

A MEDIÆVAL PILGRIMAGE INTO KENT,
IN AID OF THE RESTORATION OF
LAON CATHEDRAL.

BY ROBERT C. JENKINS, M.A.,

HON. CANON OF CANTERBURY AND RECTOR OF LYMINGE.

THE miraculous tale which I am about to bring before you has, strangely enough, dropped out of the histories of Kent, and escaped the eyes of its legendary chroniclers, while it has been picked up by their brethren on the other side of the Channel, and inserted in their voluminous narratives. Helinandus, a monk of Beauvais, who flourished in the early part of the thirteenth century, is the primitive authority in this matter, and he has not deemed the history unworthy of a conspicuous place in his chronicle, which extends over all periods and all places; while the still more voluminous Vincent of Beauvais has transferred to his 'Speculum Historiale' the series of wonders which his predecessor had related, with that delightful credulity which makes the early monastic legends so refreshing, in this age of universal scepticism. Vincent of Beauvais might, perhaps, be called the great encyclopædist of his age. His researches travelled over all time and all space. His 'Speculum Historiale,' which gives the history of the universe, was supplemented by his 'Speculum Naturale,' his 'Speculum Doctrinale,' and his 'Speculum Morale,' filling four enormous volumes in double columns, a triumph of early printing, taking a conspicuous place among the "*incunabula*" of the fifteenth century, and forming the largest of the productions of the presses of Mentz, Nuremberg, and Strasburg. Vincentius was by no means a critic, but was content with being a faithful transcriber of all that he had seen and read. He begins his

history by expressing the desire to give to the general reader the results of his immense labours; and from the evident fear of the history of the creation itself perishing and the Bible becoming a lost (as it was then in great measure a sealed) book, begins from the very beginning of time, and gives special importance and prominence to the miraculous and the monastic features of his narrative. The work of Helinandus supplies a copious stream of this kind of legendary history, and is as the Jumna to the Ganges in our author's history. The two chroniclers of the world meet in Vincentius's pages, and one can hardly determine which is the parent channel.

The story in which we are specially interested occurs in the year 1114-1115, and the events related belong accordingly to the incumbency of Archbishop Ralph, or Radulphus de Turbine, though the writer, by a not unnatural error, speaks of Archbishop William as then filling the see, anticipating thus by a few years the accession of William Corboil. But inasmuch as somewhat more than a century had passed between the events which Helinandus records and the period in which he recorded them, an error of this kind was of a very venial kind. With these preliminary remarks, we approach the history itself.

Many of us may have seen—many more may have heard or read of—the almost unique Cathedral of Laon, with its five spires, all different but all beautiful; yet very few may be aware that our Kentish forefathers contributed not a little to the earlier portions of this magnificent pile. But so it was. Like many other ecclesiastical buildings which preceded the twelfth century, it had suffered from the ravages of fire so as to need what in modern language is called “restoration,” and to be altogether unfit for that gentler process of renewal which is termed “conservative restoration.” The condition of the church and diocese of Laon was at that moment most pitiable. Waldricus, Bishop of Laon, had been murdered by the citizens, and Hugo, Dean of Orleans, succeeded him. But his episcopate lasted only seven months, when the election of Bishop Bartholomew gave a new life to the church, and inspired the despairing

canons with a resolution to become church-restorers on a grand scale. They had no wealthy population and no sufficient endowments to turn to in this great emergency. There were no diocesan boards or building associations to give munificent grants, as in our more business-like and utilitarian age. But they had what was infinitely more precious, and proved also to be infinitely more profitable—a collection of wonder-working relics capable of healing every imaginable and perhaps imaginary disease; and to what good account they turned this most improving property is shewn by Helinandus' narrative.

They began by appointing a commission consisting of seven canons and seven burghers—a sacred number, and doubtless having a mystical significance. These were charged with the anxious custody of the relics, which now, for the first time since their journey to Laon from the Holy Land, were to be exposed to perils by land and sea, making first a tour of the provinces, and then passing over into England. Of these spurious wares the most precious was the Bier of the Virgin Mary, in which (for it was probably more like a chest than a bier) were stowed the sponge, the napkin (possibly a duplicate of the famous Veronica handkerchief), and other relics of the Crucifixion, together with some precious hair of the Blessed Virgin herself, which were enclosed in what our author terms a "*phylactery*"—a word not to be read here in the Jewish sense, but rather in the sense of a box or reliquary, in which the treasures were preserved. The reliquary is described as having upon it this inscription:—

"Spongia, crux Domini, cum syndore cum faciali,
Me sacrat atque tui, genetrix et virgo, capilli."

