

Clay, Rotha Mary., The Hermits and Anchorites of England. Methuen & Co. London, 1914.

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XII. PROPHETS AND COUNSELLORS

The prophets that have been before me and before thee of old prophesied . . . of war, and of evil, and of pestilence.—Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.

Forsooth, John Baptist, prince of hermits after Christ . . . chose the solitary life.—Richard Rolle, *Fire of Love*.

I. COMPANIONSHIP IN THE CELL

The hermits and anchorites of England occupied an independent position somewhat akin to that of the Hebrew seer. Whereas monks living in community looked back to “the sons of the prophets” as the first cœnobites, the recluse regarded himself as the follower of Elijah and of John the Baptist. It was therefore his vocation to read the signs of the times, to declare, to preach, and, it may be, to predict. If, then, the solitary had a striking personality, if he were a man with force of character, or possessed the mysterious power begotten of deep personal holiness, he was to his generation the servant of God to whom secrets were revealed. To the simple people who sought him, his counsel seemed to come as a voice from heaven.

The first authentic record of an anchorite in Britain (603) illustrates this oracular office. When the bishops and monks of the British Church heard of Augustine’s arrival, they were face to face with a hard problem. They therefore visited a solitary sage before attending a second conference with the strangers :—

“They that were to go to the aforesaid council, repaired first to a certain holy and discreet man, who was wont to lead an eremitical life among them, consulting with him, whether they ought, at the preaching of Augustine, to forsake their traditions. He answered: ‘If he is a man of God, follow him’. ‘How shall we prove that?’ said they. He relied, ‘Our

Lord saith, Take my yoke upon you. and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart ; if therefore, this Augustine be meek and lowly of heart, it is to be believed that

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HERMIT EXHORTS SIR LANCELOT



THE BURIAL OF SIR GALAHAD
THE HERMIT AND THE KNIGHTS

[Plate XXXIV : The Hermit and the Knights.]

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he has taken upon him the yoke of Christ, and offers the same to you to take upon yourselves. But, if he be stern and haughty, it is plain that he is not of God, nor are we to regard his words.' They again asked : 'And how shall we discern even this?' 'Do you contrive,' said the anchorite, 'that he may first arrive with his company at the place where the synod is to be held ; and if at your approach he shall rise up to you, hear him submissively, being assured that he is the servant of Christ ; but if he shall despise you, and not rise up to you, whereas you are more in number, let him also be despised by you.'"

When they arrived at the synod, Augustine remained seated, which circumstance augured ill for the cause of unity. At once they charged him with pride, and endeavoured to contradict all he said.¹

In these primitive times, the recluse was the regular religious teacher. Maildubh, the Irishman who settled among the Christian Britons at Malmesbury (c. 637), gathered round him a school whence missionaries went forth to the pagan Saxons ; and it was Maildubh the hermit who taught Aldhelm the bishop.

In the realm of romance, the solitary is a teacher, expounder of visions, confessor, counsellor, healer, and host. In the Celtic legends, especially in the *Quest of the Holy Grail*, there is ever a cell in the background. When a joust takes place, a recluse is at hand to intervene (Plate XXXIII a). Sir Perceval, hoping for tidings of a certain knight, knocks at the recluse's little window (Plate XXXIII b). On hearing his name, she commands the gates to be opened, for she is his aunt ; she tells him of his mother's death, and gives him counsel. On Good Friday Sir Lancelot goes barefoot into the Forest Perilous and confesses to a hermit. He even stays three days in a cell, receiving exhortation (Plate XXXIV a). Again, when sorely wounded, he is cured by the knight-hermit and good leech, Sir Baudewin. When Gawayne is granted harbour at a hermitage, the good man insists on knowing how it stands betwixt his guest and God. Gawayne and Ector repair to the holy Nacyen, who, in teaching them, shows an intimate knowledge of the Round Table. Galahad, Bors, Lionel, and other knights-errant might often be found at the hermitage. After the burial of Sir Gal-

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ahad, at which a hermit assists (Plate XXXIV b), Sir Perceval takes a religious habit, and so lives until his death. The solitary is always some noble knight of fame who has forsaken great possessions.²

Returning to Bede and the chroniclers, we find amongst the Saxon saints many renowned counsellors, men like Cuthbert and Guthlac, endowed with intellectual gifts, rare insight, and a wisdom born of experience and meditation. It was remembered of Cuthbert that, even before he entered upon the solitary life, he spoke so beautifully and had such a bright angelic countenance that no man durst conceal from him the most hidden secrets of his heart, but confessed his guilt, believing that it could not be hidden from him. Guthlac, also, was sought by men of every condition, and, from the King to the least of his subjects, none left the young monk of Crowland uncomfited or uninspired. Among the illustrations on

the fine Harley roll is one entitled : “Guthlac consoles the exile king Ethelbald (Plate XXXV)”. The King is represented as gazing intently at the hermit, who is in the act of exhortation, with one hand uplifted, and clasping in the other the holy book. The saint is declaring that he has made intercession for Ethelbald, predicting that he will be restored to his kingdom, and encouraging him to wait patiently.

