



*The end panel of the Bayeux Tapestry is missing. Is it really the key to an imminent Armageddon? Luke Steiner needs to put the puzzle pieces together, real soon. Can Luke find the answers in time? X never marks the spot, until it does.*

## **A Pale Winter's Sun: A Novel**

By Robert R Hamlyn

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# A Pale Winter's Sun



*A Novel*

Robert R Hamlyn

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## Prologue

Dawn nearly broke through a cloudy sky at half past six on Saturday, 14 October, in the Year of Our Lord, 1066. The sun, in the cold autumn air, looked like a pale disk suspended above the horizon. The Norman army of William the Bastard, encamped at Hastings, was ready to march the eight miles to Harold's Ridge. The 776 shallow draft long-boats of Count William and his itinerant Norman invaders had crossed the English Channel and landed in Pevensey Bay back in September. The tide, the wind, and the will of the Lord were apparently with them, as evidenced by the presence of the banner of Pope Alexander II, and a papal ring bearing a relic of Saint Peter on William's hand.

On the day of the battle, the two massed armies faced off in a triangular area of Hastings Plain between the high ground of Harold's Ridge near Caldbec Hill to the north and the lower land near Telham Hill to the south. It had been raining for weeks and the ground was spongy under foot.

It is a common affair for men-at-arms to ponder the mystery of why they are willing to kill and be killed. The only motive for the Norman horde was the promise of treasure. England was rich, and the civic structure of king, duke, earl, thane, and other landed gentry provided a means of extracting taxes from the people who worked the land and produced the goods that were taxed. William wanted the English throne. The rest of the lot wanted to pillage the land and wealth that graced the Anglo-Saxon landscape, with which William had enticed them, in turn for their willing participation in the fight. *Victori Praede Sunt* (to the victor belong the spoils.)

The Anglo-Saxons had a more direct cause—they were fighting for their homes. They did not want a foreign king. They wanted the right to choose their own king in their own manner and to be ruled by the system they had established for themselves. They did not want foreign invaders ravaging their villages. They wanted England to remain English.

William's army consisted of three detachments. William's Normans occupied the center. Their left flank was comprised of Breton mercenaries commanded by a Breton Count, Alan Fergant. The right flank was comprised of French and Flemish mercenaries under the command of Eustace of Boulogne. Each unit had its compliment of three separate combat arms. Archers were in front, armed with bows or crossbows with an effective range of one hundred yards. These were followed by the infantry, swathed in chain mail and carrying swords and pikes. These were followed by the mounted cavalry. The knights, helmeted and fully armored, carried swords and lances, while their horses were unencumbered and unprotected. The clusters of banners and pennants indicated the command-and-control element of each division, with William's position in the center division indicated by the Gold and White Papal Banner of the Vatican, wafting unfurled over the heads of 7,000 belligerents. Harold's army consisted of a mixed bag of thanes and housecarls, that is draftees and professional soldiers, estimated at 6,000 to 7,000 strong.

As the opposing forces closed and stood ready, a midget minstrel named Ivo Taillefer rode out alone from the Norman ranks, singing *Le Chanson de Roland* while juggling his sword and catching it. He jogged his horse across the plain and into the English line of infantry standing at the ready. It is said a Saxon man broke ranks and Taillefer killed him before he himself was cut down, having achieved everlasting fame. The Norman archers advanced in line abreast.

The English formed their front line to build a wall of overlapping shields to protect themselves and their fellows in the rear ranks from the incoming missiles. The Norman archers loosed their first volleys of arrows and bolts at fifty paces. The Battle of Hastings had been joined.

In twilight, after the battle had raged all day, William, Duke of Normandy, defeated Saxon King Harold on 14 October, 1066. After a long, meandering, circuitous route of looting, pillaging, and burning whatever villages, manors, and other edifices the Norman army encountered through the English countryside, from Hastings to London, William assumed the throne of England on Christmas Day of 1066. William had set a real and concrete example of how he intended to rule his Kingdom—through terror.