In their progress to the sea-coast at Wissant, they visited Vermandois and Artois, where fresh proofs of the vitality of the sacred bier were exhibited. At Arras, however, where they arrived on a Friday, a singular incident happened which seems to throw some doubt on the authenticity of the relic. An old man at Arras, a workman (or carpenter) who for twelve years had been totally blind, heard that the "*fere-trum*," whatever that may mean, "of the Virgin Mary

of Laon" had been brought into the town, and asked with suspicious anxiety respecting the shape and nature of the article. When they describe it to him, immediately from the depth of his soul he drew profound sighs, and, weeping copiously, spake thus:—"This secret repository (*secretum*) I put together with my own hands in my early youth at the commandment of Helinandus, Bishop of Laon, in which the same Bishop deposited some most precious relics. Among these was the head of St. Waleric, the Abbot, and the head of St. Montanus, the monk and recluse, who foretold the birth of St. Remigius, and received his sight by the application of the milk of his mother, Cilime, according to his own prediction. O! (he exclaimed) that thou couldst give me the mercy granted to St. Montanus, most tender-hearted Mother of Pity, and restore me my sight, that I might behold thy *feretrum*, which I manufactured with my own hands!" Thus saying and weeping, he begged that his eyes might be bathed with the washings of the holy relics, and then drank of the water, and all night remained in prayer before the *feretrum*. In the morning he received his sight. Now this is a very damaging story, however we read it, almost as disheartening to the pilgrims as the discovery by some modern *connoisseur* that his mediæval furniture had been manufactured in Wardour Street. For besides the fatal revelation in regard to the *feretrum* itself, it gives an entirely new catalogue of the original relics, and there is no mention of the far more precious articles with which (as we have seen) the "*phylacterum*" was labelled. But what do all these temptations to scepticism signify, so long as the miracles go on notwithstanding? These, true or false, were the sole monastic criterion of the authenticity of relics, and here they were most conspicuously seen. However, the inadvertent exclamation of the blind artificer rendered it very important that the *feretrum* (lest, like a local prophet, it should lose honour in its own country) should make a visit to more distant parts, and thus the opportuneness of the voyage to England became apparent on more grounds than one.

On the Feast of St. Mark the travellers, with their pre-

cious freight, arrived at Wissant, and embarked on their anxious voyage. When they came to the middle of the Channel, they spied out some pirates approaching their vessel, the master of the ship therefore entreated the Priest Boso to take in his hands the relics of the Blessed Virgin and interdict the pirates from doing them any injury. Accordingly, taking the "phylactery," with the hair of St. Mary, with fear and devotion, he ascended the poop of the vessel, he adjured them vigorously in the name of Christ and His Mother to come no farther, and no sooner had he made the sign of the Cross on the "phylactery" against the enemies, than, quicker than thought, a violent contrary wind sprang up, which forced back their ship, and broke the mast. In a short time the ship with the *feretrum* came safely and joyfully to land.

It appears that Dover was the first scene on which the *feretrum* appeared in England. From that port the pilgrimage was carried on to Canterbury, which, as it had no precious shrine of its own in that early day, and could offer no rivalry to the Canons of Laon, was likely to become a mine of wealth to the enterprising exhibitors. Archbishop Ralph (not William, as our informant terms him) gave a most honourable reception to the pilgrims. For he had himself been for some time a guest of the Bishop of Laon, in order to see and hear (St. ?) Anselm. And there he had taught the sons of Randolph, the Chancellor of the King of England. Presently a very wealthy lady experiences the efficacy of the *feretrum*, and the usual prescription of the Priest Boso having been carried out—viz., a full confession of sin and a drink of the washings of the relics, she receives instant relief. Of course her gifts and offerings of devotion are munificent and costly.

