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A Reading Pageant.

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EPISODE I.

*The Coming of St. Birinus and the Conversion of
the Reddingas.*

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ—A THANE.

ST. BIRINUS.

Saxon peasants are seen engaged in peaceful avocations gathering in their harvest. Children run about and gather flowers. A group of men are drinking and singing beneath the shade of a tree.

They sing :

We have ploughed and we have sown ;

Washael ! Harvest home !

We have reaped and we have mown ;

Washael ! Harvest home !

Merrily our chorus lead,

Fill your cups with flowing mead,

Washael. Harvest home.

A Thane attended by his retainers comes to see the harvest gathered in, and is greeted by the men with loud shouts of

Washael ! Washael !

A child bears to him a cup of mead.

In the distance a company of priests is seen approaching, and at their head marches St. Birinus carrying a rude cross of wood.

The Saxons shade their eyes and look expectantly at the newcomers, who advance singing a Latin hymn.

Deus pacis et amoris,
Tristitiæ in horis
Nos salva venerantes
Numenque supplicantes.

Salva in horâ mortis ;
Salva sepulchri portis ;
Post terminum laborum
Da cantus angelorum.

ST. BIRINUS plants his cross in the ground exclaiming :

In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Sancti Spiritus.

The Saxons crowd around him. The THANE advances and says :

What means this, Sire ? And what this new device
To let the people from their harvest toil ?
The meaning of this mumming we would know ;
Your speech, your garb, your words, are strange to us.

BIRINUS. O come, my children, gather round me here.

Come listen well, while I a tale unfold.
This is the sacred symbol of our faith,
And I have come o'er lands and seas, to tell
Of Him who died and suffered on that tree,
That He might save you from the wrath to come.
Ye worship Thor, Woden, earth and sky,
The stars that wondrous shine, aught else but God.
But He alone has made and ordered all.
Doubtless the sky is high, the earth is great,
The sea immense, the stars most beautiful ;
But He who made them is the greater far,
And far more beautiful. Come, then and hear,
And I will tell you of the Lord who loves
And died to save you on this lowly cross.

They kneel down and worship before the Cross.

Here, where I plant my cross, a mighty town
Shall spring like some great noble forest tree
From tiny acorn. Here shall homes arise

Like beauteous flowers in an upland mead.
And here a mighty fane shall proudly stand,
An Abbey great, where holy men shall live
And spend their days in worshipping their Lord
And caring for the souls of men like you,
Whom Christ did call his treasures. Learning and light
Shall radiate hence like rays of setting sun.
And when this sun has set, I see a town,
Great, fair, and beautiful, by Tham—es' stream,
A people loving God and serving Him,
Whom ye this day have taken for your Lord.
Come to the bank of Jordan, your stately Thames,
And there in its bright waters wash away
The stains of past transgressions, and new born
Begin to lead the new, the Christ-like life.

They follow him, as he leads them away to the river.

EPISODE II.

The Danes at Reading.

A company of Saxon Thanes headed by Ethelwulph, Earl of Berks, return from hunting, riding on horseback with their followers on foot, some carrying hawks. The riders alight from their steeds. Suddenly a messenger is seen galloping hard towards them. He falls on one knee before the Earl, and tells him in dumb show of the arrival of a terrible foe—the Danes, and points in the direction whence they are coming. Horns are blown loudly, and the English are seen running in all directions with their weapons. They approach the Earl and his companions. He directs them and gives orders to his chieftains who ride about, and gather their companies together for the fight. Presently the Danish host is seen advancing. A fierce battle ensues and the English fly pursued by their enemies. The Danes rest after their fight. Some throw themselves on the ground. Mighty casks of ale are brought, and cups of horn are quickly replenished. A Gleeman comes and sings a song—

Sound the loud war-horn
Sons of the grey-beard,
Sons of the heroes
Children of sea-mist ;

Out of the north lands
 Sweep with your sword-strokes.
 Lay all the lands low,
 Scatter where'er we go
 Death and destruction.

Chorus—Scald to the Viking ! Scald.

When swords are flashing,
 And shields are clashing,
 Then do our foes fly,
 When our loud war cry
 Is heard in the fierce fight.
 Scald to the Viking,
 Scald to the Viking,
 Scald !

