

“The People’s Crusade”

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Fiction

July 22, 2023

I had just been sent out for salt and garlic when I came across a large crowd of onlookers circled around a priest standing upon a barrel.

“Hear me!” he implored in heavily-accented French, which I struggled to comprehend. “The time has come when all earnest Christians are called to account. Belief is not sufficient! It has never been sufficient. We must put our faith into action and now is the moment!”

He wore an indigent clergyman’s clothing: a tattered and ill-fitting black wool cassock, cinched at the waist, which revealed bare ankles and feet, mud-spattered and heavily calloused. One might have mistaken him for a mere pious peasant were it not for the large bronze crucifix he clutched in one hand as he harangued the masses.

“The Holy Land is occupied by pagans and misfits and the enemies of the faith of Jesus. The Muslims have driven us from our sacred territory, and there they defile our holy sites and mistreat and persecute our Christian brethren. Believe me, I say! I have been there of late. A year past, I journeyed to the walls of Jerusalem, but, before I could complete my pilgrimage and rightfully honor our Lord and Savior, was turned back and abused by the infernal Turks who squat upon the city. Beasts they are, these Turks. The spawn of Satan!”

The audience, whom, at first, were only mildly curious, grew increasingly engaged as the priest built momentum. Some raised fists, others applauded and shouted affirmations.

I spotted a girl a bit younger than me and approached her and asked who the sermonizer was. “It is Peter The Hermit, don’t you know,” she said somewhat scornfully, also with a French lilt. “He leads the People’s Crusade.”

“What’s that?” I asked, having never heard the term.

“Let us listen,” she replied and directed her attention to the priest.

He continued: “Those of you who have the spirit and the ambition and the constitution to march with me must join our advance upon the Holy Land. We must take matters into our own hands and with pure hearts filled with the Spirit of The Christ, push these invaders, these blasphemers, out of our land and back into the rotten caves from whence they first emerged...”

I must admit, I was soon captivated and caught up in the emotion of the message. I found myself clapping when the others clapped and hissing when they hissed. Peter described a militant pilgrimage that was to be undertaken not just by the soldiers and the chivalry, but also by the common folk – the laborers and the craftsmen and the farmers, and even the women and children. “Secure your salvation!” he entreated. “Assume your place in the Kingdom come, at the foot of the Father, in the celestial shadow of our Lord and Savior. This, my children, is the most noble of missions, the most righteous of battles. Play your part and you shall be rewarded in eternity!”

There was a roar of approval, and ejaculations of “God wills it!” which snapped me out of my entrancement, at which point I realized that Bertram The Butcher would be sore with me for causing him to wait so long for the goods I had been entrusted to retrieve. I looked once more to the girl as she continued to listen and respond to Peter The Hermit’s speech. Her hair was

silken and the color of hay, her nose strong and straight, upon her neck a reddish discoloration, a birthmark perhaps. I hoped that she might direct her attention to me, offer a smile, but it seemed that I did not exist in her world at that moment. I left and headed to the market.

I was a butcher's boy and those years, at the end of the 11th Century, were quite lean. A pestilence had passed through Cologne not long prior, followed by a blight in the countryside and many succumbed and many others left to find better circumstances. Our business had dwindled considerably during that time. At the peak, there were three butcher's boys and two butchers, and we were working through at least a full cow, four pigs, and a dozen chickens per day. But now, it was just Bertram and me and our production had been cut by two-thirds. I feared that, soon enough, he would decide that I was no longer worth the trouble.

At the time that Peter The Hermit came through the city, I was fifteen years old and had been with Bertram for five years. He was my father's cousin, and I was sent to work for him after my father passed and my mother went to live with Aunt Ermina. I had not seen either of them for that entire time, but had, on two occasions, received word from merchants who had come from Utrecht indicating that they were subsisting fairly. I had recently considered relocating to be nearer to them, but worried about finding a foothold in an unfamiliar city.

Peter returned to the square each day for a fortnight, pronouncing his call to arms, and most days, as I passed, I stopped to listen. According to some of the other people I encountered, in addition to the salvation that the endeavor promised, there were also riches to be had. Crusaders would have rights to the precious goods and treasures that had been wrongly appropriated by the Muslims. And those things, it was said, could well pull one up from the depths of privation.