The same rôle is attributed to St. Neot. A Saxon homily declares that King Alfred often came to this holy man about his soul’s need, and relates that Neot reprovèd and exhorted him with foreknowledge. Neot’s later biographers, indeed, represent him as pronouncing judgment upon his royal kinsman for pride, tyranny, and licentiousness ; but there is no occasion to quote what Dr. Plummer with righteous indignation calls “wretched tales which besmirch the fair fame of our hero king in order to exalt a phantom saint”. Without giving credence to legends which are inconsistent with historical fact, we may believe that Neot was a friend and adviser of the King, and a faithful pastor of the people. He cheered the sad and turned aside the wrath of those who had been burning with anger. The homily relates that he preached

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A HERMIT-COUNSELLOR

[PLATE XXXV : A Hermit-Counsellor.]

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to all men the true faith, and to those who confessed and renounced their sins, he declares the goodness and mercy of God.

Among the less-known saints, few are more interesting than Wulsi, who became the oracle of Crowland during a critical time (p. 37). When he removed to the west of England, he was still an influential counsellor. Knowing how to speak a word in season, he was able to induce St. Wulstan to accept the bishopric of Worcester :—

“Since, then, Wulstan the man of God could not be led to consent, although he had been asked by many men of the religious life and worshipful persons, at length, having been sharply rebuked for his disobedience by Wulsi the recluse, a man of God who had lived the solitary life for more than forty years, and being terribly warned by a divine oracle, he was compelled to consent with great sorrow of heart”.³

Again, like some dreamer of old, Wulsi had a vision which led to the re-foundation of Westminster Abbey (p. 38 and Plate XIV). The departing seer (like Edward the Confessor, whose last utterances showed premonitory instinct) predicted evil times, though he hoped that he might “be found a lying prophet”.

From the cell there went forth now and again warnings of impending misfortune. Godric, for example, who showed many tokens of possessing clairvoyant powers, discerned “the spirit of famine”. The devastating dearth of 1258 was presaged, it was said, in a vision seen by the anchoress dwelling at St. Peter’s church at St Albans—“a most holy recluse, who was accustomed to see not simply dreams but heavenly signs of the future”. One of her visions was that of a venerable man ascending the tower of the church, turning towards the town and pronouncing repeatedly the dire message : Woe, woe, woe, to all the inhabitants of the earth !

“And soon, in the same year, on account of the failure of the crops, the herds also died, and so great a famine ensued that in the city of London 15,000 souls perished of hunger. In various by-ways, indeed, folk fell down and died miserably. And so great was their number that the grave-diggers for very weariness threw many bodies in a heap into a single pit.”

The neighbourhood of St. Albans had formerly been famed for the spirit of prophesy manifested by Roger the hermit and Christina the recluse. The chronicler declares that Roger, “the friend of God,” taught Christina almost incredible things of the secrets of heaven, for his body alone seemed to remain on earth, his soul conversing with the invisible. Christina’s super-natural faculty consisted in thought-reading, presentiments, and the power of seeing what took place at a distance. She was regarded with awe as a prophetess—for did not an

angel in the form of a bird alight in her bosom, foreshowing her things? The discrimination of her counsels caused her to be frequently sought by the abbot himself, even in political matters, as, for example, when he was sent as ambassador from King Stephen to the Pope.

William of Malmesbury speaks of the “ambiguous oracle” pronounced by Roger, who was believed to have anticipated the fate of Robert Bloet, Bishop of Lincoln. This prelate, a man of dissolute life, demanded of Christina’s protector why he harboured a maiden who, having forsaken her suitor for the sake of celibacy, had sought refuge with him. When the hermit gave a fitting reply, the bishop broke out : “Bold and insolent is your answer ; your cowl alone sustains you”. To which Roger retorted ominously : “Despise the cowl as you will, a day will come when you will sorely wish to have one, and words shall be wanting to you with which to ask for it”. Roger’s words were remembered when, without a moment’s warning, Bishop Robert died of apoplexy.⁴

The dark saying was sufficiently vague, and its half-enigmatical language might have admitted of many interpretations. Wulfric of Haselbury, however, predicted events with astounding clearness. He claimed to speak in the name of the Lord, and was highly esteemed as a prophet. When he heard that Henry I was arranging for his departure to foreign lands, he said : “He will go, indeed, but he will not return ; and even if he should return, he will not be either sound or whole”. Hearing this, the King was wroth with the seer, and sent to inquire whether he were indeed the author of these words. Wulfric replied : If I said them, I am not sorry, because I

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have not spoken from myself”. King Henry departed, and when his death took place, the anchorite intimated it to Sir William Fitzwalter : “Yesterday the King died ; do you take counsel what you will do”. Then the knight, being amazed, commanded him to be silent. “It is easy enough for me to be silent,” said the priest, “but it will happen on the morrow that all men will speak it openly ; and so it fell out. On another occasion Wulfric predicted that King Stephen was about to be led away captive, but would be set free. Some time before Stephen’s accession, the recluse had saluted him as the future king ; and he subsequently announced to the young Prince of Anjou that he would reign in succession.

