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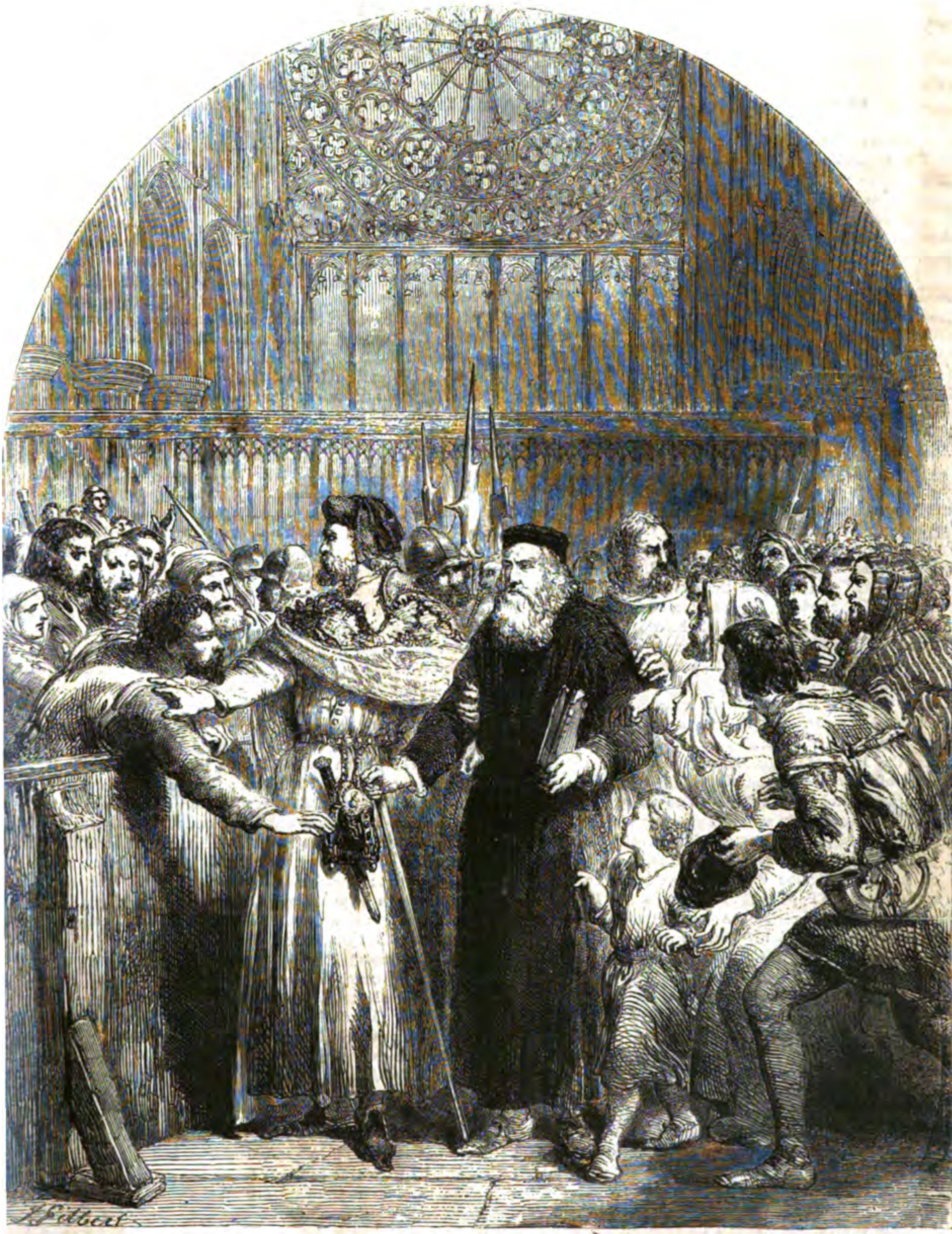

WYCLIFFE, ATTENDED BY THE DUKE OF LANCASTER, APPEARING IN ST. PAUL'S, AT THE CITATION OF THE PRELATES.

WYCLIFFE.

The history of Wycliffe is intimately connected with that of the stormy period in which he lived. He was born in the year 1324, in the parish of Wicklif, a village upon the banks of the Tees, near Richmond, Yorkshire. His name, taken from the place of his birth, like that of many of his contemporaries, is spelt in a variety of ways; thus in the document which appointed him papal delegate in 1374, we find it as John Wiclif; and in other places as Wickliff, Wiclef, and De Wycliffe.

