

# Wednesday 8th September 1066

## The Town and Port of Dives Sur Mer, Normandy

Duke Guillaume of Normandy sat disconsolately astride his horse, one hand loosely holding the reins and resting on the saddle before him, the other holding his cloak fast. The wind tore through the sky like a demon, whipping flags and the canvas of the tents with a ferocity to make them crack loudly into the air. Men walked with an effort or were pushed by an invisible hand depending on the direction they were taking. The sky was as dark as his mood and the threat of yet more rain only added to the misery of everyone in the camp.

“The Devil finds work for idle hands,” Odo, the Bishop of Bayeux, observed dryly. He looked around the city of temporary accommodation and noted how battered and beaten everything appeared. “We have spent too long in this place.”

The duke glanced north. Windblown sand stung his face as he squinted into the hard blown gale. Odo was right; the weather had held them trapped here for far too long. The men had grown restless with little else to do other than training and foraging for fuel. It was inevitable that their minds, fired by the prospect of plunder abroad, should seek diversion here at home when there was not much else to do other than sit around and wait.

He looked down at the two soldiers who awaited his attention. Their faces were dirty and fearful, as they had every right to be. It was unfortunate that they were Normans too. However, he could not show leniency in this matter and expect the army to retain its discipline regardless of who committed the crime. Around them were gathered a large portion of that army, enough to communicate to the others what they saw today and what it meant for anyone else who did not respect the duke’s commands.

“What is the charge?” Guillaume asked loudly in his most authoritative tone.

“Theft and rape Your Grace!” A young officer responded promptly, his hand on the pommel of his sword, his back straight and true. The soldier’s hair was cut short on top and shaved both at the back and on the sides in the current popular fashion. He

looked like the epitome of young Norman martial stock. Against him the two accused hardly compared with their wild eyes and cowering postures.

“And how do they plead?” Guillaume pressed.

“Not guilty, Your Grace.” The officer spoke promptly again. No one was surprised by his answer, however.

“The complainant.”

A middle-aged townsman was hustled forward at the duke’s command. He looked almost as terrified as the prisoners, wringing his velvet hat in his hands, but unlike them his manner had also about it a degree of determination, he was here for a reason and would not balk now no matter what authority he appeared before.

“Speak your charge,” The duke instructed him.

“Sir, I left my daughter to mind my shop whilst I did business in the market. When I returned I found that she had been vilely assaulted and robbed of many things of value from our house. Neighbours told me of a disturbance and when they came to see what it was they were pushed aside by two soldiers who were then seen running back towards the camp. I followed and made my complaint to the officer, this one here, who found through his questioning that these two were seen entering the camp in haste and carrying goods that did not belong to them.” He rushed his words as if he still pursued the offenders but he also spoke with conviction. At the end of his speech the man glowered at the two soldiers and then turned a more respectful face to the duke.

“Officer?” The duke looked to the young man.

“It occurred as the townsman says, Your Grace. Upon hearing the complaint I questioned the sentries and these two were named as entering the camp hastily. Upon apprehension we found goods for which they could not account and not in keeping with a soldier’s equipage.” He answered smartly and again with confidence.

“The woman?”

“Too distressed sir,” the father insisted with a touch of anger. “She is but a child, stained by these beasts!”

The Duke glanced at the accused again. They looked like time served men, a sad loss that would be to an army about to invade a foreign land. Nevertheless, he had issued a general order to govern the behaviour of the troops whilst they camped within the vicinity of Dives Sur Mer; the local population were not the enemy.

“Admit your guilt and seek clemency,” Bishop Odo suggested to them.

“My Lord, we did nothing.” They looked at their commander with fearful eyes and then around at the soldiers and officers gathered for the impromptu court. They believed that there was little hope for leniency and ignored the words of the clergyman. Odo also knew the military worth of the two men and had hoped to offer both them and the duke an alternative to summary execution by the intervention of some Christian compassion, but they had just ignorantly spurned his help.

“You broke the curfew and went into the town?” The young officer demanded, fully understanding the path down which the court must now be seen to go.

“Yes sir,” one replied meekly.

“You ran back to the camp with this man in pursuit?”

“To avoid wrongful accusation sir.”

“You were seen carrying goods for which you cannot account.”

“We bought them,” they insisted together.

“You maintain your innocence?” The duke demanded having grown weary with the proceedings already.

“Yes sir.” They both spoke and raised their hands to him in supplication.

“Have them whipped and then hung,” Guillaume ordered.

The two soldiers started to beg piteously but were dragged away by their former comrades under the command of the young officer.

