

WILLIAM of NEWBURGH
The History of English Affairs

BOOK I

edited with translation and commentary by

P.G. Walsh & M.J. Kennedy

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The green children

1 I think that I should not omit mention of a prodigy
unprecedented since the world began which is known to have
occurred in England during Stephen's reign. I myself had protracted
doubts over this, though it was reported by many, and it seemed to
me absurd to accept as genuine an event whose rational basis was
non-existent or most obscure. But finally I was so overwhelmed by
the weighty testimony of so many reliable people that I was
compelled to believe and marvel at what I cannot grasp or investigate
by any powers of the mind.

2 In East Anglia there is a village which is said to lie four or
five miles from the famous monastery of the blessed king and martyr
Edmund. Close to the village some very ancient ditches are visible.
In English they are called Wilpittes or wolf-ditches, and they lend
their name to the village close by. At harvest-time, when the
harvesters were busy in the fields gathering the crops, two children, a
boy and a girl, emerged from these ditches. Their entire bodies
were green, and they were wearing clothes of unusual colour and
unknown material. As they wandered bemused over the countryside,
they were seized by the reapers and led to the village. Many people
flocked to observe this most unusual sight, and for several days they

sunt cibi expertes. cum ergo inedia jam paene deficerent, nec tamen aliquid ciborum qui offerbantur attenderent, forte ex agro contigit fabas inferri, quas illico arripientes legumen ipsum in thyrsis quaesierunt, et nihil in concavitate thyrsorum inventientes amare flevērunt. tunc quidam eorum qui aderant legumen ex corticibus erutum porrexit eis, quod statim libenter acceptum comederunt.

Hoc cibo aliti sunt per menses aliquot, quousque usum panis noverunt. denique colorem proprium, ciborum nostrorum praevalente natura, paulatim mutantes et similes nobis effecti, nostri quoque sermonis usum didicerunt. visumque est prudentibus ut sacri baptismatis perciperent sacramentum, quod et factum est. sed puer, qui minor natu videbatur, post baptismum brevi vivens tempore inmatūra morte decessit, sorore incoluni permanente et nec in modico a nostri generis feminis discrepante. quae nimirum postea apud Lennam, ut dicitur, duxit maritum, et ante annos paucos superstes esse dicebatur.

Sane cum jam nostrae usum loquelae haberent, interrogati qui et unde essent respondisse feruntur: 'Homines de terra sancti Martini, qui scilicet in terra civitatis nostrae praecipuae venerationi habetur.' consequenter interrogati ubinam esset terra illa et quomodo exinde huc advenissent, 'utrumque' inquirunt 'nescimus. hoc tantum meminimus, quia cum quodam die pecora patris nostri in agro pascereamus, sonitum quandam magnam audivimus, qualem nunc apud sanctum Edmundum cum signa concupere dicuntur audire solemus. cumque in sonitum illum quem admirabamur animo intenderemus, repente, tanquam in quodam mentis excessu positi, invenimus nos inter vos in agro ubi mehebatis.' interrogati utrum ibidem vel in Christum crederetur vel sol oriretur, terram illam Christianam esse et ecclesias habere dixerunt. 'Sed soli' inquirunt 'apud nostrates non oritur; cuius radiis terra nostra minime illustratur, illius claritatis modulo contenta quae apud vos solem vel orientem praecedit vel sequitur occidentem. porro terra quaedam lucida non longe a terra nostra aspicitur, amne largissimo utramque dirimente.' haec et multa alia, quae retexere longum est, curiose percontantibus respondisse feruntur. dicat quisque quod voluerit, et ratiocinetur de his ut poterit; me autem prodigiosum mirabilemque eventum exposuisse non piget.

were kept without food. So they were now almost fainting with hunger, yet they paid no heed to any food offered to them. It then chanced that beans were brought in from the fields; they at once grabbed these, and looked for the beans in the stalks; but when they found nothing in the hollow of the stalks they wept bitterly. Then one of the bystanders pulled the beans from the pods and offered them to the children, who at once gleefully took and ate them.

For several months they were nourished by this food until they learned to eat bread. In the end they gradually lost their own colour when the qualities of our foodstuffs had their effect. They became like us, and also learned the use of our speech. Persons of prudence decided that they should receive the sacrament of holy baptism, and this was also administered. But the boy, who seemed to be younger, lived only a short time after baptism and then died prematurely, whereas the girl continued unaffected, differing not even in the slightest way from the women of our own kind. She certainly took a husband later at Lynn, according to the story, and was said to be still living a few years ago.

