

# **THE STORY OF WILLIAM CAXTON**

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The story of William Caxton by Susan Cunnington

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**SUSAN CUNNINGTON**

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WILLIAM CAXTON**



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WILLIAM CAXTON

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# THE STORY OF WILLIAM CAXTON

*BY*

SUSAN CUNNINGTON

AUTHOR OF

'STORIES FROM DANTE' 'HOME AND STATE'

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ETC.

*WITH NINE ILLUSTRATIONS*



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## CHAPTER I: *The Kentish Home*

**W**ILLIAM CAXTON, whose father was a Kentish farmer, was born about the year 1421. He lived to the age of seventy, and during that time saw the accession of five kings to the throne. Those years were some of the most troublous in our history, yet to Caxton we owe the introduction of one of the most powerful of the arts of peace. In bringing to England the invention of printing he began a revolution of greater moment than that of any overthrow of crown or kingdom. The story of his life makes known to us many interesting features of fifteenth-century England.

Kent, popularly praised as 'the Garden of England,' was no garden when Caxton was born. A century before it had been famous for its fruit-trees and 'wort-yards' (orchards), but these were now neglected, and in the Weald the scenery was wild and the cultivation of the land difficult. Not far from Tunbridge is a small village called Hadlow, which is supposed to have been near the place of Caxton's birth; standing thus amid acres of moor, covered with low bushes of furze and thick tufts of heather. These growths, varied with thick coppice woods, though picturesque and charming to the modern eye, offered serious drawbacks to farming. The small villages and hamlets scattered over the Weald (once the ancient forest land) were inhabited by people whose hard lives and want of intercourse with other parts of the country kept them in a very

## *William Caxton*

primitive state. Years afterward, when Caxton was beginning the work which was to make him famous, he wrote in the preface to one of his translations: "I was born and learned mine English in Kent, in the Weald, where I doubt not is spoken as broad and rude English as in any place in England." Any one who has seen the lonely farms in the Cumberland or Derbyshire vales or on the Devonshire moors will have some idea of the kind of place which was the home of Caxton's boyhood.

In the fifteenth century Kent and Sussex were the 'Black Country' of England; and the timber of the ancient forest which once stretched over the greater part of those counties and into Hampshire served as fuel for the iron-smelting furnaces. The roads were bad, and across the Weald were often almost impassable; only those from Hythe and Sandwich to Canterbury, with its famous cathedral containing the shrine of Archbishop Thomas Becket, were occasionally repaired in the interests of the pilgrims journeying to and fro. For two centuries there had been a law that woods should be cleared away for two hundred yards on either side of main roads; but in many places they overgrew them, and besides making travel difficult they offered shelter to the many robbers who lay in wait for travellers. To-day in journeying through Kent the fruitful orchards and hop-gardens, and the comfortable farmsteads sheltered from the sea-breezes by clumps of hardy trees, make one think that life on a farm may be both prosperous and pleasant. But in the fifteenth century it was an altogether different scene.