

8

St. Frideswide.

A Legend of Bampton.

BY

MARGARET NETTLEFOLD.

OLD MAN : Why here we sit at the Ford of the great river, like a frog in the marsh, and never another to put our back against ! Haven't the Danes come up the river before now and burnt us out ? Aren't there wild west Saxons to pour over the Downs from the South, and most fierce little black fellows from the Welsh hills and the north lying open to any stranger ? If the old gods shut their eyes to this land because we offend them, we shall be lost and done for.

MAIDEN : Well these be matters too high for you and me, gaffer ; but hush, here comes our Master the King, with the Queen our lady. *Exit.*

Enter KING DIDAN and QUEEN.

KING : Loitering and lingering by the hearth, thou lazy knave, when guests are coming to the Homestead ! Where are the eels for the pot, and the salmon from the nets ? Have they brought the deer from the forest, and killed the sucking pig ? Is the bread baked, wife, and hast thou put out the fairest weavings on the walls ?

QUEEN : Is that thy work, or mine, Husband ? Look thou to it without doors, but leave me to make all fair and fit within. It do pass my patience how a man will fuss and fidget the very hairs off his head.

KING : Well, well, wife, have it thine own way. But this is a weighty matter and much hangs thereby. To-day come the messengers from four kings for our daughter's hand. Great lords and mighty earls have been sent, they tell me—and all waits on a wench's yea or nay ! There has ever been fighting up and down this valley, and now friends of ours are few, and the foe is fierce. Dour and doughty are the Danes down stream. Grim is the battle and gory is the field when the Dane meets the Saxon by the Ford !

QUEEN : Alack and well-a-day, Husband ! Men call our Frideswide the Fair Flower by the River, but nevertheless she looks not kindly on suitors, nor will she spin the white wool, nor dye it for the weaving.

KING : Nor can she cook, that I warrant ye ! Why her last venison pasty was scorched without, but red and raw within. It lay like a lump of lead in my poor belly.

QUEEN : As for her learning, it fair frights me.

KING : This Christian faith of hers, I count pure folly.

QUEEN : Happy are we if the old gods pay no heed to her wilful ways.

KING : A plague on all wenches say I.

QUEEN : Here cometh our daughter. Now Husband, I prithee, put her in mind of our will in this matter.

Enter FRIDESWIDE.

KING : Full timely thy coming my daughter to welcome these suitors. Now bear thyself seemly, I pray thee. Look kindly upon them and choose one for thy husband.

FRIDESWIDE :

Ye behold a maiden most hapless,
For hateful to me is a husband
And wed with a heathen I will not,
Nor plight him my troth.
For this land is lost in the darkness of heathen unknowing ;
Grimly and great are the gods that they worship,
Altars to Odin and Thor stand in the forest,
Or high on the hill tops,
And the blood of the slain drips down on the stones.
But I am a Christian,
I was baptised by the Blessed St. Bricius,
Fell at his feet ;
And he taught me to worship
Christ the Redeemer and Mary the Mother Our Lady.
Saints and Angels now shield me
And let not the heathen beset me.

(Curtain).

THE HALL.

KING, QUEEN, FRIDESWIDE. SUITORS from North,
South, East and West.

ALGAR :

Hail, Didan the King, and hail to thee, Frideswide, the
Fair One !

I am Algar.

Far to the north, beyond the wild wolds,

Where the wolves track the wandering sheep,

I am King.

Sharp is my sword to hew down the heathen

And hold you unhurt.

A friend I would be to your father, if so be I should wed
you.

KING : Daughter, this king from the north is a doughty warrior. I would you take him for husband.

FRIDESWIDE : Algar, I thank thee, but hold me excused,
I prithee.

Sutor from South : Hail, Lady ! Greetings I bring from my master beyond the river and the hills to southwards, to the sea-shore. On the high seas sought he his fortune, and fares

hither at your feet to lay it. May he hope for a bride's happy home coming ?

KING : Daughter, help from the Southern shore should be wholesome. Flout not this friend who offers.

FRIDESWIDE : Good Father, I cannot away with this fierce fighter.

