

William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum anglicarum* 5.xxii-xxiv¹

Chapter 22: Of the prodigy of the dead man, who wandered about after burial

[1] In these days a wonderful event befell in the county of Buckingham, which I, in the first instance, partially heard from certain friends, and was afterwards more fully informed of by Stephen, the venerable archdeacon of that province. A certain man died, and, according to custom, by the honourable exertion of his wife and kindred, was laid in the tomb on the eve of the Lord's Ascension. On the following night, however, having entered the bed where his wife was reposing, he not only terrified her on awaking, but nearly crushed her by the insupportable weight of his body. The next night, also, he afflicted the astonished woman in the same manner, who, frightened at the danger, as the struggle of the third night drew near, took care to remain awake herself, and surround herself with watchful companions. Still he came; but being repulsed by the shouts of the watchers, and seeing that he was prevented from doing mischief, he departed. Thus driven off from his wife, he harassed in a similar manner his own brothers, who were dwelling in the same street; but they, following the cautious example of the woman, passed the nights in wakefulness with their companions, ready to meet and repel the expected danger. He appeared, notwithstanding, as if with the hope of surprising them should they be overcome with drowsiness; but being repelled by the carefulness and valour of the watchers, he rioted among the animals, both indoors and outdoors, as their wildness and unwonted movements testified.

[2] Having thus become a like serious nuisance to his friends and neighbours, he imposed upon all the same necessity for nocturnal watchfulness; and in that very street a general watch was kept in every house, each being fearful of his approach unawares. After having for some time rioted in this manner during the night-time alone, he began to wander abroad in daylight, formidable indeed to all, but visible only to a few; for oftentimes, on his encountering a number of persons, he would appear to one or two only though at the same time his presence was not concealed from the rest. At length the inhabitants, alarmed beyond measure, thought it advisable to seek counsel of the church; and they detailed the whole affair, with tearful lamentation, to the above-mentioned archdeacon, at a meeting of the clergy over which he was solemnly presiding. Whereupon he immediately intimated in writing the whole circumstances of the case to the venerable bishop of Lincoln, who was then resident in London, whose opinion and judgment on so unwonted a matter he was very properly of opinion should be waited for: but the bishop, being amazed at his account, held a searching investigation with his companions; and there were some who said that such things had often befallen in England, and cited frequent examples to show that tranquillity could not be restored to the people until the body of this

¹ 'William of Newburgh: Book Five', [Medieval Sourcebook](#) (last accessed 24th Oct. 2017). The translation provided on Medieval Sourcebook is from *The Church Historians of England, volume IV, part II*, trans. Joseph Stevenson (London: Seeley's, 1861). Medieval Sourcebook has altered the original paragraph divisions and added the paragraph numbers, and has modernised spellings for ease of readability and reference. The electronic form of this presentation is ©1999 by Scott McLetchie and may not be reproduced for any commercial purposes whatsoever. It may be reproduced for non-profit educational purposes.

most wretched man were dug up and burnt. This proceeding, however, appeared indecent and improper in the last degree to the reverend bishop, who shortly after addressed a letter of absolution, written with his own hand, to the archdeacon, in order that it might be demonstrated by inspection in what state the body of that man really was; and he commanded his tomb to be opened, and the letter having been laid upon his breast, to be again closed: so the sepulchre having been opened, the corpse was found as it had been placed there, and the charter of absolution having been deposited upon its breast, and the tomb once more closed, he was thenceforth never more seen to wander, nor permitted to inflict annoyance or terror upon any one.

Chapter 23: Of a similar occurrence at Berwick

In the northern parts of England, also, we know that another event, not unlike this and equally wonderful, happened about the same time. At the mouth of the river Tweed, and in the jurisdiction of the king of Scotland, there stands a noble city which is called Berwick. In this town a certain man, very wealthy, but as it afterwards appeared a great rogue, having been buried, after his death sallied forth (by the contrivance, as it is believed, of Satan) out of his grave by night, and was borne hither and thither, pursued by a pack of dogs with loud barking; thus striking great terror into the neighbours, and returning to his tomb before daylight. After this had continued for several days, and no one dared to be found out of doors after dusk -- for each dreaded an encounter with this deadly monster -- the higher and middle classes of the people held a necessary investigation into what was requisite to be done; the more simple among them fearing, in the event of negligence, to be soundly beaten by this prodigy of the grave; but the wiser shrewdly concluding that were a remedy further delayed, the atmosphere, infected and corrupted by the constant whirlings through it of the pestiferous corpse, would engender disease and death to a great extent; the necessity of providing against which was shown by frequent examples in similar cases. They, therefore, procured ten young men renowned for boldness, who were to dig up the horrible carcass, and, having cut it limb from limb, reduce it into food and fuel for the flames. When this was done, the commotion ceased. Moreover, it is stated that the monster, while it was being borne about (as it is said) by Satan, had told certain persons whom it had by chance encountered, that as long as it remained unburned the people should have no peace. Being burnt, tranquillity appeared to be restored to them; but a pestilence, which arose in consequence, carried off the greater portion of them: for never did it so furiously rage elsewhere, though it was at that time general throughout all the borders of England, as shall be more fully explained in its proper place.