Godric uttered predictions of a similar nature. The following story, accurate in detail, is too long to relate fully. About March, 1170, a knight from the court visited Godric and sought his blessing. As his visitor turned to go, the hermit sent a message to Henry II in which he referred to his own approaching death and also mentioned “the young King.” Before long, the import of the mysterious allusion became plain. The old sailor-saint did indeed—to use his own words—“pass the borders of the Great Sea,” and a month later the King’s son Henry was crowned, on account of unforeseen political circumstances.⁵

Such oracles were frequently given unasked, but persons used also to inquire of the recluse, as warriors of old resorted to seer or prophetic. When he was in the Holy Land, Richard Cœur de Lion went by night to consult the hermit of St. Samuel, who predicted that Jerusalem would not be taken by him.⁶

Nor was it unusual for the solitary to act as spiritual adviser to those who visited him. No voice carried more weight than did the voice crying repentance in the wilderness. To Coquet Island, near the Northumbrian coast, came many from distant parts to converse with Henry the hermit. Their secrets he made perfectly clear, as though his bodily eye could look into hidden things. When a monk of Tynemouth came to him, he bade the man beware and keep sober, and told him both the place and hour when he had been disgracefully

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drunk. Bartholomew of Farne exercised a strong and abiding influence alike on rich and poor, on wild border barons and rough sailors. The chronicler Gaufridus describes him thus :—

“Jovial also was he in his talk, and yet was he grieved by sin. Whenever they came before him, he used fearlessly to convict the pride of those rich men the report of whose cruelty reached him. So grave was his countenance and so reverend his mein that many of them, moved by his works, set themselves earnestly to leave off oppression of the poor, to keep their hands from unlawful gain, and to atone for their sins by alms. He had compassion on the poor and the sick, persuading them to bear life patiently.”

Even the proud and passionate Norman Kings were open to influence when brought face to face with an outspoken man of God. Henry I came to Wulfric a suppliant ; Stephen left him a penitent.

“A certain great prince⁷ of the household of King Henry said when he heard of the fame of Wulfric : ‘The king would do well if he sent to the cell of this scoffer to take possession of his property, because it is impossible that one to whom so many resort should not have laid up much treasure’. And while the words were yet in his mouth, behold, he fell throttled to the earth, with his mouth twisted back right to his ear, and wallowed foaming. The king having heard of it, went when opportunity offered, to the cell of the servant of God ; and commending himself earnestly to his prayers, told all things, and made supplication for this knight. ‘I do not,’ said he, ‘lay this sin to his charge, and I am present here to do whatever I ought to do.’ Then one of those who stood by, taking the hand of Wulfric, laid it on the face of the sick man, and immediately his mouth returned to its place, and becoming sound in mind, he spoke aright, glorifying God.”

Wulfric not only admonished Count Stephen as to his future conduct, but afterwards chode him because he had ruled ill, and the whole peace of England had been disturbed. After much wholesome exhortation, Wulfric added that, unless Stephen were penitent, his throne would never be established. “When the king heard these things he began to weep copiously and to make confession from

the bottom of his heart, and he turned his cheek to the prophet to be smitten and spat upon.”

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Robert of Knaresborough boldly spoke his mind to King John. When the king and his retinue arrived at the hermitage, Robert was prostrate before the altar, and would not leave his devotions, although aware of their presence. At length Sir Brian de Lisle roused him, saying : “Brother Robert, rise quickly : lo! the king is here who would speak with thee”. The hermit awoke, and having picked up from the ground an ear of corn [grain], he held it towards King John, and said : “If thou be king, do thou create such a thing as this” : and when the king could make no reply, he added : “There is no King but one, that is God”. Certain of the bystanders regarded the hermit’s conduct as madness, but one replied that Robert was indeed wiser than they, since he was the servant of God in whom is all wisdom. Even the unbelieving despot was duly, if momentarily, impressed by the good man’s boldness. Before Robert, says the rhyming chronicler, tyrants trembled, beasts and birds bowed, and fiends fled.

It was not unknown for recluses to use their influence as protectors or mediators. The Countess Loretta, anchoress of Hackington, was one of the chief promoters of the Franciscan Order when the friars first arrived at Canterbury. Thomas of Eccleston says that she “cherished them in all things, as a mother her sons”. Through her influence, some nuns of Canterbury gained privileges, and a certain man obtained pardon for manslaughter. Henry III, yielding to the entreaty of Nicholas, the monk of Westminster, released a man from outlawry, and also issued a writ providing for the maintenance of another man.⁸

Westminster Abbey had a succession of anchorite-confessors. One of these was the chosen counsellor of Richard II during Wat Tyler’s insurrection (1381) :—

“That same day the king went . . . toward Westminster, attended on by the number of 200 persons, to visit Saint Edward’s shrine, and to see if the Commons had done any mischeife there. . . . After which he spake with the Anchore, to whome he confessed himselfe.”⁹

He was consulted on important political matters ; nor was he altogether free from suspicion of disloyalty by encouraging

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rebels. He was said to have acted as adviser to Thomas, Earl of Warwick, one of the Lords Appellant (1397). Accused of treason, the aged nobleman pleaded that he had been led away by the Duke of Gloucester and the Earl of Arundel— “trustyng also in the holynes and wisdom of the Abbot of Saint Albones, and of the Reluse of Westmynstre, that saide it was lawfuller that he dede”.¹⁰ It was perhaps from this same man that Henry V received serious impressions at the time

of his accession (1413), as related by Thomas of Elmham, afterwards his chaplain :—

“After he had spent the day in wailing and groaning, so soon as the shades of night covered the earth, the weeping prince, taking advantage of the darkness, secretly visited a certain recluse of holy life at Westminster ; and lying bare to him the secret sins of his whole life, was washed in the laver of true repentance”.¹¹

The Abbey archives may yet prove whether these various monks can be identified as one and the same. Sir John London was enclosed before 1389 and lived until 1429. About the year 1415, however, another priest was enclosed there, William Alwyk by name, who was appointed by Henry V to a burdensome ecclesiastical office, but shortly returned to his cell (p. 144). With one or the other the king had monetary transactions, perhaps by way of alms, for the Issue Roll of the Exchequer (1420) notes £4 as “paid by the hands of a certain recluse within the monastery of Westminster”.

