

## Books in the Middle Ages.

BY FREDERICK ROGERS.



HERE is a lovely little piece of word painting in Longfellow's "Golden Legend" which ought to be dear to all who care for books. The scene is the scriptorium in the Convent of Hirschau, in the Black Forest, and Father Pacificus is standing by the window looking out at the setting sun. The scriptorium is the chamber set apart in the convent for the writing and binding of books. Every great religious house had its scriptorium, wherein men, and youths undergoing their novitiate, found employment in the writing of service books for the church, or other books for the library. Father Pacificus, who is engaged in transcribing the New Testament, has finished his day's work, and now in the cool of the evening is pondering, as he is an old man, whether he shall have strength and grace given him to go on till he reaches the last words in the Apocalypse; when, nature lover that he is, he is carried out of his own sad thoughts by the beauty of the landscape, and utters the following tender and touching words:—

"How sweet the air is! How fair the scene!  
I wish I had as lovely a green  
To paint my landscapes and my leaves!  
How the swallows twitter under the eaves!  
There now, there is one in her nest:  
I can just catch a glimpse of her head and breast,  
And will sketch her thus in her quiet nook  
For the margin of my Gospel book."

The words express the true spirit of the mediæval artist in love with his work for its own sake, and gathering all the beauty he could see in nature to create the beautiful in art. In the middle ages the knowledge of the arts of writing and illuminating was almost entirely confined to the monks. They were also the custodians and binders of books. Strength first and then beauty, was the aim of the monastic binder when he was working for his convent, and the books were heavy with metallic bosses, clasps, and corner plates fixed to the great oak boards. In the German and Italian religious houses to-day the visitor is often shewn

"A volume old and brown,  
A large tome bound  
In brass and wild boar's hide,  
Wherein was written down  
The names of all who had died  
In the convent."

There is, however, ample evidence to show that monks were not always the careful stewards that some writers would make them appear. Father Berington, a scholarly and fair-minded Roman Catholic priest of the beginning of the present century, furnishes valuable information of the state of the monasteries, and complains bitterly of the idleness and ignorance of the clergy, and of their shameful neglect of the books it was their duty to preserve. The majority of them were without any appreciation of the value of literature, or care for what was committed to their charge. It was the select few to whom their labour was really a prayer, like Father Pacificus in the poem, who created the

beautiful illuminated missals that are of such priceless value now. The scriptorium, even though estates were sometimes given for its sole support, was never very much crowded with workers.

A famous Englishman of the fourteenth century, Richard de Bury, who was Bishop of Durham and King's Treasurer from 1333 to 1345, has displayed his love for books in a delightful treatise called "Philobiblon," and has left a record of the lending library of his time. Tutor to Edward III. when that monarch was a prince, and his faithful friend and adviser when he was king, Richard de Bury was a powerful man in the realm, and he used his power to help the poor, and to forward learning by the collection of books. He had been a monk himself and knew the carelessness of the monks, and he lashes them pitilessly with his sarcastic pen for the way they neglected their libraries. He lashes them for their bad morals, too; he was a man of pure life himself, but he seems to have regarded the neglect of books as being almost as great a sin as a breach of the seventh commandment. In a passage of inimitable descriptive writing he illustrated at once his monastic aversion to women, and his passionate love for books, making the books themselves raise their voices in protest against the neglect of degenerate priests.

"In the first place," say the books, "we are expelled with heart and hand from the domiciles of the clergy apportioned to us by hereditary right, in some interior chamber of which we had our peaceful cells; but to their shame, in these nefarious times we are altogether banished to suffer opprobrium out of doors; our places, moreover, are occupied by hounds and hawks, and sometimes by a biped beast—woman to wit—whose cohabitation was formerly shunned by the clergy, from whom we have ever taught our pupils to fly more than from the asp and the basilisk; wherefore this beast, spying us at last in a corner protected only by the web of some long deceased spider, drawing her forehead into wrinkles, laughs us to scorn, abuses us in virulent speeches, points us out as the only superfluous furniture lodged in the whole house, complains that we are useless for any purpose of domestic economy whatever, and recommends our being bartered away forthwith. . . ."

"We labour under various diseases; our back and sides ache; our native whiteness, perspicuous with light, is now turned tawny and yellow, so that no medical man who may find us out can doubt that we are afflicted with jaundice; some of us are gouty, as our diseased extremities evidently indicate. The damp, smoke, and dust with which we are constantly infected dim the field of our visual rays, and superinduce ophthalmia upon our already bleared eyes. . . . We are thrown into dark corners, ragged, shivering, and weeping; or with holy Job seated on a dunghill. . . . We are sold like slaves and female captives, or left as pledges in taverns without redemption. We are given to cruel butchers to be cut up like sheep and cattle. . . . Every botcher, cobbler, and tailor whatever, or any artificer of whatever trade, keeps us shut up in prison for the superfluous and lascivious pleasures of the clergy."