Chapter 24: Of certain prodigies

[1] It would not be easy to believe that the corpses of the dead should sally (I know not by what agency) from their graves, and should wander about to the terror or destruction of the living, and again return to the tomb, which of its own accord spontaneously opened to receive them, did not frequent examples, occurring in our own times, suffice to establish this fact, to the truth of which there is abundant testimony. It would be strange if such things should have happened formerly, since we can find no evidence of them in the works of ancient authors, whose vast labour it was to commit to writing every occurrence worthy of memory; for if they never neglected to register even events of moderate interest, how could they have suppressed a fact at once so amazing and horrible, supposing it to have happened in their day? Moreover, were I to write down all the instances of this kind which I have ascertained to have befallen in our times, the undertaking would be beyond measure laborious and troublesome; so I will fain add two more only (and these of recent occurrence) to those I have already narrated, and insert them in our history, as occasion offers, as a warning to posterity.

[2] A few years ago the chaplain of a certain illustrious lady, casting off mortality, was consigned to the tomb in that noble monastery which is called Melrose. This man, having little respect for the sacred order to which he belonged, was excessively secular in his pursuits, and -- what especially blackens his reputation as a minister of the holy sacrament -- so addicted to the vanity of the chase as to be designated by many by the infamous title of "Hundeprest," or the dog-priest; and this occupation, during his lifetime, was either laughed at by men, or considered in a worldly view; but after his death -- as the event showed -- the guiltiness of it was brought to light: for, issuing from the grave at night-time, he was prevented by the meritorious resistance of its holy inmates from injuring or terrifying any one within the monastery itself; whereupon he wandered beyond the walls, and hovered chiefly, with loud groans and horrible murmurs, round the bedchamber of his former mistress. She, after this had frequently occurred, becoming exceedingly terrified, revealed her fears or danger to one of the friars who visited her about the business of the monastery; demanding with tears that prayers more earnest than usual should be poured out to the Lord in her behalf as for one in agony. With whose anxiety the friar -- for she appeared deserving of the best endeavours, on the part of the holy convent of that place, by her frequent donations to it -- piously and justly sympathized, and promised a speedy remedy through the mercy of the Most High Provider for all.

[3] Thereupon, returning to the monastery, he obtained the companionship of another friar, of equally determined spirit, and two powerful young men, with whom he intended with constant vigilance to keep guard over the cemetery where that miserable priest lay buried. These four, therefore, furnished with arms and animated with courage, passed the night in that place, safe in the assistance which each afforded to the other. Midnight had now passed by, and no monster appeared; upon which it came to pass that three of the party, leaving him only who had sought their company on the spot, departed into the nearest house, for the purpose, as they averred, of warming themselves, for the night was cold. As

soon as this man was left alone in this place, the devil, imagining that he had found the right moment for breaking his courage, incontinently roused up his own chosen vessel, who appeared to have reposed longer than usual. Having beheld this from afar, he grew stiff with terror by reason of his being alone; but soon recovering his courage, and no place of refuge being at hand, he valiantly withstood the onset of the fiend, who came rushing upon him with a terrible noise, and he struck the axe which he wielded in his hand deep into his body. On receiving this wound, the monster groaned aloud, and turning his back, fled with a rapidity not at all inferior to that with which he had advanced, while the admirable man urged his flying foe from behind, and compelled him to seek his own tomb again; which opening of its own accord, and receiving its guest from the advance of the pursuer, immediately appeared to close again with the same facility. In the meantime, they who, impatient of the coldness of the night, had retreated to the fire ran up, though somewhat too late, and, having heard what had happened, rendered needful assistance in digging up and removing from the midst of the tomb the accursed corpse at the earliest dawn. When they had divested it of the clay cast forth with it, they found the huge wound it had received, and a great quantity of gore which had flowed from it in the sepulchre; and so having carried it away beyond the walls of the monastery and burnt it, they scattered the ashes to the winds. These things I have explained in a simple narration, as I myself heard them recounted by religious men.

