

ROCHESTER BRIDGE;

A POEM WRITTEN IN A.D. 1601.

COMMUNICATED BY WILLIAM BRENCHLEY RYE.

WHILE I was Keeper of the Printed Books in the British Museum, it became my duty in 1873 to recommend for purchase for the National Library a small volume of the utmost rarity, no copy having previously found a place among the treasures of early English literature in that depository. The subject of this book was a poem, written by JOHN WEEVER, and entitled, "*The Mirror of Martyrs, or The Life and Death of that thrice valiant Captaine, and most godly Martyre Sir John Oldcastle, Knight, Lord Cobham.*"—*Printed by V. S. for William Wood, 1601.* Two years earlier, Weever had published a volume of "*Epigrammes, in the oldest cut and newest fashion,*" one of which, viz. the 22nd Epigram of the "fourth week," is inscribed, "*Ad Gulielmum Shakespeare,*" whom the author calls "Honietong'd Shakespeare," who, at the date of the composition of the work in 1595, was 31 years of age. The *Mirror of Martyrs* was acquired at the sale of the library of the Rev. Thomas Corser, for a sum considerably below that (viz. £27) which Mr. Huth had some years before paid for his copy. When I examined the poem, I found to my surprise that it contained several stanzas in commendation of Rochester; the author having evidently confounded Sir John Oldcastle, who was Baron of Cobham only in right of his wife Joan, Lady of Cobham, with John, the third Baron of Cobham, the co-founder with Sir Robert Knolles of Rochester Bridge. Believing that this poetical description of Rochester will prove of interest, I have copied the verses; the work from which they are extracted being ex-

cessively rare, and unknown to the editors of *The Kentish Garland*, lately published by Miss Devaynes.

(I.)

But ROCHESTER shall eccho forth my praise
 If Rochester remaine not most ungratefull,
 A sin in fashion for these humerous daies :
 To whome wee owe, to them we are most hatèfull :
 O that it were in fashion ; I am sure
 Nine daies (like wonders) fashions but endure.

(II.)

I must upraide her else, not praises giving,
 How first my favours patronag'd her pride :
 But in too much remembrance of the living,
 In darke oblivion dead mens praise wee hide.
 A begger from the dunghill once extold,
 Forgets himselfe, whom what he was of old.

(III.)

When first her gravell-purified river,
 No Bridge upon her bore-lod'n bosome bore,
 Some high renowne I strived for to give her,
 And made a Bridge her swiftest currant o're.
 Sir Robert Knowles was in the same an actor :
 But *Cobham* was the chiefest benefactor.

(IV.)

And *Walter Merton*, Mertons Colledge founder,
 (Why doth mischance neere charitie thus dwell),
 With lime and sand gainst tempest-beating bound her,
 Who from her top by great misfortune fell,
 Riding along the workemen for to see :
 Fortune is alwaies vertuesemie.

(V.)

Kinde *Rochester* it seemes hath yet respected
 His name should live in ages for to come,
 In whose Memoriall lately is erected
 An Epitaph upon a marble tombe :
 But one good turne another still doth crave,
 For this ; they found a goblet in his grave.

: (VI.)

Warham, th'archbishop once of Canterbury,
 The Iron barres upon the Bridge bestow'd :
Warner the copings did reedifie,
 And many since their liberall minds have show'd,
 Whose deedes in life (if deedes can Heaven merit)
 Made them in death all heavenly joyes inherit.

(VII.)

Thus *Medway* by this faire stone Bridge adornéd,
 Made *Thamesis* enamor'd of her beauty :
 All other rivers England had he scornéd,
 Yeelding to her kinde love-deserving duty,
 In smiles, embracements, gracious lookes and greetings,
 In amorous kisses, murmures, night-set meetings.

(VIII.)

But how he courted, how himselfe hee carri'd,
 And how the favour of this *Nymph* he wonne,
 And with what pompe *Thames* was to *Medway* marri'd,
 Sweete *Spenser* shewes (O grieffe that *Spenser's* gone !)
 With whose life Heaven a while enricht us more,
 That by his death wee might be ever pore.

(IX.)

Let marriners which shute his arches through,
 Describe aright his length, his bredth, his beautie ;
 Riding in's sight, they vaile their bonnet low,
 And strike their top-saile in submissive dutie :
 He'el not be brav'd ; no vessell since the marriage,
 Will he receive ; but of a lowly carriage.

(X.)

Some higher ship, whose sailes are swolne with pride,
 Whose bloody flaggs like fierie streamers hing,
 At *Chattam* lies, and from her hollow side,
 With double charge sendes forth a culvering,
 Which rends the shore, and makes the towne to shake,
 The Bridge her breath, herselfe in snuffe doth take.

(XI.)

The fierie smoake this Engine vomits out,
 To him transported by the aire and wind[es]
 Hee straight receives, and prisons in throughout
 His hollow vaults, his crevices and rindes,
 So th'aire redoubling in his arches, slips
 A mocking eccho to these powder ships.

