

Lomea

© *Lee Stoddart 2019*

Wading, waist-deep, through icy waves, I curse the fisherman. He'd ferried me from Sandwich to Lomea, but now, as night fell, he was leaving me stranded.

"God's bones, you'll regret this. I am Abbot Wido, here on the Archbishop of Canterbury's command!" I yell into the sleet-flecked wind.

The cowardly churl pauses in his rowing to shout back, "Ha. I don't care overmuch for your disgraced archbishop. And, coin or no, I won't set foot on yon corrupted isle at night. So, better you be an angry monk than me a dead fisherman. I'll return after first light. If you're here, I'll take you back. If not..."

Corrupted isle? Even from his exile in France, Archbishop Anselm had caught the smell of heresy and secretly ordered me, his protégé, to investigate.

Struggling out of the surf and across the sand, my tunic clings to me. I shiver with cold and pull the cloak tighter, hood closed against the thickening snow-storm. Trudging towards the village, it looks long-abandoned.

God's name, what was that?

Barely discernible, a large creature lopes between the decaying buildings, before disappearing into the growing blizzard.

A wolf or a bear? Probably looking for scraps of food, attracted by my scent. I must find shelter and set a fire to drive it off and dry myself out.

Before me stands a building, much larger and less dilapidated than the surrounding hovels. Straddling shore and sand, a jetty juts out from its rear, into the harbour.

Mayhap it is a meeting hall or even a church?

On further reflection, I think it unlikely to be a church. The Abbey archives hinted that Archbishop Lanfranc, Anselm's predecessor, had sent a priest to establish one, but it

was never built. The cleric returned, a madman, raving he'd encountered Satan. Though Lanfranc swore everyone involved to secrecy, rumours persist to this day.

Behind me, I hear shuffling, grunting noises. Has the beast circled me? My gorge rises as I recall the priest's tale. Perhaps it's no bear, and I'm hunted by Lucifer himself? Fear grips my heart - I am on the brink of panic. I must hide.

Hastily, I approach the massive doors. They are slick with algae, but visible beneath are reliefs: strange half-fish, half-man devils. With no time to dally, I force the door and squeeze through, pushing it closed behind me as best I can.

Inside by the door, set in stands, are two torches. Seizing one, I tremble to light it with my flint and steel; then quickly light the second from the first. Acrid smoke mixes with the smell of decomposing punk-wood that pervades the hall.

The dim light reveals a dais at the other end of the building, an altar upon it. Maybe it is a church after all, a sanctuary from the infernal?

Moving warily forward, the flickering flames cast eerie shadows and illuminate profane designs on the walls. Trident-wielding men, their lower halves fish, attack dolphins. Fish-headed men with spears herd people into the waves.

Yet, I am strangely drawn to other images. Naked women and men, sensuously caress many-limbed sea creatures. Visions of Hell, surely?

Catching myself in sinful musings, guilt overwhelms me. "Get thee behind me Satan," I intone.

The altar is carved with yet more horrors, kith and kin to those in the friezes, worshipping some unseen deity. The stone, stained reddish-brown and scored with grooves like a butcher's slab, is testimony to its foul purpose.

Beyond the dais, a fresco depicts the object of their veneration: a naked man and woman, kneel to face each other; so that from the congregation, it appears the altar forms a bridge between them. They would be fully two rods high, if they were standing and look back out across the blasphemous church through dead fish-eyes set in piscine heads. Their webbed hands beckon me forward, beyond the altar to a portal, which can only lead out to the jetty.

Above the wicked mural, writ large in Latin script:

‘... will rise again’

The first word has been obliterated by deep knife-wounds scored in the plaster. Perhaps it is the name of the devil being invoked, destroyed by Lanfranc’s cleric before madness took him? But, why Latin?

The brief studies I had undertaken before setting forth had revealed the ancient Romans used Lomea as a haven for storm-harried ships. They called it Infera Insula or Low Island.

Is this a shrine to some heathen Roman god?

Behind me, there is a crash as the doors burst open, sending a howling wind through the hall, blowing out the torches.

Lumbering towards me with a clammy slapping sound, silhouetted against the shattered doors, comes an enormous beast. It is no wolf or bear. Grey-green of hue, it drags itself using stubby, flipper-like arms, while a serpent’s tail propels it forward in sporadic lurches.

Oh God, ‘tis Satan, come to take me to Hell. Shaking, I let out a terrified cry and make the sign of the cross, “Lord, protect me.”

The thing rises on its fishy hind, looking me in the eye, its face horrifyingly familiar. Voice oozing, it speaks, “Why, Abbot Wido, are you not pleased to see me? And after I

brought you here because you served me so loyally, in my land-bound existence. Now, it is time for you to serve me once more, in my new aquatic life.”

Repulsed, my tongue is frozen as the monster lurches forward. I step backwards, desperate to avoid the embrace of the thing which was once Anselm; until, sobbing, my retreat is blocked by the altar. “Please, no...”

Strong fish-scaled arms grab my shoulders from behind, pulling me down onto the slab. Distracted by the abomination in front of me, I had not seen a brace of shambling sea-demons enter from the jetty.

God, save me. Defiantly, I struggle and shout out the Lord’s Prayer, “Pater noster, qui es in caelis...”

Anselm gives a gurgling laugh, “Pray as hard as you like - your false-Father won’t help you. You’ll belong to me, once more.”

“I’ll not be your thrall.” With wild effort, born of desperation, I push up violently, futilely trying to break the grip of my assailants, over-and-over, screaming my lungs out.

Eventually, exhausted, I lay defeated on the altar. The sound of rushing water fills my ears. The sea must have surged in the storm, and flooded the island. Pinned down by the fish-god’s acolytes, waves wash over me as the water-level rises in the sacrilegious minster. Brine fills my mouth and nose making me cough and splutter. I fight for every breath, but my lungs are filling.

Anselm stands over me, muttering incomprehensibly.

“Shush, Wido. Soon, your gills will begin working and it will be over.”

Now I understand my fate.

The Romans had it wrong. It was not *Infera Insula* but *Infernum Insula*: Hell Island.