

## The River Ouse

The Viking fleet moved slowly up the River Ouse as the light faded in the west. Each ship carried a burning torch at the stern so that those behind could mark their place on the water. The several hundred vessels, warships and supply ships, were stretched out in a long line so that in the growing gloom it looked as if a giant snake of fire was making its way along the surface of the water. Seen in the dark it would not be too far a stretch of the imagination for one to believe that Midgard's Worm, the World Serpent, had released its tail from its mouth, rose from the ocean, and now looked to mark the end of the world as the well known prophecy said it would.

In truth it was only the ships of men, however. The dragon's head that led the way was carved from wood, as was the tail. The oars dipped and rose, dipped and rose, pushing the fleet further and further into the territory of the enemy, but they moved slowly because it was a tidal river marked by several pronounced bends that had to be worked with some skill. With the setting sun safe navigation became more and more difficult.

Tostig Godwinson stood in the stern of his ship and absently watched the slow progress of the fleet. Hardrada's Long Serpent was out near the front of course, closely following the smaller snekkes but staying to the mid-channel due to her large size. Some of the tighter bends had posed a problem to her but the skill of the Vikings had seen the ship rowed past any possible obstacles without mishap.

The weather was mild and the wind had dropped as it usually did on warm September evenings. The sails were furled and they depended entirely upon the strength of the oarsmen now. They operated in shifts so that no one became overtired; it was not forgotten that there would be a city to take on the morrow. There was a rhythm to their movement that was almost hypnotic, especially when accompanied by the gentle slap of the water against the ship's hull. Birds darted through the growing gloom chasing insects, one last meal before the night closed in.

Occasionally they saw lights off in the distance, indications of Saxon settlements. The people would be retiring indoors now, settling down to an evening meal accompanied with beer or fruit wine. Mayhap they would tell stories or sing songs to one another as they rested from the chores of the day. Larger villages might even enjoy a visit from a travelling scop bringing news of the outside world, songs no one had heard before and poems that everyone knew well. Of course the news of the Viking fleet might also be on the lips of the people already.

Did they know how close the Norsemen were right now?

Would they shutter their homes and cower in the dark praying for the terror to pass them by?

Would their sleep be haunted by the images of Vikings descending upon them in a bloodlust with fire and steel?

Tostig neither knew nor cared. His mind dwelled on York and what its capture would mean. If Harold was still in the south, which he did not doubt, then the fall of York would demand a response. He would have to push north but that would leave the southern coast undefended and open to Guillaume, almost tempting him to try a landing.

How long would it take Harold and his army to reach York?

A week would be a quick march. He would probably raise the local fyrd and have them watch for the Normans in his absence. That would take time to organise so it would have to be left in the hands of a trusted lieutenant, no doubt one of their younger brothers. Ten days then. If York fell tomorrow, a thing only to be dreamed of if the eorls of the north were not present to defend the walls, then Harold could be expected at the gates by the end of the month; that was plenty of time for them to consolidate their success in Northumbria. Hardrada would declare himself King and Tostig would become an eorl again, although he looked to take the family lands of Wessex when all was done and settled. They would raise fresh forces from amongst the peoples of the north, those of Viking descent who might be expected to sympathise with a king of their own blood and those Saxons looking to improve their lot at the expense of brother Harold's supporters. If they could raise enough extra men then it was possible that they could trap Harold between two armies, one commanded by Hardrada, one by himself. If only all of Tostig's enemies could witness the vengeance that he would wreck upon his brother. If only he was not alone on this adventure.

A sudden pang of loneliness interrupted his thoughts.

Judith.

He thought about his wife and their family residing at the court of Count Baldwin of Flanders; her half-brother. It was not such a hard life for them since fleeing Northumbria and enduring exile. The Count was a gracious man. He had even given Tostig ships and men to help mount his return to England. It was a pity that Judith's status as aunt to Matilda of Flanders, the wife of Guillaume of Normandy, had not resulted in any advantage when Tostig had visited the duke's court only a few months previously. All of Tostig's skills in diplomacy, learnt and practiced at the court of King Edward, and also that of King Malcolm of Scotland, had come to nothing before the duke. It mattered not; he had a king for an ally now.