Suitor from WEST : Hail to the Lady Frideswide, fairest of Maidens ! Up the wide river, through the Welsh Marches, my Master is King of the Cymri among the mountains ; fain would he wed with the maiden of the river valley, and be friends with her father and no war between us.

FRIDESWIDE : I am no bride for the King of the Mountains.

(King and Queen wring their hands).

KING : So is her answer to all men.

Suitor from East : Up from the mouth of the river, where landed our fathers, Hengist and Horsa, come I a Messenger, seeking good tidings and a fair answer. Fat is the land and flowing with milk and honey, and the meadows full of sheep and of cattle. The King, my master, seeks in marriage the maiden, fairest of flowers on the banks of the river.

KING : Daughter this marriage were most fit and seemly, and from the froward and ravaging Danes would surely defend us.

FRIDESWIDE : Nay, my Father, I pray thee push me not from thy threshold. Press me not to depart from the Ford on the river, where I fain would build me a house for my sisters, a nunnery—teaching the worship of Christ the Redeemer and of Mary His Mother, Our Lady most Holy.

KING :

Great Lords and mighty Earls, good my Masters !

Ye have heard the words of the lady my daughter.

Wedlock she will not,

Nor is her heart soft to her suitors.

I bid ye therefore depart

And may ye fare well on the homeway.

(All bow and depart except Algar).

ALGAR :

But I, Algar the King, will not be thus daunted.

Shame it is that a lady so fair and lovable,

Should deny herself thus to the sons of the doughty.

Bowmen and spearmen I lead into battle,

Defying the foe who lurks in the thicket.

Frideswide the fair by the Ford on the river

Bear I back as my bride to the northland,
Nor shall she gainsay me.

(Seizes her).

FRIDESWIDE :

Never I say, and will liefer
Leave Father and friends and fare forth in the forest !
Good St. Augustine, give aid now and comfort,
Blessed Birinus, be with me this day !
St. Bricius, befriend me !
St. Ebba, give aid !

Our Lady, lead thou my footsteps ! *(Rushes out).*

ALGAR : But I will follow thee. *(Rushes after).*

KING : A most stout and lusty wooer, and one not to be
daunted by moppings and mowings of maidens.

QUEEN : Husband, I fear me ! How shall she fare in the
wilderness, what fierce beasts assail her ?

KING : Nay, wife, be not faint-hearted. She will be wiser
when wed in the home of the Northman, and we shall be
friended.

QUEEN : Forefend us from evil, but sore it mislikes me.

Enter MESSENGER.

KING : How now ? What doeth our daughter ?

MESSENGER : The Lady Frideswide fled to the river.
She stood by the water-side and called on the Blessed Saints.
Then appeared a boat, a barge on the river, and a young man
in white, a shining one. He beckoned her, and wrapping
her cloak about her she stepped in the barge and was rowed
up the river. Out of our sight she was taken. Surely the
Saints themselves heard her prayer. While Algar the King
stood astonished on the staithe.

KING : Now may the Blessed Saints have her in their
charge ;

(Curtain).

SWINEHERD'S HUT IN FOREST.

4 Peasants standing round.

SWINEHERD : Dark lies the night round our poor hut,
and we've been long afeld. In the fall of the year when the
ripe acorns and the beechmast lie among the leaves, lead I my
Lord's Swine far in the forest. They fill themselves with fine
food and grow fat for the winter. Drink, neighbour ! Art
busy, Huntsman ?

HUNTSMAN: Aye so. Deer and wild boar I follow to their fastness. With my sharp spear I slay them and bring their meat for his table. How farest thou, Dick Fowler?

FOWLER: With my snares and nets I lie in wait for the wild fowl. When the cold of winter drives the duck up the river, I lie in the reeds of the frozen marshes and catch them by hundreds. Pass the mug, Oxherd.

OXHERD: Through the nights of winter I guard the oxen from the wolves, and in spring I drive my span in the plough land.

SWINEHERD: A mighty man is our master. He has built him a fair house here in the forest. Of stout oaken timbers he hewed it. On the hearthstone bright burns the fire of great logs in the winter, and warm are the ashes where the serfs sleep at night.

