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Peter The Hermit



A fascinating look into a man who managed to
“Drive the Nations of Christendom
into the Saracenic Wars”

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INTRODUCTION

At the conclusion of a most impressive Third Degree Ceremony some while ago, in fact many years ago one of our younger members asked me, who was Peter the Hermit?. I had to confess that I knew little, if anything, about this character. However, to assuage the curiosity of this Brother, and for my own education we approached, in turn, the Exalting Officer, the Knight President, the Vice President and various other members wearing the red ribbon, none of whom could give us any further information beyond the meagre reference in the ceremony book. So, to satisfy at least two members, and any others who may be interested I delved into the archives and elicited the following facts about Peter the Hermit.

Few members of the Order know anything about the man who has come down through the centuries, to figure prominently in one of our ceremonies, under the style and title of 'Peter the Hermit', and fewer still will bother to find out any more. So we picture him as a 'wild man of the desert', or some old humbug living in a cave, and we wonder how on earth he managed to "Drive the nations of Christendom into the Saracenic Wars", indeed, some amateur historians assure us that he did no such thing. Yet he was a man of considerable importance in his time, and the facts of his career were fully set down by 11th century writers, to be found by anyone who knows where to look for such information.

Two versions are contained within this book and both have a bearing on this very important character in our history.

Mick Walker ROH, Grand Primo 2006

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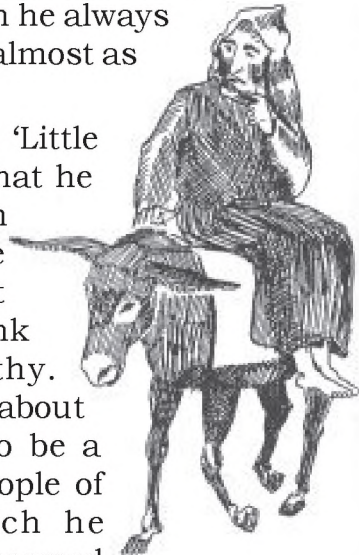
PETER THE HERMIT
A NEGLECTED CELEBRITY

“Whose Enthusiastic Eloquence”

Peter was born in France, somewhere near Amiens, in the early part of the 11th century. Born of peasant stock, of his early life there is no record, but it is probable that he was given to the Monastery in his early years, a custom in those times, when an additional mouth proved too much for the slender resources of a family. His early monastic life would consist of devotions, learning and tilling the fields or tending the flocks, in return for which he would be fed and clothed. The time came when he was called upon to leave the Monastery and travel the countryside, preaching the Gospel to the people in return for food and accommodation.

A description of him at this period states he was a man of short stature with a long lean face, horribly like the donkey which he always rode, and which was revered almost as much as himself.

He was known at first as ‘Little Peter’, but the hermit cape that he habitually wore earned him the surname of ‘Peter the Hermit’. He ate neither meat nor bread, only fish, and drank wine. His clothes were filthy. There was a strange authority about him, and he was thought to be a visionary by the ignorant people of the villages through which he travelled. Whatever he said seemed



like something half divine. The burden of his preaching was that war and strife were ungodly and that to reach the gates of Heaven man had to live at peace with man. This was balm to the ears of the peasants, whose lives were constantly in jeopardy by Barbarian invasions and raids of the Norsemen.

Often dykes were broken and the sea and rivers allowed to encroach upon the countryside so that much land had gone out of cultivation. The Lords opposed the clearing of the forests for they were required for the hunting of game. Added to these circumstances a village, at any time, was liable to be robbed and burnt by outlaws, or by soldiers fighting petty civil wars. So it is little wonder that the villagers listened with enthusiasm to the doctrine of the Pope, spoken by Peter the Hermit, condemning all wars and bloodshed. And they may have wondered, if this were the way to heaven, why they, peaceful loving citizens remained poor, while the war mongering Barons waxed fat and wealthy in spite of their infidel ways. But, at this time all was not well with the Papacy. The Saracens, Arab tribes of Syria had embarked upon a land annexation campaign. They overran many rich areas that had formerly belonged to the Church. Part of this wealth lay in the caravan route to Jerusalem, a goal that thousands of penitent pilgrims visited, carrying gifts of precious stones and gold. The Saracens, in capturing Jerusalem, had diverted this wealth to their own uses. They were careful not to disrupt the pilgrim trade, being content to lay certain restrictions upon those who made the journey to the Holy Land.