Judith was a pious woman, however, and she had been very taken with King Edward; religion was an obsession that they shared. Her devotion rendered her submissive before authority, though. Judith had argued that they should accept the decree of exile from such a

virtuous monarch as Edward and instead of making war on Harold that he, Tostig, should make the most of the honour and position as the governor of Saint-Omer that her half-brother had conferred upon him.

From an earl to a governor!

How could he, a son of the fabled Earl Godwin, be expected to accept such a fall from grace without lifting a sword in the defence of his own honour?

Taking Judith to wife had been a good move, or so it seemed, but she lacked the political insight of either her niece Matilda, who supported Guillaume fully, or even his own sister Edith who had been such an able queen to King Edward. Judith had given him two young children, although he had more by other women. The two legitimate children gave another impetus to Tostig's desire for revenge; he did not want them growing up dependent upon the favour of a foreign count for their success in this world. Tostig would bequeath them a worthy legacy by taking back that which was his own in England or die trying.

Whichever wyrd prescribed.

Stretching languidly Tostig sat down on the timbers of the deck. Like the crew he would sleep here tonight, rocked into slumber by the movement of the ship, at least those who were not required at the oars, and then tomorrow; tomorrow he would seize his destiny with both hands. If only brother Harold were there to see it!

King Harald Hardrada sat comfortably on a thick ox hide spread over the timbers of his ship. He was joined by his son Prince Olaf and the Jarls of Orkney; Paul and Erlend Thorfinnsson. Their youth reminded him of his own early vigour in the days when he was free to travel the world without any constraint other than which direction the wind blew.

The jarls had seen a little more than twenty summers each. Their father, Thorfinn Sigurdsson was known as Thorfinn the Mighty. That name was rightly earned too. He had ruled over Orkney for five and seventy years and had added nine Scottish earldoms to his control. In the west this made the young jarls men of note, a position reflected by their ability to bring a sizeable number of men and ships to add to the expedition. Of course the jarls had their own ambitions too; Hardrada had two eligible daughters to his first wife, Elsif of Kiev. Maria and Ingegerd would make fine alliances for the Jarls of Orkney but Hardrada had other plans for them, not that it hurt his most pressing concern to allow the young jarls to think otherwise, however.

At sixteen Prince Olaf Kyrre was very much the junior but he was already tall for his age and well proportioned. The fact that many at court commented on the prince's good looks, a fresh face framed by blond hair, secretly pleased Hardrada. He looked even fairer sat next to the jarls who had inherited their father's black hair and, unfortunately, a degree of his infamous harsh looks. He was not so satisfied with the boy's taciturn disposition, however. A

leader of men who was reluctant to speak was not going to achieve great things in this life. The Jarls of Orkney were much more effusive, expressing more of the character that Hardrada liked to see in a Norseman. He hoped that by mixing the young men, along with some ale, he might influence the prince's disposition to be a little more like that which he considered proper for a future king.

"Your ships do you proud," Hardrada complimented the jarls, "the men who crew them are deserving of their Viking heritage."

"Thank you, My Lord," Paul replied with a smile, "amongst our islands a good ship is a necessity."

"Along with a good crew," Erlend added. "Our father would not have reached so far without the men who put the steel in his word."

"Thorfinn Sigurdsson was indeed a man worthy of remembrance." Hardrada nodded. "He fought long and hard with Rognvald Brusason for control of the islands and even though my nephew, Magnus Olafsson, once King of Norway and on whose throne I now sit, swore vengeance on your father I saw things differently. Thorfinn Sigurdsson was a man after my own heart and Orkney has ever been a friend at my court. He will be written into the sagas and so will you be when we have defeated the Saxons' power. For every warrior glory awaits upon the battlefield and I will bring you there, to the place where your forefathers can judge your merit before the spears of our enemy. They will sing songs in the mead halls across all the lands where I am known after what we will have done here in England."

"That will include a great many halls indeed," Paul flattered the king.

"What say you Olaf?" The King prompted his quiet son.

"That I will watch and learn as I follow where you lead," he replied with a little smile, hidden by the cup that he raised immediately to his lips. The drink was beginning to take its effect upon him and he felt himself relaxing more with the company. "Tell us how you mean to take Jorvik father?"

"How to take a city, eh?" Hardrada put on a show of contemplation, staring past their heads and stroking his beard. "There are many ways to take a city; it all depends upon the defences and the quality of the men manning the walls."

