

Table of Contents

Introduction	7
Historical Fiction	
The Climax	27
The Barbarians.....	57
The Death of Robert the Strong.....	64
The Night After Hastings.....	70
Blanchetaque.....	76
The End of Henry IV.....	85
The Apprentice.....	90
The Money-Lender	95
Drouet's Ride	103
Gornay	108
Fables and Fantasies	
The Ogre.....	117
Short Talks with the Dead	121
The Opportunity	128
The Way to Fairyland.....	135
A Conversation with an Angel.....	142
The Honest Man and the Devil	147
Home.....	155
The Tree of Knowledge	165
The Death of Wandering Peter.....	171
The End of The World	177
Satire	
The Captain of Industry.....	185
The Good Poet and the Bad Poet.....	192
The Book.....	198
The Obituary Notice	205
Lord Rumbo and Lord Jumbo.....	209

THE NIGHT AFTER HASTINGS

On 14th October, 1066, a great body of men from all parts of Europe, a few of them Italian, many Breton, but most of them French, led by William the Duke of Normandy, who claimed Edward the Confessor's inheritance, defeated upon a hillside called "Hastings Plain" above the river Brede the less civilised supporters of Harold, who, under that provincial noble, had marched at full speed from Yorkshire to meet the invaders. The contest was not determined till very late in the day, and while there was no regular pursuit, the cutting off of laggards and the attempt to prevent the information and reorganisation of the enemy could only be pursued after sunset.

The hermit in the wood beyond the Brede was very proud. He was not proud by nature — on the contrary, it was humility which had made him become a hermit, but a long acquaintance with mankind, with whom he favourably compared, and the increasing reverence of his neighbours had made him proud. He was proud because all the way from Dungeness through the Weald up to Crowborough Top he was the only Holy Man. There were, indeed, the parish priests, though but few even of these in the uplands, in the marsh parishes, and especially along the seashore, but they were of little account in his eyes, and of no very great account in those of their parishioners. Some were married over the left, some brazenly married and given to argument that such marriage was tolerable. All were drunken. He would wager that there was no man tonsured between Thames and the sea that could properly interpret the Creed: the Apostles' Creed, let alone the Nicene Creed. Nay, there were few that did not make a slip in the spoken parts of the Mass, and when it came to singing it was deplorable. For his part it was his bounden duty to walk over into the valley of the

THE EYEWITNESS

Rother and hear Mass upon Sundays and upon certain Feasts, but he sat there in his little hut waiting for the day when good hermits should be the pattern of mankind, and he himself should be a priest as a priest should be. But he would not take orders; not he; he would have nothing to do with the accursed hand of Stigand. He had once walked to Canterbury. It had taken him two days and the sight he saw at the end of it was quite enough. He cursed all those who made lax the service of God, and when any man made mention of the Archbishop in his presence he spat upon the ground.

He sat thus lonely in his little hut, with an expectation which was at once vague and convincing that better things were at hand. The lords were decayed, the clergy were corrupt, ignorant and rare, the populace had no voice—even the keen and talkative men who worked about the charcoal smelting-forges were besotten in temperament and servile; but better things were at hand. How they would come he could not tell. He thought, indeed, that the worst of the darkness had past, for there had been news, days and days past, of the landing of yet another host of pirates; yet he waited with an interior faith for order, for a light spread over the land and for a dignified and fixed society.

He was just upon eighty years old. He had something of a memory—and, above all, a tradition—of better things, for his father had revered and followed Dunstan, and he himself had hung up against the wall of his hut a leaden image of that man whom he already called a saint. In Mayfield he had friends who thoroughly agreed with this contempt of his for the decline of the countryside, and who partially understood his clinging to a resurrection of it.

Filled thus with a large dream, very confused but very powerful, he sat that night and slowly drank his ale out of a large, round, wooden bowl which he held up to his mouth with both hands as he supped it. It was a good four hours after sundown

and there was no kind of noise in the Vale of Brede. A damp and somewhat cold mist was over all the countryside, and every now and then one could hear the drip of the wet falling from the leaves of the trees.

To him thus melancholy there stumbled in through the opening of the hut (for it had no door) a wounded man.

This man was very tall in stature, not very broad-shouldered, strong in the muscles of the arms, and uncertain in his gait. His face was long and narrow, hair let to grow for weeks straggled over it, and it was as pale and dull as a wet leaf in autumn. The man had light blue eyes, not without fever. He staggered down, flopping upon the bench which ran by the side of the hut, and stared at the hermit for a good half-minute before speaking; the hermit, looking at him, saw that all his left arm was bandaged up in rough rags; they were dirty and saturated with blood.

