very well. As for the *Pastoral Rule*[2] of Pope Gregory, I need only say that it was written by Pope Gregory as a manual for the use of priests and bishops,—con-

[1] *Boethius De consolatione philosophiae* tr. *c* 888.
[2] *Gregory's Pastoral care* tr. *c* 897.

taining advice about all matters relating to the proper discharge of clerical duties. This book King Alfred translated particularly for the use of the English priests—many of whom were imperfectly educated, and could not easily read the same book in Latin.

So far English prose literature offers us nothing particular in the way of original work: nearly everything is translation. But I said that the student need remember only four or five names, and the fifth mention is not the name of an author but of a chronicle. It is supposed that King Alfred founded this *Chronicle;*—but we are not sure. At all events, from King Alfred's time we have a record of English history, kept by the monks and extending over a period of some 300 years. It came to an end only in the early part of the 12th century.

This is called *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.* It was not kept at one monastery alone, but at least at four different monasteries. It is very much like the Japanese *Nihongi* in one respect—the extraordinary brevity and pithiness of its mentions. Great events as well as small are put down in a few lines. The style is not always like this—neither is it so always, in the Japanese record. But most of it is dry reading—of interest mostly to the historian alone. Nevertheless it does contain some bits of real literature. It contains, for example, that splendid war song about the victory of Athelstan. It contains also a wonderful personal account of William, the terrible Norman conqueror, and this account proves that the monkish writer was a man of truth and courage, not afraid to say what he thought about the conduct of the most awful of English kings. But this is all that we need say about English prose before the Norman Conquest; for the work of Ælfric[1] and of Wulfstan[2] consists almost entirely of sermons. However, I must add one mention about Ælfric: he made the first attempt at an English dictionary; and he attempted long before anybody else, to teach by a system closely resembling what is now called the system of Ollendorf.

[1] Ælfric (*d. c* 1020).
[2] Wulfstan, Archbishop of York (*d.* 1023).