John the anchorite of Westminster was remembered in the will of the noted conspirator, Lord Scrope of Masham (1415), who bequeathed him the rosary which he used, and a considerable sum of money. One of such exalted virtue was believed to have superabundant grace, and a high value was set upon his intercessions. This is confirmed by the curious *Revelation respecting Purgatory*,¹² in which the spirit of the nun Margaret is represented as appearing to her friend on earth requesting prayers and masses :—

“And also sende to thi fadir the recluse of Westemynster, and byd hym singe twa messis of saynt Petir for me, and saye fyve dayes for

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me this psalme Miserere mei dues and this ympne Veni creator spiritus and so forthe, in the manere a-bowne sayde. And bydde him warne dane Perse Crowme¹³ that he saye two messis of the haly gaste for me.”

This vision is dated 1422. Seven years later the Chronicle of St. Albans announces the death of Master John, the monk of Westminster, “prominent as a hermit enclosed there during forty years”.¹⁴ An undated manuscript, said to be in the Westminster archives, seems to refer to this event, which caused a sensation in the community :—

“After the singing of Mattins, on the morning of St. Thomas’ or Mumping Day, when the Brethren began the Lauds for the dead, it was whispered abroad that the Abbey Ankret was dead at last. Brother Innocent . . . sang the news in my ear when we turned to the Altar for the *Gloria* : ‘Dead is our holy Ankret ; he is dead ; he died at midnight ; the Abbot confessed him ; he is dead’”.

In so great veneration was the old man held, that, even when his mind was failing, his incoherent utterances were treasured in the monastery : “his discourse consisted of pious ejaculations, some of which have been written down by the *cancellarius*”.¹⁵

Claiming to know the Divine will by special revelation, the recluse often exercised an important influence both in public and private affairs. When the young Henry VI became King, an anchoress of York (Dame Emma Rawghton) declared that it had been shown to her by Our Lady that he ought to be crowned in France as well as in England, and also that no person was better fitted to be his guardian than Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick.¹⁶ The Earl turned to this holy woman for advice in his private affairs, as described in chapter III.

Whilst the secluded anchorite was the passive counsellor of individuals, the hermit might be an active leader among the people, closely associated with reform—sometimes, indeed,

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with revolution—whether moral, social, or political. The most notable example is that of the preaching of the first Crusade by Peter the Hermit (1096), whose cry *Dieu le veut* rang throughout Christendom. A tragic fate, however, often awaited the religious fanatic or political firebrand. The ruthless persecution of the Jews in 1190, was in York incited by a hermit. This militant priest, a Premonstratensian canon, would go early in the morning “to offer the unbloody sacrifice,” and then walk forth to his bloody work. Clad in a white habit, the hermit led his fellow-Christians against “the enemies of Christ,”—the terrified Jews shut up in the castle, and he assisted the mob in placing engines for the siege. Advancing incautiously too near the wall, he was crushed by a great stone which was cast down upon him ; and it was thought that since he was the only one of the besiegers to be slain, it showed the guilt of one in that profession or order taking part in such wanton work.¹⁷

There was danger, too, when hermits, persuaded that they spoke as true prophets, but sometimes (in Hebrew phrase) as “lying prophets, who spoke a vision of their own heart,” stood before Kings as messengers of judgment to come. The tale of Peter the Wise (called, of Pontefract, and also, of Wakefield), the trouble of King John, is related in the Chronicle of Barnwall,¹⁸ written some fourteen years after the occurrence.

“There was a certain man of Wakefield, Peter by name. This simple, rustic man, living upon bread and water, was esteemed by the people as predicting future things. He foretold that the rule of King John would not last beyond the next Ascensiontide, insasmuch as it had been revealed to him in a vision that John the king would reign fourteen years. . . . Being asked whether he would die of be driven out or resign, he answered also, as they say, that he did not know : this thing only he did know, that he would not reign beyond that time, neither he nor any one of his own family in his stead, but one whom I should please God to appoint. This

thing did not escape the king, and it seemed first of all that they laughed at the man as an idiot and not sound in his head. But it came to pass that, as the man was a wanderer and told the story everywhere, he was taken by the king's favourites and shut up in prison. This saying

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spread far and wide and his name became very famous, so that he who before was known to few and despised, from the time of his imprisonment was considered a man of note and everywhere spoken about. Daily, as is the custom of people, lies were added to lies ; daily they attributed to him new things, and everybody developing some lie out of his own heart, asserted that Peter had said it."

We learn from Matthew Paris¹⁹ that the hermit staked his life on the certain truth of his prediction, saying : "If I be found guilty of falsehood, thou mayest do with me as thou wilt" ; to whom King John replied : "Be it according to thy word". The King then committed him to William de Harecurt to guard him in close confinement at Corfe, until it were proved how the matter would end.

