

Souris  
by Scott Aiken  
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*My paper this evening deals with history – specifically the history of William the Conqueror ... or Duke William of Normandy, as he is better known even today in Normandie herself.*

*I beg the medieval historians amongst us not to wince – at least visibly – at the anachronisms and other historical faults I'm sure you'll hear.*

*I've tried to offer a different perspective on William from that we usually hear.*

*One more comment: To give this story as much flavor of Normandie as I could – I've named my narrator Souris, which means mouse in French.*

We'd just measured the meadow, one of his strides to two and more of mine. He was bending a new bow, a bow as long as I am tall, flexing it as easily as another would a maple sapling.

"I'll have an arrow," said Duke William.

Just then, from the field's far end a rider cantered toward us, the January sun's long, low rays glinting off the silver on his cloak. In that moment, my Lord's life changed.

"Your friends in London have sent me," the boyish knight begins. "Edward the Confessor, King of England, is dead. "And I am instructed to tell you more. England's Saxon lords have already elected Earl Harold Godwineson as king."

Never, never have I seen my lord, Duke William of Normandy, so still, so silent. His left hand slid to his right forearm – encircled by a bracelet with the hammer of Thor. I placed it there when my William was a boy. Then ... his right hand touched the Christian cross hanging from his neck.

Years ago, King Edward promised my Duke – his very distant cousin – England's throne.

And I remember it all well.

I have been with Duke William before he was born. His mother, Herleve, brought me to the castle in Falaise as she carried the bastard son of Duke Robert.

Ah!, I still chortle, Herleve ... a tanner's daughter, but pure cream face, dark eyes, saucy lips, a body as pleasurably mounded as our own sweet Normandy – she did not slink by night to

the castle. She told Duke Robert, “I’ll come, but only by your carriage. In the full of day, you’ll escort me into your castle.”

But I stray.

As I have grown old, my spirit skips about as nimbly as my legs once did ... when I threaded amongst the nobles overhearing their thoughts and plots.

Sunrise to sunset, I still ride behind my Duke. Who would have thought he would survive nearly 40 summers? (Or years, as the Christian priests count.)

Duke Robert left when his bastard was a bare seven summers. He set out for his god Jesus’s home – Jerusalem, reached its gates, ... and died.

No sooner did the news reach Normandy than the Duke’s brother and nephews were scheming to kill my William. More than scheming....

Not long after, I lifted him from the blood-drenched bed of his count guardian, stabbed dead by lords eager to replace Duke William. (It was the hammer of Thor – I am sure – that kept my William safe.)

For months we hid, the Duke and I, in a woodcutter’s cottage.

Could it have been in that spring and summer my Lord inhaled the beauty of this land? Like a maiden’s chest as she breathes softly in and out, our Normandy rises and falls.

Fair Normandy ... a land of sweet wines, soft cheeses, good meat, and good bread! That’s why our Norman ancestors came – and, most contented, have stayed.

Oh! Sorry. Once more I wander.

On orders of his own uncle, archbishop of Rouen, murderers sought yet again to kill my Duke. They succeeded only in striking down his brave tutor. Patient, brutal when he needed to be brutal, but solid as a peasant, Duke William built his power in Normandy –into Brittany, then north to Flanders.

Flanders! Home of petite Matilde, daughter of Count Baldwin. My Lord sought Matilde as his wife; his wife she became. Though brief in body – on tiptoe she reaches barely to my Duke’s chest, her spirit is alert and clever as the fox.

Yet neither Duke William nor Duchess Matilde foresaw the edict from Pope Léon [the Ninth] – a ban on their marriage. A ban! Why?

As I heard it, the Holy Father decreed William and Matilde are cousins – as distant, my lord Duke snorts, as Rome lies from our Rouen!

“Mon petit souris,” my Duke confides, “This is not a matter of blood. The truth is this: our fellow Normans beleaguer this cunning German Pope. He wishes me to help him.”

Loyal to the Pope, Abbot Lanfranc, the most respected Christian priest – I swear – in all this land, incites Normandy’s bishops and priests against Duke William. Equally steadfast, my Duke orders Lanfranc to remove his self and shadow – scant though it be – forthwith from Normandy.

Mon père Lanfranc: Mon père is a carrot. Above, he is wispy and delicate. A sprawling beard masks his small face. His substance hides below – thin and hard. From that root, he draws power, and it flourishes with words, words, words. They are, he says, “God’s law.”

Oh!, all the Latin he spouts: Blessing good, cursing evil.

Pardon once more. I do wander....

We ride – the Duke and I – from Caen, my Lord still irked, but undeterred. Our destination: Rouen and Duchess Matilde.

Of a sudden, limping towards us on a sorry horse is this Abbot.

“Why tarry you so long,” my Lord barks? “Two days past I ordered you out.”

“Truly, my Duke, I would be gone more quickly,” bows Lanfranc, “had you loaned me a younger, speedier steed. As it is, I must often halt to pray – pleading to my Lord Jesus for this mare to live ’til sunset.”

Duke William’s eyes crinkle. He laughs. Beckoning the closest knight, he commands him to dismount.

“Should our Lord Jesus be so kind as to lift you up ..., climb aboard this stallion,” he says, taking measure of the half-sized abbot.

“If, if, you can mount, then ride with me.”

Lanfranc looks to the stirrup above him.

“Despite my follies and sins, I pray I shall rise to Heaven when I die, but ...” – inclining his head slightly – “... I cannot mount this beast.”

