JOHN LYDGATE, MONK OF BURY.

By the late John Greene,

Of Bury St. Edmund's.

John Lydgate is one of the few inmates of St. Edmund's Abbey whose career has been marked in the history of literature or of politics. He rose decidedly above the intellectual level of his Order and his day. His fame as a poet and as a teacher of letters was unbounded among his contemporaries, and his writings have been preserved in MS., with a care which bespeaks the high estimation in which they were held by succeeding generations. Little, however, is known of his personal affairs, beyond the details which can be gathered from his works. He was born at Lydgate, about ten miles from Bury St. Edmund's, and hence took the name of John of Lydgate or John Lydgate. Camden, in his *Britannia or Survey of the British Isles*, published in 1586, notices the distinction to which the "little village" of Lydgate is entitled, as the birthplace of one, "whose genius," he says, "seems to have been fashioned by the muses themselves, insomuch that all graces and elegancies shine forth in his *English* poems."* Camden remarks, with emphasis, that his writings are in English, and it will be seen that to his substitution of a better and purer English for the corrupt Latin and French of most of his predecessors, he is

* Nec procul dissitus est Lidgate viculus qui hoc nomine neutiquam tacendus quod in lucem Johannem Lidgate monachum ediderit—cujus ingenium ab ipsis musis effictum videatur ita omnes veneres et elegantiæ in suis *Anglicis* carminibus renident.

indebted for the greater portion of his fame. He himself thus speaks of his birthplace :—

> "Borne in a village which is called Lidgate
> In olden times a famous castle town
> In Danes time it was beaten down
> Time when St. Edmund Martyr Maid and King
> Was slain at Hoxne."
>
> *Fall of Princes.*

He was born about the year 1375, 50 years later than Chaucer and Gower, was ordained a subdeacon in 1389, a deacon in 1393, and a priest in 1397. Born in or just before the reign of Richard II., he lived through the reigns of Henry IV. and V., and almost to the conclusion of the reign of Henry VI.

The age in which he lived was one of great political disquiet. The wars of ambition in France, beginning with the victory of the English at Agincourt, and ending with their defeats at the hands of Joan of Arc, and their ultimate expulsion from France—the insurrection of Wat Tyler—the treasonable deposition of Richard II.—the unsettled succession of the Crown, and the bloody contentions of the houses of York and Lancaster—all these drained the country of its best blood and discouraged the cultivation of the arts of peace. Moreover, during fifty years of Lydgate's life the world was distracted by the schism in the Papacy. One Pope at Rome and another at Avignon, and for a time a third in Spain, confounded all ecclesiastical order and national policies by their mutual excommunications, maledictions and intrigues. Church discipline was relaxed, and the people perplexed. But the leaven of religious truth was stirring among them. Wickliffe, by his disputations and writings, and translation of the Bible, had placed truth and fable—revelation and tradition—the example of the Apostles and the lives of the Friars—face to face. His doctrines had been industriously diffused throughout the country, and particularly among the middle classes, by his "poor priests," or travelling preachers, who were deeply imbued with his

principles, and provided with MS. extracts from his works. For the invention of printing, though due to this age, was not introduced into general use until after the death of Lydgate. Literature and science were at a low ebb. The colleges and men of learning neglected their usual studies, to engage with ardour in the great controversy of the Popes. The scarcity of books obstructed the progress of learning among the people, yet would not so much affect Lydgate, who had of course access to the literary stores collected in the Abbey. But there was no public opinion or public taste, the art of criticism was unknown, and grammar itself was neglected. The knowledge of Latin, though still the language of divines, lawyers, and physicians, as well as of the public service, had greatly declined. And the Greek language, though studied with assiduity in Italy, was almost unknown in England and in France. Mathematics had been so mingled with astrology, that mathematician and astrologer had been of old synonymous terms; and, while the science was despised, the imposture was loaded with honours, and the wisest princes paid more regard to the responses of astrology than to the counsels of their ministers. The common people of course were helplessly ignorant and illiterate. It was not until Lydgate had attained to ripe manhood* (7 Hen. IV.) that villeins, farmers, and mechanics, were allowed by law to send their children to school.