It was on the tenth day of Peter's ministry in Cologne that I decided to join the Crusade. Bertram, although typically surly, was exceptionally abusive that morning and berated and beat me with a stick for improperly curing a leg of lamb. He then sent me to retrieve spices and lard and, with tears in my eyes, I came upon the fair-haired girl.

"What is wrong with you, boy?" she inquired with some compassion in her eyes.

"It is my business, not yours," I replied harshly.

"There is no reason to be so distressed. God has called upon us. You are in your rights to leave this city. You are in your rights to start anew with the People's Crusade. There is no shame in it, only glory and redemption."

"Will you join the pilgrimage?" I asked her.

"I already have," she answered, then turned and walked away.

That was all the encouragement I needed. That day I informed Bertram that I would join Peter The Hermit's flock. He immediately cast me out, so I went to the church and sought out the charismatic holy man. He was not there, but another priest directed me to the bivouac outside of the city where Peter's Crusaders had gathered.

It was a two-hour walk, and I carried all of my earthly possessions in a large satchel: my clothing, some dried meats and fruit, a candle. In my belt, I tucked a dagger that I had kept since I was a child. I assumed that I would acquire a more formidable weapon prior to engaging with the Turks, but I was glad not to begin the journey emptyhanded.

Finally, I came upon the campsite, which was something to behold. In a large field there were many hundreds of tents, some cloth, some canvas, and many thousands of people of all stripes gathered, a fair number cooking, others organizing, musicians performing, children playing, soldierly men clustered and telling stories. I could hardly believe the scope of the

situation. When I approached, a sentry accosted me to ask my business. I told him my intentions and he directed me to a large tabernacle, where there were several women and children. Most were repairing articles of damaged clothing.

One old woman, who was baking bread over a small fire, asked me what my intentions were.

I told her, "I intend to be part of the Lord's army."

"I see. How old are you?"

"Fifteen," I said.

"Those who fight may very well die. Is that something you are prepared for?"

"I am prepared, but I will not die. I will enter Jerusalem alongside Peter The Hermit."

"That is my prayer for you," she sighed. Then she bid me wash my hands and assist her with the dough, which I did.

I learned that there were nigh on thirty thousand Crusaders in Peter's army, inclusive of the women and children. On Sunday at noon, Peter led a mass in the field, gathering all of his followers, then we broke camp and began our trek south toward the Rhinelands.

Spirits were quite high in those early days, but, I must admit, my feet and legs were not quite conditioned for the exertion. We walked all day, stopping briefly in midmorning and midafternoon and making camp before sunset. Some of the Crusaders led donkeys which pulled carts of dry goods and supplies. Others steered small herds of goats and sheep. The knights rode destriers and bore longswords on their backs. Women carried small children in slings and the peasant men brandished pikes and hoes and axes – crude instruments that they intended to wield in battle. At night, many sang songs and ate small portions and then quieted as the moon rose toward its peak.

In the Rhinelands, there were numerous Jewish villages. As we approached, word rippled through the assembly that the knights would lead raids against these blasphemers' homes and shops, punishing them for their historic opposition to the Gospel and for their ancestors' role in the crucifixion of the Christ. I chose not to participate for several reasons. First, such capricious pillaging was never part of my intention as I set out on this Crusade. Second, I knew Jewish merchants in Cologne and, to me, although they could be quite shrewd, they did not seem to be evil people. And third, having spent a fair portion of my life working in a shop, I could not imagine callously destroying someone's livelihood in that manner.

Nevertheless, the incursions went forward, and, at each village, the raiding parties augmented in size and fervor. Word came back that many hundreds of Jews were killed, some for refusing to convert to Christianity on demand, and many of the Jewish women were raped. This caused a sort of schism amongst Peter's followers, many of whom found such behavior detestable. Peter, himself, indirectly endorsed the raids in his sermons, professing that those who were enemies of God were enemies of the Crusade and that the whole of Europe must be cleansed of heresy. Fortunately, that malignant period came to an end as the flock passed out of the Rhinelands and through Frankfurt and the morale of the pilgrimage recovered.

Much of the remainder of our trek through the German Empire was peaceful yet arduous. The weather was with us, except for a few thunderstorms, during which we sheltered in place. At times there was little food to go around and, for days, I would struggle with hunger pangs and a sense of weakness. Fortunately, the markets in Bavaria were quite robust and I had an opportunity, as a skilled butcher's boy, to participate in the roasting of two dozen pigs at a campsite near Salzburg. I filled my belly that evening.

