

CHAPTER XIV THE FATHER OF ENGLISH HISTORY

WHILE Caedmon was still singing at Whitby, in another Northumbrian village named Jarrow a boy was born. This boy we know as Bede, and when he was seven years old his friends gave him into the keeping of the Abbot of Wearmouth. Under this Abbot there were two monasteries, the one at Jarrow and the other at Wearmouth, a few miles distant. And in these two monasteries Bede spent all the rest of his life.

When Bede was eight years old Caedmon died. And although the little boy had never met the great, but humble poet, he must have heard of him, and it is from Bede's history that we learn all that we know of Caedmon.

There is almost as little to tell of Bede's life as of Caedmon's. He passed it peacefully, reading, writing, and teaching within the walls of his beloved monastery. But without the walls wars often raged, for England was at this time still divided into several kingdoms, whose kings often fought against each other.

Bede loved to learn even when he was a boy. We know this, for long afterwards another learned man told his pupils to take Bede for an example, and not spend their time 'digging out foxes and coursing hares.'¹ And when he became a man he was one of the most learned of his time, and wrote books on nearly every subject that was then thought worth writing about.

Once, when Bede was still a boy, a fearful plague swept the land, 'killing and destroying a great multitude of men.' In the monastery of Jarrow all who could read, or preach, or sing were killed by it. Only the Abbot himself and a little lad were left. The Abbot loved the services and the praises of the church. 'His heart was heavy with grief and mourning for the loss of his friends; it was heavy, too, with the thought that the services of his church could no longer be made beautiful with song.'

For a few days the Abbot read the services all alone, but at the end of a week he could no longer bear the lack of singing, so calling the little lad he bade him to help him and to chant the responses.

The story calls up to us a strange picture. There stands the great monastery, all its rooms empty. Along its stone-flagged passages the footsteps of the man and boy echo strangely. They reach the chapel vast and dim, and there, before the great altar with its gleaming lights, the Abbot in his robes chants the services, but where the voices of choir and people were wont to join, there sounds only the clear high voice of one little boy.

That little boy was Bede.

And thus night and morning the sound of prayer and praise rose from the deserted chapel until the force of the plague had spent itself, and it was once more possible to find men to take the places of those singers who had died.

So the years passed on until, when Bede was thirty years of age, he became a priest. He might have been made an abbot had he wished. But he refused to be taken away from his beloved books, 'The office,' he said, 'demands household care, and household care brings with it distraction of mind, hindering the pursuit of learning.'²

1 C. Plummer.

2 H. Morley, *English Writers*.

Bede wrote many books, but it is by his *Ecclesiastical History* (that is Church history) that we remember him best. As Caedmon is called the Father of English Poetry, Bede is called the Father of English History. But it is well to remember that Caedmon wrote in Anglo-Saxon and Bede in Latin.

There were others who wrote history before Bede, but he was perhaps the first who wrote history in the right spirit. He did not write in order to make a good minstrel's tale. He tried to tell the truth. He was careful as to where he got his facts, and careful how he used them. So those who came after him could trust him. Bede's *History*, you remember, was one of the books which Layamon³ used when he wrote his *Brut*, and in it we find many of the stories of early British history which have grown familiar to us.

It is in this book that we find the story of how Gregory saw the pretty children in the Roman slave market, and of how, for love of their fair faces, he sent Augustine to teach the heathen Saxons about Christ. There are, too, many stories in it of how the Saxons became Christian. One of the most interesting, perhaps, is about Edwin, King of Northumbria. Edwin had married a Christian princess, Ethelberga, sister of Eadbald, King of Kent. Eadbald was, at first, unwilling that his sister should marry a pagan king. But Edwin promised that he would not try to turn her from her religion, and that she and all who came with her should be allowed to worship what god they chose.

So the Princess Ethelberga came to be Queen of Northumbria, and with her she brought Paulinus, 'a man beloved of God,' as priest. He came to help her to keep faithful among a heathen people, and in the hope, too, that he might be able to turn the pagan king and his folk to the true faith.

And in this hope he was not disappointed. By degrees King Edwin began to think much about the Christian faith. He gave up worshipping idols, and although he did not at once become Christian, 'he often sat alone with silent lips, while in his inmost heart he argued much with himself, considering what was best to do and what religion he should hold to.' At last the King decided to call a council of his wise men, and to ask each one what he thought of this new teaching. And when they were all gathered Coifi, the chief priest, spoke.

"O King," he said, "consider what this is which is now preached to us; for I verily declare to you, that the religion which we have hitherto professed has, as far as I can learn, no virtue in it. For none of your people has applied himself more diligently to the worship of our gods than I. And yet there are many who receive greater favours from you, and are more preferred than I, and are more prosperous in their undertakings. Now if the gods were good for anything, they would rather forward me, who have been more careful to serve them. It remains, therefore, that if upon examination you find those new doctrines, which are now preached to us, better and more efficacious, we immediately receive them without delay."

Another of the King's chief men, approving of his words and exhortations, presently added: "The present life of man, O King, seems to me, in comparison of that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your commanders and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, while the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad. The sparrow, I say, flying in at one door and immediately out at another, whilst he is within is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight into the dark winter from whence he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant. If, therefore, this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed."