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Much of what we know of the crossing and the battle come from the works attributed to Bishop Guy de Amiens, and the Chaplain, William de Poitiers: the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*—*The Song of the Battle of Hastings*, and the *Gesta Guillelmi*—*The Deeds of William*, respectively. Their accounts are illustrated by the Bayeux Tapestry, widely regarded as the world's first comic strip.

The Bayeux Tapestry, also known as *La Tapisserie de la Reine Mathilde*, is an embroidery 231 feet long by 20 inches tall. It is comprised of fifty-eight scenes describing the battle of Hastings. The actual embroidery is not a Tapestry at all, it is an anachronistic web of woolen thread on linen, its brilliant colors undimmed after nearly a thousand years. The final scene or final two scenes—it is not known how many scenes aren't there—have been lost to the vagaries of time. Repeated exhibition in a cathedral nave and subsequent storage in a damp basement over a period of 940 years can perhaps do that to a piece of linen. Or,

the end panel(s) may have been ripped from the main body of the embroidered linen and pilfered by parties unknown sometime in the past millennium.

The existence of the embroidery was undiscovered until 1476 when it was listed in an inventory of the treasures of Bayeux Cathedral. Since then, it had been hidden and displayed and hidden again a number of times until it had been secured in anticipation of the Nazi's Blitzkrieg invasion of France in June of 1940. In late 1944, after the Allied Invasion of Normandy, the embroidery was briefly displayed at the Louvre and returned to Bayeux in March 1945. Since then, the Tapestry was preserved and retained by the French, however, the fate of the final panels have been the subject of much conjecture, as they had not yet been found.

Most commentators declare the subject matter to have been William's coronation and ascent to the English throne. Some proclaim it, as a matter of Faith, to be the prediction of future events. But what if the final panels could be located to reveal the result of The Final Battle, Armageddon? As we will see, our man Lucas Steiner, Luke to his friends, will once again confront the persistent presence of a pernicious evil stemming from the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.

As fate would have it, Luke, a consistently unwitting participant in the battle between benefic good and baleful iniquity, is in the appointed place at the appointed time to put the puzzle pieces together. X never marks the spot, until it does.

# Chapter One

“Hi. How are ya?” seems to be a pertinent phrase. Get comfortable. Settle in. This might take a bit. My name is Lucas. Lucas M. Steiner. The “M” stands for “Maler”. I am told “Maler” means “painter” in German, but that is a separate and not very interesting story. It has been said that failure is the harbinger of wisdom. I’m not sure I agree. If failure in life is the metric by which we gauge wisdom I should be wise beyond my years. As near as I can tell, I seem to be pretty average in the wisdom department. I have given this matter some thought and I believe that if we are lucky, some of us can bounce back from a catastrophic failure in life and with repeated effort, achieve our dream (dream, goal, objective, purpose, life mission; use whatever term you like). Some of us on the other hand, may be so overwhelmed by the indomitable back-handed slap of life that we may simply sink to the bottom of our life’s experience and take our place in the sediment of social, cultural, and psychological dysfunction of a life irredeemably misspent. Don’t worry, we have lots of company.

In the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, of 1921, Ludwig Wittgenstein told us, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Bearing in mind Wittgenstein’s aphorism it would bode well to keep one’s thoughts to oneself, and here we go breaking that established rule.

So, let’s get you up to speed, shall we? Please take my word for it, this is the short version: some time ago, while I was in graduate school and desperately needing to finish my dissertation, I had crossed paths with a drawing. Having been attributed to the school of Van Aelst by the auction company handling its disposition, which meant they didn’t have a clue as to who actually made the piece, the drawing was essentially



unattributed to anyone. I believed that drawing to have been the unattributed, uncatalogued, and unknown product of Pieter Brueghel, the Elder. I knew this to be true because it told me so, but that is a different story. In retrospect, maybe it was and maybe it wasn't. But I wagered the award of my PhD, and my future career as an Art Historian, on the fact that I believed that it was Brueghel's work.

