

A door of light

or

The romance of our English Bible

CHARACTERS.

A HERALD (a girl).

A BOY.

A GIRL.

AN INTERPRETER (Departmental Leader or experienced teacher).

CAEDMON.

BEDE'S SCRIBE.

MISTRESS ROSE OF LUTTERWORTH.¹

MASTER PAKINGTON (a merchant).

A PAGE FROM THE COURT OF KING JAMES I.

A WESTMINSTER ABBEY CHOIRBOY.

The last six may sit in the body of the hall or church, coming forward and on to the platform as needed, and remaining there, when their part is said, to form a growing semi-circle, seated, behind the other four.

The term *herald* is used to indicate the leader of the worship, who might well be an older scholar, a young teacher taking the opening prayer, the closing litany, and the benediction if desired.

HERALD: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light."
"Thy word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path."

We will sing as a prayer (*she reads the words, so that no books need be used*):

¹An imaginary character.

“Light of Light, shine o’er us
On our pilgrim way,
Go Thou still before us
To the endless day.”

—(Tune S.S.H. 379, last four lines.)

HERALD (or Young Teacher) (*continuing the prayer*):

“God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.”
“God is Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship in
spirit and in truth.”

Joyfully so would we worship Thee. In Thy light would we see light.—
Amen.

HERALD: We will sing: “Let all the world in every corner sing.” (S.S.H. 610.)

INTERPRETER: Where is the Book?

BOY: What book?

INTERPRETER : The Book (but for which we should not be here.)

GIRL: Oh, you mean the Bible.

(*A Sunday School copy is passed up from the front row.*)

INTERPRETER : The Book of a thousand adventures.

BOY (*seating himself at the table to look at the Book*): A thousand adventures? Not this one.

INTERPRETER: This one. A thousand adventures while still in the making. Sung and told round the camp fire; carried in the hearts of men and women when their homeland was desolate, their Temple in ruins, and themselves in exile; written, copied, and re-copied; smuggled in the strangest ways, hidden in the queerest hiding-places, burnt by its enemies: still it lived and grew.

GIRL (*seating herself at the table, too*): But that was not this Book.

INTERPRETER: Two thousand years was this Book in making, begun thousands of years ago by men of a foreign race, many of them nameless.

BOY: But this is the *English* Bible.

INTERPRETER: Have you heard of the monk of Bethlehem?

BOY: No.

GIRL: Who was he?

INTERPRETER: In those days the Book we call the Bible was a pile of scrolls, some Hebrew, some Greek, some Syriac. He translated the whole into Latin, the language understood by all scholars of whatever nationality. Men call his translation the *Vulgate*. It was copies of that which were brought to England long ago, when first the Good News came to our country.

GIRL: Latin? But this Bible is in English.

INTERPRETER: Yes. And a thousand more adventures lie behind our English Bible, more smuggling, more bonfires . . .

BOY: Oh, I *wish* I'd been there!

GIRL: So do I.

INTERPRETER: You would like to hear about it?

BOY: I should like to have met the people and heard their stories.

INTERPRETER: Some of them you shall. It would take too long to hear the whole story. Here is one (*Caedmon comes forward carrying a scroll*) who can speak of the first Bible stories ever told in the language of English people. You know, of course, that stories came before books, and story-telling before book-making.

BOY: Who is it?

INTERPRETER: The farm-hand of Whitby. Tell us, Caedmon,

CAEDMON: In the firelit hall of the monastery, when the day's work was done, the monks and their guests gathered for the evening meal. Priest and soldier, minstrel, merchant and beggar were there; and there too came fishermen and we of the farms and stables. When the feast was ended, the harp was passed round so that each in turn might sing for the pleasure of all. Then was I ashamed, for of all that great company I alone was dumb. I rose from my place and went to the stable, and there in the straw I slept. As I slept I dreamed. One stood by me and said, "Caedmon, sing me some song." "I cannot sing," I said. "For that reason I left the feast." "Yet you shall sing to me," said the other. "What shall I sing?" I asked. "Sing," said he, "the beginning of created things." And straightway I sang, and that with joy. When I wakened, I remembered both dream and song. The farmer wondering led me to the monastery, and told the Abbess Hilda. "Sing to me," commanded the Abbess, and unashamed, nay, with joy, I sang to her the song of created things:

"Now must we praise
The grandeur of Heaven's Kingdom . . ."