“My Lord, I praise your justice, but...” The townsman looked at him meaningfully.

Guillaume considered the unspoken request. He did not like the idea of parting with his money as a result of someone else’s actions but on this one occasion at least he valued the support of the locals more.

“Your goods will be returned to you and due recompense for the harm done to your good name made.” Guillaume conceded. His scribe made the appropriate note and the townsman was ushered away with little ceremony. “Come brothers.”

Leading the way the duke recommenced what he had intended to be his regular tour of the camp. Behind him rode his two half brothers, Bishop Odo and Robert, Count of Mortain. In their wake came their servants and a mounted guard. In truth the duke had seen enough of the camp already, its condition had not changed any since yesterday but it seemed that the same could not be said for the men. As if in defiance to the violent weather he led the way down to the beach and into the teeth of the storm. For a moment he simply sat and watched the broiling waves pummel the shore,

his mind lost in other thoughts. Eventually Robert moved his horse alongside the duke's and that prompted a response from his brother.

"The wind is my enemy," Guillaume muttered.

"It does not compare with the weather that Harold Godwinson enjoys in England," the Count of Mortain commented dryly. "It is as if the season mocks us. Here we have winds too strong to sail against; there they have a glorious late summer. Harold disbands his army so that the men can fetch in the harvest, a bumper crop they say."

"So contrary to our expedition are these winds that the English have retired their fleet. In truth nothing stands between us and their southern shore but this storm," Odo of Bayeux added as he came alongside Guillaume on the left.

"The wind is Harold's ally but all I need is one day of good weather," Guillaume asserted. He turned to look again at the fleet hugging the bay for protection. A spit of headland extended north along the river, like a protective arm, shielding the vessels from the worst of the weather that whipped up the waves in the dark sea beyond. The tents of the men were lashed by those same storm winds as they raced over the sands, raking the river and then tearing along the southern bank. There were thousands of soldiers here and they should be a marvellous sight to see. A terrible sight for the enemy to behold, but they were miserable. The wind was beating them down as were the months of inactivity. Desertion was not yet a problem but as winter loomed and they sat here exposed to the storms that would get colder as they raged through the channel between Normandy and England, the men would leave.

Mayhap the barons would leave sooner?

"We must do something and soon," Robert urged his older brother. "This idleness will defeat the men's resolve more certainly than any power that Harold could bring to bear. The crimes of those two this morning will be just the beginning. The barons too grow jaded with our plans. They long to return to the comfort of their estates and the warmth of their hearths. The promises that we've made concerning the wealth of the Saxon kingdom will grow empty and respect for your authority will be lost. All our enemies will laugh into their cups."

"And what, my brother, of Brittany?" Odo again reminded the duke. "If we do not act before the year is out Duke Conan will trumpet our failure throughout France. He will use it to stir up King Philip against us. Our enemies will grow strong on every border of Normandy."

“What would you have me do brothers? Everything is bent on this one enterprise and it has stalled due to the wind. I have the banner of God from the hand of the pope himself Odo but I lack His divine approval all the same. Is it not His breath that blows over these sands and keeps my fleet bottled in the river mouth? Can you not intercede in your capacity as a priest on our behalf Odo and can you not keep the adventurers in check with more tales of gold and land in Saxon England Robert?”

“There is no point in blaming the persistent weather. We Normans know what the winter seasons bring along this coast. The storm will blow out eventually,” Robert replied. “More irksome is knowing that Harold basks in the sunshine of a late summer, seemingly untouched by these petulant storms. No doubt if they do breath upon his kingdom it is along the cliffs of England's rugged coastline, doing little harm to his army.”

“His army! What army? A force of peasants and no more,” Odo insisted. “The whole of the Saxon world is peasant in character. Even these eorls as you call them, their nobility, are but farmers with mud on their heels.”

“They all live on the land but in many ways that is their strength, not their weakness. They defend that land with a bloody tenacity. Not even the Vikings have conquered them. Oh, they placed their Norse kings upon the English throne but that was more a result of Saxon in-fighting rather than by the keenness of Danish axes. For over five hundred years the Saxons have withstood the Norsemen, our ancestors I remind you. That alone makes them a dangerous enemy. These eorls and theigns that you dismiss so lightly are born to war. Their victories are measured by the gold that encircles their heads and pins their cloaks about their shoulders. Where is your circlet of gold Odo?” Guillaume retorted.

“One might think that you honoured your enemy,” Robert noted.

“I do honour my enemy,” Guillaume admitted, “because he is a worthy enemy.”

“Harold Godwinson is a usurper,” Odo insisted.

