

LITERARY GIANTS

(For the *N.Z. Tablet*, by ANGELA HASTINGS.)

(2) EDMUND SPENSER.

The fact that it was nearly two hundred years before Aurora again heralded the coming of an English poet is ample proof of the precocity of Chaucer's genius. In 1579 Chaucer stood alone, but within thirty years he was joined by a great company of fellow poets, some courtiers, others professional playwrights. Among the courtiers, Spenser sang his *Faerie Queene*, the swan-song of medievalism; among the latter, Shakspeare created Hamlet and Ophelia.

Well-connected and of good parentage, Edmund Spenser was born in London, in 1552. Having been educated at the Merchant Taylors' School, he went to Pembroke Hall, Cambridge. Although only seventeen, he was then translating Petrarch's Sonnets with admirable skill. A fellow student, Gabriel Harvey, a brilliant pedant, much admired by Sir Philip Sydney, had great influence in moulding Spenser's mind and character. Harvey's academic theories were as follows:—(1) that the true aim of literature was to convey moral instruction; (2) that all literature should follow Greek and Latin models; (3) that the drama should observe unity of time and place, keeping tragedy and comedy distinct; (4) that rhyme was an ignoble artifice and that English poetry should follow the classical method of scansion by long and short syllables.

The lamentable result of Harvey's teaching was that both Spenser and Sydney spent valuable time in composing deplorable hexameters; fortunately, however, they at last escaped from this pedant's bondage, and in his sonnets *Astrophel and Stella*, Sydney has left us beautiful and natural verse; while Spenser, by his *Faerie Queene*, has proved himself one of the greatest masters of English metre. Nevertheless, Harvey's detrimental influence still remained, for both Sydney and Spenser are artificial to an almost exasperating degree; moreover, Spenser is insincere, falsely portraying as noble, persons whom we know were not so. Yet it is possible to read and enjoy the *Faerie Queene*—as Keats did—merely as a wonderful romance.

To Spenser who abhorred the modern, masquerade was essential. Were the subject peace, as in the *Shepherd's Calendar*, then the masquerade was one of shepherds; were the subject war or adventure, as in the *Faerie Queene*, he presents to us a masquerade of knight-errantry.

A considerable portion of Spenser's life was spent in Ireland, whose forests and streams he loved, but whose people he hated. Hither in 1580, he went as secretary to the brutal Lord Grey, whom he untruthfully represents in the *Faerie Queene* as Sir Arthegall, the incarnation of Justice. In 1598 the great Irish Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell having set the whole country aflame from the north to Munster, Spenser had to flee for his life. In 1599, he died in London, poor, neglected, perhaps one might say justly ordained by Nemesis to be the victim of the race he abhorred.

Although the stanza used by the poet in the *Faerie Queene*, and of his own invention, is not really suitable for narrative, it yet suited the artificial character of the poem. The stanza which is known by the poet's own name is admirable for moralising, the wave-like roll of the ninth Alexandrine line producing a fine effect. The following is an example of Spenserian stanza:

“By this the northerne wagoner had set
His sevenfold teme behind the stedfast
starre
That was in ocean waves yet never wet,
But firme is fixt, and sendeth light from
farre
To all that in the wide deepe wandering
arre:
And chearefull Chaunticlere with his note
shrill
Had worned once that Phoebus' fiery carre
In hast was climbing up the easterne hill,
Full envious that night so long his room did
fill.”

It is indeed a great pity that such a master of English verse stifled his real personality under the masquerade of a time-server, for in lines such as the following we get a glimpse of the real man to whom it is evident that the artificial and the archaic were not natural:

“Full little knowest thou, that hast not tride,
What hell it is, in suing long to bide:
To loose good dayes, that might be better
spent;
To waste long nights in pensive discontent;
To speed to-day, to be put back to-morrow;
To feed on hope, to pine with feare and
sorrow;
To have thy Princes grace, yet want her
Peeres;
To have thy asking, yet waite manie yeeres;
To fret thy soule with crosses and with
cares;
To eat thy heart through comfortlesse dis-
paires.”

Poor unhappy Spenser, realising no doubt, in his abject poverty, how much better it is to serve one's God than one's king. Even if he were not so great a genius, could we not forgive him much for awakening the sleeping lyre from which some two hundred years later, floated forth the exquisite music of Keats' soul? Must we not in some degree return to the Elizabethan a small guerdon of thanks for even these lines?—

“Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowering at the
skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands
drest?
What little town by river or sea-shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel
Is emptied of its folks this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

“O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weel;
Thou, silent form! doth tease us out of
thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou
say'st,

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is
all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”
—Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

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