Long before Wycliffe had attained any celebrity as a divine, he had won for himself a high position at Oxford as one of the first scholars at that famous university. At a comparatively early age he had entered as a commoner at Queen's College, founded by Thomas Eaglesfield, confessor to Queen Philippa; but he soon removed to Merton, where he distinguished himself as a laborious student of law and philosophy. But, besides this, he made himself so thoroughly acquainted with the Scriptures as to obtain for himself among the eminent divines of his day the title of Evangelical Doctor.

The first public recognition of his talents, however, was obtained by his famous controversy with the mendicant friars. These friars were divided into four principal orders—the Dominicans, established by St. Dominic, the founder of the Inquisition; the Franciscan, or Grey Friars, founded by St. Francis, of Assisu; the Carmelites, or White Friars; and the Augustinian or Austin Friars. Among these friars the ecclesiastical government of many cities was divided, and thus, in London, the districts where they were licensed to beg are to this day known as Black-friars, White-friars, Gray-friars, and Austin-friars. Their authority for mendicancy was derived, they said, from the example of their great Master, who was himself of poor and low estate. But, unlike Him, they soon began to arrogate to themselves enormous power and privileges, and vast estates were made over to them as death-bed gifts by the superstitious wealthy.

Into the controversial warfare on behalf of the university, in which he held the post of Divinity Professor, Wycliffe entered heart and soul; but on the death of Simon de Islip, Archbishop of Canterbury, he was deposed from the wardenship of Baliol, in exchange for which he was presented with the living of Fillingham in the county of Lincoln,—an exchange which he did not submit to, however, without an unsuccessful appeal to the Pope.

It is not necessary for us further to enter into the history of this remarkable controversy than to mention, that while it was going on, a war of principles seemed to have commenced between the King of England and the Pope. Urban V. demanded of Edward that the tribute promised by the weak-minded John, in token of submission to the papacy, should be paid. This demand, however, came a day too late, for the House of Commons, just then erected into a real political estate and power in the realm, united with the monarch in resisting the claim. To bring the dispute to an issue, an embassy was sent to meet the Pope at Bruges, composed of Englishmen of the highest rank and station. Among them were the Bishop of Bangor, Wycliffe, and his future patron, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. To this celebrated man, the third son of Edward III., was confided the task of defending the English Commons before the pontiff; and much of the real business of the state, during the end of this, and the beginning of the next, reign, was committed to his management. The immediate effects of the mission to the fine old continental city of Bruges were a species of reconciliation between the King and the Pope, and a partial settlement of some disputed points concerning church government; but of the steps which led to these changes no certain records remain.

It would be beyond our scope to trace the disputant Wycliffe through all the changes of opinion his mind underwent during his residence at Bruges, or to speak of those writings, full of invective, which assailed the principal doctrines of his church, and charged its propounders with corruption in doctrine and depravity in practice,—with pride, avarice, tyranny, and usurpation, and which, in the one word "Antichrist," hurled defiance at its head. We should rather follow the Christian Wycliffe to his quiet living at Lutterworth, in Leicestershire, where, from the old pulpit, yet preserved, he preached the truth on Sundays to the poor and unlearned; and from the altar chair—a relic yet among the village valuables—he dispensed that "good and comfortable" doctrine which inculcates charity with all men. We would rather linger amid the shades of that retirement, where, like Chaucer's good parish priest, he went about preaching and teaching in the way-sides and waste places of the world, visiting the widow and the fatherless in their affliction and keeping himself unspotted from the world.

But we cannot, if we would, linger in this quiet village. Wycliffe's out-spoken opinions were far too plain and honest for his enemies; and scarcely had he settled at Lutterworth, ere he was cited by the prelates to appear before them at St. Paul's, to answer for alleged false doctrines and heresies.

From Lutterworth to London was no day's journey in 1377; but the summons of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London was by no means to be neglected, and so Wycliffe was, perforce, obliged to appear. The wise old king had died ere the message had arrived, and the child-sovereign, Richard II., sat upon the throne. But Wycliffe had a firm protector in the Duke of Lancaster, and so to him he appealed for aid in this extremity; and John of Gaunt, as regent during Richard's minority, had perhaps many reasons besides friendship which induced him to lend his countenance to the Reformer; and so, supported by Lancaster and Earl Percy, the Marshal of England, and attended by a vast concourse of people, the venerable divine appeared before his judges in old St. Paul's.