Once they had the use of our language, they were asked who they were and where they came from. They are said to have replied: "We are people from St Martin's land; he is accorded special reverence in the country of our birth." When they were next asked where that land was, and how they had come from there to Woolpit, they said: "We do not know either of these things. All we remember is that one day we were pasturing our father's flocks in the fields, when we heard a mighty din such as we often hear at St Edmund's when they say the bells are ringing out. When we turned our attention to the sound which caused us surprise, it was as though we were out of our minds, for we suddenly found ourselves among you in the fields where you were harvesting." When they were asked whether people believed in Christ there, or whether the sun rose, they said that it was a Christian country and had churches. "But the sun does not rise among the natives of our land", they said "and it obtains very little light from the sun's rays, but is satisfied with that measure of its brightness which in your country precedes its rising or follows it setting. Moreover a shining land is visible not far from our own, but a very broad river divides the two." They are said to have made these and many other replies too long to narrate to interested enquirers. Every person can say what he wishes, and can rationalise these events as best he can; but I am not ashamed to have described this unnatural and remarkable event.

De quibusdam prodigiis

1 Alia quoque aequae mira et prodigiosa nostris temporibus
contigerunt, ex quibus pauca reteram. mira vero huiusmodi dicimus,
non tantum propter raritatem, sed etiam quia occultam habent
rationem.

Dum in lapidicina quadam petra ingens ferramentis finderetur,
apparere duo canes capacem sui in eadem petra concavitatem
replentes absque omni spiraculo. videbantur autem esse ex eo canum
genere quos leporarios vocant, sed vultu truces, odore graves, pilorum
expertes. et unus quidem eorum, ut dicitur, cito defecit; alterum
vero stupendae, ut aiunt, edacitatis Henricus Wintoniensis episcopus
diebus plurimis in deliciis habuit.

2 Refertur etiam quod in alia lapidicina, dum pro eruendis
fabricae necessariis lapidibus altius foderetur, repertus sit lapis
formosus duplex, id est ex duobus subtili agglutinatione compactus
lapidibus. mirantibus operariis, episcopo qui non longe aberat
exhibitis, designari iussus est ut innotesceret si quid in eo lateret
mysterii. inventaque est in eius concavitate bestiola quam bufonem
vocant, cathenulam auream circa collum habens. cunctis ergo qui
aderant tam inusitatae rei stupore suspensis, praecipit episcopus iterum
signari lapidem et lapidicinae altitudini redditum ruderibus in
perpetuum operiri.

3 In provincia quoque Deiorum, haud procul a loco nativitatis
meae, res mirabilis contigit quam a puero cognovi. est vicus aliquot
a mari orientali milliaris distans, iuxta quem famosae illae aquae quas
vulgo Gipse vocant numerosa scaturigine e terra prosiliunt, non
quidem jugiter sed annis interpositis; et facto torrente non modico per
loca humiliora in mare labuntur. quae quidem cum siccantur signum
bonum est; nam earum fluxus futurae famis incommodum non
fallaciter portendere dicitur.

4 Ex hoc vico rusticus quidam ad salutandum amicum in proximo
vico commemorantem profectus, multa jam nocte minus sobrius
remeabat. et ecce, de proximo tumulto — quem saepius vidi, et
duobus vel tribus stadiis a vico abest — voces cantantium et quasi
festive convivantium audivit. miratus quinam in loco illo sollemnibus
gaudiis intempestae noctis silentium rumperent, hoc ipsum curiosius
inspicere voluit; vidensque in latere tumuli januam patentem, accessit
et introspexit. viditque domum amplam et luminosam, plenamque

Some unnatural events

1 Other events equally remarkable and unnatural have occurred in
our day, and I shall recount a few of them. I call things of this
kind remarkable not only because they are unusual, but also because
they have a hidden significance.

2 When a huge rock was being split by iron implements in a
quarry, two dogs became visible, filling a receptacle in the rock
which was big enough for them, but which contained no air-holes.
They seemed to be the breed of dog called greyhounds, but they
were ferocious in appearance, smelly and hairless. It is reported that
one of them soon died, but the other, said to have had an
astounding appetite, was kept as a pet for very many days by Henry
bishop of Winchester.

3 Another account has it that in a different quarry men were
digging deeper to unearth stones required for building, when there
was found a beautiful double-stone, formed from two stones joined
with a fine glue. The workmen were astonished. When it was
shown to the bishop who was close by, he ordered it to be marked
so that it could be ascertained if any secret lay hidden in it. In the
hollow within was found a little creature which they call a road; it
had a small chain of gold round its neck. All the bystanders, then,
were astonished at this strange sight. The bishop ordered the stone
to be sealed up again, returned to the depths of the quarry, and
buried with rubble for ever.

4 Again, in the province of the Deiri, not far from my
birthplace, a remarkable thing happened of which I have known from
my boyhood. There is a village, a few miles from the North Sea,
near which some celebrated waters commonly called Gipse leap from
the earth in numerous springs, not continuously, but at intervals of
years. They form a considerable torrent, and glide over lower
ground into the sea. It is a good sign when they dry up, for the
time when they flow is said to presage with certainty the hardship of
impending scarcity.