Pope Urban pondered this problem with mixed feelings. Hitherto he had declared all war as unchristian, and yet, if he were not to lose more of the possessions of the church, he would have to authorise a campaign

that would halt and press back the invader. Eventually a solution occurred to him, and he forthwith set out on a journey through Europe to hold Council with his Bishops. Pope Urban arrived at Clermont in France in the late summer of 1095.

Knowledge of his coming had spread through the area, and so vast was the crowd of church dignitaries and lesser clerics to welcome him that the Council had to be held in the meadows near the church. Peter the Hermit, together with another itinerant monk called Walter the Penniless were among the congregation who listened to the deliberations of the Council. The Council sat from the 18th to the 28th of November, and discussed many subjects, including lay investiture, Simony and clerical marriage. At this Council, King Philip was excommunicated for adultery and



the Bishop of Cambrai suffered the same fate for Simony. (Simony is the ecclesiastical crime of paying for holy offices or positions in the hierarchy of a Church, named after Simon Magus, who appears in the Acts of the Apostles 8:18-24. Simon Magus offers the disciples of Jesus, Peter and John, payment so that anyone he would place his hands on would receive the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the origin of the term simony, but it also extends to other forms of trafficking for money in “spiritual things”). But the Pope wished to use this occasion for a more momentous purpose. On the final day of the Council the Pope made his speech. He stressed the special holiness of Jerusalem, he painted

a word picture of the plight of pilgrims, and condemned the aggression of the Saracens, and intimated that whilst it was sinful to slay each other it was righteous to slay the Saracens.

Let the West march to the rescue of the East was his lesson. It would be the duty of the leaders of such a march to see that in all the towns captured the Church was to have all its rights and possessions returned. Pope Urban stressed that this was a Holy War, and that all who were killed in it would go straight to the gates of Heaven, and, for identification purposes a cross of red material should be sewn to the shoulder of the surcoat.

Peter the Hermit and Walter the Penniless listened to this address with amazement. This was a complete reversal of all that they had hitherto been taught. But, being faithful servants of the church, they took up the challenge with enthusiasm. Without delay they set out to preach the new doctrine. Parting at the cross roads after making a date for a rendezvous, they each carried the message through the villages of France. So the villagers heard a new Peter. No longer did he speak of peaceful existence, but called upon to follow him into a war. Many believed that he was promising to lead them out of their present miseries into a land flowing with milk and honey. Few had any idea of the distance they were to travel, for most of them had never been beyond the confines of their own village, and the nearest town was the limit of their imagination as far as distance was concerned. But as Peter went from village to village he was followed by a band of believers, which increased in numbers wherever he made his stirring address. This vast motley of enthusiasts were of many types. Some brought their women, some even their children. Most were peasants, some townsfolk former brigands and criminals. Their arms were the most primitive - sickles,

staves, and the occasional sword. Their only link, the fervour of their faith in Peter the Hermit.

In ragged formation they straggled across France and into Germany, more adherents joining the ranks on the way. It was essential to keep them on the move if they were to be fed, for few districts in Medieval Europe had sufficient surplus of food to supply for long the needs of so large a company.

On the 12th April 1096 they arrived at Cologne, led by Peter the Hermit on his donkey. Here they met up with Walter the Penniless, who had also amassed a following of enthusiasts. Peter wished to stay in Cologne for a rest after the arduous journey, but Walter, a younger man was impatient and declined to wait. Walter set out for Hungary with a few thousand followers. They crossed the River Savi and entered Belgrade where Walter demanded food for his army. But the harvest had not yet been gathered and there was little food to spare. Walter's men, hungry and dispirited resorted to a spate of pillaging that alarmed the Governor of the town. He tightened up the police regulations in an effort to suppress this outlawry. Sixteen of Walter's men tried to rob a bazaar on the outskirts but they were captured, stripped of their arms and clothing and sent, naked, into Belgrade. This caused further trouble, and the Governor resorted to arms. Many of Walter's men were killed, and others burnt alive in a church.