In the distance Alfred appears with a victorious army fresh from the battle of Ethendune, and routs the Danes. Alfred is received with mighty cheers, and makes a speech to the people.

ALFRED. Brothers, well fought ; we've wrought a deed to-day,
 That matches well our fight on Ashdown Hill,
 Where the White Horse looks proudly t'wards the north,
 A deed the fame of which will ring thro' England ;
 And centuries hence old men will tell their sons
 How Alfred and his gallant English lads
 Drove the rude Danes 'mid slaughter to their ships,
 And freed the land from savagery and shame.
 Yon bold White Horse will tell your gallant deeds
 To Englishmen of ages yet unborn,
 How Berkshire lads on Berkshire hills and dales
 Could fight. No braver are in all the world.
 Come with me now and chase these Danish wolves,
 And free our England from her ruthless foe,
 And make her once again true English land.
 Now who will fight for England ?

ALL.

We all ! we all !

ALFRED. So will our England once again be free,
 The home of freedom, and in time to come
 This little isle girt by th' inviolate sea
 Shall rule the whole world wide, and free the lands
 From yoke of tyranny and oppressive laws ;

And all the world shall praise her name and fear
Her might and sovereignty. Brothers, to arms !

ALL. To arms, to arms ! Hurrah !

They follow Alfred.

[*Exeunt omnes.*]

EPISODE III.

The Founding of the Nunnery by Queen Elfrida.

A bishop is seen approaching with his priests and monks, and the people rush to welcome him.

He takes his stand in the centre of the arena, and a throne is set for him, and near at hand an altar.

An architect comes and presents to him a scroll with the plan for a nunnery engraved upon it. He examines it, and while he is doing so, Queen Elfrida, the widow of King Edgar, is seen approaching leaning on the arm of an aged man, and followed by a company of nuns.

THE BISHOP. Whence come you, lady, and for what intent
Have you requested for our presence here ?

QUEEN. You see before you, sire, a sinful queen,
And one unworthy of the rank she bears ;
A soul oppressed with sense of direful woe,
Yet has to bear her daily punishment.
How have I sought some freedom from my guilt
To wipe away the stain of that dark deed,
Wrought at the Castle gates of Corfe. That name
Is burnt into my brain as by a brand.
I see again sweet Edward's smiling face
As he rode home, so hot, and tired with chase.
And then he called, "good Suard, a cup of mead,"
So cheerily he spoke, his voice will stay
For ever in mine ear. "Sweet mother mine,"
He used to say, though I was but his stepmother,
A harsh and cruel one—may God forgive my sin.

And then he raised the goblet to his lips
 And then, and then, the assassin's greedy knife
 Struck the poor lad, ah God ! I see his blood,
 I hear his cry, his piteous cry ring out,
 'Twill ring into mine ears, until I die.
 For this base deed, pardon in vain I've sought.
 I've fasted, knelt all night in prayer to God,
 I've scourged these shoulders till the welted flesh
 Lay thick and rugged like the bell-ropes there
 That hang in yonder minster. All in vain.
 And now I come to expiate my guilt,
 To found a nunnery where daily prayer,
 Uttered by holy and unprofaned lips,
 May go to God and win me peace on earth,
 And some forgiveness in the world to come.

BISHOP. Daughter, thy prayer is heard, within these holy walls,
 Which thou wilt build to expiate thy crime,
 The daily sacrifice will offered be
 For thee and all poor souls that do offend
 Against the laws of God. Here is thy gift ;
 Take it and offer it at God's holy shrine.
 May He forgive thy crime and give thee peace—
 Nunc et in sæcula, vobiscum Pax.

Queen goes to altar, kneels and offers the parchment scroll.
 Nuns kneel around her, while the monks and priests chant a Latin
 hymn.

EPISODE IV.

*The Empress Queen Matilda comes to Reading Abbey
 and is received by the Abbot and Monks.*

SCENE—Abbey gate which is moved forward from behind trees.
 Monks assembled outside the gate and Abbot comes out.
 Monks rise and greet him. A messenger arrives to say
 that the Queen is coming.

ABBOT. Alas ! alas, my brothers ; what is this ?
 Although she be the daughter of her sire,

Our noble founder, yet it grieves me sore
That she doth hither come.
I who did lodge King Stephen, and did pray
God bless him, must now this wandering woman feast,
And cry God save the Queen Matilda.
I wot not how these strange events may turn,
But fear the clamour of rude war's alarms.
But here she comes.