“Harold Godwinson has taken Edward's crown by expectation, not by right. His power as the greatest eorl of the kingdom gave him that expectation and, mayhap, the marriage of his sister to King Edward gave him a form of right, enough that the Witan recognised his claim over all others,” Guillaume deliberated on the recent events in England.

“You were cousin to King Edward, a bond of blood existed between you, one recognised by King Edward himself when he acknowledged your claim upon his

crown. Godwinson vowed to support that claim, over holy relics he made his oath; you cannot now admire his transgression when it is at your own expense,” Odo insisted.

Guillaume only smiled.

“I announced to the world my revulsion at Harold Godwinson's breaking of a holy oath, an act that resulted in him being excommunicated by the pope, but I am minded that I would not have acted any differently if our roles were reversed.”

“And Harold insists that the presence of the holy relics was not made known to him until after the oath was taken, and that under some duress as he was, as it might be said, a captive of our brother's court at the time.” Robert added. The use of the relics had been Odo's idea of course, but Guillaume had been just as keen to keep Harold ignorant as to their presence. It occurred to Robert that mayhap now both of his brothers might wonder if their connivance was the cause of their bad luck with the weather.

“I do applaud his bravado but I regret the measures to which it now puts us to. An invasion of England is no small matter, it puts us in a vulnerable situation if we should fail, it strains my authority over the nobility of Normandy, and it empties our coffers,” the duke said.

“Necessity demands it of us. Our Normandy is a duchy hemmed in by enemies and no matter how many battles we win eventually the weight of the King of France's arms will bear you down and Normandy will become but another vassal; a coronet to the French crown,” Robert replied with a little heat.

“King Henry is dead and his son is still but a boy. This Philip may have taken the throne from his regent mother but the boy king poses no immediate threat,” Odo insisted. “Under his father, King Henry, the French kingdom actually grew smaller and weaker.”

“King Philip is surrounded by men looking to make their names and fortunes by extending the provinces of the French kingdom. They will do this by annexing lands to the crown that are either new or previously belonged to it. Normandy would make a choice addition,” Robert countered with an argument that was already known to the three of them.

“I do not fear war with the French; did we not defeat them nine years ago at Varaville? Was that but a postponement of the inevitable? The French are jealous of our Norman independence and will always look for ways to curtail it.” Guillaume

looked at both his half-brothers in turn, enjoying their company and conversation despite the cold and inhospitable location. The same could not be said for the men who sat silently awaiting their lords. “In such circumstances what the Duke of Normandy needs is to become a king himself and organize the power of a kingdom against our enemies. No, the barons are wrong in their popular supposition that you espouse Odo; the Saxons are not weak, disorganised peasants, incapable of withstanding a Norman charge of heavy cavalry. They are stout of limb and strong of heart. They will make fine soldiers when properly trained in the modern method of warfare; our method of warfare.”

The mood between the three brothers brightened considerably as they talked even as the clouds on the horizon grew darker and more threatening. They spoke then with more feeling about their plans. And of course there was the gold. England had more gold than anyone else it seemed. The gold alone, if he was to admit it, drew Guillaume's ambition more than anything else to this enterprise. That gold of England would make him powerful enough to resist the boy king of France and all his other enemies without fear, and with Saxon stock in his infantry his army would indeed be formidable; but first he had to get the crown.

How do you pull a crown from the head of a Saxon warrior-king?

“Have you made a decision?” The Count of Mortain asked. Guillaume looked at him.

“Yes.” He replied simply.

“If we do not do something soon then winter will be upon us and all of this talk and planning may prove to be for nothing,” Robert prompted him. “Too much money has been spent already. We must act, be it to England or to home.”

Odo glanced from one to the other, knowing that the moment had come and eager to discover the resolution.

“We will move,” Guillaume determined confidently.

“Where?” Robert demanded with a note of exasperation.

“Closer to England, give the order, the army is to board ship and the fleet is to head north-east to St Valéry-sur-Somme. That will give them something to occupy the men with.” He looked a little pleased with his decision.

Robert looked out to sea where the waves continued to broil under the dark, oppressive sky.

“It's some 160 miles to St Valéry-sur-Somme from here,” he pointed out, “the fleet will be at risk every day it spends away from the shore!”

“True, but not from the Saxons,” Guillaume answered easily.

Robert knew him well enough to realise that the duke's mind was made up. There would be no going back and in truth he welcomed this decision.

“Then we move one step closer,” Odo pointed out, not exactly dismayed either.

“When the fleet embarks know this, that there will be no turning back. From St Valéry-sur-Somme one clear day is all we'll need to land our power on English soil and that is all I pray for.”