

FIONA BANNER

THE WOODEN BOATS SET SAIL, EACH IS LOADED WITH KNIGHTS, ARCHERS, HORSES. NIGHT DESCENDS. WILLIAM IS IN THE MIDDLE STANDING LIKE CHRIST, MOUTH OPEN, PERHAPS SINGING. THEY LAND. HORSES JUMP ASHORE, BEASTS FOR THE FIRST TIME. SOME HAVE TO BE TUGGED, JADED AND WRONG-FOOTED, FROM THE ROCKY SEAS. THE INVADING ARMY MAKES ITS WAY TO HASTINGS. THE GUYS ON HORSEBACK TOWER OVER THE GUYS ON FOOT. ONE WIELDS AN AXE ABOVE HIS HEAD, HIS ODDLY CONTORTED BODY SEIZED IN A MOMENT AS HE LETS IT FALL DOWN ONTO A LAMB'S NECK. BLOOD IN THE VIRGIN FUR. WILLIAM PREPARES FOR BATTLE. A BOY BRINGS HIS MOUNT, THE HORSE'S MOUTH OPEN, RARING TO GO, EXCITED TO BE THE CHOSEN ONE. A STIRRUP DANGLES DOWN IN FRONT OF THE HORSE'S BALLS AND ERECT PENIS. THE HORSE IS BLUE-GREEN EXCEPT FOR ONE LEG, WHICH IS LIGHT BROWN. ALL IS TAUT. ALL IS EXPECTATION. ALL IS WAITING. WILLIAM'S RALLYING SPEECH EXHORTS THE KNIGHTS TO BE RUTHLESS; THEIR WAN RESOLVE SHOWS BEHIND THEIR MASKS, HELMETED FACES BLANK. THE CAVALRY MOVES OFF. A MESSENGER THUNDERS TOWARDS WILLIAM BEARING NEWS OF KING HAROLD'S TROOPS. THERE ARE THOUSANDS OF THEM. HAROLD IS AMBLING ON A BLACK HORSE WITH A GOLD BRAID IN ITS MANE. THE GROUND BECOMES ROCKY, STEEP AND UNEVEN. HE GIVES THE ORDER. THE DENSE MASS OF BODIES MOVE, ONE SCALY ANIMAL SLOWLY MARCHING FORWARD. THE BATTLE BEGINS. BIG STORMS OF ARROWS KNIFING THROUGH THE AIR. AXES WIELD THROUGH SPACE LIKE MOBILE GUILLOTINES, GOUGING INTO HORSES' FLESH, JACKKNIFING HEADS AND SKIN, SLICING THROUGH A STUD LIKE IT'S A WATERMELON. BLOOD YOLKS OUT OF ANOTHER HORSE AND IT FALLS LIKE A CAR CRASH. THE AMBER MORNING ON THE HILLS BEHIND. THE HORSES COME, ARSES VAST, HOOVES LIKE GAUNTLETS, EYES BLACK WITH RAGE. THE ENGLISH ARE TERRIFIED. AT THE BATTLE FACE, THE GROUND IS NO LONGER VISIBLE. WILLIAM'S MOUTH'S WIDE AS HE PRESSES THE TROOPS FORWARD. THE HORSES ARE THE SHOCK OF THE FRENCH, BUT THE ENGLISH HAVE THE CLEAVERS. THE STUPENDOUS STORM OF ARROWS DOESN'T LET UP. THE SWORDS BELT IT BACK. NO ONE KNOWS WHO IS WINNING. ALL LOOK AS ONE. IN HAND-COMBAT THE ENGLISH ARE FEROCIOUS AS HELL. WILLIAM'S MEN TURN AND RUN. NOT EVERYBODY IS PREPARED TO DIE. THE BATTLE IS AT ITS PEAK. A MESS OF HOOVES. A MESS OF MUD AND SHIT. A PLAN EMERGES. WILLIAM HAS HIS MEN RETREAT AND THE ENGLISH FOOLISHLY FOLLOW. HIS ARCHERS FIRE OVER THE SHIELD WALL. THE ACTION SLOWS, BUT HORSES AND SWORD-WIELDING MEN, MAD WITH BATTLE, EXPLODE FROM THE PUTRID CROWD. THE LIGHT IS BEGINNING TO WANE. WILLIAM ORDERS A FINAL ASSAULT. BACK FROM THE RIDGE HAROLD INSTINCTIVELY LOOKS UP AT THE STORM OF ARROWS WHIPPING THE AIR. ONE BREAKS FREE AND STRIKES HIM IN THE EYE, AN ABSURD DEADLY ROD STICKING OUT FROM HIS FACE. HE FALLS TO THE GROUND. THE LAST OF THE FIGHTING IS STILL GOING ON. THE MOON IS BEHIND THE CLOUDS, AND THE BATTLEFIELD IS NOW IN ALMOST TOTAL DARKNESS.