St. Edmund's Bury, and its monastery, seem at this time to have enjoyed a reasonable amount of repose. The contention between the Abbot and the Bishop of Norwich as to the Bishop's visitatorial rights over the Abbey had been adjusted. The feud between the town and the monastery on questions of jurisdiction and privilege had been quelled, the ravages committed by the townspeople in their attack upon the abbey had been repaired, and the beautiful gateway, which now forms its entrance, stood in all the freshness and perfection of its original design. It is true that in Lydgate's boyhood occurred the notable

* Stat. 7 Hen. IV., c. 17.

insurrection of Wat Tyler, whose lieutenant, Jack Straw, at the head of 50,000 men of Norfolk and Suffolk, pillaged the abbey and beheaded, at Bury, the Prior and the Steward, and also the Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench, Sir John Cavendish, whom they captured at his country seat. But tranquillity had been speedily restored, and the concessions, which the Aldermen and Burgesses took the opportunity of exacting, had been quietly revoked.

Such was the era in which Lydgate lived. Such a general survey of the circumstances which surrounded his, is necessary to a proper appreciation of his attainments and conduct in the various capacities which he filled.

He was, as before observed, a monk and a priest, and he seemed to be proud both of his monastic character and of his connection with our Abbey. For, in every prefix to all his works, he takes care to call himself Monk of Bury. He had the advantage—very rare in those days—of travelling for self-improvement. He was a school-master of great renown in mathematics, astronomy, and rhetoric —and a poet of unbounded popularity.* Of his distinctive qualities as an ecclesiastic a judgment can be formed only from his writings. The treatises on theology which attracted the admiration of his contemporaries are not extant, and his poems cannot be expected to throw a very definite light on his character as a divine. But they abundantly show his familiarity with all pending controversies, and exhibit, as might be supposed, much more respect for the religious notions of the day than the writings of his master, Chaucer, who revels in satirical portraiture of pilgrims, pardoners, and friars. Yet, neither in the choice of his subjects nor in his manner of handling them does he manifest, in the modern sense, a religious spirit, or betray any of that anxiety for the spiritual welfare of mankind which is regarded as the proper attribute of a clergyman. Little, indeed, is heard of the

* Erat autem non solum poeta et Rhetor disertus—verum etiam Mathematicus expertus—philosophus acutus et Theologus non contemnendus.—*Pitts's Brog.* 1590.
Scripsit partim Anglice—partim Latine—partim prosâ partim versu libros numero plures—eruditione politissimus.—*Ibid.*

Bible, but very much of the legends of the saints, and the history of relics, in which he seems to have been profoundly versed. Renowned, however, as he was for learning and attainments, it is remarkable that he received no preferment in the Church, but continued a simple monk to the end of his days.

He was educated for a short time at Oxford. He then travelled into France and Italy, and made himself perfect master of the language and literature of both those countries. In Italy he might have acquired a knowledge of the Greek language, which was unattainable in England, but it is evident that his acquaintance with Greek literature was derived not from original sources, but from Italian versions and imitations. He studied with special ardour the works of Dante and Boccacio, then in the height of their popularity, but seems to have had no taste for the amatory effusions of Petrarch, which were at that time almost equally famous.

Lydgate returned from his travels a complete proficient in polite learning, and at once opened in the monastery at Bury St. Edmund's a school for the instruction of the sons of the nobility. This was not improbably the first Grammar School for the *laity* established in that town. Abbot Sampson more than 200 years before had purchased houses for schools near the present Shire Hall, and from these the still surviving name of School Hall Street was derived. But beyond the three lines which Jocelin de Brakland gives to the fact, existing registers or annals afford no evidence of general instruction being given under the auspices of the Abbot, except that the Precentor, in order to maintain the choir, taught the young monks to sing, to chant, and to read, and that the art of writing and illuminating MSS. was sedulously cultivated among them. Indeed, before the Reformation, schools and colleges were almost exclusively dedicated to the service of the Church. Such was the object of Wykeham's foundations at Winchester and Oxford, and those of Henry VI. at Eton and Cambridge. The earlier patrons of mental

culture never dreamed of encouraging the diffusion of secular learning among the laity. Their object was to improve the education, and with it the influence of the clergy. All the lawyers, physicians, and diplomatists of that day were in Holy Orders. Lydgate's school was one of the few exceptions to the general rule, but even he did not condescend to the instruction of the commonalty, and many of his pupils were, doubtless, destined for the Church. Philology was Lydgate's favourite subject, and, himself a master of language, he instructed his pupils in rhetoric, versification, and composition, with assiduity and success. If these were the abbey schools over which he presided, he resigned the charge on the approach of old age. For there is* extant *a Grant*, dated in the 23rd year of King Henry VI. (about 1445), by which the Abbot appointed Robert Farceux to be Master of the Grammar Schools then said to be *vacant* or without a master, and assigned him a rent-charge out of the rectory of Wetherden, together with board and lodging in the Abbey for himself and a clerical assistant.