HUNTSMAN: Deep is the ditch that runs round the home-stead and a high fence fends off the foe. Bampton its name is, the beam town, the farm built of beams; firmly it stands and defies the foul weather. About the great hall are the huts of the serfs. Wattle and daub are their walls and the roof is of thatch.

OXHERD: The brook flows past to the river, and the mill grinds our corn. Fine is the ploughland, and six span of oxen turn up the earth in due season.

FOWLER: Eelpots too on the river has our lord at Radcote, and much fish in the fish ponds. A salt pan at Aston, the farm toward the east by the marshes.

SWINEHERD: Dark is the night, and cold blows the wind up the river. The swine sleep heavily in the warm stock-yard.

(A knock).

SWINEHERD: Who knocks so late in the dark night? If a friend, we bid you come in.

(Enter FRIDESWIDE).

FRIDESWIDE: Peace be to this house and all in it.

SWINEHERD: Peace be to you, Lady. Whence come ye, and what seek ye?

FRIDESWIDE: Weary and worn am I, footsore and heart weary. Wandering on far ways through the forest unknown, an outcast from my father's hall, by the Ford on the river.

SWINEHERD: Neighbours, this is a fair maid and a seemly. A lady meseemeth, and surely high placed! We bid you right welcome. Sit down by the hearthstone. Share the warmth of the fire. Bread and salt set before her and milk from our sheep. Guest free we bid you, on this our poor hearth-stone.

FRIDESWIDE : Praise to the Holy Ones, Saints and Blessed Angels, who have led me thus far in honour and safety ! Thanks, praise and blessing be theirs everlasting, and to ye, thanks and blessing, my kind hosts in the wilderness.

(*Curtain*).

THE SAME.

SWINEHERD : Tell us, I pray thee, more tales to beguile us, for sure as long as I have been my lord's Swineherd, never have I heard such songs and such stories.

ALL : Yes, tell us more.

FRIDESWIDE :

Gladly I'll teach you the tales of our Blessed Ones,
Struggling and striving through days full of danger,
To spread the good tidings, the gospel of Jesus.

SWINEHERD : Tell us again of good St. Augustine.

FRIDESWIDE :

He who in Rome saw the slaves in the market,
Lads fair haired and blue eyed, sons of the Saxon,
Found they were heathens, had not heard of the gospel,
Fared forth from Rome over landways and sea ways,
Till he came to the shores of this Island, and straight hway
Preaching and teaching, converted the heathen.

HUNTSMAN : Tell us of Birinus who followed his footsteps.

FRIDESWIDE :

Good Saint Birinus who sought out the West Saxons
Laboured unwearied and baptised our King Cynegils.

FOWLER : Tell us of Ebba.

OXHERD : Or tell us of Bricius.

(*Knock at the door*).

SWINEHERD : Who rides so late in the dark night ?

ALGAR (*without*) : Open, I bid you, to the King Algar.

SWINEHERD : Master, what seekest thou in the poor peasant's hut ?

ALGAR : I seek my bride, Frideswide the Fair. Yea, here I find her, and shall surely bear her away.

SWINEHERD : Alas, poor silly maiden, what now shall save thee ? Fain would we serve thee, but we are weaponless, and this Lord has bowmen and spearmen, who wait without on his word.

PEASANTS : Alas, poor maiden, what can await thee ?

FRIDESWIDE : Saints and Angels hear me, when I call upon ye ! Mary, Blessed Mother, in Thy hands I place me.

(*Takes up bowl of water*).

Water from the Holy Well I throw upon him. Strike him with blindness who in his blind pride would take me. To Thee I commend me! Blessed Mother save me!

(Dashes water over him).

ALGAR: How now, what betides me? All is dark around me! Sure she has bewitched me? I am blind and helpless!

PEASANTS: Sure her Saints have heard her, and stricken down the strong one. They have stretched out their hands and laid him low. Here alone let him grovel in the darkness, but we will fly with the Lady. Surely a King's daughter and beloved of the Blessed ones. Leave him, alone let him lie, unshriven and unhouseled, in the wild wood to wander, till he perish.

(Exeunt).

