

## RICHARD HENDERSON

The afternoon was warm; it was the last lesson in the day. The History teacher's voice droned on and on. Young Richard Henderson was finding it difficult to pay attention. The teacher, Mr Hunt, had been talking about the Battle of Hastings; he had been saying that after the initial fighting, there was a lull around two in the afternoon. "Harold knew", he had said in his usual monotone, "that he could win this battle if he just held on until darkness. William could not stay in the area all night and would have to retreat. Harold knew that retreat meant defeat for William ...."

"Supposing", thought Richard, "Harold's troops *had* held on till the evening and William's troops had been defeated. What if we'd had no Norman kings ...."

As he was musing, he gradually became aware that Mr Hunt did not seem to be speaking English. At least, bits sounded something like English but, no, it was not English. As he looked around the class, Richard recognized some of his fellow pupils well enough, and others looked more or less familiar, but he was not sure if they were all really the same; however, there were several others he simply did not recognize at all. He thought he must be dreaming, and pinched himself two or three times – but nothing changed.

When Mr Hunt asked Penelope Wilson a question (at least he thought it was Penelope Wilson) and she replied in the same strange language, Richard began to worry. Was *he* going mad? What would he do if he was asked something? He would not understand the question. And would any reply of his be understood? Fortunately, he was not asked; and when the class was dismissed, he thought his best plan was to leave as quickly as he could without, if possible, speaking to anyone, and get home where, he hoped, things would get straightened out.

Richard left quickly, and when someone did call out, he mumbled something fairly indistinct and hurried on. Fortunately, he lived only ten minutes from the school. But as he walked quickly along, he noticed that the houses and shops he passed gave the same impression as when he looked around at his classmates: some were familiar, some were more or less familiar, and some were quite different. What particularly alarmed him was the writing he saw on the shops and advertisement hoardings: it was not English.

When he turned into Rowan Close he was relieved to see that his own house still looked the same. There was his mother in the front garden. "Hi, Mum!" he called out. He noticed she looked a bit surprised. She spoke to hm

and he was alarmed he did not understand her. He tried to reply but it was clear she did not understand him either.

He quickly went into the house and switched on the television in the living room. It seem to be tuned into a foreign channel; but as he tried the different channels, he found they were all foreign – at least foreign to him. It dawned on him that what he was hearing was the language Mr Hunt had been speaking, his mother had been speaking and he had seen written on his way home. What was happening? Surely he was not mad. But it was incredible that everyone else should suddenly go mad. And what about the different houses he had seem? And what had happened to his classmates? What was happening? This was lasting far too long to be a dream.

When his father came in a hour or so later, he heard his mother talking to him in very worried, whispered tones. He could not understand what his father said, except that every so often there were odd word here and there he seemed to recognize. He had noticed that with Mr Hunt, with his mother and with what he had heard on the television. His father came into the living room and sounded very stern; but Richard did not understand him. He tried to reply, but his father got angry. It was all too much – frightened and frustrated, Richard just broke down in tears, convinced he must be going mad.

His mother came in and did her best to comfort him. He calmed down. He could see his parents were very worried. They were talking hurriedly together; phone calls were being made. But he was left to watch television. When the evening meal was ready, his parents called to him. They now spoke slowly to him, and rather louder than usual as he had noticed they spoke to French and Spanish people when they were on holiday. "Richard, kum te dhet bord!" Could 'kum' actually mean "come" and was he called "Richard". Did she mean "table" when she said 'bord'?

Richard kept quiet as they were eating. This was unlike him. But he listened as his parents talked. Did his dad actually call his chair a 'stuhl', or was that a coincidence? He was sure his Mum referred to the meat they were eating, which was obviously pork, as "swineflesh". Something stirred in mind; something about Ivanhoe, he thought; but he could not quite remember.

As he lay in bed that evening, he kept turning the events of the last few hours over in his mind. "Swineflesh ~ pork?" He was sure there was a clue there. Then he remembered: in the first chapter of Ivanhoe, Wamba and Gurth were talking together: "And swine is good Saxon," said the Jester; "but how call you the sow when she is flayed, and drawn, and quartered, and hung up by the heels, like a traitor?" Pork," answered the swineherd. "I am very glad every fool knows that too," said Wamba, "and pork, I think, is good Norman–

French.”

He knew that ‘table’ was the French for ‘table’, and he had read somewhere that ‘chair’ was old French and had replaced the Saxon peasant’s ‘stool’. Things had started to go wrong in the history lesson. He remembered he had been thinking what would have happened if Harold had defeated William. Was he now living in an England which had had no Norman invasion? If no Normans had settled here, there would have been no Norman kings, no Norman families. Did that explain why some of his fellow pupils looked the same or vaguely similar and some were quite different. An English with no Norman French would be different too, wouldn’t it? No, this was not possible: the Normans had invaded England and won in 1066; everybody knew that! Yet, something strange was happening. Gradually, however, he drifted off to sleep.

When he woke next morning, he hoped things would be back to normal, but somehow felt they would not be. He was right. He soon found he was in this strange new world when his Mum came in to see if he was all right. He was made to understand that he would not be going to school that day. He wondered what would happen.

He had his breakfast and went into the living room. It was not long before there was a knock at the door. His mother brought a man into the room and said slowly and loudly to Richard: “Rihard, hier is dhe léch te see dhee.” “Almost intelligible,” thought Richard, “but what on earth is a ‘léch’?” It quickly became apparent that it was a doctor. He spent sometime examining Richard, getting him to look at various charts and so on, besides the usual things doctors do. Richard wondered what the doctor would make of him. After about half an hour the doctor seem to decide he had finished and went into the kitchen with Richard’s mother and closed the door. Richard could hear quiet conversation, but could not catch any of the words. The doctor soon left.