Peter the Hermit, riding his donkey at the head of his horde, followed the road that Walter had taken, little realising the trouble that his friend's companions had caused. They made good progress, travelling twenty five miles a day on good roads, and eventually reached Semlin. The Governor, however, having heard of the troubles at Belgrade, imposed severe restrictions on this

formidable motley throng. Peter found himself unable to quell the unrest that these restrictions created among his followers, who became suspicious, and a riot broke out which turned into a pitched battle. Peter's army attacked the town and succeeded in storming the Citadel. 4000 Hungarians were killed and a large store of provisions captured. Then, to avoid retribution they made speed to cross the River Savi. They took all the wood they could find and hastily built rafts. As they were crossing they were attacked by mercenaries employed by the Governor. Gradually they forced their way across the river, losing many lives but sinking several of the mercenaries boats, the occupants being either drowned or captured and put to death.

All Peter's exhortations failed to stem the savagery of his followers, created by the privations they had suffered and the mirage like quality of the journeys end, which seemed so near at the outset, and yet seemed to draw further away.

They entered Belgrade in late June and promptly set fire to it after a wholesale pillage. Then they marched on for a further seven days, through thick forest and hill country to arrive at Nish on July 3rd. The next day they set out for Sofia. As they were leaving Nish a party of the followers, who had quarrelled with some townfolk the previous night, wantonly set fire to some dwellings by the river.

The Governor of Nish, infuriated by this act, sent a body of troops to attack the rearguard of the army and to return with prisoners. The troops, however, were overcome by Peter's men, and were killed, whereupon the Governor let all his forces loose upon them and they were completely routed and scattered. Many were slain, many were captured. Men, women and children

to spend the rest of their days in captivity. Peter and about 500 men fled up a mountain side. Their food supplies were lost, as was the chest of money they had amassed on the way. Broken and hungry, the remnants of the vast concourse that had set out with such high hopes arrived at Constantinople on August 1st. To the Emperor Alexius they were not impressive. He feared that if they crossed into Asia they would soon be destroyed by the Turks. So they were allowed to rest until the 6th of August when they were conveyed across the Bosphorus to join up with the army led by Walter the Penniless. Peter's authority, which had been waning fast during the latter part of the journey, was here finally renounced. The land "flowing with milk and honey" had failed to materialise, except by pillage. And so they elected a new leader, and Peter returned to Constantinople to seek solace and refuge in the Church.

In the meantime, at Civetot, the Crusaders were gathered together. From Italy they had come, from Spain, England, Germany and France. Large and small bands of Christians banded together in one cause, the capture of Jerusalem. And, on October 21st they marched out from the camp at Civetot, 20,000 strong. They left behind old men, women and children. In the grey dawn of that morning they trod, noisily and carelessly. Barely three miles from the camp the road enters a narrow wooded valley on its way to Nicaea and here the Turks were lying in ambush. As the Crusaders entered the valley a hail of arrows descended upon them.

The leading horses were either maimed or killed and as they plunged in confusion, unseating the Knights, the Turks attacked. Panic seized the army who had never faced such a circumstance before. The whole host fled in disorder back to Civetot closely followed by the Turks. Those who were left in the camp had hardly awoken to

prepare breakfast when the horde, pursued and pursuers, burst upon them. And then ensued a terrible massacre. Soldiers, Priests, women and children were put to the sword. Only young boys and girls whose appearance pleased the Turks were spared their lives to be taken captive. By mid day all was over.

So ended the People's Crusade. It cost many thousands of lives and gained nothing. It taught that Faith alone, without wisdom and discipline, would not open the door to Jerusalem. Peter the Hermit received the news of the debacle from a Greek soldier who had escaped death in the massacre. Although seriously wounded he managed to find a boat at dusk which he sailed to Constantinople. At this point Peter the Hermit makes his exit from the pages of history. His donkey, faithful companion of his early travels he had to desert when he fled into the hills. Probably it became a beast of burden for one of the inhabitants of Nish. Strange how a donkey has figured so often in stories of the past.

