EVERYMAN'S LIBRARY
EDITED BY ERNEST RHYS

PIERS PLOWMAN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
ARTHUR BURRELL, M.A.

INTRODUCTION

In bringing before the reader a version of this amazing book, I wish, as in the case of my edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, to disarm, if I can, the criticism of the scholar. My version is not intended in any sense for those who can read with ease the alliterative poems of the fourteenth or earlier centuries. Knowing, however, that it requires very careful study to read *Piers Plowman* with ease and pleasure, I have occasionally omitted and always simplified. I have tried to preserve and bring out the meaning, the careless alliteration, and the elusive rhythm. I have regularly modernised the spelling, and have indeed followed the example set by the most learned editor of the poem, who has himself published a modernised text: indeed there are several of such texts in the market. This, as in the case of the Chaucer, is the whole of my offence. The specialist will find echoes from M. Jusserand and Professor Skeat everywhere.

Piers Plowman is regarded as the poor mans book. But, though I hope the spirit is preserved, I have resolutely avoided by any phrase reading into it a special message for to-day. A comment with notes inwoven has indeed called attention to singular survivals, parallels in social life, but these parallels would, even without the reference to them, force themselves upon the attention of any one.

Much has been made about the confusion in the poem; but the main scheme is perfectly clear. Under the favourite form of a vision, it is a picture and an arraignment of the England of Edward III. and Richard II. As the first Isaiah, said to have been a young aristocrat, listened to the call in the Temple, and left a life of ease to act for thirty years as the unsparing critic of the Jerusalem and Judah of his day, so *per contra* our author, a man of humble extraction, it would seem, and of no social pretension, hurled his invective, his satire, and his grim fun at the London and the England of Chaucers time. He is an Old

Testament prophet with English humour added to Hebrew seriousness. We are, whatever we think of the question of authorship, in the presence of one who when in earnest is terribly in earnest, whether he is describing the great plain which lies below Malvern Hills, or the marriage of Jobbery to Falsehood, or the shriving of Gluttony and Wrath, or the iniquities of the hated lawyers at Westminster, or the beauty of Charity, or the triumphant march on Hell by Piers Plowman, the man Christ Jesus. Picture after picture paints the same story, preaches the same sermon; and the story and the sermon are these. The world is good enough if man were not so bad; the birds sing blissfully enough if underneath there droned not on the note of misery; life is sweet and jolly enough if men were not so bitter; Malvern Hills are fair enough if only in the plain, in the great Field Full of Folk, there were more charity, more honesty, more simplicity, more useful work, and a greater wish to set forth on the great pilgrimage. This pilgrimage is not to Canterbury or Walsingham or Compostella or Rome; it is a pilgrimage to Truth, the saint whom men so regularly disregard.

" Knowest thou a holy saint that men call Truth?
Canst thou tell us of the way where that saint dwelleth? "

" God bless me, nay," quoth this fellow then.
" Never saw I palmer with pike-staff and with scrip,
That asked after Truth till ye now in this place."

Instead of seeking Truth, men seek money; instead of honouring Love, they honour Wrath; instead of dealing honestly, they bow down before Pride, Flattery, Bribery, Corruption, and Jobbery, branded under the title of Lady Meed, who is the thin disguise of Alice Perrers, the infamous mistress of Edward III. Kings are weak, barons are cats that seize and poss about the people of the realm, knights are idle hunters, lawyers are thieves; monks and nuns are no better than they should be, merchants are swindlers, bankers are coin-clippers, and all the wonderful array of papal officers and English churchmen are mere plunderers of the land, pocket-fillers, and cheaters of the people. As for Friars, " there was one good Friar, in the days of Francis, but that was long ago." Neither Wit nor Learning, Scripture nor Imagination, helps the seeker one

