

Merrie England

The Story of "Merrie England" is woven round the Court of Queen Elizabeth I and provides a picture of court intrigues with the background provided by Townsfolk and Foresters of Windsor. The opera opens with the arrival of the May Queen who is enthroned. She receives declarations of love from Big Ben (a Royal Forester) and men of Windsor including a Tailor, a Butcher, a Baker and a Tinker. Big Ben's brother, Long Tom, is in love with "Jill-all-Along" a "fey" character who is denounced by the May Queen as a witch. The element of comedy is introduced by Walter Wilkins, a player in Shakespeare's Company, who discourses at large on the subjects of writing, singing, dancing and love. It is disclosed that Queen Elizabeth loves Sir Walter Raleigh who, in turn, loves Bessie Throckmorton, a maid of honour to the Queen. He has been rash enough to write a declaration of love, in the form of an acrostic which includes the name of Bessie. This reaches the hands of the Earl of Essex who plans to use it to turn the affections of the Queen to himself.

The entrance of Queen Elizabeth and her Court provides the setting for the famous song "O Peaceful England." She then commands information on the May Day Revels which is provided by the ubiquitous Wilkins. He proposes to play Robin Hood in a Morris Dance and Elizabeth commands him to bring his May Queen with her attendants and players. Long Tom seizes his opportunity to plead the cause of Jill before Queen Elizabeth, but the May Queen again denounces Jill as a witch and calls upon the four men of Windsor to speak against her. They introduce themselves to the Queen in their well-known quartet and Jill is commanded to speak for herself. Essex reveals that he obtained the acrostic in Raleigh's handwriting from Jill and he hands it to the Queen who supposes it to have been written for herself. Raleigh disillusiones her and proclaims his love for Bessie Throckmorton. Elizabeth in her rage, orders Jill to be burnt as a witch, Raleigh to be banished to his country house and Bessie to be imprisoned in the castle. The Act ends with the entry of the Morris Dancers.

Jill's knowledge of a secret passage from the castle to "Herne's Oak", enables her to escape to Windsor Forest bringing Bessie with her. Raleigh has also escaped and arrives, dressed as a Forester, trying to enter the castle with the Morris Dancers. Essex, having followed Bessie through the secret passage, makes a bargain with Raleigh to help his suit with Bessie, thus clearing the way for his own approach to the Queen. He plans to startle the Queen by the appearance of the legendary "Herne the Hunter" telling her that the figure only appears when the Sovereign contemplates an injustice.

The Queen arrives to watch the Masque of St. George and the Dragon which has been arranged by Wilkins. The performance is stopped by the appearance of Herne the Hunter (impersonated by Long Tom); all but the Queen deny being able to see the spectre and she is startled into proclaiming a change of mind with regard to the punishment of Raleigh, Bessie and Jill and their pardon is announced before the finale.