

Roger Bacon.

Starting now from about the same point in time where we left off, our opening scene will take us to the old University town of Oxford. It is a rare city for a young American to visit; its beautiful High Street, its quaint Colleges, its Christ Church Hall, its libraries, its Magdalen walks and tower, its charming gardens of St. John's and Trinity, its near Park of Blenheim, its fragrant memories—all, make it a place where one would wish to go and long to linger. But in the far-away time we speak of it was a walled city, with narrow streets, and filthy lodging houses; yet great parliaments had been held there; the royal domain of Woodstock was near by with its Palace; the nunnery was standing, where was educated[78] the Fair Rosamund; a little farther away was the great religious house of Abingdon and the village of Cumnor; but of all its present august and venerable array of colleges only one or two then existed—Merton, and perhaps Balliol, or the University.[33]

But the schools here had won a very great reputation in the current of the thirteenth century, largely through the scholarship and popularity of Grosseteste, one while Bishop of Lincoln, who held ministrations at Oxford by reason of his connection with a Franciscan brotherhood established here; and among those crop-haired Franciscans was a monk—whom we have made this visit to Oxford to find—named Roger Bacon. He had been not only student but teacher there; and a few miles south from the King's Arms Hotel in Broad Street, Oxford, is still standing a church tower, in the little parish of Sunningwell, from which—as tradition affirms—Roger Bacon studied the heavens: for he[79] believed in Astrology, and believed too in the transmutation of metals; and he got the name of magician, and was cashiered and imprisoned twice or thrice for this and other strange beliefs. But he believed most of all in the full utterance of his beliefs, and in experimenting, and in interrogating nature, and distrusting conventionalisms, and in search for himself into all the mysteries, whether of nature or theology.

He had sprung from worthy and well-to-do parents in the Western County of Somersetshire. He had spent very much money for those days on his education; had obtained a Doctorate at Paris; his acuteness and his capacity for study were everywhere recognized; he knew more of Greek than most of his teachers, and more of Hebrew than most of the Rabbis, and more of Chemistry and Physics generally than probably any other man in England. He took a Friar's vows, as we have said; but these did not save him from interdiction by the Chief of his Order, by whom he was placed under ten years of surveillance at Paris—his teachings silenced, and he suffering almost to starvation. A liberal Pope (for those days), Clement IV., by his intervention set[80] free the philosopher's pen again; and there came of this freedom the *Opus Majus* by which he is most worthily known. Subsequently he was permitted to return to his old sphere of study in Oxford, where he pursued afresh his scientific investigations, but coupled with them such outspoken denunciations of the vices and ignorance of his brother Friars, as to provoke new

condemnation and an imprisonment that lasted for fourteen years—paying thus, in this accredited mediæval way, for his freedom of speech.

It is not improbable that we owe to him and to his optical studies—in some humble degree—the eye-glasses that make reading possible to old eyes: and his books, first of any books from English sources, described how sulphur and charcoal and saltpetre properly combined will make thunder and lightning (*sic facies tonitrum et coruscationem*). We call the mixture gunpowder. In his *Opus Majus* (he wrote only in Latin, and vastly more than has appeared in printed form) scholars find some of the seeds of the riper knowledges which came into the *Novum Organum* of another and later Bacon—with whom we must not confound this sharp,[81] eager, determined, inquiring Franciscan friar. He is worthy to be kept in mind as the Englishman who above all others living in that turbid thirteenth century, saw through the husks of things to their very core.

He died at the close of the century—probably in the year 1294; and I have gone back to that far-away time—somewhat out of our forward track—and have given you a glimpse of this Franciscan innovator and wrestler with authorities, in order that I might mate him with two other radical thinkers whose period of activity belonged to the latter half of the succeeding century: I mean Langlande and Wyclif. And before we go on to speak of these two, we will set up a few way-marks, so that we may not lose our historic bearings in the drift of the intervening years.

Bacon died, as we have said, in 1294. William Wallace fought his great battle of *Cambuskenneth* in 1297. Those who have read that old favorite of school-boys, Miss Porter's "*Scottish Chiefs*," will not need to have their memories refreshed about William Wallace. Indeed, that hero will be apt to loom too giant-like in their thought, and with a halo[82] about him which I suspect sober history would hardly justify. Wallace was executed at *Smithfield* (Miss Porter says he died of grief before the axe fell) in 1305; and that stout, flax-haired King Edward I., who had humbled Scotland at *Falkirk*—who was personally a match for the doughtiest of his knights—who was pious (as the times went), and had set up beautiful memorial crosses to his good Queen Eleanor—who had revived King Arthur's Round Table at *Kenilworth*, died only two years after he had cruelly planted the head of Wallace on *London Bridge*. Then came the weak Edward II., and the victories of Bruce of *Bannockburn*, and that weary Piers Gaveston story, and the shocking death of the King in *Berkeley Castle*. The visitor to *Berkeley* (it is in Gloucestershire, and only two miles away from station on the Midland Railway) can still see the room where the murder was done: and this Castle of *Berkeley*—strangely enough—has been kept in repair, and inhabited continuously from the twelfth century until now; its moat, its keep, and its warders walks are all intact.

After this Edward II. came the great Edward III.—known to us through Froissart and the Black[83] Prince[34] and *Crécy* and *Poitiers*, and by *Windsor Castle*—which he built—and by

Chaucer and Wyclif and Langlande and Gower, who grew up while he was king; known to us also in a worse way, for outliving all his good qualities, and becoming in his last days a peevish and tempestuous voluptuary.

Some few foreign way-marks I also give, that the reader may have more distinctly in mind this great historic epoch. Dante died in exile at Ravenna, six years before Edward III. came to power. Boccaccio was then a boy of fourteen, and Petrarch nine years his elder. And on the year that Crécy was fought and won—through the prowess of the Black Prince, and when the Last of the Tribunes, as you see him in Bulwer Lytton's novel, was feeling his way to lordship in Rome,—there was living somewhere in Shropshire, a country-born, boy poet—not yet ripened into utterance, but looking out with keen eyes and soreness of heart upon the sufferings of [84] poor country folk, and upon the wantonness of the monks, and the extravagance of the rich, and the hatefulness of the proud—all which was set forth at a later day in the Vision of Piers Plowman.

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