5 A countryman from this hamlet had gone to greet a friend
staying in the next village. He was returning late at night a little
drunk, when suddenly from a hillock close by (I have quite often
seen this; it lies two or three furlongs from the village) he heard
voices singing, as though people were feasting in celebration. He
wondered who were breaking the silence in this spot at dead of night
with festive rejoicing, so he sought to investigate the matter more
carefully. In the side of the hill he saw an open door; he
approached and looked inside. Before his eyes was a large, well-lit

discumbentibus tam viris quam feminis, tanquam ad sollemnes epulas, unus autem ministrantium aspiciens stantem ad ostium, obtulit ei poculum. quo ille accepto consule noluit bibere, sed effuso contento et continente retento concitus abiit. factoque tumultu in convivio pro sublatione vasculi et persequentibus eum conviviis, perniciatè iumentū quo vehebatur evasit, et in vicum cum insigni se praeda recepit. denique hoc vasculum materiae incognitae, coloris insoliti, et formae inusitatae Henrico seniori Anglorum regi pro magno munere oblatum est, ac deinde fratri reginae, David scilicet regi Scottorum, contrahitum annis plurimis in theaunis Scotiae serratum est; et ante annos aliquot, sicut veraci relatione cognovimus, Henrico secundo illud aspiciere cupienti a rege Scottorum Willelmo resignatum est.

Haec et huiusmodi incredibilia videntur nisi a dignis fide testibus contigisse probarentur. si autem poterunt magi per incantationes, ut scriptum est, Aegyptiacas et arcana quaedam, operatione utique malorum angelorum, virgas convertere in dracones, et aquam in sanguinem, novas quoque ranas producere — quos tamen, ut ait Augustinus, creatores draconum vel ranarum non dicimus, sicut nec agricolas segetum; aliud est enim ex intimo et summo causarum cardine condere atque administrare creaturam, quod qui facit solus est creator Deus, aliud autem pro distributis ab illo viribus et facultatibus aliquam operationem fortisecus admovere, ut tunc vel tunc, sic vel sic exeat quod creatur, quod non solum mali angeli sed etiam mali homines possunt — si, inquam, mali angeli per magos Deo permittente ea potuere, non est mirum si et illa de quibus nunc quaeritur quadam angelicae naturae potentia, si a superiori potestate permittantur, partim praestigialiter et fantastice, ut illud in tumultu nocturnum convivium, partim etiam in veritate, ut vel illos canes vel bufonem illum cum cathenula aurea seu scyphum illum valeant exhibere, in quibus homines stupore inutili teneantur; qui nimirum mali angeli libentius faciunt, cum permittuntur, in quibus homines perniciose fallantur, porro puerorum illorum viridium, qui de terra emeruisse dicuntur, abstrusior ratio est, quam utique nostri sensus tenuitas non sufficit indagare.

dwelling crowded with men and women reclining at table as at a formal feast. One of the servants noticed him standing at the door, and offered him a cup. He took it, but deliberately refused to drink it; he poured out the contents, but kept the container, and left with all speed. The removal of the vessel caused a disturbance at the feast, and the diners pursued him. But the speed of his mount enabled him to escape, and he retired to the village with his notable prize. Eventually this cup of unknown material, unusual colour, and strange shape was offered as a splendid gift to the elder Henry, king of England. Subsequently it was passed on to the queen's brother, David king of Scots, and kept for very many years among the treasures of Scotland. Some years ago, as I learned from a reliable account, Henry II wished to see it, and it was surrendered to him by William king of Scots.

These and similar stories would appear incredible were they not proved to have happened by witnesses worthy of belief. But scripture has it that magicians were able by exploiting Egyptian spells and secret practices — through the work of wicked angels, undoubtedly — to turn sticks into serpents and water into blood, and to produce newly-formed frogs as well. However, as Augustine says, we do not call them creators of snakes or frogs, just as we do not call farmers creators of crops; for it is one thing to fashion and to sustain created things from the innermost and highest nexus of causes — God the Creator alone does this — and quite another thing to use the powers and abilities assigned by God to perform some external action on them, so that a created thing appears at a particular time or in a particular form; not only wicked angels, but also wicked men can do this. So if, as I say, wicked angels could do these things with God's forbearance, through the agency of magicians, it is not surprising that they can by some force of their angelic nature make the objects of our present investigation appear, if the higher Power allows it. Some things they achieve by trickery and ghostly appearances, like the feast at night inside the hill, but others are actual objects like the dogs or the toad with the golden chain or the cup, by means of which people can be gripped by a profitless fascination. These wicked angels, when permitted, undoubtedly perform with greater eagerness actions which can cause men to be deceived and damaged. But an explanation of the green children who are said to have come forth from the earth is more puzzling; the frailty of our intelligence is quite incapable of unearthing this.