"You expect them to stay behind their walls then?" Erlend asked with genuine interest.

"Lord Tostig Godwinson says as much and he is the man to know such things. He was the Eorl of Northumbria almost a year ago, although the people liked his rule but little and cast him from his high station by a popular revolt. The Saxons know how to pursue a blood feud and they will not take kindly to his return. That matters little, however in regard to the subject that you have raised. How to take a walled city? Anyone of good sense would do what the Saxons have always done when we trod across their land; bar the gates and hurl javelins from the walls."

“You speak as if this is to our advantage,” Olaf commented and the king smiled.

“It can well be. The truth is that people hidden behind walls are trapped. They hide there because they are afraid of the danger without. They are afraid of us. The trick is to make that fear grow and let it eat them from within. A terror imagined is often greater than the terror realised, and so we stoke their fear with the flames of our ferocity in war. I offer them with one hand survival through surrender, and the loss of whatever treasure they may own, and with the other death by fire and spear, and again the loss of whatever treasure they may own. If they spurn the first offer then they will know that I will give them no quarter.”

“Must it be so ruthless?” Olaf asked. Hardrada looked at him as if he neither understood the question nor the speaker.

“Ruthless? It is war boy.”

“Nevertheless, they are people; people that you hope to rule over,” Olaf persisted.

“A people pressed too hard can prove most belligerent, as Tostig Godwinson found out,” Paul agreed.

“And what if the people of Jorvik prove more resilient to the fear you would have us put in their hearts; they are Saxons after all and known for their stubbornness?” Erlend added.

“As I said, there are more ways to take a city than one.” The king adjusted himself to a more comfortable position and Olaf knew instinctively that he was going to regale them with an often told tale of one his exploits. They waited patiently while the Viking chief ruminated on which story to tell them. “When I was in the service of the Emperor of Byzantium I was commanded to take a city with walls so great that no siege engine could hope to bring them down. The people within the city were supremely confident that they could resist us, and with good reason, so they feared us not at all when once their gates were shut. My mind recalled the tale of the Greeks before the great city of Troy, a tale often told to us when we were in those parts, and I schemed to have myself taken inside the city gates.”

“You would not fool them with a great wooden horse, My Lord,” Paul declared, mayhap knowing that indulging the king in retelling this tale guaranteed his good humour.

“Indeed, but with a dead body I stood a chance. The people were devout followers of Jesus Christ so I had myself laid out in an open coffin, dressed for death and burial in my finest armour. My good friend Eystein Orre went before the walls of the city with me in the coffin and appealed to the city-folk to allow me to be buried in hallowed Christian ground; then he would lead the soldiers away and return in peace to Byzantium.”

“The people agreed?” Olaf prompted the story along from familiarity but with a good humour.

“That they did. They flung open their gates and the priests came out to conduct my funeral procession to the graveyard within their great walls. I lay with my sword upon my breast and my guard of honour carried only their spears, but it was enough. Before we had gone too far

from the gates Eystein stopped and began a speech of thanks to the gentle townsfolk. When they became impatient with him I jumped from the coffin, sword in hand, and sealed their doom. My guard secured the gates and the rest of our men poured into the city and we took whatever we wanted. When strength of arms fails always turn to craft."

Hardrada took a great draught from his cup as if telling the famous story had given him an equally great thirst. The young men followed his example and a servant refilled their cups without waiting to be asked.

"But you let the townspeople live?" Olaf said.

"Yes. It is not good policy to kill all of those on whom you depend for robbing and pillaging, or, if in your own country, to tax and to rule," he paused a moment in thought. "In truth Prince Olaf has a point about being ruthless. I want to capture Jorvik, not raise it to the ground. Against their warriors I will be merciless because then they will fear me and know that I am stronger than they are. Against the townsfolk I will be less harsh."

"Less harsh than Tostig Godwinson?" Erlend inquired. The king shrugged.

"I know not to what extent he pressed those who owed him loyalty but I do know that a king must strike a balance. It is good that his subjects fear him to a degree, but it is also good that they know he is strong enough in mind and body to defend them against their enemies on the borders. The king has an obligation too, and tipping the balance too far one way will, as Tostig Godwinson found out even as an eorl, see the fall of any crown or circlet of gold."