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The Pearl

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THE PEARL

A MIDDLE ENGLISH POEM

A MODERN VERSION IN THE METRE OF THE ORIGINAL

BY

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1908

To

KATHARINE LEE BATES

THE TRANSLATOR TO THE AUTHOR

Poet of beauty, pardon me
If touch of mine have tarnishèd
Thy Pearl's pure luster, loved by thee;
Or dimmed thy vision of the dead
Alive in light and gaiety.
Thy life is like a shadow fled;
Thy place we know not nor degree,
The stock that bore thee, school that bred;
Yet shall thy fame be sung and said.
Poet of wonder, pain, and peace,
Hold high thy nameless, laurelled head
Where Dante dwells with Beatrice.

PREFACE

Among the treasures of the British Museum is a manuscript which contains four anonymous poems, apparently of common authorship: "The Pearl," "Cleanness," "Patience," "Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight." From the language of the writer, it seems clear that he was a native of some Northwestern district of England, and that he lived in the second half of the Fourteenth Century. He is quite unknown, save as his work reveals him, a man of aristocratic breeding, of religious and secular education, of a deeply emotional and spiritual nature, gifted with imagination and perception of beauty. He shows a liking for technique that leads him to adopt elaborate devices of rhyme, while retaining the alliteration characteristic of Northern Middle English verse. He wrote as was the fashion of his time, allegory, homily, lament, chivalric romance, but the distinction of his poetry is that of a finely accentuated individuality.

The poems called "Cleanness" and "Patience," retell incidents of biblical history for a definitely didactic purpose, but even these are frequently lifted into the region of imaginative literature by the author's power of graphic description. "Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight" is a priceless contribution to Arthurian story. "The Pearl," though it takes the form of symbolic narrative, is essentially lyric and elegiac, the lament, it would seem, of a father for a little, long-lost daughter.

The present translation of "The Pearl" was begun with no larger design than that of turning a few passages into modern English, by way of illustrating to a group of students engaged in reading the original, the possibility of preserving intricate stanzaic form, and something of alliteration, without an entire sacrifice of poetic beauty. The experiment was persisted in because its problems are such as baffle and fascinate a translator, and the finished version is offered not merely to students of Middle English but to college classes in the history of English literature, and to non-academic readers.

If "The Pearl" presented no greater obstacle to a modern reader than is offered by Chaucer's English, a translation might be a gratuitous task, but the Northwest-Midland dialect of the poem is, in fact, incomparably more difficult than the diction of Chaucer, more difficult even than that of Langland. The meaning of many passages remains obscure, and a translator is often forced to choose what seems the least dubious among doubtful readings.

The poem in the original passes frequently from imaginative beauty to conversational commonplace, from deep feeling to didactic aphorism or theological dogma, and it has been my endeavor faithfully to interpret these variations of matter and of style, sometimes substituting modern colloquialisms for such as are obsolete, or in other ways paraphrasing a stubborn passage, but striving never to polish the dullest lines nor to strengthen the weakest.

A reader who will observe the difficult rhyming scheme, a scheme that calls for six words of one rhyme and four of another, will understand the presence of forced lines, an intrusion that one must needs suffer in even "The Faerie Queene." These padded lines are a serious blemish to the poem, but the introduction of naïve and familiar expressions is one of its charms, as when the Pearl, protesting like Piccarda in Paradise[1] that among beatified spirits there can be no rivalry, exclaims: "The more the merrier." [2]

The translation may, at many points, need apology, but the original needs only explanation. Readers familiar with mediæval poetry expect to encounter moral platitudes and theological subtlety. Dogma takes large and vital place in the sublimest cantos of Dante's "Paradise," and the English poet is consciously following his noblest master when he puts a sermon into the lips of his "little queen." To modern ears such exposition is at harsh discord with the simple human grief and longing of the poet, but to the mediævalist symbolic theology was a passion. Precisely in the moment when she begins a discourse concerning the doctrine of redemption, Beatrice turns upon Dante "eyes that might make a man happy in the fire," and at its close he looks upon her and beholds her "grow more beautiful." [3] If even Beatrice has been considered mere personification, it is natural that the Pearl should be so regarded, but the plain reader finds in the symbolic maiden of the English poem, as in the

transfigured lady of the Italian, some record of a human being whose loss was anguish, and whose presence rapture, to a poet long ago.