In the meantime, the King of France, urged on by the Pope, prepared to invade England, and on 15 May, 1213, John did homage to the legate, agreeing to hold his realm as tributary to the Pope. Several causes contributed to his submission, the chief being his forebodings at the approach of the ominous festival—"afraid that he would lose with his life his kingdom, both of this world and of the world to come". When the day came, the King, with his bishops and rulers, were in high spirits, and those who had given credence to Peter thought that after all he was half-witted, and deceived by his own simpleness. It was represented to the King, however, to what an extent the man had troubled the country, sowed discord, and stirred up the King's enemies ; for his words had incited the French to invade England. The passion of the King was thus kindled, and he commanded Peter to be hanged on a gibbet in the face of the sun ; and not he alone, but also his son, "who"—says the Barnwall chronicler—"being considered equally guilty was alike hung, lest by chance he also should have been a partaker, or even the author, of his father's prophesy."

For an account of the final interview and of the hermit's last impassioned harangue, we must turn to the pages of a Scottish chronicler :—²⁰

"King John, perceiving in himself that the day appointed by Peter as aforesaid had passed away, and that no bodily ailment had

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come upon him, called to Peter, whom he cause to be brought forth from prison, a false prophet. Who boldly resisted the king to his face, affirming that he was telling the truth, and he stated that the king himself was not reigning at the time, since . . . he had subjected the rule of his kingdom to the power of another. When then Peter was convicted by such judgment

as this, and was condemned to be hanged, he said in a loud voice to the king, That it was natural he should feel that he must rage against the Church and her members, since from the time when he was born he proceeded, forsooth, from the devil ; but that he might not at last return to him, in abounding love he himself had besought the pity of the Most High. ‘This one nature,’ said he, ‘I tell thee—thou who art not a king of men, but the dregs and a cross of all—is common both to thee and to thy relative the devil, whose work it is to lay traps, to prepare stumbling-blocks, to dig pitfalls, to make things a ruin, to stir up bodies from the depths of their evil souls, that they should not be saved ; to hate virtues, to love vices, to sow errors, to nourish strifes, to disturb the peace, to scatter true love, to profane humanity, and strain to the uttermost all that is divine.’ When he had finished his short speech, the king was angry and commanded that his life should end by hanging from the nearest tree.”

Matthew Paris gives a slightly different version of the execution, and tells us what the people thought of it. John commanded that Peter, who was bound with chains in Corfe Castle, should be tied to the tails of horses, and dragged over the plains to Wareham, and there hanged, together with his son. “It seemed to many an unworthy thing that he should be punished by so cruel a death for speaking the truth. For if those things which are written above are considered acutely, it will be proved that he had spoken no falsehood.”

Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V were confronted by hermits heralding judgment. William Norham delivered his message first to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who had been wrongfully appointed on the banishment of Thomas Arundel :—

“In Lent [1399][sic], a certain hermit called William Norham came to Archbishop Roger Walden saying that he was sent to him on behalf of One whom it was not safe to disobey ; to impress upon him to resign the archbishopric which he held unjustly, and to advise the king that he should amend his life and that he should recall others whom he had exiled unjustly . . . else would there certainly

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come upon both of them, king and archbishop alike, in a short time, such terrible and new things that both the ears of every one that heard it should tingle.”

Offended at the man’s message, the archbishop suspended him from the celebration of Mass, and imprisoned him for a season. He afterwards sent him to King Richard, who desired nothing less than to hear words of correction, which things the prophet proceeded to speak. Coming into the royal presence, he declared that he was sent from God to warn the King to lead a better life. Richard, thinking lightly of the matter and despising the poverty and lowliness of his appearance, said : “If indeed thou art so close a servant of God, go and run on

thy feet upon the water, that we may have certainly that thou art a true messenger of God". To whom the hermit replied : "I am not like such great saints as those who do miracles of this sort, nor may I go of my own will upon the water ; but this I boldly affirm that unless thou doest obey my warnings, there will shortly come upon thee such terrible new things as thou has never read of or seen". Richard, displeased at the man's freedom of speech, ordered him to be taken to the Tower of London. There he was kept until he was his prophecy fulfilled, and the King led captive in his stead.²¹

For some time we hear nothing of William Norham. The new King, however, being regarded by not a few of his subjects as a usurper, was not likely to escape ill-omened oracles, and at his coronation many a shrewd man said openly that the third heir should be uncrowned. The soothsayer bided his time. At length, believing in his mission, and encouraged by the speedy fulfillment of his former predictions, the bold priest followed Henry IV after the Battle of Shrewsbury (1403). "That same hermit who foretold disaster to King Richard came to the King and told him many secret things which were unknown to him. Whom the King commanded to be beheaded, which was also done."²² Much consternation was caused by his fate :—

"At this time a certain hermit who had predicted many future things to King Richard, when he had set himself to prophesy to the

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new king, and when he inveighed with too little prudence against him, having been convicted of speaking falsehood, he was beheaded at York ; whose flesh a prickly hair-shirt had scraped ; whose feet no shoes had covered for many years—except, perhaps, when he celebrated mass—although he had gone to Rome and returned ; whose lips had tasted absolutely no flesh for a long while : nevertheless, he died the death."²³

Although in the *Scotichronicon* a veil of secrecy shrouds the "White Hermit of England," we may conclude that he was none other than William Norham :—