jot in his pilgrimage; words, words, words, are the end of them. The working man, God save the mark, is an idler, a drinker, a spoil-work, a wastrel, a loafer, and an unemployable; the professional beggar, with limbs professionally broken for his trade, is no worse than he; and ruffling Regulars, covetous lords, cheating shopmen, idle priests, lying pilgrims, and fine-furred harlots, jostle one another in the chaos of the scene. Through all, warning all, and at times tearing and punishing all, stalk the shadow forms of Plague and Storm and Famine, regularly visiting England, God's messengers to the generation that have clean forgotten Him; and though Piers Plowman may go down to Hell and fetch Humanity from Satan's grip, yet there rises the dread shape of Antichrist and sweeps that sweet and gentle figure from the scene; "and it was night."

This is the first impression that one gets of the book known as *Piers Plowman;* but it is a first impression only. Another reading shows another side. Kings may be weak, but they are resolved to deal sharply with Lady Meed. Reason and Conscience have by no means left the land; they plead passionately for the punishment of Wrong (the king's officer). Barons and knights are not all wicked; they can rule far better than the people could who would try their hand at government; and it is they who will, when the time comes, bring the Church to the bar of judgment. Gentlemen are willing and even anxious, though almost impotent, to help against the disorders of the day; some lawyers here and there will plead for God's poor and take no fee for it; some monks and nuns stay in their convents, some hermits in their cells, and there they work or pray; some honesty is still left in trade; and a bishop here and there knows his business, and parish priests here and there do not skip away to London, but stay in their parishes and comfort and feed their people. Unity and Peace and Conscience and Charity never cease to do their work in the human heart, and they raise the banner of the Christ in the field of Armageddon. The working man, the real, true, leal, honest, uncomplaining, working man, is up early and hard at work for very few pence; the cottage woman holds her head up and "puts a good face on it;" some of the beggars are Christ's poor who can perforce do nothing but lie as Lazarus did at Dives' door; and in the mob that fill

the Malvern plain, stretching to Worcester roofs, are honest traders, good ancres, and a stray woman of the streets, eager for the great pilgrimage. Through all, warning all, encouraging all, comes at length, though foreshadowed throughout the former scenes, an ordinary man, PIERS PLOWMAN, the people's man, the people's Christ, poor humanity adorned with love, hardworking humanity armed with indignation, sympathetic humanity clad in the intelligence that knows all and—makes allowances; at one time setting high-born ladies to work, at another passionately attacking the insolent priest, at another calling upon Famine to help him against the loafing, growling wastrel of the streets; but always encouraging the penitent sinful, helping the weak, leading the way in the great journey; a strange figure, Christ in humanity, humanity Christ-clothed, neither all a poor man, nor all a ploughman, nor all a Jesus, but fading and vanishing and reappearing in all forms of his humanised divinity, and ending as the Christ conqueror that from the Cross went down and burst the doors and defied the brazen guns of hell, and brought *Piers Plowmans Fruit* home with victory; yet, even in this majestic battle with Lucifer and Belial, Ragamuffin and Goblin, no omnipotent God far removed from the cares and sorrows of fourteenth-century England, but—

> One like the Good Samaritan and somewhat like Piers Plowman,
> Barefoot, bootless, without spur or spear,
> Riding on an asses back, brightly he lookèd
> Like one that cometh to be dubbèd knight,
> To get him his gilt spurs and his slashed shoon.

This is the general picture of the poem, or of such parts as are here wholly or partly transcribed.

The teaching of the book is negative in that, in face of the tremendous issues, it counsels no opposition to King, Church, Barons, or Knights. It is not inflammatory; it is no harbinger of the Reformation, though it contains a startling prophecy of that great event. It cannot be looked upon as anti-papal, though it was written in the time of the Great Schism; it distinctly disbelieves in the extremes of what the modern world calls democracy, although moral collectivism is its watchword; and it nowhere gives any support to the notion that it foresaw the coming of the great revolt of 1381, or approved of that revolt when it

came. It seems, notwithstanding a few political allusions, to be as remote from politics as are the Gospels themselves, and for the same reason. No form of government, it would say, is in itself bad, if men have the religious spirit; every form of government is bad if they have it not.

