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# *Augustine Came to Kent*

by

*Barbara Willard*



illustrated by

Mary Beth Owens

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SAN FRANCISCO

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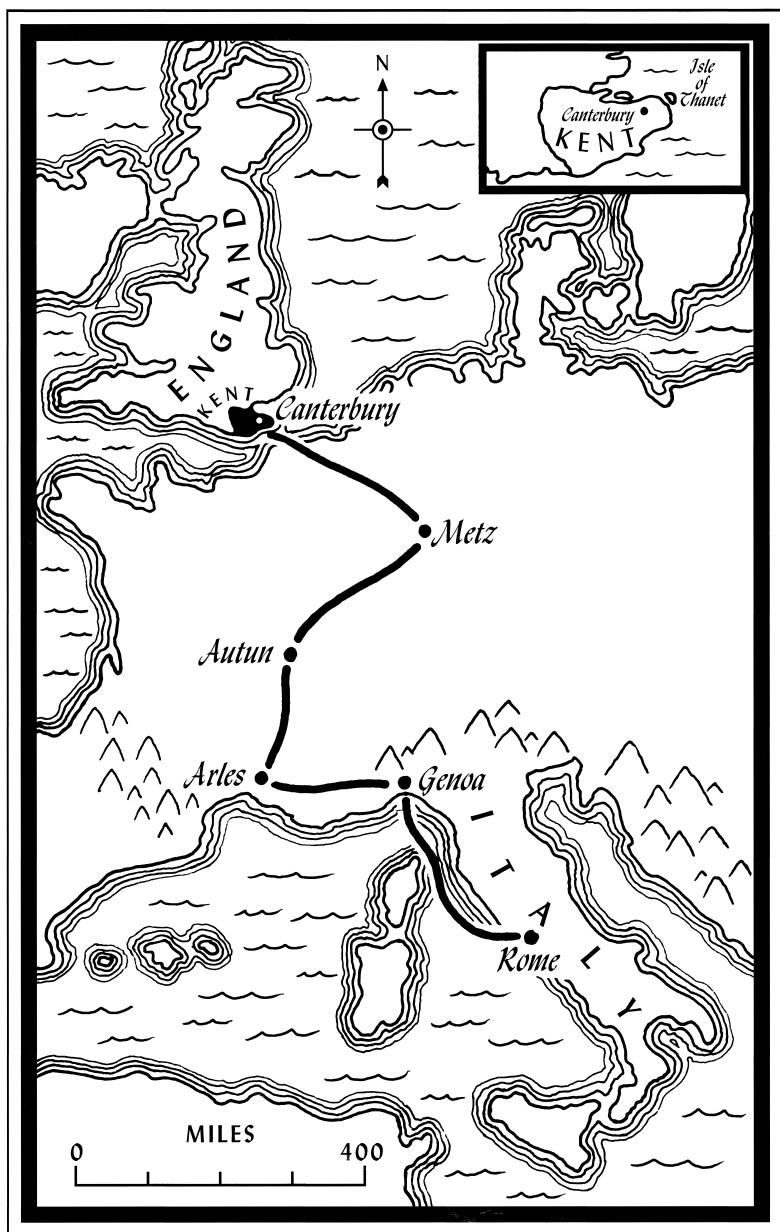
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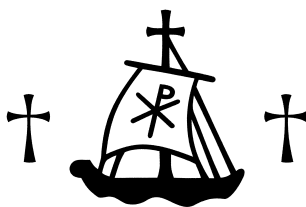
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## AUGUSTINE'S JOURNEY TO KENT





## *Introduction*

AS A CHILD I loved the series of books entitled *He Went with Marco Polo*, *He Went with Christopher Columbus*, etc. Most children enjoy the formula of a historical novel seen through the eyes of a girl or boy their own age. In imagination, they become part of the story. If the story is not only historical—in this instance, set in Rome and England at the end of the sixth and beginning of the seventh centuries—but also supernatural—how God intervenes in history through the saints—it becomes a first-rate tool of instruction at many levels.