The lover of things mediæval will find in this little book not only the familiar garden of Guillaume de Lorris, of Boccaccio and of Chaucer, but an unexpected and enchanting vision of great forest and rushing water, of hillside and plain, of crystal cliffs and flame-winged birds; of the Pearl among her white peers; of the Apocalyptic Jerusalem, discovered to the poet, it may be, as a goodly Gothic city, though its walls are built of precious stone, and its towers rise from neither church nor minster.

If even a few readers turn from the modern to the original version, the translation will have had fair fortune, for the author of "The Pearl" is, though unknown and unnamed, a poet second only to Chaucer in Chaucer's generation.

It is a pleasure to record my many debts of gratitude: to Professor Frank H. Chase of Beloit, Professor John L. Lowes of Swarthmore, and Dr. Charles G. Osgood of Princeton, for their careful reading of the translation in manuscript, with invaluable assistance and suggestion; to Professor Martha Hale Shackford, and Miss Laura A. Hibbard, for constant aid while the work was in making, and, above all, to Professor Katharine Lee Bates for a critical, line by line, comparison of this version with the original.

[Footnote 1: Par. III.]

[Footnote 2: Pearl, stanza 71.]

[Footnote 3: Par. VII, II. 17-18; Par. VIII, I. 15.]

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WELLESLEY COLLEGE,
June, 1908.

EDITIONS: R. Morris, *Early English text Sc.* 1864; I. Gollancz, London, 1891; C.G. Osgood, Boston, 1906 (with admirable introduction, etc.). TRANSLATIONS: Gollancz (above); S. Weir Mitchell, New York, 1906 (poetic, but incomplete); G.G. Coulton, London, 1906 (metre of the original); C.G. Osgood, Princeton, 1907 (prose).

THE PEARL

I

Pearl that the Prince full well might prize,
So surely set in shining gold!
No pearl of Orient with her vies;
To prove her peerless I make bold:
So round, so radiant to mine eyes,
smooth she seemed, so small to hold,
Among all jewels judges wise
Would count her best an hundred fold.
Alas! I lost my pearl of old!
I pine with heart-pain unforgot;
Down through my arbour grass it rolled,
My own pearl, precious, without spot.

Since in that spot it slipped from me
I wait, and wish, and oft complain;
Once it would bid my sorrow flee,
And my fair fortune turn again;
It wounds my heart now ceaselessly,
And burns my breast with bitter pain.
Yet never so sweet a song may be
As, this still hour, steals through my brain,
While verity I muse in vain
How clay should her bright beauty clot;
O Earth! a brave gem thou dost stain,
My own pearl, precious, without spot!

Needs must that spot with spices spread,
Where such wealth falleth to decay;
Fair flowers, golden and blue and red,
Shine in the sunlight day by day;
Nor flower nor fruit have witherèd
On turf wherein such treasure lay;
The blade grows where the grain lies dead,
Else were no ripe wheat stored away;
Of good come good things, so we say,
Then surely such seed faileth not,
But spices spring in sweet array
From my pearl, precious, without spot.

Once, to that spot of which I rhyme,
I entered, in the arbour green,
In August, the high summer-time
When corn is cut with sickles keen;
Upon the mound where my pearl fell,
Tall, shadowing herbs grew bright and sheen,
Gilliflower, ginger and gromwell,
With peonies powdered all between.
As it was lovely to be seen,
So sweet the fragrance there, I wot,
Worthy her dwelling who hath been
My own pearl, precious, without spot.

Upon that spot my hands I crossed
In prayer, for cold at my heart caught,
And sudden sorrow surged and tossed,
Though reason reconciliation sought.
I mourned my pearl, dear beyond cost,
And strange fears with my fancy fought;
My will in wretchedness was lost,
And yet Christ comforted my thought.
Such odours to my sense were brought,
I fell upon that flowery plot,
Sleeping, — a sleep with dreams inwrought
Of my pearl, precious, without spot.