But we are told that the blessings of the *feretrum* were limited to the inhabitants of the diocese, during the visit to Canterbury. Probably the Archbishop suggested this little restriction, from the fear that all London might flock into Canterbury if the blessing was made too general. From Canterbury the procession advances to Winchester, thus passing through the principal part of Kent, and a fresh

crop of miracles springs up. The subjects are the King's baker (who, strangely enough, was blind) and a rich man named Walter. This latter, notwithstanding the magnificence of his offerings, was denounced by the bystanders as having by no means given in proportion to his immense wealth. Whereupon he replied that he could not give more at present, until he had returned all the money he had obtained by usury, and made the public crier summon all whom he had thus victimised to receive back their money. After various other healings, the *feretrum* is carried on to Christ Church, in Hampshire, where there happened to be a great concourse of merchants. But the dean of the church, with his twelve canons, refused it a place in their church, which was itself in process of building, for they naturally dreaded a diversion of the gifts of the rich merchants into this foreign channel. And though a heavy storm had come on, the inhospitable dean scarcely allowed them to shelter their treasure beneath the roof of the church, at a low altar in a remote corner of the building. But when he saw the merchants come in to offer their gifts to the *feretrum* (for they had heard of the miracles at Winchester), he ordered it to be turned out of the church. The poor pilgrims, in the midst of a pelting rain, could find no shelter and no resting-place, for every lodging was occupied. Hereupon a good matron, pitying them, persuaded her husband to let them occupy an empty house which he was building, and had already let for two marks to the merchants for a night or two, and thus, as our author phrases it, to "accommodate the Queen of Heaven, who had been turned out of the church." To this he assents, and the good matron devotes herself assiduously to her new guests and their wonder-working treasures, which she adorns with curtains. One of the merchants, who has three bells in his stock-in-trade, hangs them up and rings them, so as to bring all his brethren to the new tabernacle, where he ascends a kind of pulpit, and tells them of the outrage of the dean, charging them to desert the church, and resort (as we might say) to the chapel. And they not only agree to this, but resolve to levy a fine upon all who venture to church. Of course the

feretrum was equal to the occasion, and vindicated itself by a number of its accustomed miracles.

But presently a much more terrible incident occurs. A dragon, belching out flames, comes up from the sea and flies about the town, setting fire to houses and churches in the most indiscriminate manner. What were the wretched inhabitants to do? The *feretrum* had just started on a new journey, so they sent horsemen after it in all speed, who entreated the strangers from Laon to return and save their burning town. They return accordingly, and behold the church of the poor dean literally reduced to nothing, only the site remaining. The unhappy man, gathering together all his vestments and other belongings, puts them into a ship in the hope of their escaping the monster. In vain! The dragon, our author observes, as if it had come for this object alone, flies on to the ship, and puts an end to both the cargo and the ship itself. Meantime the house which had sheltered the *feretrum* remained uninjured, with all that were in it; and the merchants, for their loyalty to the Laon deputation, suffer no loss even in their goods. While the dean, moved by a late repentance, follows the *feretrum* barefooted, and prostrating himself before it, confesses the judgment of God, and implores his pardon.

The next halting-place was Exeter, where Robert the Archdeacon, who also had been a pupil of Anselm at Laon, receives the *feretrum* and its bearers with all honour. Similar miracles are exhibited on sixteen infirm persons of the diocese. But the relic was so careful to preserve episcopal authority and to observe religiously the diocesan system, that a poor cripple from Salisbury could derive no benefit from his journey to Exeter, but had to wait until the exhibition (if we may so term it) arrived at Salisbury. At Wilton the strangers were shewn the tomb of Bede, where healing miracles were alleged to take place. But what was the tomb of the old presbyter to the bier of the Virgin? Such, in effect, was the question which a famous versifier of the day, a lady-poet, put to a poor invalid in a dream, after she had spent a long time in attempting to heal a fever at the tomb

of the great historian—a scene (one would think) rather likely to produce one. “You can’t be healed in this way by Bede (were her words), for the Blessed Virgin hath herself come down to us.” The Laon deputies hear of the vision, prescribe the usual remedies, and the healing is of course accomplished. Then they pass on into Cornwall, where the inhabitants shew them the chair and the oven of that famous King, the subject of the fables of the Britons—Arthur. There they recognise Algaricus, who was afterwards Bishop of Coutances, and had formerly been a hearer of Anselm at Laon. One of the candidates for healing, who had a withered hand, began to dispute with one of the brethren from Laon in behalf of King Arthur, and therefore he was unable to be healed.