“A prick of my sword in your ass ... would that impel you,” Duke William jokes?

Lanfranc laughs. And together they ride on, bantering as though closely joined, like the plough share to the plough.

The abbot suggests Duke William – and Duchess Matilde – each build an abbey in Caen, all in Caen’s lustrous stone. So will they offer that Holy Father in Rome golden buildings ... and gold. The abbeys rise, but Pope Léon dies.

A more amenable priest – Pope Alexandre [the Second] – is seated in Rome.

Yet as my queen goddess Frigga, she who spins the future’s threads, was weaving this tale, she loosed another thread to amuse the old gods. It started with my Duke’s rescuing the Saxon Earl Harold Godwineson of England – only Frigga knows why!

England’s King Richard wanted to affirm that he had chosen Duke William to succeed him. The King sent the Earl Harold as his messenger. (At least, Abbot Lanfranc murmurs, that is the supposed reason. He believes – and I agree – old king Richard wanted to be free of this pesty lord. He wished the sea to claim him.)

It nearly did. One of the many storms in that deep river without a ford between our sweet Normandy and sour England wrecked the earl on the beach of yet another of my Lord’s cousins.

Count Guy [of Ponthieu] held the earl for ransom ... until my lord directed the Earl be delivered to him.

That was a sight! Earl Harold, tall as my Duke, fair as he is dark, but too meager where Duke William is robust and strong.

All the Saxon lords I have seen are like England’s beef, all stringy and rancid – as this Earl is too. Why would anyone want England’s crown? I wouldn’t give a starving Norman rabbit – if ever there were such – for all England! Its cheeses are hard; they’re sharp; they’re bitter. And the ale! So sour!

Our Norman wine tastes of flowers and sunny hillsides. Why would anyone want England’s crown?

Sorry, I do stray. As Earl Harold readied himself to return to King Edward, we all witnessed him kneel, so humble, to our noble Duke.

But, as my Duke would say, that was yesterday; we have to deal with today.

Abbot Lanfranc sends a priest [the archdeacon Gilbert of Lisieux] to Rome with letters showing Pope Alexandre how he will benefit should Duke William become King. I understand little of the abbot’s discourse.

But I do hear this: England disobeys the Pope. (He is especially angry with the rebellious Saxon Archbishop [Stigand] of Canterbury.) Lanfranc promises Duke William will tame the errant English church. And, with my Duke guarding the sea between England and Normandy, no more Vikings will sail south to plunder Italy.

When Lanfranc's priest returns, he displays a ring enclosing a hair and a tooth of the great Saint Peter. Hair and tooth! If we are to worship this saint, couldn't this priest have brought a skull – or at the least a leg bone?

But also, the Pope sends his banner to fly alongside Duke William's. Jesus Christ and His Father, claims Abbot Lanfranc, will ride at my Duke's side.

All summer, counts, bishops and knights arrive with their men of arms and archers. Carpenters cut, shape, and join planks into war ships.

Answering to the Pope's appeal to overthrow Harold ... – and to my Duke's promise of gold and land, more knights come from Aquitaine, Gascony, Saxony, Bohemia, Lombardy, even distant Venice.

September is upon us. Duke William's fleet sails – only to be met by a fierce storm and soon hurled ashore at the small fishing village of Saint Valéry.

Days on end, rains pelt our tents. The west wind shrieks, writhes under the canvas, shivering my Duke and common soldier alike.

Through the torrent comes Lanfranc, so blown by the god Niörd's fierce breath he swerves, stumbles, and, I swear, he curses!

"Welcome, mon père," I bow.

"May Christ bless you, Souris," whispers he. "I come with news."

Drawing aside the curtain, I let him pass. His head, even straight up, doesn't brush the curtain folds.

"An English priest," he announces, "has just been tossed up on Saint Valéry's beach. He comes to warn us.

"King Harald Hardråda of Norway has landed in England.

"Norway is a powerful warrior. Should he prevail against Earl Harold, those Saxon nobles will quickly rally to him."

Duke William lifts his chin, leans his head as though he would better hear the storm's clamor.

"My Duke," Abbot Lanfranc slowly speaks. "I do urge you to seek the aid of Saint Valéry.

Why have we come to this small port? It is surely a sign from God."

Duke William is still, listening to his own spirit and heart. His left hand briefly rubs the hammer of Thor; his right fingers close – very slowly – around the Christian cross.

He stands, nearly brushing the tent roof: “Lanfranc, our plan must move forward, or ....”

He stops. He decides.

“Let us ask the abbot to bring forth his Saint’s relics.

“All of us, counts and knights together, shall offer Saint Valéry a treasure. Just bring me fair wind and sky.”

What a harvest in gold and jewels rises before that saint's dry bones! The abbot smiles. His monks chant. He nods.

The monks hoist Saint Valère to view the offering.

Oh!, he must have reached out to his God! For the wind begins to drop.

Cries of "look, look." The weathervane atop Saint Valéry's church twitches from its steady westerly fix. It slides southward, toward the wind my Duke longs for.

As the day slips into dusk, the clouds part. The sun – the god Frey's wild boar – flares over the still white-flecked waves, across our ships, into our camp.

"My comrades, my friends, my warriors all," calls my Duke, "tomorrow we sail to claim England!"

They cheer. They cheer. The sun's last beam illumines Duke William in golden light. They roar. They dance.

I can think only of England's bitter cheese, sour ale, cloddish women, and ... hard bread. Of whether and when will the fates return me to sweet Normandy?

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