"To this Henry there came a certain holy man who was called the White Hermit of England, saying that he had been taught by the Holy Trinity, and that he saw in spirit a reception room prepared for him, aflame with the fires of hell and attended by devils, in which after death he should be placed unless he should resign the crown of the realm which was not meet for him. To whom the king replied : 'If indeed, I should renounce it, who will succeed me?' 'After thee,' quoth the hermit, 'a devil, and after a devil, a saint, and after a saint, a sword, and after a sword, a nobody.' 'Since then,' said Robert de Waterton, a counsellor of the king, 'thou art so dear to God that His secrets are thus open to thee, it is fitting that thou should speedily be sent to him.' By whose counsel, and that of others who agreed with him, the king immediately commanded that his head should be smitten off. Who afterwards blazed forth in manifold miracles."²⁴

Henry V was confronted during his last campaign by a French hermit, who appeared whilst the King was before Dreux, and represented to him the great ills he had brought upon Christendom by his unjust ambition in usurping the kingdom of France. The hermit threatened him in God's name with awful punishment if he did not desist from this enterprise. It seemed to Henry but an idle dream, a mere suggestion of the Dauphin's followers ; but the French chronicler tells us how the blow followed close upon the threat. Smitten with a strange incurable disease, he grew gradually worse, and was brought to Vincennes, where he died.²⁵ The tale is related to Southey's ballad Henry V and the Hermit of Dreux :—

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He pass'd unquestion'd through the camp,
Their heads the soldiers bent
In silent reverence, or begg'd
A blessing as he went ;
And so the Hermit pass'd along
And reached the royal tent.

The prophecies of one John the Hermit about the issue of the war with France had sufficient influence to cause them to be discussed in the Privy Council in 1439.²⁶

Certain hermit-preachers now claim attention. Richard of Hampole, social reformer, evangelist, and writer, was one of the most remarkable men of medieval England. Of his prophetic utterance, threatening the land with famine, plague, inundation, and war, Thomas Fuller says shrewdly that these predictions "if hitting, were heeded, if missing, not marked". It is, however, rather as a preacher and writer than as a prophet that Richard Rolle made his influence felt. Passing in and out amongst the people, like another St. Francis of Assisi, he appealed to them personally in a persuasive manner, and converted many to God. At the outset of his eremitical career, he delivered at a village church in Yorkshire a discourse which deeply affected the congregation :—

"Moreover, he entered the same church a second time, and putting on a surplice without any mandate, he sang with the others mattins and the office of the mass. But when in the mass the gospel was to be read, having before asked the priest's blessing, he went into the pulpit of preaching and made to the people a sermon of wonderful edification, so much so that a great number of the congregation were by his preaching so seized with compunction that they could not restrain their tears, and they all said that they had not themselves heard aforetime a sermon of such excellence and efficacy."²⁷

The young prophet, however, was often without honour. He had enemies, persecutors, and slanderers, and even by friends he was misunderstood. Some

thought him demented ; others misinterpreted his converse with the rich, and despite his rigorous abstinence, accused him of being a glutton and a wine-bibber.

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Churchmen maintained that he could not preach, and schoolmen ridiculed his writings. As a reformer, Richard the hermit seemed to fail, nevertheless he became the beloved master of a chosen few to whom he expounded the word of God. Speaking or writing, he was a man with a message. He re-discovered Love, the principle of Christ. He re-installed feeling, the spring of life, which had been obliterated in the reign of scholasticism. He re-opened the inner eye of man, teaching contemplation in solitude, an unworldly life in abnegation, in chastity and charity."²⁸

After this preacher of righteousness arose another social reformer, the eccentric priest, William of Swinderby. Both these men were swayed by fervent emotions, impatient of authority, eager to reform the world in their own way ; but whilst Richard was an apostle of love, and inspired people to live a higher life, William was a fanatic, and estranged his hearers by his violence of speech. Richard was able to draw women as disciples and instill into them his teaching of love and purity ; William inveighed so loudly against their sins that the women of Leicester threatened to drive him out with stones.

“There was in those days at Leicester, a certain priest, hight William of Swynderby, whom they commonly called William the hermit, because, for a long time, he had lived the hermitical life there ; they received him into a certain chamber within the church, because of the holiness they believed to be in him, and they procured for him victuals and a pension, after the manner of other priests.”²⁹

After returning to ordinary life for a season, he was received into Leicester abbey. He afterwards dwelt at the chapel of St. John Baptist in a wood outside the town.³⁰ Followers resorted thither, for William was an earnest teacher, preaching “by the desire of the people that were hungry and thirsty after God’s word”. He made bitter enemies, however, by his fierce attacks upon the Church and upon ecclesiastics. In 1382, he

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was inhibited by the Bishop of Lincoln, who forbade him to preach in any church, chapel, or churchyard in the diocese ; but the hermit evaded the order by preaching on the highway. Cited to Lincoln and convicted of heresy, he was, however, set free through the influence of John of Gaunt, and was restored to the bosom of the Church on condition that he publicly confessed at Lincoln and Leicester the falsity of his preaching.