Sometimes, in the evenings when we had settled in, when the cookfires were dying and the people had reclined to rest their weary bones, I would explore the campsite, searching for the girl with the flaxen hair. I did not have a lust for her per se; indeed, she seemed a bit too thin and young for a carnal encounter. And I was yet a virgin, of course. However, I desired her company and felt I would have been much happier during those months of travel had she been my companion. There were quite a few boys of my age, and girls as well, but most spoke only French and were culturally different, and the German ones were rather tribal. At times we played at tossing stones and wrestling and, on occasion, hunted foxes and rabbits in groups. Yet these diversions were fleeting and, for me, insubstantial. I suffered from a spiritual deficiency for the duration of the pilgrimage.

We followed the Danube River through Vienna and into the Kingdom of Hungary and, all along, the people grew more zealous, determined to see the mission through, to conquer in the name of our Lord. At the same time, we remained hungry and weary. Not all towns opened their markets to us, compelling us to take measures into our own hands with some frequency. The Hungarians, in general, were not particularly welcoming, and this led to armed skirmishes and riots. Some of the Crusaders ransacked villages and took hostages and, I have to admit, famished and swept up in the moment, I participated in the looting once or twice.

But there was attrition. Many of the elder Crusaders and the enfeebled fell back, unable to complete the strenuous pilgrimage, and hundreds more were injured or killed in the melees. As we progressed into the Balkans, our numbers had been reduced by at least a quarter. I presumed that my young muse – so slight, so delicate – was among those who could not continue. And, for a period of weeks, I struggled with my own motivations and, even more so, with my own demons.

I thought often of my father, who succumbed to consumption when I was nine years old. I remembered his final days, racked with fever and bloody, bone-shaking coughs. He seemed to waste away right before my eyes: one day a virile and competent yeoman, the next a skeletal and jaundiced mound of expiring flesh. He was the one who had taught me to hunt, to plow, to exercise in order to improve my constitution, to forage for mushrooms, to butcher a lamb... to have faith in Jesus and, as a correlative, faith in myself. I so wished he was there to urge me on, to guide me in this journey, both spiritual and physical, to be a fallback when times were rough. But, also, I knew that I was a man, and that my father would have wanted me to conduct myself as a man and not as a child. And this is what propelled me forward, because men always finish that which they set out to achieve.

My mother was in my thoughts as well. Although she had a roof over her head, she certainly could not have been very comfortable. My Aunt Ermina, too, was a widow, and the two of them earned only pennies as seamstresses. They lived in the lowly quarter of Utrecht and, in part, relied upon the generosity of the church to feed themselves and maintain the home. My aim was to bring Mother the rightly gained spoils of my expedition, to establish myself as reputable tradesman, and to build for them a proper residence on the good side of town.

And so, this pilgrimage was not only about me.

The People's Crusade went south from Hungary into the Balkans and our numbers continued to erode as the faithless and incapable travelers dropped off. We expected to encounter resistance at Belgrade, but instead found the city largely deserted. We slept in empty homes for a few nights, then took what scant inventories we could find and carried on.

But it was at Nish where we had our first battle. The Governor agreed to exchange food and supplies for the Hungarian hostages, which was a welcome arrangement. However, some

among the German contingent remained hostile. They set fire to storerooms and mills, causing the Governor to call up his soldiers, who pursued us southward. Against the advisement of Peter The Hermit, the Germans, along with a troop of French Crusaders, chose to hold their ground. I, being a German, felt compelled to take up arms and was given a short spear. However, as soon as the violence broke out, there was disorganized mayhem. The knights and soldiers led the attack against the advancing Byzantine troops, but, for the most part, the laypeople of Peter's army were hapless. Before I had an opportunity to engage with an enemy, our ranks were in full retreat. We suffered a rout, incurring many hundreds of casualties, before the Byzantines were satisfied that they had inflicted enough punishment. Hiding in a nearby woods, I escaped injury.

Henceforth, the mood of the people was abysmal. With weeks yet to travel, we had been decimated and had lost the great confidence with which we had embarked on the journey. Unwilling to risk additional disasters prior to facing the Turks, we refrained from sacking towns or provoking fights. Our foodstuffs were profoundly depleted and some travelers succumbed to starvation. I, myself, wondered night after night whether I would live to see my mother one day.