Brueghel died in 1569. He gained some fame during his lifetime and it grew exponentially soon after his death. It was the practice at the time, among many if not most artists, to use drawings as mere records of landscapes (as photography as a form of documentation did not yet exist). As a rule, only the most elaborately developed drawings might be preserved and prized enough by the artist for him to sign them and thus elevate them as a developed "work of art". It has been widely held that just sixty-one drawings by Brueghel were known to exist - which made them rare, and it has been argued that they were especially vulnerable to loss; few of his sketches survived the burn barrel in his back yard.

When I found that drawing in the auctioneer's gallery, that was precisely what I thought I was looking at. I even went so far as to give it a working title of *The Wages of Sin*. In fact, I came to believe that it was probably Brueghel's last drawing. In spite of its peak-of-his-craft excellence, I could never find his signature on that drawing, and I looked for it with earnest determination.

In the meantime, my mentor, primary adviser of my advisory committee, and my friend, Doctor William Skuller, passed away due to complications from a long-term illness. It was no mean feat to find a faculty member willing to step into the space vacated by Doctor Skuller.

Doctor Hanna Flemming was at that time faculty with the history department at the College of Arts and Sciences, and as

it happened, Bill had introduced us some weeks before in the course of my research for my dissertation.

Having exhausted all other options, I asked Doctor Flemming to assume Dr. Skuller's place as my primary adviser for my dissertation committee. After, what was apparent to me to have been, a profound deliberation of the soul, she agreed. In so doing, she took a huge burden upon herself and I believe she did so as a testament of her friendship with Bill. For which I was, and remain, supremely grateful. Substituting for Bill, she assumed the mantle of mentor. Our relationship remained polite and professional.

Fate is a fickle mistress. We will never know if *The Wages of Sin* was actually Brueghel's work or if it wasn't. On the very day of its scheduled exhibition to the public, that drawing was immolated in a motor vehicle collision between a fuel tanker truck carrying 9500 gallons of gasoline and a twelve-and-a-half-ton armored cash transport vehicle. The drawing was turned to ash. With no drawing, there was no proof. And with no proof, my dissertation was regarded as little more than interesting conjecture.

Life since then has been a series of ups and downs, mostly downs. Having failed to prove the central thesis of my dissertation, the award of my PhD was declined. In my effort to prove the existence, establish the provenance, and make known to the world Brueghel's lost drawing, I had lost my marriage, I had lost my friend and mentor Doctor William Skuller, and I had lost my purpose for being in a graduate program. I was summarily dismissed from the School of Art and Art History.

I drifted, untethered, among the lower recesses of the economic landscape. Ditch digger, laborer, bull-gang worker, house-painter's helper, security guard, night watchman, cleaner in a puppy mill, garbage man, courier for an armored car service, retail sales, and most recently clerk in a book store.

Who knew that one's employability would be determined by one's knowledge, skills, and abilities at a keyboard? I certainly didn't. Suffice it to say, I had none of those things: knowledge, skill, or ability with a keyboard. In spite of my education, incomplete as it was, I was relegated to the lower bastions simply because I never learned to type, or use a computer. You will also no doubt notice that none of those occupations listed above are particularly good for the lower back. We age. Life goes on. Shout out to Thomas Hobbes for his piquant observation on life in the state of nature ("solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," *Leviathan*, 1651). And so, it goes. And that brings us up to recent events.

## Chapter Two

One of the better jobs on that list, and one of the most recent, was clerk in a book store. My duties included receiving book shipments and entering them by title into our inventory. Hunky-dory, right? Easy, plain, and simple, right? No. Not if you are an inveterate bibliophile and feel the compulsory need to examine each and every book coming across the work bench. I got spoken to, on more than one occasion, for that particular character flaw.

“Hi, Boss,” I said.

“Steiner, you’re not supposed to read them; you’re supposed to receive them,” he said.

“Right, Boss,” I said.

No matter, other duties included stocking shelves and helping customers. The stocking shelves bit wasn’t so bad, that is until my latent OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) kicked in and then it became a total disaster. It was my penchant to stock the shelves from left to right, tall to small, it simply made visual sense to me to arrange the books on a shelf in that order. However, that method seldom corresponds to the first letter of the author’s last name. Little details will trip you up every time.

