

THE FIRST LANCASHIRE GHOST STORY (1373)

A tale recorded in a late medieval preacher's commonplace book, headed:

A story relating to the celebration of Mass, told by Master Richard de Puttes in 1373.

There was once a man who lived in Haydock in Lancashire, who had kept a mistress who had borne him sons. She had died, however, and he had subsequently married another woman. Some time later, he was going to a smithy to have his plough-irons (that is, the coulter knife and ploughshare) fettled and sharpened. The blacksmith in question lived at Hulme, a village which is about two miles away from Haydock. On his return from there, at night time, the man passed a cross at the side of the road in Newton-le-Willows, when he suddenly felt an extreme attack of fear and horror coming over him. While he stood there, stricken with terror, he looked round and saw an apparition like a dark shadow. He called upon the thing not to do him any harm, and asked what it might be. A voice came out of the shadow and said to him,

“Be not afraid. I am the woman who was your lover. I have been permitted to come back to you to seek your help.”

The man asked how things were with her.

“Bad”, she replied. “But if you wish, you can help me.”

He answered, “I will gladly do anything I can. Just tell me what to do.”

She said, “I can only be delivered from the bitter punishment which is being inflicted on me by means of Masses celebrated by worthy priests.”

To which he said, “I will have Masses said for you, even if I have to spend all my goods.”

She replied, “Don’t be afraid. Just put your hand on my head, and take what you find there.”

He did what she asked, and took a handful of deep black hair. Now the woman, when she was alive, had a head of fine golden locks.

She spoke again, and said to him, “When you have had as many Masses said for me as there are hairs in this handful, then I will be released from punishment.”

He agreed to this, thereupon she said to him, finally, “Come to this place at such and such a time and you will learn what has happened to me.”

Then she vanished.

The man then took the handful of hair and put it for safe-keeping in a hole in a door-post. Then he immediately sold half his property, and with the money he raised from it he journeyed far and wide, looking for priests and having large numbers of Masses said. At times he would come back, and have a look at the handful of hair, and so it went on until every strand had turned to gold. Finally, at the appointed time, he came to Newton Cross, and waited there for some time. Suddenly, he saw a light in the distance, moving quickly towards him. When it had reached him, a voice spoke from out of the light, which thanked him many times and said, “Blessed be you amongst all men. You have delivered me from the extremity of pain, and now I am going to bliss.”

After a few more words had passed between them, she left him and sped away.

Translated by Dr Paul H. W. Booth

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