

# LIFE IN THE MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITY

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY

“ A Clerk ther was of Oxenford also,  
 That unto logik hadde longe y-go  
 As lene was his hors as is a rake,  
 And he was not right fat, I undertake ;  
 But loked holwe, and therto soberly.  
 Ful thredbar was his overest courtepy,  
 For he had geten him yet no benefyce,  
 Ne was so worldly for to have offyce.  
 For him was lever have at his beddes heed  
 Twenty bokes, clad in blak or reed,  
 Of Aristotle and his philosophye,  
 Than robes riche, or fithete, or gay sauntrye.  
 But al be that he was a philosophre,  
 Yet hadde he but litel gold in cofre ;  
 But al that he might of his freendes hente,  
 On bokes and on lerninge he it spente,  
 And bisily gan for the soules preye  
 Of hem that yaf him wherwith to scoleye,  
 Of studie took he most cure and most hede,  
 Noght o word spak he more than was nede,  
 And that was seyde in forme and reverence  
 And short and quik, and ful of hy sentence.  
 Souninge in moral vertu was his speche.  
 And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche.”

## 2 LIFE IN THE MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITY

AN account of life in the medieval University might well take the form of a commentary upon the classical description of a medieval English student. His dress, the character of his studies and the nature of his materials, the hardships and the natural ambitions of his scholar's life, his obligations to founders and benefactors, suggest learned expositions which might

in judicious hands  
 Extend from here to Mesopotamy,

and will serve for a modest attempt to picture the environment of one of the Canterbury pilgrims.

Chaucer's famous lines do more than afford opportunities of explanation and comment; they give us an indication of the place assigned to universities and their students by English public opinion in the later Middle Ages. The monk of the "Prologue" is simply a country gentleman. No accusation of immorality is brought against him, but he is a jovial huntsman who likes the sound of the bridle jingling in the wind better than the call of the church bells, a lover of dogs and horses, of rich clothes and great feasts. The portrait of the friar is still less sympathetic; he is a frequenter of taverns, a devourer of widows' houses, a man of gross, perhaps of evil, life. The monk abandons his cloister and its rules, the friar despises the poor

## INTRODUCTORY

3

and the leper. The poet is making no socialistic attack upon the foundations of society, and no heretical onslaught upon the Church; he draws a portrait of two types of the English regular clergy. His description of two types of the English secular clergy forms an illuminating contrast. The noble verses, in which he tells of the virtues of the parish priest, certainly imply that the seculars also had their temptations and that they did not always resist them; but the fact remains that Chaucer chose as the representative of the parochial clergy one who

“wayted after no pompe and reverence,  
Ne maked him a spyced conscience,  
But Cristes lore, and his apostles twelve,  
He taughte, but first he folwed it himselve.”

The history of pious and charitable foundations is a vindication of the truth of the portraiture of the “Prologue.” The foundation of a new monastery and the endowment of the friars had alike ceased to attract the benevolent donor, who was turning his attention to the universities, where secular clergy were numerous. The clerks of Oxford and Cambridge had succeeded to the place held by the monks, and, after them, by the friars, in the affection and the respect of the nation.

Outside the kingdom of England the fourteenth century was also a great period in the growth of

#### 4 LIFE IN THE MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITY

universities and colleges, to which, all over Europe, privileges and endowments were granted by popes, emperors, kings, princes, bishops and municipalities. To attempt to indicate the various causes and conditions which, in different countries, led to the growth, in numbers and in wealth, of institutions for the pursuit of learning would be to wander from our special topic ; but we may take the period from the middle of the fourteenth to the middle of the fifteenth century as that in which the medieval University made its greatest appeal to the imagination of the peoples of Europe. Its institutional forms had become definite, its terminology fixed, and the materials for a study of the life of the fourteenth century student are abundant. The conditions of student life varied, of course, with country and climate, and with the differences in the constitutions of individual universities and in their relations to Church and State. No single picture of the medieval student can be drawn, but it will be convenient to choose the second half of the fourteenth century, or the first half of the fifteenth, as the central point of our investigation.

We have already used technical terms, " University," " College," " Student," which require elucidation, and others will arise in the course of our inquiry. What is a University ? At the present day a University is, in England, a corporation whose

## INTRODUCTORY

5

power of granting certain degrees is recognised by the State ; but nothing of this is implied in the word "University." Its literal meaning is simply an association. Recent writers on University history have pointed out that *Universitas vestra*, in a letter addressed to a body of persons, means merely "the whole of you" and that the term was by no means restricted to learned bodies. It was frequently applied to municipal corporations ; Dr Rashdall, in his learned work, tells us that it is used by medieval writers in addressing "all faithful Christian people," and he quotes an instance in which Pisan captives at Genoa in the end of the thirteenth century formed themselves into a "*Universitas carcera-torum*." The word "College" affords us no further enlightenment. It, too, means literally a community or association, and, unlike the sister term University, it has never become restricted to a scholastic association. The Senators of the "College of Justice" are the judges of the Supreme Court in Scotland.

We must call in a third term to help us. In what we should describe as the early days of European universities, there came into use a phrase sometimes written as *Studium Universale* or *Studium Commune*, but more usually *Studium Generale*. It was used in much the same sense in which we speak of a University to-day, and a short sketch

## 6 LIFE IN THE MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITY

of its history is necessary for the solution of our problem.