Cavalcade of the Queen with waiting maids and retainers enter.

QUEEN. 'Tis mine own father's house, the gracious gift
Of mine own sire. How dared ye then
To entertain that foul usurper, Stephen?
He is in dungeon deep; there let him rot.
But lead me to my own dear father's tomb,
And there imprint a kiss on that cold stone
That holds him there and marks his memory.
And you, Sir Abbot, open wide your chests,
And coin your money faster than the wind;
And bid your cooks and scullions quickly fly
And spread a banquet. We are starving all.
And bid your men-at-arms, your knights, your serfs,
To quickly arm and follow us to fight.

ABBOT. My lady, queen, alas, I may not lend
The little store of money that lies here.
The day is young, we pray you pass our doors
With but a stirrup cup. No woman's foot
Can pass the threshold of this holy house
Built by thy sire, but dedicate to God.

QUEEN. Beshrew me, sir, I'll have no traiterous monks,
No dogs that bark, and fain would turn and bite.
I am your queen, and am I not exempt
From petty rules of monkish modes and men?

ABBOT. Alas! my lady, I am here to keep
The holy rules of saintly Benedict,
And cannot let you enter.

QUEEN. Unmannered rogue, you false and traitorous monk!
Here will I stay. Am I proud England's queen
Thrust out like some poor beggar brat

To starve by lonely roadside ? Ho ! my knights,
 What think you of these stubborn rebel monks ?
 I bid you draw your swords. The sight of steel
 May quell their ardour. Now, my noble lord,
 Ope wide those doors, and lodge us safe this night,
 Or some of you may sleep and never wake.

Knights draw their swords and advance threateningly.

ABBOT. Then enter, queen, my conscience doth forbid.
 But we must bow to stern necessity.

Doors are thrown open. Maids try to speak to the monks who
 repel them, and rush into abbey. The queen and cavalcade enter
 the abbey through the open doors.

[Exeunt omnes.

EPISODE V.

*Consecration of completed Abbey, and the single combat
 between Robert De Montford and Henry Earl of Essex.*

Monks and townspeople are assembled to greet Thomas à
 Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, who is seen approaching. A
 gorgeous procession accompanies the Prelate, with the King, and
 Earls, and knights and bishops. The Abbot meets him at the gate
 with the singing men. They march round the precincts of the
 abbey chanting a Psalm in Latin and then enter the gates.

Some of the Knights stay behind, amongst them Robert de
 Montford and Henry Earl of Essex. The King, Henry II., rides
 out of the abbey to meet them.

THE KING. Sir Knights ; methinks you have some business afoot
 which claims our presence.

DE MONTFORD. We have, your liege. I accuse Henry de Essex,
 who had the honour of bearing the Royal Standard of Eng-
 land, of treachery and cowardice.

THE KING. These are grave charges, my lord. It would be well
 that you should make them good ; or that you should at
 once withdraw them.

DE MONTFORD. Know then, sire, and all good earls and knights of England, that when we were fighting in my lord the King's service against the Welsh, this villain did cast away the Royal Standard of the King, and did shamefully flee away. He cried out that you, my lord and King whom God preserve, were slain in the fight, and did thus induce many of your Majesty's lieges to seek safety in flight. And, therefore, I do charge this man with being a coward and traitor to his King. And there do I throw my gage of battle.

Casts down his glove on the ground.

KING. And what say you my lord of Essex to this grievous charge?

DE ESSEX. I do say, my lord and King, that this villain De Montford, hath shamefully and scandalously lied. And here do I accept his wager of battle.

He picks up the glove.

THE KING. Let the lists be formed, and may God defend the right.

De Montford and Essex fight on horse and then on foot. A great combat ensues.

At last Essex becomes enraged, and attacks vigorously, and falls grievously wounded.

Some monks enter and carry him into the Abbey. De Montford kneels to the King and lays his sword at the Monarch's feet.

The company enter the Abbey, whence issues strains of music and the chanting of the monks.

The procession reforms and marches out of the gate. The King remains in the Abbey.

[Exeunt omnes.]

(To be continued.)