Whether Peter the Hermit was the originator of the Order of Knights is debatable. That he blazed a trail that was followed by many Knights in the following years is true. And, apart from one short period, that they met with no more success than Peter did is also true, for Jerusalem stayed firmly in Turkish hands until it was liberated, over eight hundred years later by the Forces of the British Army under General Allenby in 1917.



This second episode tells of Peter the Hermit in a different light. It is shorter and more concise and is reproduced almost exactly as I found it.

Peter was born of a good family, at Amiens, in 1071 A.D., and was sufficiently well off to receive a good education; something which, in those days, was limited to the upper classes. He seems to have lived an ordinary life, until his wife died, after which he retired into a monastery. Here we might have lost him, but evidently it didn't suit him, for after a while he moved into a respectable hermitage, from which he derived the nickname bestowed upon him by history. His legal name at the time was Peter of Picardy (Pierre le Picard). Restless as a hermit, Peter, an active man and deeply religious, determined to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

It was a courageous undertaking; the journey, on foot, could not be accomplished in less than a year, and took him through many unfriendly lands. The perils of travel in the middle ages can hardly be conceived by modern readers, robbers and brigands infested every highway, and the keepers of hostelries were usually in league with them. Petty princes and barons resented strangers within their territories, and all travellers were suspects. It says much for Peter's vigour and determination, that he made his way to Jerusalem without losing his life, or his enthusiasm.

He was appalled at the conditions he found there. A Turkish despot named Togul Beg was in absolute command of the city, with an army of Janissaries, and they took delight in robbing and ill treating the thousands of Christian residents and visitors, while a favourite pastime of theirs was to desecrate and damage the holy places and sacred monuments. Peter consulted

Simeon, the Christian Patriarch of Jerusalem, who gave him 'credentials' and begged him to appeal to the Pope and the Christian Princes for assistance. This he swore faithfully to do, and set off on his journey back.

Returning to Europe, Peter called on Pope Urban II at Avignon, who was horrified at his dismal news. The Pope at once issued appeals to all the princes of Europe, calling for a Holy Crusade, and commissioned Peter to broadcast the appeal to the populace; a commission which he undertook with his customary vigour. For two years he traversed France on foot, preaching in every town, village, and market place. His "enthusiastic eloquence" aroused the common people, and multitudes were shouting for a crusade. But the Princes were otherwise engaged; England and France were at war, and most of the others were either involved or awaiting the outcome, there were no prospective leaders.

In 1095 the First Crusade set out, an army of peasants, led by a gentleman named Gualtier Sans Avoir (Walter Have Nothing). In Bulgaria they were attacked by the whole Bulgarian army, and dispersed, so Gualtier brought the remainder back to France, where, to their eternal credit, they immediately enlisted in the second attempt. This was led by Peter himself, desperate at the lack of princely support; they fought their way through Rumania and Bulgaria to Constantinople, where a favourable government helped them to cross into Africa; but on the plain of Nicea they were opposed by a large army of both Christians and Mussulmen, who cut them to pieces.

The third and fourth attempts, both organised by non entities, met with no better success, for it was apparent now that only a well organised expedition could even reach the Holy Land. In 1096 the first really

'military' crusade went forth, assembled by one of the great leaders of the time, Godfrey, Comte de Bouillon. They were successful all the way, laid siege to Jerusalem, and captured it in five weeks. With them was Peter the Hermit, his great work crowned by triumph. This campaign lasted for three years, and when it was over, Peter was appointed as Vicar General of Jerusalem. He set up 'hospitals' which were resting places for pilgrims, and from these grew the 'Knights Hospitallers'.

The island of Malta became an important staging point on the line of communication, and its garrison founded the 'Knights of Malta'. While it would be wrong for anyone to claim that 'Knighthood' originated with Peter the Hermit, it is manifestly true that the various 'Orders of Knighthood had their origin' in this great man.

He is a fitting example to set before our members, who need to emulate his courage, his loyalty, and (above all) his tremendous enthusiasm.