II

From the spot my spirit springs into space,
The while my body sleeping lies;
My ghost is gone in God's good grace,
Adventuring mid mysteries;
I know not what might be the place,
But I looked where tall cliffs cleave the skies,
Toward a forest I turned my face,
Where ranks of radiant rocks arise.
A man might scarce believe his eyes,
Such gleaming glory was from them sent;
No woven web may men devise
Of half such wondrous beauties blent.

In beauty shone each fair hillside
With crystal cliffs in shining row,
While bright woods everywhere abide,
Their boles as blue as indigo;
Like silver clear the leaves spread wide,
That on each spray thick-quivering grow;
If a flash of light across them glide
With shimmering sheen they gleam and glow;
The gravel on the ground below
Seemed precious pearls of Orient;
The sunbeams did but darkling show
So gloriously those beauties blent.

The beauty of the hills so fair
Made me forget my sufferings;
I breathed fruit fragrance fine and rare,
As if I fed on unseen things;
Brave birds fly through the woodland there,
Of flaming hues, and each one sings;

With their mad mirth may not compare
Cithern nor gayest citole-strings;
For when those bright birds beat their wings,
They sing together, all content;
Keen joy to any man it brings
To hear and see such beauties blent.

So beautiful was all the wood
Where, guided forth by Chance, I strayed,
There is no tongue that fully could
Describe it, though all men essayed.
Onward I walked in merriest mood
Nor any highest hill delayed
My feet. Far through the forest stood
The plain with fairest trees arrayed,
Hedges and slopes and rivers wide,
Like gold thread their banks' garnishment;
And when I won the waterside,
Dear Lord! what wondrous beauties blent!

The beauties of that stream were steep,
All-radiant banks of beryl bright;
Sweet-sighing did the water sweep,
With murmuring music running light;
Within its bed fair stones lay deep;
As if through glass they glowed, as white
As streaming stars when tired men sleep
Shine in the sky on a winter night.
Pure emerald even the pebbles seemed,
Sapphire, or other gems that lent
Luster, till all the water gleamed
With the glory of such beauties blent.

III

For the beauteousness of downs and dales,
Of wood and water and proud plains,
My joy springs up and my grief quails,
My anguish ends, and all my pains.
A swift stream down the valley hailes
My feet along. Bliss brims my brains;
The farther I follow those watery vales,
The stronger joy my heart constrains.
While Fortune fares as her proud will deigns,
Sending solace or sending sore,
When a man her fickle favour gains,
He looketh to have aye more and more.

There was more of marvel and of grace
Than I could tell, howe'er I tried;
The human heart that could embrace
A tenth part were well satisfied;
For Paradise, the very place,
Must be upon that farther side;
The water by a narrow space
Pleasance from pleasance did divide.
Beyond, on some slope undescried
The City stood, I thought, wherefore
I strove to cross the river's tide,
And ever I longed, yet more and more.

More, and still more wistfully,
The banks beyond the brook I scanned;
If, where I stood, 't was fair to see,
Still lovelier lay that farther land.
I sought if any ford might be

Found, up or down, by rock or sand;
But perils plainer appeared to me,
The farther I strode along the strand;
I thought I ought not thus to stand
Timid, with such bright bliss before;
Then a new matter came to hand
That moved my heart yet more and more.

Marvels more and more amaze
My mind beyond that water fair:
From a cliff of crystal, splendid rays,
Reflected, quiver in the air.
At the cliff's foot a vision stays
My glance, a maiden debonaire,
All glimmering white before my gaze;
And I know her, — have seen her elsewhere.
Like fine gold leaf one cuts with care,
Shone the maiden on the farther shore.
Long time I looked upon her there,
And ever I knew her more and more.

As more and more I scanned her face
And form, when I had found her so,
A glory of gladness filled the place
Beyond all it was wont to show.
My joy would call her and give chase,
But wonder struck my courage low;
I saw her in so strange a place,
The shock turned my heart dull and slow.
But now she lifts that brow aglow,
Like ivory smooth, even as of yore,
It made my senses straying go,
It stung my heart aye more and more.