At Totnes a man lame from his nativity experiences the healing influence of the *feretrum*, upon which his brother, who is the proprietor (or provost) of the Castle there, offers to the relic the sum of forty pounds sterling, to which the people of the place made “infinite” additions. This signal success, however, provoked a violent gainsaying among the more sceptical. Three young men, nearly related to one another, when they saw these vast sums carried to the *feretrum*, began to slander the deputies of Laon, charging them with the most sordid motives, and even accusing them of using magical arts—a terrible accusation in that day. One of them, moreover, endeavoured to persuade the others, on pretence of kissing the sacred relic, to lick up with their tongues some of the money that had been laid upon it, so as each of them to carry away a good mouthful of the coveted spoil. The two who were appealed to were, however, not equal to so bold a venture, so that the tempter had the field to himself. He was as good as his word, and sucked up a goodly portion of the heap of gold on the bier. Then, having in vain persuaded his kinsmen to accompany him to a neighbouring tavern to feast on the booty, he has the feast as well as the fray to himself, his friends going their own way, while he mounts his horse and rides into a wood, and goaded perhaps by the pangs of conscience, puts a wooden halter over his neck and hangs himself to a tree, while his

horse starts off and leaves him hanging. The horse returns without its rider to an assembly of people to which the two more prudent youths had betaken themselves. They trace back its steps into the wood, and are relieved of their suspense by finding their kinsman in a state of suspension, and quite dead. Taking his leather bag from his girdle, they find the money he had stolen just as it had come out of his mouth. Hurrying away in all speed and with loud lamentations to the *feretrum*, they place the money upon the altar. "Falling on the ground, they implore the mercy of the Mother of God for the soul of their relative, and declare aloud before all present the guilt that the deceased had perpetrated. Every one wondered at the swiftness of the Divine vengeance, and, beating their breasts, poured forth floods of tears." "Thus far,"—so our author concludes his story—"the miracles of the Bier of Laon, which were performed in the years of our Lord 1114 and 1115."

The first question which must present itself to our minds on reading this series of wonders is, What would have been the English version of them? One notable point is that the farther the valuable "properties" of the Church of Laon travel from their proper home the more wonderful the narrative becomes, and that the less important or populous the scene of their operations, the more venturesome are the feats of the performance. "What they say in Spain," as Melchior Canus observes, "would appear to be true in this case—From long journeys come long lies" ("*De luengas vias, luengas mentiras.*") And Tacitus gives the good reason, "*Major è longinquo reverentia*"—You must not come too near a thing to have a value for it. A miracle, like a rumour, grows as it advances—"*Vires acquirit eundo.*" And hence the astonishing growth of the miracles of these good Canons, as they passed into that then *terra incognita*, the west of England. At Canterbury or Winchester the wonders are very ordinary to what they are at Christ Church or at Totnes. The people at Laon were too near to the birthplace of the sacred relic to be as deeply impressed with the sense of its surpassing worth as those on this side the Channel. Possibly the good Canons may have

been indebted to the Arthurian legend itself for what we might call the Pen-dragon incident, for the imagination of the faithful might easily have seen the five-headed monster in a general conflagration such as often broke out in the wood-built towns of our forefathers. Yet whatever incredulity we may indulge in regarding the miracles of the Bier of Laon, we can have none whatever in respect to its result. It was undoubtedly "a great success"—a real "benefit"—a plan of church building and restoration for which we can find no parallel in this matter-of-fact and unromantic age. One moral it has for all of us, which is, never to despair of small means and small beginnings. The Canons of Laon began with nothing whatever. Their stock-in-trade was a few old relics of very doubtful authenticity. And yet, having a most unquestionable and unquestioning faith, they made a great success. For (as one of the most illustrious of the sainted church-builders of antiquity affirms of such a work) "*Sumptus noster firma fides est.*"