There was not much to do that day. His mother made a few telephone calls but he did not know what they were about, though he guessed some were to do with him. He was left alone and had plenty of time to think. He tried watching television; he wanted to see if he could start to make sense out of the language. He had always been a good mimic and when he had been on holidays in France and Spain, he had picked up quite a bit of the languages. His own parents pathetic attempts used to embarrass him.

After a time he got bored just watching the television, though he was beginning to pick up odd phrases of his new parents’ language. He sat back, thinking about things he had seen on television in that former life of his before

yesterday afternoon. He remembered a program he had seen; it must have been four years ago; he eleven at the time. It was a Horizon program on BBC2 about parallel universes. He remembered someone saying that there may be an infinite number of parallel universes. "Some of them may even contain you, in a slightly different form," the narrator had said, "Astonishingly, scientists believe that these parallel universes exist less than one millimetre away from us."

He remembered that the program had gone on to explain that it was something to do with superstrings, hyperspace and dark matter; he had not understood that part; but he remembered something about our universe being just one bubble among an infinite number of membranous bubbles which rippled as they wobbled along. It had sounded weird to him, but he remembered this bit about the 'membranous bubbles rippling and wobbling' as it had amused him at the time.

He could think of no other explanation for his present predicament than that somehow or other he had swapped places with an *alter ego* of his in a parallel universe in which Harold had defeated William. He was just thankful that he and **this** *alter ego* apparently looked much the same and that his new parents looked much the same as his former parents. But before he could think further on these matters, his father came home.

There was conversation going on in the kitchen, but he could not pick up much. At the meal that evening, he understood – at least he thought he understood – that he would be going off tomorrow to stay with 'Tante Edhel', which he assumed was his 'Aunt Ethel'. He was a bit puzzled as it sounded as though she lived in 'Thorp'; but that was not the name of the village on the south coast where she lived – at least in that other universe it was not.

It was later during his stay with his aunt that he learnt that 'thorp' in fact simply meant "village"; he learnt also that the doctor had thought he had suffered some sort of breakdown or mental trauma that had affected his memory and had recommended a month's rest away from the town. The idea was as there were only one and a half weeks of term-time remaining, he should go to his aunt's immediately, miss the rest of term and then, all being well, return after the Easter break.

That evening he packed ready to go away. He was amused to find some of his clothes looked very familiar but others were quite strange to him. The next day his mother drove him down to his aunt's on the south coast. His aunt did not look entirely the same as his aunt Ethel in that other life. However, the cottage where she lived seemed familiar enough. His mother stayed a while, but left in the afternoon.

Although there seemed to be many familiar things in this new world, it was certain there would also be differences. For one thing the kings and queens of England would be quite different. He determined to use his stay with his aunt to find out as much as possible about this new life. So most mornings saw him in the local library, pouring over reference books, histories and so forth. Besides finding out about this Norman-less England, it also helped him learn the language, which he discovered was called 'English'.

He found it difficult to understand all that he was reading, especially at first. He found maps and diagrams more helpful. From what he could understand the name "England" was applied to the whole island. It seemed that the Saxon kings had united all the old Saxon kingdoms, including that of Scotland, into a united kingdom very early on. There had been no English involvement in France in the Middle Ages, but there had been close connexions with Scandinavia and some English kings had for a time claimed sovereignty of Denmark. He also discovered that the capital of England had been established at York, which had grown to a far greater size than in that old world of his, while London was simply the main town in Middlesex.

The map of Europe was vaguely familiar, but some of borders in central and eastern Europe were somewhat different. His biggest surprise was when he looked at America. He found there was no USA! He supposed there was no George III to annoy the colonists; at least they had remained English. There were many other differences, he noticed, in the Americas as well as Africa.

He read of wars and revolutions, civil strife and the advancement of technology. Once again, some things seemed vaguely familiar, but there were very many differences from the old world he had know. Clearly, it would take him some time to get all this straightened out in his mind. He was, however, relieve to find that technology had advanced to much the same stage as in his old world.

He did not spend all his time in the library; the afternoons were spent mostly by the sea. He listened as much as possible to people talking, so as to pick up the language as quickly as he could. When the school holidays began, he soon made friends with some of the local teenagers, and thus came to speak the language reasonably well.

In the early days with his aunt he had tried to see if he could get back to his former world by musing on what might have happened if the Normans had won; but it did not work. Also he came to realize that even if it had worked, there was no guarantee that he would go back to the post-Norman world he had known. There might be hundreds or thousands of different post-Norman

universes. He could finish up in a far worse position than he was in now. Indeed, he realized he had been very lucky in finding himself in a non-Norman England that, though different from the England he had known, was not uncomfortably different. He decided that all things considered, the best thing was to get on with his new life and make the most of it. One thing he was certain about: he must learn more about superstrings, hyperspace and dark matter. Could he be the only person who had slipped from one universe to another? He thought of news items he had read or heard about people found wondering with memory loss and wondered if any of them had been such people.

His parents joined them towards the end of the holiday, and he returned to his home town in time for the summer term. Rihard was a bright boy and soon made up for the lost week and half of school. He certainly never daydreamed in class again and he did well in the Summer exams, excelling in mathematics and physics. Rihard clearly had a bright future ahead of him in his new world.

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