Barbara Willard has beautifully combined history and the Christian faith in this book. With a true story-teller's instinct, she has interwoven historical facts (you can check them in Butler's *Lives of the Saints* for the Feast of St. Augustine of Canterbury, May 27th) with an absorbing fictitious tale in such a way that eager readers will take delight in, and learn from, the great adventure of St. Augustine's mission to the land of the Angles (later England). She begins with the well-known story of the future Pope St. Gregory the Great, passing through the Roman market-place in A.D. 585 and inquiring about some handsome fair-haired slaves who were being sold there. On being told they were "Angles," he replied with his famous pun: "Not Angles but angels," and resolved one

day to send a Christian mission to the pagan country of these captives who had so arrested his attention. In A.D. 597 his envoy, the future St. Augustine of Canterbury, landed in Kent with a few fellow-monks, and some interpreters. This is where the story essentially begins, told from the viewpoint of Wolf, son of Wolfstan, who Miss Willard images to have been one of the slaves seen by Gregory.

Such is the skill of the narrative—not too simplistic, nor too complicated—that it is also an excellent book to read aloud. The advantage of this is that parents can stop to expand a point—whether historical or religious—where appropriate. There are many such points where one might pause to explain or where a young reader might ask a question: why did the pagan world tolerate slavery; the “Providential” aspect of Pope Gregory’s stroll in the Roman market-place; why spiritual warfare against evil does not mean actual violence or armaments; what does it mean to have a missionary vocation—all these questions arise to stretch both faith and imagination.

Miss Willard conveys a wealth of wisdom in simple dramatic pictures: Wolf, the Christian boy, part Romanized, part native, “realized a strange thing—it was simply that the stranger, Augustine, standing upright there with the cross borne at his shoulder, supported by a few unarmed men, was none the less stronger than Ethelbert, King of Kent, on whose hospitality and understanding he depended. . . .” Queen Bertha bows to her husband, but kneels to Augustine, thus showing the hierarchy of the sacred over the secular; the Christian death of Cyneog, a recently baptized Angle, so impresses his fellow Saxons with its steadfast dignity and faith, that many of them seek conversion, too.

Miss Willard deals sensitively with the romantic element in the story—the developing friendship, and later love, between Wolf and Fritha, a native girl whose uncle, Hardra, provides the “dark” side of the story, in his violent resistance to the truth. Yet again, a pattern of divine providence is shown in the Angles’ response to religious vocations. Monastic life itself is shown as the immensely civilizing force it was, in the period after the collapse of the Roman Empire known as the Dark Ages: “Increasingly there was church property to be administered—farms and villages, granaries and herds, dovecots and stewponds, and the sea fishery which provided winter fare for the monks and the poor they fed in great numbers. . . .” All around Wolf lies the evidence of the Roman past—ruined villas, overgrown roads, hidden mosaic floors—but contrasted with this is the Christian future of Angle-land, with the stupendous message brought by the handful of monks: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.”

FRANCIS PHILLIPS  
*England, 1996*



## AUGUSTINE CAME TO KENT





I

*Men in the Market Place*

“WE HAD STOOD in the market place for many hours with all the rest,” Wolfstan began. He paused and frowned. “But you have heard this often. Is this the story I should tell you again?”

“Yes, it is the best!” cried Ana.



The story Wolfstan had to tell his young son and daughter was so wild and strange that it seemed to come from another world. It was indeed a true tale, and certainly it had been told many times. But as she urged her father on, Ana's eyes were already round with anticipation. Her older brother, Wolf, was sitting by the doorway in the sunshine. It was just a little after noon on a day in spring and Rome seemed to doze. But not Wolf. He was sitting cross-legged, and gripping his ankles tightly, because this tale from the past that so nearly concerned him filled him with excitement however often he heard it told.

It was, after all, the story of how a boy with a Saxon name came to be living with his family in a decent home on a Roman hillside—under the direct and benevolent patronage of Pope Gregory himself.

Wolf looked across at his father and smiled. "The sun was shining so fiercely that you were faint," he prompted.

"Faint indeed, Wolf." The interruption made Wolfstan frown. He always told the tale in simple words, for he was a plain man who had had no schooling. "Where was I?"

"You were fainting in the Roman market place, Father. In the year of Our Lord five hundred and eighty-five."

"Or thereabouts. I have forgotten . . . Eobald was in greater distress even than I. We saw two men watching us. . . ."

"They were wearing strange clothes," Ana prompted him.

"Strange clothes unlike any we had seen before, Ana. Simple and clean. As pilgrims might wear."

"And they came up to you and Eobald," cried Ana, swept away by excitement, as she always was at this point of the story, "and there was sorrow in their faces because you were a poor slave, and Eobald was a poor slave, and you would be sold to cruel masters."