The twelfth century produced in Europe a renewal of interest and a revival of learning, brought about partly by the influence of great thinkers like St Anselm and Abelard, and partly by the discovery of lost works of Aristotle. The impulse thus given to study resulted in an increase in the numbers of students, and students were naturally attracted to schools where masters and teachers possessed, or had left behind them, great names. At Bologna there was a great teacher of the Civil Law in the first quarter of the twelfth century, and a great writer on Canon Law lived there in the middle of the same century. To Bologna, therefore, there flocked students of law, though not of law alone. In the schools of Paris there were great masters of philosophy and theology to whom students crowded from all parts of Europe. Many of the foreign students at Paris were Englishmen, and when, at the time of Becket's quarrel with Henry II., the disputes between the sovereigns of England and France led to the recall of English students from the domain of their King's enemy, there grew up at Oxford a great school or Studium, which acquired something of the fame of Paris and Bologna. A struggle between the clerks who studied at Oxford and the people of the town broke out at the time of John's

## INTRODUCTORY

7

defiance of the Papacy, when the King outlawed the clergy of England, and this struggle led to the rise of a school at Cambridge. In Italy the institutions of the Studium at Bologna were copied at Modena, at Reggio, at Vicenza, at Arezzo, at Padua, and elsewhere, and in 1244 or 1245 Pope Innocent IV. founded a Studium of a different constitution, in dependence upon the Papal Court. In Spain great schools grew up at Palencia, Salamanca, and Valladolid; in France at Montpellier, Orleans, Angers, and Toulouse, and at Lyons and Reims. The impulse given by Bologna and Paris was thus leading to the foundation of new Studia or the development of old ones, for there were schools of repute at many of the places we have mentioned before the period with which we are now dealing (*c.* 1170-1250). It was inevitable that there should be a rivalry among these numerous schools, a rivalry which was accentuated as small and insignificant Studia came to claim for themselves equality of status with their older and greater contemporaries. Thus, in the latter half of the thirteenth century, there arose a necessity for a definition and a restriction of the term Studium Generale. The desirability of a definition was enhanced by the practice of granting to ecclesiastics dispensations from residence in their benefices for purposes of study; to prevent abuses it was essential that such permission should

## 8 LIFE IN THE MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITY

be limited to a number of recognised *Studia Generalia*.

The difficulty of enforcing such a definition throughout almost the whole of Europe might seem likely to be great, but in point of fact it was inconsiderable. In the first half of the thirteenth century, the term *Studium Generale* was assuming a recognised significance; a school which aspired to the name must not be restricted to natives of a particular town or country, it must have a number of masters, and it must teach not only the Seven Liberal Arts (of which we shall have to speak later), but also one or more of the higher studies of Theology, Law and Medicine (*cf.* Rashdall, vol. i. p. 9). But the title might still be adopted at will by ambitious schools, and the intervention of the great potentates of Europe was required to provide a mechanism for the differentiation of General from Particular *Studia*. Already, in the twelfth century, an Emperor and a Pope had given special privileges to students at Bologna and other Lombard towns, and a King of France had conferred privileges upon the scholars of Paris. In 1224 the *Studium Generale* of Naples was founded by the Emperor Frederick II., and in 1231 he gave a great privilege to the School of Medicine at Salerno, a *Studium* which was much more ancient than Bologna, but which existed solely for the study of Medicine

## INTRODUCTORY

9

and exerted no influence upon the growth of the European universities. Pope Gregory IX. founded the Studium at Toulouse some fifteen years before Innocent IV. established the Studium of the Roman Court. In 1254 Alfonso the Wise of Castile founded the Studium Generale of Salamanca. Thus it became usual for a school which claimed the status of a Studium Generale to possess the authority of Pope or Emperor or King.

A distinction gradually arose between a Studium Generale under the authority of a Pope or an Emperor and one which was founded by a King or a City Republic, and which was known as a *Studium Generale respectu regni*. The distinction was founded upon the power of the Emperor or the Pope to grant the *jus ubique docendi*. This privilege, which could be conferred by no lesser potentate, gave a master in one Studium Generale the right of teaching in any other; it was more valuable in theory than in practice, but it was held in such esteem that in 1292 Bologna and Paris accepted the privilege from Pope Nicholas IV. Some of the Studia which we have mentioned as existing in the first half of the thirteenth century—Modena in Italy, and Lyons and Reims in France—never obtained this privilege, and as their organisation and their importance did not justify their inclusion among Studia Generalia, they never took rank among the universities of

## 10 LIFE IN THE MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITY

Europe. The status of Bologna and of Paris was, of course, universally recognised before and apart from the Bulls of Nicholas IV.; Padua did not accept a Papal grant until 1346 and then merely as a confirmation, not a creation, of its privileges as a Studium Generale; Oxford never received, though it twice asked for, a declaratory or confirmatory Bull, and based its claim upon immemorial custom and its own great position. Cambridge, which in the thirteenth century was a much less important seat of learning than Oxford, was formally recognised as a Studium Generale by Pope John XXII. in 1318; but its claim to the title had long been admitted, at all events within the realm of England. After 1318 Cambridge could grant the *licentia ubique docendi*, which Oxford did not formally confer, although Oxford men, as the graduates of a Studium Generale, certainly possessed the privilege.

Long before the definition of a Studium Generale as a school possessing, by the gift of Pope or Emperor, the *jus ubique docendi*, was generally accepted throughout Europe, we find the occurrence of the more familiar term, "Universitas," which we are now in a position to understand.

A Universitas was an association in the world of learning which corresponded to a Guild in the world of commerce, a union among men living in a Studium and possessing some common interests to