So I sang. The Abbess marvelled. She would have me stay in the monastery with the monks. They should tell me the Bible stories from their Latin scrolls, and I should make of them songs that all could understand. So I did, and the brothers then with brush and colours wrote down these songs on fair vellum. Then in the great hall at night no longer was I silent nor rose from my place ashamed when the harp was passed round. (*He hands over his scroll to the Girl.*)

INTERPRETER: So for the first time in our land men heard the Bible stories in their own language.

GIRL: Is this your song?

CAEDMON: This is but the beginning.

GIRL (reading):

“Now must we praise
The Grandeur of Heaven’s Kingdom,
The Creator’s might
And His mind’s thought.
Glorious Father of men,
The Lord Eternal,
Who formed the beginning . . .”

HERALD: The music of Caedmon’s song is lost, though the words live. His song we cannot sing, but we will sing a modern hymn of praise for the glories of creation: “I sing the almighty power of God,” (S.S.H. 73.)

INTERPRETER: Here, now, is a young man (*Bede’s Scribe comes forward carrying a scroll*) of those same long ago days, who can tell us of the great Englishman who ran a race with death in order to give to those who could read at least part of the Bible in their own language.

BOY: Who was he?

GIRL: I know—Bede!

BEDE’S SCRIBE: Bede’s Scribe am I. As my master lay dying, I wrote at his dictation the Gospel of St. John translated from Jerome’s Vulgate.

BOY: (to the Interpreter): Jerome’s? Then that was the name of the Bethlehem monk? (*The Interpreter nods.*)

BEDE’S SCRIBE: All his disciples were there that day, and we begged our beloved master to rest. “I don’t want my boys to read a lie,” he said, though he spoke with difficulty, “nor after my death to spend further labour on this thing.” Now he would dictate, and I would write my swiftest; then he would pause for breath, while we sang him the psalms

he loved. "There is yet one chapter of the book, Master," I said at last, "but it seems very hard for thee to speak." "Nay," he replied, "it is easy. Take up thy pen and write quickly." I could scarcely see for the blinding tears, but at last one sentence only was left. Slowly the words fell from his lips; swiftly I caught them and wrote them on my scroll, "It is finished!" I cried. "Ay, it is finished," he replied quietly. "Lift me up, place me at the window of my cell where I have so often prayed to God. Now glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit!" And with these words his own spirit passed into the presence of God. (*He hands his scroll to the Boy at the table.*)

INTERPRETER: But he won the race with death. He left us the Gospel of John in our own language.

HERALD: Let us give praise for such as Bede. We will sing: "Now praise we great and famous men." (S.W. 372.)

INTERPRETER: Alfred comes into the story now.

GIRL: King Alfred who burnt the cakes?

INTERPRETER: He and Archbishop Aelfric and others translated yet other parts of the Vulgate into Anglo-Saxon; but then comes a long silence. Invasions and war turned men's thoughts from such things.

BOY: William the Conqueror, I suppose.

INTERPRETER: Yes, and the Danes before him. The Saxon language and literature were scorned by the new-comers, But in the long years that followed a new language was created. Six hundred years passed, and the early treasures were all but lost, The only Bible was in Latin and copied by hand, "a spring shut up, a fountain sealed." Only churchmen and a few scholars could read it. Then into those dark days came John Wycliffe, the born fighter, determined to give the English people the whole Bible in their own language. (*Mistress Rose of Lutterworth comes forward, carrying a large, heavy Bible.*)

BOY: Who is this coming?

MISTRESS ROSE OF LUTTERWORTH: Mistress Rose am I, of Lutterworth. I knew Master Wiclif. My brother studied under him at Oxford. Geoffrey and others worked night and day for him and the cause he loved. They made hundreds of copies of the Bible Master Wiclif translated from the Latin that we could not read. He was skilled with the artist's brush, was my brother. Where some made fair copies illuminated on fine parchment for the wealthy, and others made plain and neat copies for preachers and teachers, my brother, with his fine small script, made

copies that would go in a man's pocket. In those days men paid large sums for even a few pages of such Bibles. Why, I have known a *load of hay* given in exchange for the loan of one for an hour a day. Know you what they did who borrowed such copies? Ay, I did it myself, with one Geoffrey spared me for a single precious day. I learnt chapters by heart. Some learnt the Ten Commandments, others parts of St. Paul's letters. I loved best the words of Jesus Himself. Over and over again was I sent for after that, now to the heart of some lonely wood, now to a distant farmhouse, to repeat the words I had learnt to a hundred people and more, gathered secretly to hear,

GIRL: Secretly? Why?