On the other hand, the teaching of the book is positive enough, in that it puts its finger on the abuses of the time, lawlessness, falseness, dishonesty, jobbery, money-grubbing, luxury, and idleness. Idleness of all things it cannot away with; the idle rich are scourged as much as the idle poor; idleness, with all its accompanying evils—begging, gluttony, dishonourable dealing, simony, neglect of plain duty, luxury senseless and unbridled, idleness is the unpardonable sin; and Professor Minto has sketched a curious parallel between this poem and the teaching of Thomas Carlyle, who possibly never had the book in his hands. If the undecided king is the victim of his circumstances, the wasters among the rich are what they are because they have not enough true work to do. The same may be said of the unworthy prelate—he does not do his true work. It may equally be said of pardoner, merchant, knight, lady, hermit, pilgrim, huckster and hewer, ditcher and delver. Truth (who stands confusedly for God the Father) rules that each man should have his work and do it well; and the heaviest condemnation of Truth is for those in all ranks of life who instead of working go a-hunting or sit by the road and sing "Hey Trolly Lolly" and "God save you, Lady Em." Piers Plowman himself preaches *work;* he puts his mittens on and hangs a basket round his neck, a mock pilgrim, and off he goes to plough his half-acre. Indeed, the motto of the poem might be EACH MAN MUST PLOUGH HIS HALF-ACRE; but it must be ploughed without the thought of self-enrichment at the cost of others. Work is not enough; Pride and Flattery work, traitors work, lechers work, disers and minstrels work, thieves work, Liar works for the Friars, the Friars themselves work, merchants and their 'prentices work, the Pardoner works hard—they are all Judas children. It is not enough to work; a man must work honestly for himself *and* for his fellows; he must work for his religion, for his king, and for his country.

In the humorous section dealing with his own life, the writer condemns himself for idleness; and we in our day

should say he condemns himself with justice. His definite teaching is that of the Gospel, "The poor ye have always with you: more shame to you. Your rich England should have no poor: it is your bounden duty to rid the world of the miserably poor, and you can do it if you will, by making all work for all." "The poor ye shall have always with you" is a text he never refers to, because he knows that he cannot find it in the Gospels. No autocrat can be more severe than he upon those who will not work. He has one word for the able-bodied loafer, and one alone: "Starve him;" and he knows that such an heroic remedy had not been tried in his own day, any more than it has been tried since.

Along with this gospel of true work for self and others, for home and country, is his definite preaching of home sympathy. England for England is his cry throughout the poem. He hates to see the Pope meddle in the appointment of foreigners to livings that have not fallen vacant; he hates to see men carry good English money to Avignon or Rome; he hates to see men make pilgrimages to St. James and St. Peter, when the pilgrimages they should make are to jails and hospitals, and to their poorer neighbours cottages. If Englishmen go to Sinai and Bethlehem to seek the saints, for Gods sake let them stay there, he says; we want no such pilgrims here. You can find your true pilgrimage by going the round of your own parish.

Again, he is definite enough, as we should expect, in his demand for a clean life. The King has his Alice Perrers; she must go; the bishops have their lemans, the hermits and pilgrims their girls; the beggars breed like rabbits, and are never married. Luxury, lust, and lechery spell the same thing for him, and with unnecessary wealth comes unnecessary wantonness. In passage after passage he declaims against the fatal gift of Constantine and legacies to the Church: religion goes a-hunting with a pack of hounds at his tail, and with this wealth in money and lands comes the ill life, the life of wantonness. Stained windows and gorgeous churches, fine vestments and full church pockets, are as much anathema to him as are the evil deeds of Richard II. and of the king's officers who pay the poor in receipts instead of in money, and who rob the honest worker of his horse, of his wife's honour, and his maid's innocence.