Courtenay, Bishop of London, attended by a great crowd of ecclesiastics, was there to meet him, as he entered escorted by the Duke and his armed retainers; and hundreds of the "common people" pressed forward to catch a glimpse or request a blessing of the defender of their rights. It was a matter of no small difficulty for Wycliffe to make his way through the people, and the Earl Marshal demanded of the Bishop that honourable place should be accorded to the divine. Then the Bishop, annoyed to find Wycliffe so attended, exclaimed,—"Lord Percy, if I had known what maisteries you would have kept in the church, I would have kept you from coming hither."

But John of Gaunt was ready to beard the Bishop in his stronghold, and so he tauntingly replied, with a loud voice,—"He shall keep such maisteries here, though you say nay."

Lord Percy. Wycliffe! sit down; for you have many things to answer to, and you need to repose yourself on a soft seat.

The Bishop. It is unreasonable that one cited before his ordinary should sit during his answer. He must and shall stand!

The Duke of Lancaster. The Lord Percy his motion for Wycliffe is but reasonable. And as for you, my lord bishop, who are grown so proud and arrogant, I will bring down the pride, not of you alone, but of all the prelacy in England!

The Bishop. Do your worst, sir.

Duke of Lancaster. Thou bearest thyself, so brag upon thy parents [Courtenay's father was the powerful Duke of Devonshire], which shall not be able to help thee.

The Bishop. My confidence is not in my parents nor in any man else, but only in God, in whom I trust; by whose assistance I will be bold to speak the truth.

On this the duke exclaimed in great wrath, "Rather than I will take these words at his hands, I would pluck the bishop by the hair out of the church!"

This last inconsiderate expression, though spoken in undertone, was caught up by the bystanders, and a great tumult ensued, by which the trial was suspended.

The mob, ever prone to act upon impulse, immediately proceeded to violence. Spreading themselves over the city, they committed several acts of depredations: "broke open," says Fox, "the Marshalsea, and Fleet, and all the prisons;

and, not content with this, a vast number of them went to the duke's palace at the Savoy, where, missing his person, they plundered his house."

But the tumult did not end here. While the mob were rioting in the town, murdering a clergyman in mistake for the Earl Marshal, and committing various other acts of unwarrantable violence, the duke proceeded to the house of peers, and preferred a bill against the City of London to deprive it of its privileges, and alter its jurisdiction. In the midst of the tumult Wycliffe escaped from the city.

Once more Wycliffe sought the retirement of his favourite Lutterworth. But not for long was he allowed to repose amidst its quiet scenery. The church, baffled in its first endeavour to punish the boldness of the divine, resolved to make another attempt to exterminate both him and the new doctrines which he taught. New summonses arrived from Rome, and Wycliffe was again called to appear. Once more therefore—this time at Lambeth, and fortunately without the protection of Lancaster and his soldiers—the aged man appeared: but, in the midst of the explanation and defence of Wycliffe, a mandate from the queen-mother, the widow of the Black Prince, stopped all further progress. The legal proceedings were set aside, and the notion of imprisonment for opinion alone, as being contrary to the laws of England, rejected; and Wycliffe was dismissed by the prelates, with the injunction "not to preach any more those doctrines which had been objected to."

But a nobler work than defending himself from factious accusations now engaged his attention: no less a work than the translation of the Bible into English. The "Gospel Doctor," despite of the opposition of Courtenay and the ecclesiastics, succeeded in his design; and, though Bishop Arundel declared it "a dangerous thing to translate the Holy Scriptures out of one tongue into another, for in a translation the same sense is not easily kept," the English Bible of Wycliffe was eagerly sought for and perused by the people.

Courtenay, Bishop of London, was strenuous in his opposition to Wycliffe; and, as the Reformer himself was protected from the effects of his power, he violently persecuted his followers, who were called Lollards. This name is supposed to have been derived from Walter Lollardus, one of the teachers of these truths on the continent, or from a German word which signifies psalm-singers.