MISTRESS ROSE: Why? Because of the danger! Pope, bishops and clergy, one and all joined forces against Master Wiclif. *He* would have all men read the Bible. *They* said he would have the Bible common and more open to non-Churchmen and women than to clergy well-learned and of best understanding. They said he cast the Gospel pearl to be trodden by swine! Ay, it was dangerous enough. Readers of the Bible, if caught, were punished. Some were burnt with their Book slung round their necks. Copies were seized and destroyed. But so great was men's hunger for the Word of God that Master Wiclif at last chose the best of his students—and my brother was one—and sent them out with their sheepskin manuscripts, two by two, as Jesus did His men, throughout the length and breadth of the land to read aloud the Bible stories. No money might they take, yet they never hungered. Master Wiclif's "Poor Preachers," or Lollards, they were called. On village green, on the doorstep of a cottage, in barn, hall, or castle, they read aloud the words their master had translated. It was no easy task, in spite of the welcome of the common people, for the Church was determined to be rid of them. My brother died for his faith, not many days after Master Wiclif himself.

INTERPRETER: But though Wycliffe died, he had given his country the *first* complete Bible in English. Slowly but surely the light was coming.

HERALD: We will sing: "Life of ages, richly poured." (S.W. 368, v. 1, 3, 4, 5.)

INTERPRETER: Seventy years after John Wycliffe's death, all Europe rang with the news that the Turks had captured and sacked Constantinople! "Like a hive of bees, being smoked out," Greek scholars fled westward for their lives. With them they brought not only their learning, but also their precious Greek manuscripts; and over the Alps into Italy men

flocked to learn Hebrew and Greek from these exiles, and back again into the colleges and monasteries of the West. Erasmus of Rotterdam was too poor to go to Italy; he came to England to learn there from the men who had met these Greeks. And it was he who gave the world a Greek New Testament. This book came to the hands of a boy studying Greek at college. It was to William Tyndale “a door of light.” By now a new and wonderful art had been discovered. Could he use printing to give England the English Bible? From then on he dreamed of doing it. “If God spare me,” he said, “I will one day make the boy that drives the plough in England to know more of Scripture than the Pope does,” (*Master Pakington comes forward carrying a large Bible.*)

BOY: Is this Tyndale?

MASTER PAKINGTON: No such scholar I! They say he knew seven languages! I am Master Pakington, a merchant. But well I knew Master Tyndale. His heart was set on translating the Bible in the light of the new learning; but there was no place in England for him. He went into exile, taking with him the first precious pages in his own handwriting of a New Testament in English. Day and night he worked till it was done. Then he searched till he found, at Cologne, a printer who would dare to print it. Behind locked doors the type was set up; and only under cover of night did Master Tyndale dare to go and read and correct the proofs. Not that he feared for himself; it was his work that was everything to him. But the secret leaked out. It was the printer’s man who was to blame; and Master Tyndale, getting wind of the danger, rushed to the printer’s office, seized all the pages he could find, and fled to Worms. There the printing was finished, and, knowing that his enemies would be on the watch, Master Tyndale had a smaller edition printed that could more easily be smuggled into England.

BOY: Smuggled! How?

MASTER PAKINGTON: In barrels and cases, in bales of cloth, in sacks of flour; and the people of England bought them by the thousand. Master Tyndale’s enemies seized what they could find, and burnt them: but the stream of copies across the Channel was too much for them.

INTERPRETER: Tell us where the money came from to print fresh supplies to take the place of those destroyed, Master Pakington.

MASTER PAKINGTON: Ah! That is a good story. The Bishop of London came to me, not knowing that I was friend of Master Tyndale, and asked me what I thought of buying up all the copies across the water.