He pleads too for a saner education and for wholesome correction. The working man is told to go and get two sticks and beat his idle wife; another is blamed because his wife's bonnet costs three pounds and his own cost five shillings. The gentleman cockers his children because he is afraid of their catching the plague; he never takes a stick to them. "Spare the switch and spill the son" is to him a maxim equally true if it be applied to idler, wife, thief, beggar, or child. He praises the good school, and laments that not enough money is spent in what we should call scholarships.

Finally, he devoutly prays that the Church will reform herself, and prophesies that if she will not do so the king and the barons will reform her in a way she will not like: and for the idler he begs that Famine will return to England, for only in the sharp correction of drought and hunger will England learn her lesson. That she will learn it finally he cannot hope; for after Calvary comes Antichrist, and Pride and Flattery regain their places; and with this his indignant spirit passes sadly into the dark.

No one can quite tell how far the author represents the true picture of his time. He is in general agreement with Chaucer, who was as earnest as he: any one will see this who cares to look below the surface of the *Canterbury Tales*. It is the custom to say Chaucer is the poet of the rich and Langland of the poor; that Chaucer laughed at and tolerated with Horatian *sang-froid* the foibles, the vices, and even the miseries of his day. Nothing, to my mind, can be further from the truth; and the plain fact is that while Langland is sardonic, indignant, fierce, you never know when you turn a page of Chaucer how near you are to tears; and it must be remembered by those who consider Chaucer an aristocrat and Langland a democrat, that Chaucers poems include the figures of the Parson, Janicula, Griselda, the old man of the Pardoners Tale, and the numberless pictures of the good and charitable rich.

The questions that surround this poem as a text are most difficult. The reader may be referred to Professor Skeats monumental edition, of which it is needless to say I have made the fullest use; to Professor Manlys chapter in the second volume of the *Cambridge History of English Literature*; to Jusserands beautiful and loving studies of the

poem; and to the bibliography given in the *Cambridge History*. Any one, however, who would feel the poem as it ought to be felt must have in his hands, if only for an hour, two books, first a black letter copy of the poem which in these days of reprints cries aloud for publicity, and secondly the volume in which Bishop Stubbs in a fine spirit of recognition has written of our author, *Christ in English Literature*.

We do not know for certain what was the original form of the poem; nor do we know when, how, or with what object the great additions to this form were made. The criterion of allusion will not fully serve as a means for settling dates; for when a work written before the days of printing is being, through forty years or more, constantly altered, contemporary allusion may creep in at any time. The utmost that can, at the present moment, be asserted without fear of contradiction is that the poem was written between 1360 and 1400; that it was constantly and in many cases carelessly revised, and large additions were made; that it was known well in some form by 1381, when a part at least of its teaching and the name of its central figure, Piers Plowman, were made free use of by the leaders of the mob which broke into London, hung the archbishop, killed the lawyers, and dragged the Flemings out of the churches to butcher them in the streets, and that traditionally it has thus been, most unfairly, regarded as the herald and literary expression of that mysterious, ill-timed, and unsuccessful movement. The reader will do well to bear in mind that though the temptation to enlarge upon such an unprecedented event as the sack of part of London must have been great, there is no word in the latest recension of this poem to describe, praise or condemn the movement of Wat Tyler, John Straw, or the Rev. John Ball. Most editors explain this allusion-silence of the last recension by saying the poet was afraid, in consequence of the re-action following, to refer to the uprising of the people; I would rather see in his abjuration of revolt, in his failure to describe the revolt, a continuation of the attitude always adopted by him, that what England needed was a change of heart and not an exchange of purses. The hateful relapses into savagery which marked the Jacquerie, the French Revolution, and the lynching states of to-day

would be to him the negation of the spirit of Piers Plowman, and the throwing away of all that men of all classes have laboriously acquired in the domain of legislation, self-government, and self-control. Thus I hold, while admiring greatly the historical novel called *Long Will*, that the talented authoress, Miss Florence Converse, has erred in her interpretation of the part played by the author and his poem in the troublesome days and awful scenes which marked the year 1381.