(XII.)

This Bridge revives my dying memorie,
 Over the which I passe into the Towne,
 To view the sacred Church of Trinitie
 Built by *Sir Robert Knowles* : and (though unknowne)
 That Chauntrye joyning to the same I founded,
 Where Harmonie for ever should be sounded.

I would remark that the author has strangely ignored

the existence of the ancient wooden bridge, the predecessor of the stone erection of Sir Robert Knolles and John, Lord Cobham. According to Stow, the first mention of a bridge in this place was in the year 1215, but I have met with a reference as early as 1130, when a contribution of 3s. 4d. was made towards repairing the bridge against the coming of the King—Henry I.: “*Et in Ponte de Rovec’ reficiend’ cont^a adventu’ Reg’ iij. s’ z iij. d’.*”^{*} This was on the interesting occasion of the solemn dedication of the Cathedral, performed by the Archbishop of Canterbury on Ascension Day, May 11th, 1130, when the King and many nobles and ecclesiastical dignitaries were present. But on the evening of that day a dreadful conflagration occurred, which consumed a great part of the city, and, according to some authorities, caused some damage to the new building. King Henry I. was a great benefactor to the Cathedral, and his statue with that of Matilda—the “good Queen Maud”—are on each side of the west door of the nave. These, although much defaced, are considered to be the earliest sculptured effigies of English sovereigns we possess. The early wooden bridge was very dangerous and unsafe, and several accidents both to men and horses are recorded; frequent repairs became necessary. In 1264 it was set on fire by Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester; in 1277 (the year of Bishop Walter de Merton’s death) it was in a very ruinous condition; in 1281 “all the bridge,” according to Stow, was borne down by the ice and snow, and for many subsequent years the Medway was crossed in boats. In 1309 it was much damaged by the ice (*Chronicle, by a Rochester Monk, Cott. Vesp. A. 22*). It was again broken in 1339–40, when a great boat was used for carrying over passengers, horses, carts, etc., four mariners being employed to work it.

The picturesque old structure of stone—the successor to that of wood—was erected between the years 1387 and 1392. For nearly five centuries it had spanned the Medway, and its strength and solidity severely taxed the energies and skill of the Royal Engineers, when it was demolished in

* *Magnum Rotulum Scaccarii*, Edit. Hunter, 1833, p. 64.

1857 and 1858 to make way for the present stately bridge of iron and its uncomely neighbour.

The "iron bars" on the bridge, mentioned in the 6th stanza as being the gift of Archbishop Warham, were probably manufactured at Mayfield in Sussex. They remained for very many years a source of great attraction to travellers, as I have had occasion to remark in Vol. VI. of *Archæologia Cantiana*, and only disappeared about the beginning of the present century to be replaced by stone balustrades which now adorn the esplanade. Charles Dickens, whose attachment to the scenes of his childhood is well known, had one of these set up in his garden at Gad's Hill, believing it to be a veritable relic of the *old* bridge. John Warner, mentioned in Stanza VI., was a merchant of Rochester.

I subjoin two curious anecdotes, one in relation to the aforesaid "iron bars;" the other to an "accident" happening to a merry young gentleman; both being derived from Thomas Lupton's *Thousand Notable Things*, book xi., 1660, pp. 316, 318; the previous editions containing only ten books. They are as follows:

"The reason why that famous Rochester Bridge hath iron barrs of great strength and height.

"That famous Bridg of Rochester is all baricadoed with iron bars, of great strength and height, but few know the reason, and 'tis fitting to be divulged. A man's wife in Rochester kept a paramour, and because she could not enjoy him as oft as she would, they both plotted to murder hir husband, which they villanously performed, and having so done, they resolved to sew him up in a sackcloth, and in the dark to throw him over the Bridg into the river. The paramour having him upon his back, the woman spyed one of his feet hang out. Stay, (said she,) I will stitch up this foot which hangs out, and in stitching she stitched it fast to her paramour's coat behinde unwittingly. He coming to the Bridg, went to hoyst him over, and violently casting him off, the weight of the dead body, of a suddain puld him over too, and so they both were drowned, who being taken up and known, the woman was examined, confessed, and was executed. And hereupon, to prevent the like mischiefes, the Bridg was incompassed with Iron Bars."

II. *"A strange thing, yet very true, of a Young Gentleman, who being a little merry with wine, came to Rochester over the Bridge.*

"'Tis known for truth, yet very strange, that a Gentleman being a little merry with wine came to Rochester over a Bridg on horseback in the dark of the evening, there being but a plank laid

over betwixt two arches, with small railes for foot folks only, for the Bridg was repairing: he not knowing of it, nor his horse making any stop, when he came into his inne, the man bad him welcome, and wondering to see him there, asked how and which way he came into town. The gentleman replyed, Over the Bridg: 'tis impossible, said his host, for a horse to come over; the other defended it. Next morning, the Gentleman and his Host went to the Bridg, and he seeing the height of it from the water, the narrownesse of the plank, and the greatness of the water, fell down dead immediately, and could not be recovered. Many have been known to have been swallowed up with grief, and to make away themselves, by thinking what evils they went to suffer. Scarce any, before this man, is known to have died, for escapeing great and imminent dangers."