“My Lord,” I said, “if it be your pleasure I could do more than any merchant in England.” And that was true, for I knew whence they came. “So,” said I, “if it be your lordship’s pleasure to pay for them—for I must disburse money for them—I will insure you to have every book that remains unsold!” “Gentle Master Pakington,” said the Bishop, “do your diligence and get them for me, and I will gladly give you whatever they cost, for the books are naughty, and I intend surely to destroy them all and to burn them at Paul’s Cross.” So the Bishop had the books, I had the thanks . . .

GIRL: And Tyndale had the money!

MASTER PAKINGTON: And had been hard at work meantime on a still better translation! Regularly there were Bible burnings at Paul’s Cross.

BOY (*to the Interpreter*): Was that St. Paul’s Cathedral?

INTERPRETER: Yes.

MASTER PAKINGTON: But these only served to make people all the more anxious to have the Book. (*He hands over his copy to the Girl.*)

BOY: And it was the Bishop’s money that kept up the supply all the time!

INTERPRETER: In the end Tyndale was betrayed to his enemies and flung into prison. He guessed well enough what the end would be. “In burning the books,” he said of the bonfires, “they did none other thing than I looked for; no more shall they do if they burn me also.” And they did it. After a year and a half of imprisonment in cold, misery, and rags, he was brought out into the daylight once again, only to be chained to the stake and burnt to death. As the flames leaped and crackled around him, his one thought was for light for England. “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes,” he prayed.

HERALD: We will sing: “Who is a brave man, who?” (S.S.H. 340.)

BOY: So they burnt Tyndale and they burnt his books. Then what was the good of it all?

INTERPRETER: The light was steadily growing stronger. Do you know that only three years after he died with that prayer on his lips, there was an English Bible in every parish church in the land! Not in many other places, it is true; nor could many except the clergy read.

GIRL (*showing the Sunday School Bible*): Was it the same as this one?

INTERPRETER: No, indeed. You would scarcely be able to read one if you saw it. The Great Bible it was called.

BOY: I know. I saw a chained Bible once.

INTERPRETER: Yes, in those days the Bibles were chained to a desk or pillar. Dark times followed. You remember Queen Mary and the persecutions? Men who were working to give every English man and woman a Bible they could read for themselves, fled to Geneva; and when Elizabeth was crowned, they brought her as a coronation gift a fresh translation, not so costly, not so big, still more accurate. The Geneva Bible, beloved by the Puritans, was followed by the Bishops' Bible of the high churchmen; but neither party liked the Bible of the other.

(*A Page-boy comes forward carrying an Authorised Version of the Bible.*) .

BOY: Who is this coming now?

INTERPRETER: This is a page-boy from the Court of King James.

PAGE: By order of my Royal Master fifty-four learned men, both High Churchmen and Puritans, set themselves to the task of giving England a Bible that all Englishmen, of whatever party, should love. They divided the whole Bible into six parts, six groups taking a part each. They studied not only the Greek and the Hebrew, not only the earlier translations, but Bibles in Spanish, Italian, French, and German, to get the exact sense and every shade of meaning, Then, having found it, they sought the finest truest English words of the day in which to say it. (*He hands to the Boy the copy he carries.*)

BOY: Why, this is the one we use?

(*Boy and Girl compare with the Sunday School copy.*)

INTERPRETER: Yes. We call it the Authorised Version. Well has it been said that the English of King James's Bible "lives on the ear like a music that can never be forgotten, like the sound of church bells."

HERALD: We will sing: "Thy Word is like a garden, Lord" (S.S.H. 299), leaving out the spoken Bible words printed between the verses.

GIRL: Are we going to see any more people who had a hand in the making of our English Bible? I had no idea it had a story like this.

INTERPRETER: It is an amazing story, this story of the Bible, and one that never ends. Explorers have found old manuscripts which the monk of Bethlehem never heard of. Men know Latin, Greek, and Hebrew even better as the years pass. Our English words themselves change their meanings, new words come into the language, old words fall out of use. (*A Westminster Abbey Boy comes forward carrying a Revised Version of the Bible.*) Here is a Westminster Abbey Boy.

Boy: Why Westminster Abbey ?