THE FOREST.

ALGAR *(alone and blind)*: Now am I indeed undone! Blind am I to the light of day. Unwitting must I wander. Who will care for a King who cannot see sword or spear, neither bow nor arrow? Proud was I and uplifted and would fain have taken the maiden, the Holy One. Now am I punished by the Blessed Ones, and my days are numbered. Blind am I indeed, but the eyes of my mind are open to see my wickedness. But no man hears me, no blessed one looks down upon me. In vain I cry aloud.

(Enter FRIDESWIDE and PEASANTS).

FRIDESWIDE: Is this indeed the proud Algar who seeks forgiveness?

ALGAR: Woe worth the day when first I wooed the Fair One! I have offended the High Ones, the Holy Ones, and dread is the doom they have put upon me.

PEASANTS: Dread is his doom.

FRIDESWIDE:

Fain would I return to the home of my fathers,

If indeed I may do so as a free maiden,

Living and dieing in the service of the Lord.

PEASANTS: Sad is her plight, far from home in the forest.

ALGAR: Humbly I beseech thee, let me be pardoned.

FRIDESWIDE: Dost thou forswear the ways of thy wooing?

ALGAR: By all Saints and Angels I forswear it, and vow and address me to serve the Lord most truly.

FRIDESWIDE:

Then three days shalt thou bathe thee

In the Holy Well of Bampton,

Lave thine eyes with the water at midnight and midday, at sunrise, at sunset. Bow to the Blessed Ones and say thy Pater Noster. Lift up thine eyes on the third day, and thy sight shall be given thee.

PEASANTS: Praise to the Lady, the Lady Frideswide, that his doom is undone.

ALGAR:

First to the Well, the Holy Well, I wend me,
Then my footsteps turning, homewards I hie me,
Humbled in heart for the high minded maiden.

FRIDESWIDE:

I to my father's house, down the wide river,
In a broad boat, ye men of Bampton shall row me.

PEASANTS:

Singing the songs that the Lady has taught us
Gladly we'll row her down the broad river.

(*Exeunt*).

THE HALL. KING AND COURT. FRIDESWIDE.

KING: We bid you welcome, my daughter, and that right gladly.

QUEEN: Welcome as flowers in May after the cold winds of winter, is Frideswide the Fair, to the House of her Fathers.

KING: Woe worth the day when wooers came here seeking wedlock.

QUEEN: Ill befits it, meseemeth, that suitors are turned from the door, and the lady, our daughter, sits lonely and lorn.

FRIDESWIDE:

Nay, not so, my Mother,
But first let us offer our thanks and our praise
To Mary the Mother our Lady.
And then to the Saints and the Angels, the Blessed Ones,
Birinus and Bricius, Augustine and Ebba,
Who from their thrones in high Heaven
Looked down and took pity on me, the poor maiden.
Then build me, I pray thee, a nunnery
Here by the river
Where I as the Abbess,
May gather around me my sisters,
Who in praises and prayer
Will daily do duties most fitting and seemly,
Giving alms at the door to the aged,
Food to the hungry, clothes to the naked
And care to the sick; a guest house for travellers;
And all shall be done to the honour and glory
Of Mary the Mother, by us her daughters.

KING :

So be it, my daughter.
 Now build we the House
 And let it be goodly and great as a dwelling,
 And round it shall cluster
 Halls of the great ones, and huts of the poor.
 For here is the Fair Way,
 Here pass the poor men, the pilgrims,
 And the rich men, the merchants,
 Seeking a market to cheap and to chaffer ;
 And the drovers of sheep and of oxen.
 And packhorses high laden
 With wool from the wolds and the uplands,
 Leather leggings and jerkins well tanned
 By the tanners of Bampton ;
 Till the town of the Ford shall wax famous and great as a
 city.
 Learned men shall hie hither to live
 At the feet of Frideswide and her maidens.
 A borough well builded shall rise from the river.
 Strong shall the walls be
 Full of men dour and doughty
 Grimly to hold and to guard the great gateway,
 And gather safely within the goods and the chattels
 The women and children.
 So shall wax famous and great the City of Oxford.