Stanza IV. The accounts differ as to the manner of Bishop Walter de Merton's death. According to the Chronicle of Thomas Wikes, it is stated that he fell from his horse when fording a certain river ("fluvium quendam"); his servants drew him to the shore, but he expired shortly afterwards on Oct. 27th, 1277. Kilburne (*Survey of Kent*, p. 228) says that he was drowned in passing over the Medway at Rochester in a boat, there being no bridge—but this is certainly a mistake as we have seen; the bridge at that time being in a very ruinous condition. He is the earliest prelate of the see of Rochester, whose place of burial can be actually ascertained. His "marble tomb" in the Cathedral, mentioned in the sixth stanza, was erected in 1598 at the expense of his College, and during the wardenship of Sir Henry Savile. "He was honourably interred near the tomb of his predecessor St. William (writes the Bishop's latest biographer),* in the north wall of the north aisle, and nearly opposite to his throne. The executors' accounts give us particulars of the sumptuous monument which arose over his remains, the chief peculiarity of which is its insertion in the thickness of the wall itself beneath the sill of a window, and the insertion of new lights filled with coloured glass, just above the level of the monumental slab, and casting their chequered hues upon the inlaid brass of Limoges work. The whole expense of masonry, Limoges work, and iron railing,

* *Life of Walter de Merton, Bishop of Rochester.* By Edmund [Hobhouse], Bishop of Nelson, N.Z. Oxford, 1859, pp. 40-42.

amounted to £70.* Within was laid the tall and portly body of the most munificent, probably the most able, statesman and prelate of the thirteenth century, habited in his bishop's robes, and accompanied by the sacred insignia of his office, the pastoral staff and chalice. Twice, at intervals of nearly three centuries, he has been visited in his chamber of death. Once in the time of Sir Henry Savile's warden-ship, 1598; once in our own day. On the first occasion, the brass having been defaced by the reformers of Edward VI.'s reign,† it was desired to replace the graven effigies of the founder and his simple inscription with sculptured effigies of alabaster and with a lengthier inscription, followed by a tetrastich. On removing the original slab, the body was found fully open to view; the staff on being touched fell to pieces, but the chalice, being sound, was removed to the College, and laid up in the 'Cista Jocalium'—the repository chest of all the College valuables."

"When, in the year 1852 [1849?] the College was strongly urged, by the decayed condition of the tomb, to undertake a complete renewal, it was resolved not to replace the inscription or the sculpture, but to follow as nearly as possible the details of the original work, which the executors' accounts happily supplied. The sculptured effigies were then removed, and in the presence of deputed members, both of the Chapter and of the College, the honoured remains were again laid bare: the skeleton was found to measure six feet, even in its decay; the fragments of the staff and of the cloth of gold were still discernible, but no other relic, not even a ring."

Stanzas VII., VIII. Edmund Spenser died January 16th, 1599; the "Marriage of the Thames and Medway" occurs in book iv., canto xi., of the *Faërie Queene*, the first edition of which appeared in 1590, the second in 1596.

* One item of these accounts has been strangely misquoted by Warton, and copied by Denne, who give it as follows: "*In materialibus circa dictam tumbam defricandam.*" The correct reading is: "*In maceoneria circa dictam tumbam defuncti.*"

† In a rare little volume by Gilles Corrozet, I met with the following interesting passage, which I have not seen quoted in any English work: "Au mois d'Aoust au dit an (1550), furent vendus publiquement, en la Megisserie, plusieurs ymages, tables d'autels, peintures, & autres ornemens d'Eglise, qu'on auoit apporté & sauez des Eglises d'Angleterre." (*Les Antiquitez de Paris*, 1577.)

Stanza XII. In 1395, John, Lord Cobham, erected at his own expense a chapel or chantry "at the bridge foot," *i.e.* the Rochester end of the bridge. It was intended chiefly for the use of travellers, and the founder desired it to be called *Allesolven* (All Souls) Chapel, dedicating it to the Holy Trinity, and appointing three chaplains to officiate in it. The instruments of foundation and endowment are printed in *Registrum Roffense*, pp. 556, 558. When the bridge chamber was pulled down a few years ago, the remains of this ancient chapel were discovered and opened up. These have been preserved and repaired with brick and stone, and a new building has been erected for the use of the bridge wardens. An inventory of its "goods and stuff, jewels and plate," sold in 1552, has been printed, by Canon Scott Robertson, in Vol. X. of *Archæologia Cantiana*. There was likewise a small chapel at the Strood end of the bridge, erected by Gilbert de Glanville, Bishop of Rochester (1185-1215), and dedicated to St. Mary.