"Do be quiet!" Wolf said, turning on his sister. "You spoil it all. I want to know what happened next."

"You *know* what happened next!"

"If you are going to quarrel I shall not tell the tale at all."

"Father, please. . . ."

Wolfstan looked sternly at his son and daughter. Ana was still not much more than a baby, plump and pretty as her mother had been. But Wolf was hardening already out of childhood into strong boyhood. He had lately grown lean and tough. There was a steadiness in his eyes that showed he had begun to think for himself. Wolfstan thanked God for him. He remembered how nearly they had lost one another and he shuddered. Telling this old story always disturbed him. But it was right that it should not be forgotten, that his children should know how much they owed to the two strangers who had walked that day at noon through the Roman slave market.

For an hour and more before they came, Wolfstan had been supporting Eobald, and for longer than that the younger man had not spoken. They had both been taken by the raiders on the same day, though from different parts of the country.

In the southern parts of the country the people had been little molested in this way, though they knew from travelers' tales that such things were common on the east and northeast coasts. Sometimes it was only the men who were taken to be sold in the slave markets of the world, but that day they took the young women and many children, too. Wolfstan had been working in the fields when the raiders—fierce marauding bands from across the seas—swooped on the village. They rounded up every soul in sight except the old people and drove them to the coast twenty miles to the south. As he was dragged off, only half conscious, Wolfstan had been aware of his young wife, Ea, screaming to him. The last thing he remembered was turning his head toward her in a final struggle with his captors and seeing her, with their young son at her side, running frantically toward him.

Later, there was the horror of the voyage. Only the men were aboard the vessel that took Wolfstan and a hundred more through plunging seas down the long coastline to Tuscany. Little more than half survived the journey. In his despair Wolfstan would have welcomed death and he was ready to contrive his own destruction. But he had helped Eobald from the start and could not abandon him. And so it had been all along, Wolfstan the tough young farmer, who had worked in the fields since he was a child, urging on Eobald, a chieftain's son, who had lived well and therefore found the ordeal twice as hard.

Caring for the lad had been a kind of distraction. But once they were penned in the Roman market place

along with a great collection of strangers taken from half a dozen lands, Wolfstan had looked about him in the blazing midday and despair made him beat on his chest with his bound fists. Then he felt Eobald sagging against him, and turned his attention from his own sorrows to the immediate need of his companion. He propped the boy against his shoulder as well as he could. The sun had blistered Eobald's skin, reminding Wolfstan of his own young son's fairness that he could never hope to see again.

It was as he looked away from Eobald, hardly able to endure his own misery, that Wolfstan had seen the two strangers.

Both men were plainly dressed. Since he knew nothing of the country's customs, Wolfstan had no idea who or what they might be. Merchants or scholars, men of influence—he could not tell. All he knew was that here were two who might be prospective buyers. That told him that the midday pause for food and rest was over and the business of inspection would begin again. Buyers would move among the slaves, attended by the overseers. The merchandise would be turned about and prodded, teeth would be inspected, muscles pinched. . . . Wolfstan looked at the newcomers, and he was scowling and black with hatred.

Then, to his bewilderment, he saw the compassion in their faces. One seemed a man of importance, the other his attendant. The first asked a question, the other deferentially replied. Wolfstan heard their words but he could not understand them. Except one. It was *Angli*. That meant they were speaking of his own

country, Anglia or England. His heart hammered because he realized that he and Eobald had been singled out by these strangers.

The first man summoned an overseer and spoke to him. All three moved forward, the overseer thrusting aside any in his way, sending them staggering against one another, since their hands were bound.

At last the overseer had his hand on Eobald's shoulder, jerking him upright so roughly that his head lolled.

The leader of the two men spoke one sharp word. The overseer scowled. The stranger's hand was laid on Wolfstan's arm—not in command or appraisal, but in reassurance. . . .

"And then?" cried Ana, rocking backward and forward, unable to keep quiet a moment longer.

"Then, Ana, your father knew the meaning of comfort."

"And you were taken away from the market," she cried.

"And led to a house in a cool and shady place," said Wolf.

"And you were given water and clean clothes."

"And food."

"And even poor Eobald felt better."

"And then?" said Wolf.

"And then that evening the tall stranger came where I had been left to rest, and he spoke three words in my own tongue."

"What did he say, Father?"

"He said, 'You are free.' "