WESTMINSTER ABBEY BOY: Because it was there that a fresh translation was made. (*He holds it up for all to see.*) Do you know the Jerusalem Chamber at our Abbey? Less than eighty years ago Scotsmen, Englishmen, and Irishmen, Churchmen, Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, sat down together to revise King James's Bible.

INTERPRETER: And across the Atlantic a great company of learned Americans faced the same task. England and America joined hands to give us the fresh translation we call the Revised Version.

WESTMINSTER ABBEY BOY: It took ten years to do it.

INTERPRETER: Ten years for the New Testament alone! They worked for *fourteen* years before the whole Bible was finished.

(*The Westminster Abbey Boy hands the Boy the Book.*)

GIRL: Why, I didn't know that America had helped in it.

INTERPRETER: As the years passed and the English language went on growing and changing, men who have longed for the Bible to be known and loved by everyone, have given us still newer translations in the speech of to-day.

BOY: I know. We use Dr. Moffatt's.

INTERPRETER: And the art of printing itself has grown and still grows. In Wycliffe's days it took ten months to make one copy of the Bible by hand, and a buyer might pay forty pounds. Do you wonder they chained them? To-day the printing press can turn out one hundred and twenty copies in an hour ... *two copies a minute* ... and the New Testament can be bought for a penny !

BOY: Two a minute, I'd like to see that printing press at work.

INTERPRETER: You would like to see some of the queer home-made printing presses in far lands. You would like to meet the men and women who have translated this English Bible and printed copies of it in hundreds of strange languages, so that to-day Chinese and African, Cree Indian and South Sea Islander, may read the Bible in their own mother-tongue.

BOY (rising): Then is that the end of the story?

INTERPRETER: It will never end. As long as our English language lives and grows, as long as our English race endures, so long will the story of our English Bible go on.

GIRL (rising, too): I never knew before what a crowd of people had a hand in it.

INTERPRETER: It was the act of men. None the less was it the act of the Spirit of God, working in men and through men.

BOY: I always thought the Bible was rather a dull book, but it has a more exciting story than any other.

INTERPRETER: Book? It is a library . . .

GIRL: I know; there are dozens of books in it.

INTERPRETER: Yes, and books within books: "myth and legend, history and fiction, drama and poetry, idyll and allegory, record and prophecy. It is a picture gallery: king and beggar, wise man and fool, rich and poor, saint and villain, oppressor and slave, hero and wastrel, dreamer and doer . . ."

BOY: Don't go so fast. I am trying to think whom you mean.

INTERPRETER: To study it is to study life. It is the Book, "Guide of pilgrim man on his journey . . . Here man may see man seeking after God," may see God Himself, step by step, little by little, showing Himself to man. And that story, too, is unfinished. Indeed, it has but just begun. There is need for men and women, boys and girls, who will take up the quest. The world is hungry for them. God waits for them. (*Turning to the whole congregation.*) Shall we all pledge ourselves to be explorers, seeking after God?

HERALD: (after a very short pause) We will sing a hymn of the quest for God. (S.W. 270.)

HERALD: Let us praise God for this treasure beyond price, and for those who in the power of His Spirit gave it to us, using as sung response: "Praise ye, praise ye, the God the Lord." (S.S.H. 450, last line).

For the story-tellers of long ago, for poets and singers, law-makers and prophets.

Response.

For writers and editors, copyists, translators, and printers; for those who dared and for those who died to give us our Bible; for those seekers after Truth who could not rest, who corrected, revised and re-translated.

Thanksgiving.

Response.

For the Holy Spirit of God at work all down the ages in and through this great and glorious company.

Response.

May we learn to love this priceless treasure given us by God, to explore its depths, to understand it better. May we set ourselves to the quest of

the knowledge of God, and of Jesus Christ, His Son.

Prayer, sung by all: “Lord, Thy Word abideth”

Benediction: May Thy word direct and rule our hearts.

—Amen.

Note: this dramatic tale for Sunday School performance was found without its cover among papers at Lee Mount Baptist Church, Halifax. The subtitle suggests that it must have been put together after the publication of Faris, John T (1924) *The romance of the English bible* Philadelphia: The Westminster Press and a couple of annotations suggest that it may have been put on at Lee Mount Baptist Church at some point in the 1920s or 1930s.