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Life of Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400)
Geoffrey Chaucer, the father of English Poetry and the grand father of English Novel was born about the year 1340 in a family which had already distinguished itself in commerce. His father, John Chaucer was a citizen and a wine merchant. He made much headway day by day in his trade. He was, also related to the royal household which gave Chaucer a fair chance to serve the court through out or nearly the whole of his life. Chaucer passed his boyhood in London on Thames Street near the river - a meeting place of traders from all parts of Europe. Of Chaucer's education we know nothing, except that he was a bibliophile, a studious reader. "No sort of knowledge", says Aubrey de Belincourt, "is alien to a great poet, it is all grist to his mill. He differs from the rest of us in that his mind is a sort of philosopher's stone,

which changed the course metal of experience into a gold." It is certain that in his boyhood he had a fair acquaintance with Latin grammar, rhetoric, logic, classical literature, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. He knew French as well as English from his childhood. When Chaucer was still in his teens, he was appointed in the service of Lionel, afterwards Duke of Clarence on one of the several expeditions of the Hundred year's war. The English army sieged Rheims in vain. At the unsuccessful siege of Rheims, Chaucer was taken a prisoner but he was soon released on the payment of a ransom out of the royal purse. When Chaucer returned to England, he became a squire and the personal attendant and confident of the King. In this period the auspicious stars were shining on Chaucer and he got married to a maid Philippa Roet, sister to the

third wife of John of Gaunt, the illustrious and influential Duke of Lancaster. This marriage into a noble family brought Chaucer in close quarters with John of Gaunt. It is often supposed that this marriage was not a happy one. But it is merely a guess work based on some remarks in his Tales on the misfortunes of matrimony. "From numerous whimsical reference in his early poems," says W. J. Long, "it has been thought that this marriage into a noble family was not a happy one, but this is purely a matter of supposition or of doubtful inference."

From 1370 to 1378 Chaucer was sent to foreign countries on diplomatic missions. In 1372 he was sent to Italy to settle a commercial treaty with Genoa and Florence. In Italy he came into contact with the leading men of letters - Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio and Italian literature which had swayed him to the

very marrow. He dived in the wide ocean of Italian literature to return with jewels to embellish his narratives. "From this Italianization", Palgrave opined "Chaucer derived a variety of range heightening style an improvement he was honoured with an office to be filled by him. In 1379 he was appointed as the Controller of Customs at the port of London. In 1386 he sat in Parliament as Knight of the Shire for Kent. During the last phase of his life Chaucer was beset with economic difficulties. Chaucer adhered to the party of John of Gaunt. As the sun of John of Gaunt set, darkness prevailed on his followers. Chaucer was one of the victims. "From this time until his death", says W.J. Long, "he is up and down on the political ladder, today with money and good prospects tomorrow in poverty and neglect," writing "his complaint

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to his "Empty Purse", which he humorously calls his "Sarcophagus down in this World here". In this last period of his life, his purse was light, as he himself said,

"Ye be my hearte's Star,
Queen of Comfort and
of good Company,
Be heavy again or elles
must I die."

Chaucer's complaint was favourably heard by the new King, Henry IV. He increased his pension in 1399 but Chaucer lived only one year ~~more~~ more to enjoy the pension, for he died on October 25, 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey. He was the first poet to occupy 'the poet's corner' in Westminster Abbey.

The end

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