And if one is uncertain about the exact date of composition, we are still more in doubt as to the authorship. The poem is attributed variously to Robert or William Langland of Cleobury Mortimer and to William Langley; but no outside allusion of any importance save that of tradition tells us who the writer was. We gather his biography, if it can so be called, from his work. The humorous description of himself occurring only in one text may have been added at any date and by any chantry priest or other person, and it is impossible to say what he means by it; and this section, the fable of the rats, the long additions which follow Gods bull of pardon, and the interludes of the Harrowing of Hell and the Coming of Antichrist, seem to the present editor to point to the composite character of the authorship, a composite character strongly maintained by Professor Manly and denied by Jusserand. It is often forgotten that when a poem dealing with social miseries is produced it may be made a vehicle to represent the feelings and aspirations of thousands more than the author; and that when in addition it becomes popular and is written in an easily imitable form, many hands, authorised and unauthorised, set to work to help, alter, continue, strengthen, weaken, and enlarge. One thinks instinctively of the Book of Psalms, the prophecies of Isaiah, the plays of Shakespeare, the Sonnets of Shakespeare, the Wiclif Bible, the Anglo-Saxon Gospels, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, all of which were (and some of which are still) assigned to one individual author or editor, though criticism has in nearly every case disputed the absolute claims set up for David, Isaiah, Shakespeare, Wiclif, Alfred, and Homer respectively. Such a composite authorship, I think, is the only thing that will account for the almost senseless "improvements" which we con-

tinually meet with in the latest text: and I believe that a careful comparative study of the texts themselves will do more to clear up difficulties than any reasoning from history or allusion. Such study the poem has not yet received. The metre and dialect have received fullest attention; but they yield more information about the scribes than about the author. Yet the scribes themselves may have been the chief offenders.

If we try to reconstruct from a careful reading what manner of man or men penned these visions, we might arrive at some picture like the following. They were or he was a man who loved the country for its birds and flowers, but loved London better for its people; who had been to school and read and remembered eagerly and lovingly, with greater intelligence than care, the Latin Bible and the Latin Fathers; who lived a precarious, poor, tramping life of mass or chantry priest, earning little and continually consorting, partly by choice and partly by necessity, in the most intimate way, with friars, theologians, merchants, pilgrims, beggars, drunkards, loose women, and with the honest and hard-working poor; who knew all the tricks of shop and cheaping, of mendicancy and mendacity; who was not averse from honest idleness, and who was stung to penitence and indignation by what he saw, heard, and felt in himself and in those around him; who hated the trickery, the aristocracy, and intricacies of law which he did not understand, and who loved the scenes in the gentleman's dining-hall and in the taverns, where he was quite at home; who abhorred—perhaps with envy—the easy life of the rich noble and the fat priest; who by his reading, his monastic training, and his own poverty imagined that the saviour of society would come from and belong to the only class he thoroughly understood; who wrote roughly the rough alliterative verse, indigenous to the land and very pedestrian, but who in his inspired hours, which were many, almost rose, notwithstanding his awkward tools, to the spiritual heights of Bunyan and Shelley and to the poetic heights of the Old Testament prophets. Like Bunyan and Shelley, he lived in stormy times; like them, he had, as an individual, been through some of the moral cataclysms of which he spoke; like them, he was prone to fall, but ready to rise; but he did not use the nervous

beauty of Bunyans prose or the metaphysical wings of Shelleys scholarship, strengthened by his unearthly and Titanic force. This, however, was his advantage, for his work was capable of being enlarged and successfully imitated. For he wrote for the ordinary man, who, whether he be king or baron, bishop or pardoner, merchant or Lombard, hermit or pilgrim, knight or knave, may, if his heart counsel him, echo the last words:

" I will become a pilgrim,
And wend as wide as the world lasteth
To seek—Piers Plowman."