As far as customers go, I would rather be at home, talking with my cat, than trying to make a suggestion to someone who is demonstrably clueless about getting a gift for someone else whom I do not know. The phrase: “Well that’s nice, but don’t you have something cheaper?” comes to mind. But don’t get the wrong idea, once in a while I really do get an opportunity to make a suggestion that works and the relief, even gratitude, in the customer’s eyes can be palpable. In that respect, I really do enjoy helping people. A friend of mine once put it this way, he called it the Ten-Eighty-Ten rule, “Ten percent of your

customers will love you regardless of how bad you fuck up. Eighty percent of your customers will put up with you. They just want to make their purchase and get out the door. And ten percent of the customers will hate you regardless of how well you may do your job and want nothing less than to extinguish your last living breath on this earth.” In retrospect, I think he summed it up pretty well.

My boss is a great guy. He is willing to forgive and forget, until it costs him money. It was rumored he had inherited the retail gene from his parents, one of whom would frequent the store every so often. One time we had a spate of shop lifting involving impulse purchase items on the counter near the cash register. Just little trinkety type stuff like book marks, and penny candy mints, and happy face lapel pins, and that type of thing. After one particular book mark was noticed to have been missing the boss’ mom made the comment, “Well, that’s eighteen cents we’ll never see again.”

The majority of our books for sale come from the big Five Publishers but Boss will buy a fair number of used books in good shape at reasonable prices. I happen to believe that he is very fair in the values he allows for trade-ins or outright purchases from customers. He will, on occasion, buy collections of books from estate sales. It doesn’t happen often, but it happens often enough to remain interesting. Once in a great while we get to see something genuinely neat. One time we had a first edition unblemished print copy of Ambrose Bierce’s *Devils Dictionary* come through the shop. Another time we had a collection of letters attributed to Lon Chaney, Junior, come through. The documents side of the business is something in which I have zero interest and less knowledge. The boss handles that stuff and typically it goes straight to an online auction site. Just as well.

Except for one day not too long ago. A customer came in with a collection of documents she had inherited from her grandfather. The why and the wherefore had yet to be revealed to me, but let it be stated: it proved to be a Pandora's box. And I sincerely and fervently wish Boss had never opened it. But he did.

Well, too late now.

## Chapter Three

So, one day a lady came into the shop. She appeared to be upset. She talked to the boss for a while, handed him a package wrapped in brown paper and left. Evidently, the story was, the customer had inherited a collection of documents from her grandfather. The grandfather had been a GI during the War and was in France in 1944 and 1945. Apparently, he spent a fair amount of time in and around Normandy. He came home with a variety of documents in his possession ostensibly regarding something of great value in the area of Bayeux. The grandfather got sick and passed away. And the grand-daughter got stuck with a bunch of medical bills. Hoping the documents might have some collector value, she asked Boss for help. She left the documents with him and took her leave. They were the last tangible link she had with her grandfather with whom she was very close. And now she had to give them up to pay for medical treatments that had proved to be ineffective.

Boss opened the package and examined several of the documents. Then, gathering them together and putting them back in the wrapper, he asked no one in particular, and everyone in general, "Can anyone here read German?"

Nope, no answer. Not a peep. Boss came into my workspace at the back of the store and said, "Hey Steiner, is your last name German?"

I nodded my head and said, "No, it's Steiner. But, yeah, it's German descent."

"Very funny. Can you read this?" he asked as he pulled one of the documents out of the package and handed it to me.

The paper appeared to be old, like about eighty years old, give or take. It was a standard letter size document with the Hoheitszeichen of the National Socialist German Workers'

Party at the top of the page. It featured the stylized image of an eagle with its wings spread laterally and with its head looking over its left shoulder. Its talons gripped a circular wreath in which was centered the Hakenkreuz, or hooked cross. The text appeared to be a standard letter format of three paragraphs. In German. Followed by an ornately incomprehensible scrawl I took to be a signature with lots of swirls and serifs. If swash and buckling could be transmuted by the nib of a fountain pen, that is what this was. Then, followed by a line in printed text beneath it which I took to be a title.

I raised my head from the work bench and said, “No, Boss. I can’t read this,” as I handed the document back to him. “But I know someone who can.”





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