Finally, in August of 1096, as we trudged from town to town along the coast of the Sea of Marmara, the great city of Constantinople arose on the horizon. A wild cheer burst from the masses of pilgrims, for it was here that we were to encounter Byzantine Emperor Alexius, who was the one who, in the first place, had called for assistance from the Western Christians against the Muslim Turks.

Despite a historically adversarial relationship with the Germans and French, Alexius granted an audience to Peter The Hermit and welcomed our retinue into his lands. He opened the markets to us and provided much needed provisions. During our first two nights on the outskirts of the city, we feasted and celebrated. Mummers came out from the city and staged dramatic

performances, which were especially appealing to the children. And there were fire breathers and snake charmers and jugglers and musicians and dancing women. At long last, we had the opportunity to relax and restore ourselves, and to reward ourselves for our months of devoted sacrifice.

It was on the second night that I crossed paths with the golden-haired girl. I found her amidst a group of French girls, who were gathered near a bonfire playing games with their hands and singing songs. When I approached, she turned and looked at me as if she had been expecting me all along.

“Butcher’s Boy,” she said flatly. She looked healthier than I would have expected after such a journey. Taller and a bit more filled out than when I had first encountered her. And her hair was longer, in wavy locks that hung to the small of her back. She donned a fresh linen smock, in sea green, which she must have acquired there in Constantinople, and a band atop her head made with small white and yellow flowers. This time, I found her quite beautiful, quite alluring.

“Nothing to say?” she asked.

“Oh,” I stammered. “I did not expect you to be here. I thought...”

“You thought that I gave up?”

“Well, perhaps... I thought that you may have suffered.”

“No more than you, Butcher’s Boy.” She grinned.

I chuckled awkwardly and felt my cheeks warm with blood.

She stepped forward and took hold of my hand. Her fingers were thin and ice cold despite the late-summer warmth. “Come with me,” she said.

We walked through the vast bivouac to the south. Overhead, the sky was endless and sparkling with infinite pinpoints of light. The merry sounds of the Crusaders carried into the night and the bonfire flames danced above the camp in golden and crimson hues. The girl led me toward the sea, and, after a time, we found ourselves upon a beach, the sandy stretch illuminated by the moonlight as if it were gilded with silver. The wash of the surf upon the shore drowned out the sounds of the distant congregation, and the sea, except for the ivory froth of the breakers, was the deepest shade of blue that I had ever experienced.

We took a seat near the water and sunk our toes into the cool, moist sand.

“I never saw the sea before this journey,” the girl noted.

“Me neither,” I said.

“How big do you think it is?”

“The sea?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm... this one is big, but they say that there are much bigger oceans... boundless waters that stretch to all corners of the earth.”

She nodded thoughtfully, her gaze far away. Then, she said, “I don’t want to be alone.”

“You are not alone,” I responded. “We are doing this together. All of us.”

“I know. I’m not stupid. I mean afterwards. After we liberate the Holy Land. After we drive out the heretics. After it is all said and done.”

“I am going to see my mother afterwards. In Denmark.”

The girl remained quiet for a long moment, then: “I don’t know whether I will go back. I have nothing to go back to.”

“What about your family?”

“I have two brothers, but they went to England. I don’t know where.”

I nodded uncertainly. I did not know much, but I knew that I wanted to keep this girl with me, now and in the future. I appraised her as she gazed out to sea. Her hair fluttered in the breeze. Her skin, so soft and unblemished. Her neck lithesome, the red birthmark in shadow. Her spirit, bent – wounded – but unbroken.

“Come with me,” I told her, “when it is all over with. Come to Utrecht. With the spoils of the Crusade we will live comfortably. My mother and aunt are there. It is a nice place and I will look after you.” I wanted to say that I would love her always, but could not summon the courage.

“That is an idea,” she responded distractedly, almost inaudibly. Then, after a pause: “Do you believe that this is what Jesus wants of us?”

“What do you mean?”

“The pilgrimage has been very difficult. Many have suffered and died. Some terrible things have happened... in the name of Jesus. And... I’m wondering... if... if we’re...” She did not finish her thought.

The girl’s unexpected dubiousness came as a bitter shock. After all, she was the one who had convinced me of the Crusade’s worthiness. She was the one who had lured me into this ordeal. For her to now question our sacrifice seemed like a form of sacrilege. And, for a moment, I felt anger. I wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake. But, one glimpse of her pained face disarmed me.

“We would not have made it this far without Jesus,” I told her after taking a deep breath. “He has blessed this mission. He has blessed the faithful. In the end, we will prevail.” I tried my best to sound sure of myself.