But it is on his productions as a poet that Lydgate's fame principally depends. His popularity among his contemporaries was immense, and continued for at least two centuries with little diminution. He was considered second only to Chaucer in genius and fancy, and superior to him in smoothness of versification and purity of language. The poet Gray, no mean authority, ratifies this judgment, and is supported by Hallam, in opposition to less favourable critics. Dean Trench, indeed, in his *English, Past and Present*, takes exception to the preference which has been assigned to Lydgate over Chaucer in respect of the quality of his language. He alleges an increase of words and idioms derived from the Latin; but if Latin forms of speech are more frequent, those derived from the French are much less so, and his language is certainly far more intelligible than that of Chaucer to an English reader of the present day.

* Dugdale, Appendix 38.

*Lydgate's writings are very numerous. No poet ever displayed a greater versatility of talent. He moves with equal ease in every mode of composition. His hymns and ballads have the same degree of merit—and whether his subject be a hermit or a hero, ludicrous or legendary, religious or romantic, a history or an allegory, he writes with equal facility. Works of the most serious and laborious kind are mingled with pieces of popular entertainment and sallies of levity. If a fête were meditated by a civic company, a mask before the King, a mummery before the Lord Mayor, a pageant for a Church festival, or a carol for the coronation, Lydgate was consulted and supplied the poetry.

His principal works, according to the estimate of his own day, were four in number, and entitled, *The Life of our Ladye*, *The Fall of Princes*, *The Siege of Thebes*, and *The Destruction of Troy*. These were all printed as soon as printing became general, and some of them by Caxton himself.

The Life of our Ladye was compiled, as the title informs us, "at the excitation and stirring of the noble and victorious Prince Henry the 5th." This poem contains some sparkling similes, but in the whimsical taste of the day the Virgin is compared indiscriminately with sacred and profane characters, sometimes with Bathsheba and Rachel, and at other times with Helen, Lucretia and Dido.

The Fall of Princes is confessedly a translation of a Latin work by Boccacio, but with much original matter intermixed. It gives a history of persons eminent for their rank and misfortunes, from the time of Adam and Eve to that of the Author. Like most of his productions it is very diffuse, and, therefore, often tedious, but it indicates in many instances the dawning of that metaphorical colouring and facility of versification which mark the poetry of the present times.

There is a splendid manuscript copy of this poem in

*See Warton's *History of British Poetry*, where Lydgate's principal writings are criticised at great length.

the British Museum, embellished with numerous miniatures, and among them a portrait of Lydgate himself.

The Fall of Thebes was intended as a continuation of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, and, is accordingly printed at the end of old editions of that famous work. But Lydgate's style, though natural and easy, does not possess the strength and racy conciseness for which his great master is remarkable, and the comparison which he provokes, is, therefore, not favourable to his fame. After the manner of Chaucer, he represents himself as joining the pilgrims assembled at Canterbury to visit the shrine of Thomas à Becket. The host of the Tabard receives him with great hospitality, and invites him to sup with the pilgrims, on the established condition that he should tell an entertaining story while travelling on the morrow. In obedience to this rule, Lydgate, during the next day's journey, recites the tragical destruction of the city of Thebes. The story belongs to the early days of Greece, yet the martial instruments of his own day are placed in the hands of the actors, and the ranks and offices of the Christian Church are whimsically applied to the temples and ministers of the Greek mythology. The most poetical and original part of the poem is an episode, describing the marriage of Wisdom and Eloquence, or as it is otherwise expressed, of Mercury and Philology. The contrast between this marriage and the ill-omened marriage of Œdipus and Jocasta, between the Muses and Syrens, which graced the one, and the demons of discord and their hideous retinue which attended the other, is strikingly depicted. In the latter we are reminded of the group of allegorical personages whom Virgil in his sixth Æneid assembles at the vestibule of the shades below.

But the most popular of all Lydgate's poems was that entitled, *The History, Siege, and Destruction of Troy.* It was undertaken at the command of Henry IV., and not being completed until after his death was dedicated to his successor, Henry V. The MS. copy which Lydgate presented to that King is in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. It is

professedly a translation or paraphrase of a romance by Colonna, an Italian writer, freely intermingled with original matter. It is replete with picturesque descriptions of rural beauty, clothed in perspicuous and musical numbers. But in this, as in the *Fall of Thebes*, feudal customs and gothic manners are ascribed to the characters and transactions of the days of Agamemnon. The Besiegers of Troy are decked in the armour, and employ the implements of war which belonged to the era of the Crusades; Arabian traditions and Oriental fictions add a rich, but also a grotesque variety to the poem. This inconsistency, partly from ignorance and partly from want of taste, was no blemish in the eyes of that and several succeeding generations of readers. To them the probability of the story, or the portraiture of the Greek and Trojan chieftains, was in no way marred by the introduction of the usages of chivalry—of cannon and Greek fire. Nor would their notions be shocked by the burial of Hector in the principal church of Troy, near the high altar and within a magnificent oratory erected for the purpose after the fashion of a Gothic shrine and with romantic decorations derived from the Saracens.