The popularity of the Lollard leader having waned, he was left in solitude at his chapel. He fled to Coventry and preached in those parts for about a year, until he was driven away. He took refuge in the diocese of Hereford, but again

met with persecution. The bishop denounced him as a child of wickedness, who had been running about in sundry places, presuming to preach—"a teacher of pernicious doctrine and a horrible seducer among the people". William denied many of the accusations brought against him, and appealed to the King and Council, but in vain. The last we hear of the hermit-heretic is that in 1392 the King (at the instance of the Archbishop and the Bishop of Hereford) issued a commission to find and arrest "a certain fellow named William Swinderby pretending himself to be a chaplain," and his companion, who would not revoke the errors of which they had been convicted, and were in hiding in Wales.

Another zealous mission-preacher was the anchorite friar, Thomas Scrope (or Bradley), who, about the year 1425, left his cell and went forth into the world for a season. Leading a life of almost incredible austerity, he preached diligently to the people by word and by example. Clad in sackcloth, with a girdle of iron fetters, Brother Thomas went into the streets of Norwich : "And he used to cry out that the new Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, would shortly come down from heaven, and that she should immediately be prepared for her Spouse. And he added, that with great joy he saw her in the spirit." This extravagant conduct was not approved by the strictly orthodox, and the Provincial of the Carmelites wrote a protest to the brethren at Norwich, in which he referred to this matter as a scandal to the Church, causing schism and disturbance, and bringing discredit upon those Orders. At length, fearing for himself "this generation of vipers," he returned to his

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cell.³¹ In 1441 Pope Eugenius IV granted to Thomas Bradley, anchorite of Norwich, an indult to choose a secular or regular priest as a confessor.³² He was afterwards dispensed from his vows and nominated Bishop of Dromore (1450).³³ He afterwards held certain Norfolk livings [employments as a parish priest], and acted as suffragan bishop. In old age he returned to the mission-work of his younger days. Walking barefoot, the venerable bishop went about every Friday in the country parts of the dioceses, into villages and into the fields, teaching the Ten Commandments of the Divine Law. He used also to give away all his goods to the poor. He died in 1491, aged wellnigh 100 years.

Whilst some of these preachers were pious and patriotic, others were mere pretenders. The troubled reign of Henry VI produced several adventurers disguised in this way. The *Coventry Leet Book* records the notable visit, in 1424, of one "callyd John Grace, heremyte," who saying that he had a licence to preach and had been at Lichfield, Birminghame, and Walsall, preached for five days in the Little Park at Coventry, and created considerable disturbance. Men said he had been a monk, after that a friar, and then, a recluse. He declared himself to be a wonder-worker as well as "a gracyous man in sayng, and a hooly lyuer [one who lives a holy life]". The King's council afterwards ordered his arrest as "a certain false prophet calling himself John Grace," accused of sedition and of attempting to overthrow the Catholic faith, especially by his preaching in Coventry and the neighborhood.³⁴

In Kent, an agitator nicknamed “Bluebeard,” who posed as a hermit, started the insurrection generally known as Jack Cade’s Rebellion (1450). The man was a fuller, Thomas Cheyny by name. Fabyan says that the commons “made of themself capitaynes [captains], and named them Bleweberde and other counterfayte names”. The execution of the ringleader created

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such indignation [among the common people] that the men employed about it [those who had to carry out the sentence] were in jeopardy. The sheriffs of London afterwards requested remuneration for carrying out the writ whereby they were directed “to send and delyver the heed of oon Thomas Cheyny feyning him silf an heremite cleped Blewberd atteynt of high treson” to the mayor and bailiffs of Canterbury, and to exhibit remains elsewhere. The corpses of traitors included that of “Jack Cade” himself, but the chief charges were involved by the carriage of Cheyny’s body, “for and by cause that unneth any persones durste nor wolde take upon ham the caridge of the seyd hed and quarters [“head and quarters,” the body was beheaded and cut into four pieces] for doute of her lyves [Officers were afraid for their lives to take and transport Cheyny’s bodily remains]”. The city documents of Canterbury record the event, and add that the head was placed over the Westgate [the “quarters” would be displayed, also, likely in different cities]. When confirming the liberties of the citizens in 1453, Henry VI commended their fidelity in the arrest of the traitor “who called himself Blewberd the hermit”.³⁵

The hermit’s garb was a favourite disguise. When Perkin Warbeck was taken as a prisoner to the Tower (1497), he was followed by one of his accomplices, “clad in armittes abytt,” bound hand and foot.³⁶

Religious malcontents played their part in the political crisis of Henry VIII’s reign. In 1535, Hugh Lathbury, hermit, was imprisoned at Bristol, for saying that he trusted Queen Katherine should thereafter be queen again.³⁷ Three years later, the hermit of Chesterfield was seized on the report of passionate words about the Pope being deprived of authority, because he would not approve the King’s marriage with Anne Boleyn. He raised, moreover, the burning question of that year of sacrilege : “If a man will pluck down or tear the King’s arms [insignia of the state], he shall be hanged, drawn [disemboweled], and quartered ; what shall he do to them that doth pluck down churches and images, being but a mortal man as we be?” This rash orator was brought before the nearest justice to be examined, and was afterwards sent to Thomas Cromwell [the belly of the beast!].³⁸

Even the secluded anchorite was not free from dangerous discussion. The Dominican recluse of Canterbury, Christopher