The girl looked at me but did not respond. We sat and listened to the song of the ocean for a while. Then she wiped her eye and stood. I followed her back to camp in silence.

Days passed, and the Crusaders grew restless. We had come all that way only to stop at the Bosphorus, the dividing line between the Byzantine Empire and the Seljuk Sultanate. Many among us, me included, were ready for action, ready to fight the ultimate enemy, ready to see our divinely inspired mission through to its glorious conclusion. There was some debate as to whether we should wait for impending reinforcements from the west, reinforcements that would have consisted largely of trained soldiers. But, invigorated, the hawks among us got their way. Alexius agreed to ferry us across the strait.

We progressed into the Sultanate and, although it was separated from the Empire by only a thin vein of water, it seemed like a whole different world. This was the land of the Muslims, and it was reflected in their customs and their architecture, in their way of dress and way of life. The air smelled different, sweeter – the water, too. Initially, the people we encountered were generally not bothered by our presence. They traded with us. They showed us hospitality, albeit hesitantly. However, as we progressed further, the tone shifted and, once again, we were strapped for food and supplies.

As September came to an end, the French contingent looted a village outside of Nicaea, which prompted the mobilization of Turkish forces. We, the German Crusaders, set off to the east, in search of our own spoils. However, in a matter of days we were set upon by the Turks. And, for the first time, I came face-to-face with trained warriors. We were on a road that ran through a wooded area – robust firs and cedars forming a sort of corridor along which the battle would take place. Armed with my iron spear, aflame with the Holy Spirit, and propelled forward

by a desire to prove my worth to God and my father and the girl whom I loved, I charged forward alongside my fellow Crusaders and engaged with the enemy.

First came the mounted forces, with powerful bows and steels swords, and they sliced through us like a hot knife through butter. But we did not cede. We cried, "God wills it!" and fought like rabid animals as their foot soldiers advanced in the second wave. A Turk with a steel helmet and a long goatee came at me with a scimitar and swung and I ducked underneath the arc of it and I drove my spear into the soft of his belly and pushed it with all of my might until the spearhead emerged through the low of his back. He staggered and twisted and fell, pulling the weapon out of my arms. I then produced my dagger from its place in my belt and pounced upon the back of another combatant. We tumbled to the ground and I jammed the point of the blade into the flesh beneath his jaw, to the hilt, and a hot spurt of blood splashed across my eyes and nose. His eyes went wide, then he shuddered and expired.

I stood, wild and terrible as a lion, in the center of a melee that was bloodier, more barbaric, more frenzied than any hellscape I had ever imagined. Then, with startling force, an arrow penetrated me near the clavicle. The pain was immediate and indescribable. I clutched at the shaft and, with all of my might, extracted it from deep within my flesh. Pure agony! Darkness closed in from my peripheral vision and I collapsed.

It was sometime later, dusk, when I regained my senses. I was piled upon a horse-drawn cart with other wounded Crusaders, my hands and feet bound with rope. My shoulder throbbed horribly, the upper part of my tunic drenched with blood from my wound.

They took us to Civetot and imprisoned us in a stone building. I had no way of knowing how many Germans had survived the battle, but it seemed safe to assume that the number was not significant. Women who were healers came and tended to our injuries. One scrubbed my

shoulder with a cloth and spread herbs across the wound. An unusual technique, but I must admit that my wound healed without festering.

Two days after the battle, a man who must have been a cleric, appeared at the prison and spoke to us in very poor German but with an authoritarian tone. He held up a thick book, which we learned was called the Quran, and demanded that we place our hands upon it and convert to the Muhammadan faith on the spot. The first prisoner refused and, without hesitation, a Turkish guardsman drove a sword through his heart. After that, only a few of us rejected the oath. When my turn came, crying like an infant, I laid my hand upon the book and vowed, “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.”

Of course, I never again encountered the fair-haired girl. I never even knew her name. Days after our defeat in battle, word came that the Turks had mercilessly slaughtered thousands of French Crusaders on the outskirts of Civetot. The surviving women were raped and taken as slaves along with their children. The People’s Crusade was no more.

My heart wanted to believe that the girl had escaped, had made her way back to Cologne, had reunited with her brothers, or, even, had ventured to Utrecht and found my mother and had comforted her with tales of my devotion and bravery. Yes, that is what my heart wanted to believe.