The *Life of St. Edmund* did not rank so high in the estimation of his contemporaries as the productions previously described. It has never been printed and consequently has received little attention from critics. To the inhabitants of Bury it is the most interesting of all his poems. Its merit is rather of an antiquarian than of a literary kind. It was composed at the command of Abbot Curtis, in consequence of the long visit which King Henry VI. paid to the monastery in 1433, and of the great interest which he conceived in its patron saint. This visit was paid for the purposes of devotion and not of State. Thirteen years later the same King paid another visit for purposes of State and not of devotion, on which occasion he held a Parliament in the refectory of the Abbey, and contrived the death of his uncle Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. In the interval Lydgate had pre-

sented his poem to the King, and been rewarded with a pension of £7 13s. 4d. for his life.

The poem contains not only a legendary life of St. Edmund, but also a history of the Abbey, a description of the shrine, and a regular enumeration of the Abbots, with quaint remarks upon each.

There are MS. copies at Oxford, at Cambridge, and in the British Museum. The last is the very book presented by Lydgate to King Henry VI. It is one of the most beautiful MSS. of that or any other period. It is written on vellum and splendidly illuminated. There are no less than 120 limnings in rich and exquisite colours. A hope would be naturally cherished of finding some architectural illustrations of the noble Abbey, the façade of the grand front, or a view of the cloisters. But there is nothing of the kind. One represents King Henry performing his devotions at St. Edmund's shrine, which is described as of gold on a pedestal of gothic stonework. Another represents the birth of St. Edmund, and gives the interior of a bedroom. Another, two mystical banners said to have been borne by St. Edmund in his wars against the Danes. Some of them have been copied for illustrated histories of costume, on which they supply reliable information.

Among our Author's minor performances is one which especially bespeaks him servant of all work to the Muses. By desire of the Chapter of St. Paul's, in London, he composed some stanzas called, *The Dance of Death*, to be inscribed under a curious series of paintings, which were executed round the cloisters, and represented Death leading off individuals of various ranks and callings. This ghastly masquerade was popular in most countries of Europe. The verses appended were originally composed by one Machaber, in German, and afterwards translated into French, from which Lydgate made a metrical translation into English.

From the account given of the French verses in D'Israeli's *Curiosities of Literature*, the task of translating them appears unworthy of so dignified a scholar as Lydgate. It is some consolation, however, to think that he assisted

in the decoration of those cloisters, in which Milton daily walked when attending the adjacent school, and to which he alludes in that exquisite passage :—

"But let my due feet never fail
To walk the studious Cloisters' pale,
And love the high embowered roof
With antick pillars massy proof,
And storied windows richly dight,
Casting a dim religious light:"

Lydgate lived to a good old age. The exact date of his death is not known. In one of his poems he mentions the death of an Earl of Warwick, which we know from other sources took place in 1446. He must, therefore, have survived to that time, and if, as the best authorities conclude, he lived till 1461, he must have attained the venerable age of 86 years. He was buried in the cemetery of the abbey. His epitaph is extant. It is written in Latin verse—a sapphic stanza—and is only remarkable, like Camden's notice of his birth-place, for the pointed allusion which it makes to his poems being in *English*.

"Mortuus sæclo—Superis superstes
Hic jacet Lydgate tumulatus urnâ
Cui fuit quondam celebris Britannæ
Fama poesis."

John Greene, writer of the above, was born in 1810 at Bury St. Edmund's, where his father, Benjamin Greene, was then in business. Educated at Bury under Mr. Blomfield, and at the Grammar School under Dr. Malkin, he left in 1828 to be articled to Mr. Wayman, a solicitor in large practice. He was himself admitted in 1833, and rapidly rose to be a successful lawyer and an active public man. In 1841 he was elected Mayor, and again filled the office in 1852-3. He was for many years a magistrate for the borough, and occupied other positions of trust. As a journalist and newspaper proprietor he fought political battles from an early age, and became an authority upon local history as well as in matters of literature. As Vice-President of the Athenæum he co-operated in raising the tone of the instruction and entertainment there afforded, and was himself a favourite lecturer.