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Warener, had been visited “because he was a prisoner” by Elizabeth Barton, the “holy maid of Kent” (p. 187). Cromwell tried to get the friar to incriminate the nun ; but he would only say that he was never of counsel with her, never saw her in a trance, nor heard her say aught against the King, except that should the

marriage go forward, it would turn to great trouble. The matter, said the anchorite, was a hindrance to his contemplation—a view of the case that would hardly disquiet the State officials.³⁹

A sixteenth-century writer, Thomas Becon, who was adverse to everything monastic, complains that, whereas anchorites professed to be followers of Judith, then did not resemble her :—

“Judith, when Tyme required, came out of her Closet to do good unto other. Our Recluses never come out of their Lobbeies [lobbies], sincke or swimme the People. Judith put herself in Jeopardy for to do good to the commune Countrey. Our Recluses are unprofitable Cloddes of the Earth, doing good to no Man.”⁴⁰

It has, however, been shown in the earlier part of this chapter, that it proved possible to return from the world without losing touch with men, and that to live in solitude was not to be without a sphere of influence, or a power of service. We now pass on to consider those recluses whose counsels were delivered chiefly in their writings, which were widely circulated and were valued by succeeding generations.

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Footnotes~

1. Bede, *Eccles. Hist.*, ed. Stevenson, 358.
2. *La Queste d S. Graal*, ed. Furnival (Roxburghe Club) ; Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (Caxton, 1485), ed. H. O. Sommer, etc.
3. M. Paris, *Chron. Maj.* (Rolls, 57) II. 39-40.
4. *Gest. Pontif.* (Rolls, 52), p. XVI.
5. *Vita*, pp. 302-4.
6. M. Paris, *Chron. Maj.* (Rolls, 57), II. 386-7.
7. Drogo de Munci.
8. A. G. Little, in *Coll. d'Etudes*, VII. 25-6. ; Patent Rolls (various).
9. J. Stow, *Chron. of Eng.*, ed. 1631, p. 288.
10. *Eng. Chron.* (Camden S., 1856), p. II.
11. A. J. Church, *Henry V*, 44-5.
12. Lincoln, MS. Thornton, in Horstman's *R. Rolle*, I. 384-5.
13. Brother Peter Combe, a benefactor of the abbey (see Stanley, *Memorials*, ed. 1868, p. 609.)
14. Jn. Amund, *Ann.* (Rolls, 28, v.), I. 33.
15. W. Besant, *Westminster*, ed. 1897, pp. 102-10.
16. *Pageants of Ric. Beauchamp* (Roxburghe Club), Pageant XLVII.
17. Wm. Newb., *Hist. Angl.* (Rolls, 82), I. 316-8.
18. In Walter of Coventry's *Mem.* (Rolls, 58) II. 208-12.
19. *Chron. Maj.* (Rolls, 57), II. 535-47.

20. J. Fordun, *Scotichron.*, ed. 1759, II. 7, 8.
21. Chr. S. Alb., *Ann. Ric. II* (Rolls, 28, 111.), 231-2.
22. *Eulog. Hist.* (Rolls, 9), 111. 397.
23. Chr. S. Alb., *Ann. Hen. IV*, 372-3.
24. W. Bower, in Fordun's *Scotichron. lib.*, XV., C. IX.
25. Mezeray, *Abregé Chron.*, ed. 1688, III. 213.
26. Nicolas, *Acts of P.C.*, V. 352-2 ; the visions of St. Bridget concerning international policy, were also discussed. In 1396 the mission of Robert l'Hermite to England had resulted in peace, and in Richard II's marriage with Isabella of France (Froussart, *Chron.*, bk. iv, c. 66).
27. *Officium*, col. 791-2.
28. C. Horstman, *R. Rolle*, p. XXXIV.
29. Twysden's *Script. X* (Knighton), II. 2665 ; Knighton, *Chron.* (Rolls, 64), II. 189-98.
30. A bequest was made in 1382 to W. de S., chaplain of St. John's chapel (*Linc. Wills*, 31). It was situated "near a leper-house," i.e. probably St. John's hospital. Nichols figures the remains of the "chapel of St. John set at the town's end" (*Leic. I*, pt. II., pl. XXIII., facing p. 302).
31. Bale says he was enclosed fourteen years (Harl. MS., 3838, f. 107), but elsewhere he says twenty years.
32. Pap. Lett., IX. 241.
33. Irish sees often gave titles to suffragans. Rev. B. Zimmerman, historian of the Carmelite Order, questions whether Scrope took possession of his see, but (1) he has a letter of the Provincial, Nicholas Kenton, commending Scrope, Bishop-elect of Dromore (formerly an anchorite of Norwich) to the bishops and nobles of Ireland. (2) Scrope suggested R. Mysyn as his successor ; Mysyn was nominated 1457.
34. E. E. Text S. (O.S., 134), I. 96-7 ; Pat. 3 Hen. VI, pt. I. m. 17 d.
35. *Acts of Privy Council*, VI. 107-9 ; *Hist. MSS. Com.*, R. IX. 140, 167, 168.
36. C.L. Kingsford, *Chr. of London*, 221.
37. L. and P., *Hen VIII*. p. 308 ; IX. p. 48.
38. *Ibid.* XIII. (I), p. 501.
39. L. and P., *Hen. VIII*, VI, 13333, 1336, 1381.
40. T. Becon, *Reliques of Rome*, 53-4.

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