ARTHUR BURRELL.

ISLEWORTH, *January* 1, 1912.

USEFUL BOOKS

Professor Skeat's edition of *Piers Plowman.* 2 vols.
J. Jusserand, *L'épopée Mystique* (the book has been translated).
Professor Manly's chapter and bibliography in the *Cambridge History of English Literature.*
Black Letter editions of the Poem (British Museum).
Trevelyan's *England in the Times of Wyclif.*
Cutts' *Scenes of the Middle Ages.*
Florence Converse, historical novel, *Long Will.*
Riley's *Illustrations of London Life from Original Documents.*
Bishop Stubbs' *Christ in English Literature.*

Much interesting matter will be found in pamphlets and magazines. These can be identified *s.v.* Langland or Plowman, or in the bibliographies of Periodical Literature in the British Museum.

Piers the Plowman. Printed by R. Crowley, 1550; by Owen Rogers, 1561; Edited with notes, glossary, etc., by T. D. Whitaker, 1813; by T. Wright (with the Crede), 1842, 1856, 1895; by W. W. Skeat, E.E.T.S., 1867, etc.; with Richard the Redeless, 1873; for Clarendon Press Series, 1869, 6th ed., revised, 1891; three parallel texts, with Richard the Redeless, notes, glossary, etc. (Clarendon Press), 1886.

Parallel extracts from 29 MSS. of Piers the Plowman, W. W. Skeat, E.E.T.S., 1866; In Modern Prose, with introduction by K. Warren, 1895, 1899; by W. W. Skeat (King's Classics), 1905.

See J. M. Manly, Piers the Plowman and its Sequence, Cambridge History of Literature, vol. ii.; and E.E.T.S., 1908; and Jusserand, Piers the Plowman, the work of one or of five, 1909.

To all who understand or would understand

PIERS PLOWMAN

I saw myself, a youth, almost a boy, in a low-pitched wooden church. The slim wax candles gleamed, spots of red, before the old pictures of the saints. There stood before me many people, all fair-haired peasant heads. From time to time they began swaying, falling, rising again, like the ripe ears of wheat when the wind in summer passes over them. All at once a man came up from behind and stood beside me. I did not turn towards him, but I felt that the man was Christ. Emotion, curiosity, awe, overmastered me. I made an effort and looked at my neighbour. A face like everyones, a face like all mens faces. The eyes looked a little upward, quietly and intently; the lips closed, not compressed; the upper lip as it were resting on the other; a small beard parted in two; the hands folded and still; and the clothes on him like everyones.

"What sort of Christ is this?" I thought. "Such an ordinary, ordinary man. It cannot be." I turned away, but I had hardly turned my eyes from this ordinary man when I felt again that it was really none other than Christ standing beside me. Suddenly my heart sank and I came to myself. Only then I realised that just such a face is the face of Christ—a face like all mens faces.

Turgeniev.

I wente forth wyde-where walkynge myn one
In a wyde wyldernesse.

THIS IS NO. 571 OF *EVERYMAN'S LIBRARY*. THE PUBLISHERS WILL BE PLEASED TO SEND FREELY TO ALL APPLICANTS A LIST OF THE PUBLISHED AND PROJECTED VOLUMES ARRANGED UNDER THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS:

TRAVEL ❦ SCIENCE ❦ FICTION
THEOLOGY & PHILOSOPHY
HISTORY ❦ CLASSICAL
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
ESSAYS ❦ ORATORY
POETRY & DRAMA
BIOGRAPHY
REFERENCE
ROMANCE

THE ORDINARY EDITION IS BOUND IN CLOTH WITH GILT DESIGN AND COLOURED TOP. THERE IS ALSO A LIBRARY EDITION IN REINFORCED CLOTH

LONDON: J. M. DENT & SONS LTD.
NEW YORK: E. P. DUTTON & CO.

CONTENTS

THE VISION
OF THE
FIELD FULL OF FOLK