[4] Another event, also, not unlike this, but more pernicious in its effects, happened at the castle which is called Anantis, as I have heard from an aged monk who lived in honour and authority in those parts, and who related this event as having occurred in his own presence. A certain man of evil conduct flying, through fear of his enemies or the law, out of the province of York, to the lord of the before-named castle, took up his abode there, and having cast upon a service befitting his humour, laboured hard to increase rather than correct his own evil propensities. He married a wife, to his own ruin indeed, as it afterwards appeared; for, hearing certain rumours respecting her, he was vexed with the spirit of Jealousy. Anxious to ascertain the truth of these reports, he pretended to be going on a journey from which he would not return for some days; but coming back in the evening, he was privily introduced into his bedroom by a maid-servant, who was in the secret, and lay hidden on a beam overhanging, his wife's chamber, that he might prove with his own eyes if anything were done to the dishonour of his marriage-bed. Thereupon beholding his wife in the act of fornication with a young man of the neighbourhood, and in his indignation forgetful of his purpose, he fell, and was dashed heavily to the ground, near where they were lying.

[5] The adulterer himself leaped up and escaped; but the wife, cunningly dissembling the fact, busied herself in gently raising her fallen husband from the earth. As soon as he had partially recovered, he upbraided her with her adultery, and threatened punishment; but she answering, "Explain yourself, my lord," said she; "you are speaking unbecomingly which must be imputed not to you, but to the sickness with which you are troubled." Being much shaken by the fall, and his whole body stupefied, he was attacked with a disease, insomuch that the man whom I have mentioned as having related these facts to

me visiting him in the pious discharge of his duties, admonished him to make confession of his sins, and receive the Christian Eucharist in proper form: but as he was occupied in thinking about what had happened to him, and what his wife had said, put off the wholesome advice until the morrow -- that morrow which in this world he was fated never to behold! -- for the next night, destitute of Christian grace, and a prey to his well-earned misfortunes, he shared the deep slumber of death. A Christian burial, indeed, he received, though unworthy of it; but it did not much benefit him: for issuing, by the handiwork of Satan, from his grave at night-time, and pursued by a pack of dogs with horrible barkings, he wandered through the courts and around the houses while all men made fast their doors, and did not dare to go abroad on any errand whatever from the beginning of the night until the sunrise, for fear of meeting and being beaten black and blue by this vagrant monster. But those precautions were of no avail; for the atmosphere, poisoned by the vagaries of this foul carcass, filled every house with disease and death by its pestiferous breath.

[6] Already did the town, which but a short time ago was populous, appear almost deserted; while those of its inhabitants who had escaped destruction migrated to other parts of the country, lest they too should die. The man from whose mouth I heard these things, sorrowing over this desolation of his parish, applied himself to summon a meeting of wise and religious men on that sacred day which is called Palm Sunday, in order that they might impart healthful counsel in so great a dilemma, and refresh the spirits of the miserable remnant of the people with consolation, however imperfect. Having delivered a discourse to the inhabitants, after the solemn ceremonies of the holy day had been properly performed, he invited his clerical guests, together with the other persons of honour who were present, to his table. While they were thus banqueting, two young men (brothers), who had lost their father by this plague, mutually encouraging one another, said, "This monster has already destroyed our father, and will speedily destroy us also, unless we take steps to prevent it. Let us, therefore, do some bold action which will at once ensure our own safety and revenge our father's death. There is no one to hinder us; for in the priest's house a feast is in progress, and the whole town is as silent as if deserted. Let us dig up this baneful pest, and burn it with fire."

[7] Thereupon snatching up a spade of but indifferent sharpness of edge, and hastening to the cemetery, they began to dig; and whilst they were thinking that they would have to dig to a greater depth, they suddenly, before much of the earth had been removed, laid bare the corpse, swollen to an enormous corpulence, with its countenance beyond measure turgid and suffused with blood; while the napkin in which it had been wrapped appeared nearly torn to pieces. The young men, however, spurred on by wrath, feared not, and inflicted a wound upon the senseless carcass, out of which incontinently flowed such a stream of blood, that it might have been taken for a leech filled with the blood of many persons. Then, dragging it beyond the village, they speedily constructed a funeral pile; and upon one of them saying that the pestilential body would not burn unless its heart were torn out, the other laid open its side by repeated blows of the blunted spade, and, thrusting in his hand, dragged out the accursed heart. This being torn piecemeal, and the body now consigned to the flames,

it was announced to the guests what was going on, who, running thither, enabled themselves to testify henceforth to the circumstances. When that infernal hell-hound had thus been destroyed, the pestilence which was rife among the people ceased, as if the air, which had been corrupted by the contagious motions of the dreadful corpse, were already purified by the fire which had consumed it. These facts having been thus expounded, let us return to the regular thread of history.