The new-comer spoke in a weak tone and yet with violence, but what he said was quite unintelligible. From his accent he was certainly northern, perhaps a Northumbrian man, but it was stupid of him to speak his language in the south. The hermit spoke rapidly to him in Latin. It meant nothing to him. Then he spoke to him slowly in Latin, but the man only replied by a stupid glare. Then the hermit, in a careful and very chosen accent, recited what was best known as a common greeting between wanderers and himself, separating out each syllable.

"Fi-li mi quid quæ-ris?"

The stranger, who was already drooping with exhaustion, looked at him dully, and replied by pulling out a loose tooth and letting his chin fall upon his chest. The hermit had not known that there were men this side of the sea who could not understand so simple a Latin phrase. There was no one in Sussex but could have answered it. That a Kentish man should not follow the speech of men from down the coast would be excus-

THE EYEWITNESS

able enough, for the dialects of the coast varied, but that any human man should be quite dumb before the simplest conventional phrase of everyday Latin was a thing the hermit could not understand. He had heard that the pirates were like this, and there fell upon him that disgust and fear of the barbarian which, to men who love civilisation and order, is the disgust and fear of a reptile; but his Christian spirit overcame. He let the wounded man lie down upon the bench, he covered him with a thick cloth, and he put under his head a heap of straw. The wounded man lay there and stared, still quite stupidly, now at the burning tow in the tallow-bowl, now at the darkness outside the doorway. As he lay, he muttered continually between his swollen lips and with his wounded and broken mouth words of the north country; that Tostig was a great lord; that Harold was a great lord; that he knew not which was lord of his lord; that lords should not force poor men to fight; that he had come through many lands and hated them all; that he hated most this land in which a plain man was asked to fight against horses, and was hit about the head with iron, and in which not even the men of the place would speak a Christian tongue, but only sorcery. So far as any emotion remained in him, it was a fear that the hermit would bewitch him. He had distinctly heard him use the language of incantation.

Meanwhile the hermit understood nothing of all this, but was still bewildered, wondering who on earth this man could be, and deciding at last that he must be one of those pirates who had so recently landed, and of whom he had heard that they were not ten miles away, and whose battle it was which had made a distant clamour over the brow of the hill that very afternoon.

The old man sat there quite silent, and bit by bit his wounded guest muttered less and less audibly, and was at last silent also.

It was now near midnight when the hermit heard outside the noise of horse-hoofs soughing in the wet clay of the woodland. He had more visitors. There came ill two men very different from anything he had met before. The one was still covered in a coat of fine-linked mail, with a leather girdle and hanging from it a very large sword. His head was uncovered and round, the hair cropped close, the face clean shaven, with a square jaw and vigorous deep brown eyes. The other was dressed in fine cloth, his gloves had fur upon them, and he carried himself like a man who was always dainty and unwilling to undergo fatigue. In these men there was no hesitation. The first of them (who was in armour) spoke at once in the Church Latin with such an accent as the hermit had heard on the lips of monks from Devonshire, with whistling "u's" and broad "a's" but with a foreign thinness. He asked whether any man had taken refuge in the hut. Then his eye fell upon the figure which lay quite still upon the bench. That companion of his who was not in armour spoke in a sort of soft and musical southern Latin which the hermit could still just follow, and repeated the question of his companion. The hermit answered:

"My lords, you are great lords. I know nothing of this man, except that I have given him charity."

The new-comers were soldiers, and true soldiers had never yet been in the island. Their reticence, their decision, their immediate actions were appalling to the hermit. The short man in armour beckoned sharply towards the outer darkness. He was at once obeyed. Two serving-men, short also, bullet-headed also, stamped with the same stamp as their lord, came in at once, leading between them a tall, fair, lumbering man who was closely bound. They bade him speak to the wounded figure on the bench and interpret for them. The prisoner did not disobey, but quite willingly spoke in that northern dialect of his a few incomprehensible words, and then shook his head. The hermit

THE EYEWITNESS

did not understand the words, but he half understood the gesture. He leant over the bench, and making the sign of the Cross upon himself and afterwards in the air above the head of the wounded man, he said to them in Latin: "He is dead."

The Norman knight and his Italian companion stood somewhat relaxed at the news, but not unpleased, as if a long quest, to which they had been ordered, and which they had themselves thought useless, was now ended. They left with the hermit two of their serving-men and money for the burial and for one Mass only. The money was of a sort the hermit had not seen before.

These lords then rode out into the night with their followers, making for their camp, and next morning the hermit hired with the money given him six woodland men, who bore the Northumbrian upon a litter, and he was buried in the churchyard over the hill by the Rother, and one Mass was said for his soul.