3 Layamon wrote (c.1205) about the beginnings of Britain and about King Arthur.

Others of the King's wise men and counsellors spoke, and they all spoke to the same end. Coifi then said that he would hear yet more of what Paulinus had to tell. So Paulinus rose from his place and told the people more of the story of Christ. And after listening attentively for some time Coifi again cried out, "I advise, O King, that we instantly abjure and set fire to those temples and altars which we have consecrated without reaping any benefit from them."

'In short, the King publicly gave his licence to Paulinus to preach the Gospel, and renouncing idolatry, declared that he received the faith of Christ. And when he inquired of the high priest who should first profane the altars and temples of their idols with the enclosures that were about them, Coifi answered, "I; for who can more properly than myself destroy those things which I worshipped through ignorance, for an example to all others through the wisdom which has been given me by the true God?"

'Then immediately, in contempt of his former superstitions, he desired the King to furnish him with arms and a stallion. And mounting the same he set out to destroy the idols. For it was not lawful before for the high priest either to carry arms or to ride upon any but a mare.

'Having, therefore, girt a sword about him, with a spear in his hand, he mounted the King's stallion and proceeded to the idols. The multitude, beholding it, concluded he was distracted. But he lost no time, for as soon as he drew near the temple he profaned the same, casting into it the spear which he held. And rejoicing in the knowledge of the worship of the true God, he commanded his companions to destroy the temple, with all its enclosures, by fire.'⁴

One reason why I have chosen this story out of Bede's *History* is because it contains the picture of the sparrow flitting through the firelit room. Out of the dark and cold it comes into the light and warmth for a moment, and then vanishes into the dark and cold once more.

The Saxon who more than thirteen hundred years ago made that word-picture was a poet. He did not know it, perhaps, he was only speaking of what he had often seen, telling in simple words of something that happened almost every day, and yet he has given us a picture which we cannot forget, and has made our literature by so much the richer. He has told us of something, too, which helps us to realise the rough life our forefathers lived. Even in the king's palace the windows were without glass, the doors stood open to let out the smoke from 'the good fire in the midst,' for there were no chimneys, or at best but a hole in the roof to serve as one. The doors stood open, even though 'the storms of snow and rain prevailed abroad,' and in spite of the good fire, it must have been comfortless enough. Yet many a stray bird might well be drawn thither by the light and warmth.

Bede lived a peaceful busy life, and when he came to die his end was peaceful too, and his work ceased only with his death. One of his pupils, writing to a friend, tells of these last hours.⁵

For some weeks in the bright springtime of 735 Bede had been ill, yet 'cheerful and rejoicing, giving thanks to almighty God every day and night, yea every hour.' Daily, too, he continued to give lessons to his pupils, and the rest of the time he spent in singing psalms. 'I can with truth declare that I never saw with my eyes, or heard with my ears, any one return thanks so unceasingly to the living God,' says the letter. 'During these days he laboured to compose two works well worthy to be remembered besides the lessons we had from him, and singing of psalms:

4 Dr. Giles's translation of *Ecclesiastical History*.

5 Extracts are from letter of Cuthbert, afterwards Abbot of Wearmouth and Jarrow, to his friend Cuthwin.

that is, he translated the Gospel of St. John as far as the words, "But what are these among so many," into our own tongue for the benefit of the church, and some collections out of the *Book of Notes* of Bishop Isidor.

'The Tuesday before the Ascension of our Lord came, he began to suffer still more in his health. But he passed all that day and dictated cheerfully, and now and then among other things said, "Go on quickly; I know not how long I shall hold out, and whether my maker will not soon take me away." But to us he seemed very well to know the time of his departure. And so he spent the night awake in thanksgiving. And when the morning appeared, that is Wednesday, he ordered us to write with all speed what he had begun. . .'

'There was one of us with him who said to him, "Most dear Master, there is still one chapter wanting. Do you think it troublesome to be asked any more questions?"

'He answered, "It is no trouble. Take your pen and make ready and write fast."

'Then the same boy said once more, "Dear Master, there is yet one sentence not written."

'And he said, "Well, then write it."

'And after a little space the boy said, "Now it is finished."

'And he answered, "Well, thou hast spoken truth, it is finished. Receive my head into your hands, for it is a great satisfaction to me to sit facing my holy place, where I was wont to pray, that I may also, sitting, call upon my Father.'"

'And sitting upon the pavement of his little cell, he sang, "Glory be to the Father and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost." When he had named the Holy Ghost he breathed his last, and departed to the heavenly kingdom.'

So died Bede, surnamed the Venerable.

We have come to think of Venerable as meaning very old. But Bede was only sixty-two when he died, and Venerable here means rather 'Greatly to be honoured.'

There are two or three stories about how Bede came to be given his surname. One tells how a young monk was set to write some lines of poetry to be put upon the tomb where his master was buried. He tried hard, but the verse would not come right. He could not get the proper number of syllables in his lines.

'In this grave lie the bones of Bede,'

he wrote. But he could not find an adjective that would make the line the right length, try how he might. At last, wearied out, he fell asleep over his task.

Then, as he slept, an angel bent down, and taking the pen from the monk's tired fingers, wrote the words 'the Venerable,' so that the line ran, 'In this grave lie the bones of the Venerable Bede.' And thus, for all time, our first great historian is known as The Venerable Bede.

BOOK TO READ

The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation, by Bede, translated by Dr. Gileo (Temple Classic), (Dent)