Richard II. countenanced Courtenay in persecuting the Lollards, and a proclamation was issued against all persons who should teach or maintain these opinions, or possess any of the books and pamphlets written by Wycliffe and his followers. Many suffered imprisonment, and were required to do penance under the most degrading circumstances; although it does not appear that any were actually put to death during this reign.

Having finished his translation of the Scriptures, Wycliffe again became obnoxious to the clergy. It had long been a political tenet among certain of the clergy, that ignorance is the mother of devotion; and, therefore, the Bible had been locked up from the common people. But Wycliffe was not satisfied with exposing this religious tyranny: he ventured to attack the grand doctrines of his opponents in what he called his "Sixteen Conclusions." These conclusions being reluctantly condemned by the Chancellor of Oxford, at the instigation of Courtenay, at this time primate, Wycliffe appealed to the king and parliament; but being deserted by his fickle patron, the Duke of Lancaster, he was obliged to make a kind of recantation at Oxford, before Courtenay, six bishops, and other clergymen, who had condemned his doctrines as heretical; and by the king's order was expelled the university, where he had annually read lectures on divinity.

Once more, and finally, the persecuted Wycliffe found an asylum at Lutterworth, but giving fresh provocation by his writings, he was again exposed to the vengeance of his enemies. But Providence delivered him from human hands. He was struck with a palsy soon after, but still attended divine worship; till a repetition of this fatal malady carried him off, in his church at Lutterworth, in December, 1384, and he was buried in its chancel.

The malice of his enemies, however, sought him in the grave. The council of Constance, in 1415, passed a decree, condemning forty-five articles of his doctrines; and, pronouncing him to have died an obstinate heretic, ordered that his bones should be dug up and thrown upon a dunghill. The execution of this act of malice was deferred till the year 1428. But in that year, Fleming, then Bishop of Lincoln, sent his officers to Lutterworth. The grave of Wycliffe was opened, and his bones taken out and burned. The ashes being carefully collected, were thrown into the Swift, a brook which flows near the town: his enemies thinking, no doubt, that his name and doctrines, as well as his remains, would perish for ever. But they have been disappointed; for, as Fuller observes, "the Swift conveyed his ashes into the Avon, the Avon into the Severn, the Severn into the narrow seas, and they into the main ocean; and thus the ashes of Wycliffe were made the emblems of his doctrines, which have been dispersed all the world over."

THE COUNTRY SQUIRE.

FROM THE "LITERARY FABLES" OF YRIARTE.

A country squire, of greater wealth than wit
(For fools are often blessed with fortune's smile)
Had built a splendid house, and furnished it
In splendid style.

"One thing is wanting," said a friend; "for, though
The rooms are fine, the furniture profuse,
You lack a library, dear sir, for show,
If not for use."

"'Tis true; but, zounds!" replied the squire with glee,
"The lumber-room in yonder northern wing
(I wonder I ne'er thought of it) will be
The very thing.

"I'll have it fitted up without delay
With shelves and presses of the newest mode
And rarest wood, befitting every way
A squire's abode.

"And when the whole is ready, I'll despatch
My coachman—a most knowing fellow—down,
To buy me, by admeasurement, a batch
Of books in town."

But ere the library was half supplied
With all its pomps of cabinet and shelf,
The booby squire repented him, and cried
Unto himself:—

"This room is much more roomy than I thought;
Ten thousand volumes hardly would suffice
To fill it, and would cost, however bought,
A plaguy price.

"Now, as I only want them for their looks,
It might, on second thought, be just as good,
And cost me next to nothing, if the books
Were made of wood.

"It shall be so, I'll give the shaven deal
A coat of paint—a colourable dress,
To look like calf or vellum, and conceal
Its nakedness.

"And gilt and letter'd with the author's name,
Whatever is most excellent and rare
Shall be, or seem to be ('tis all the same),
Assembled there."

The work was done; the simulated hoards
Of wit and wisdom round the chamber stood,
In bindings some; and some, of course, in *boards*,
Where all were wood.

With such a stock, which seemingly surpass'd
The best collection ever form'd in Spain,
What wonder if the owner grew at last
Supremely vain?

What wonder as he paced from shelf to shelf,
And conn'd their titles, that the squire began,
Despite his ignorance, to think himself
A learned man?

Let every amateur, who merely looks
To backs and bindings, take the hint, and sell
His costly library—for painted books
Would serve as well.