

The Village of Riccall

King Harald Hardrada kept a relaxed court in Riccall, even though for safety's sake he had spent the night on board his fabulous warship Long Serpent, the largest ship in the Viking fleet, surrounded by his companions; his chosen bodyguards. He sat now on rugs thrown over the deck of the ship, getting warm in the early morning sunlight and about to commence his breakfast. Even in a reclined position and without his armour Harald Hardrada impressed with his size. He was a giant of a man but not just in height, his body was perfectly proportioned, his arms and legs muscled, his chest broad. There beat within that chest a powerful heart that was both infamous for violent tempers and known for a love of loyalty.

The air was heavy with the scent of river water and already insects had begun to fill the day with their buzzing and flitting to and fro. Birds left their roosts in the trees along the river and went in search of their first meal of the day. A heron flapped majestically overhead, following the course of the river to some fishing spot it knew of. Life continued as it always had done along the River Ouse, unmindful of the apocalyptic clash of arms that had shaken the world of men only yesterday.

The King of Norway did not breakfast alone; he had invited his son Prince Olaf, along with the Jarls of Orkney whose company he genuinely seemed to enjoy. Reliable Eystein Orre sat to his left, his grey hair betraying his years. Tostig Godwinson sat on the King's right with an expression that suggested that he found the boards of his own ship far more comfortable than those of the Viking longship. They ate leisurely, choosing from a selection of bread, fruit, cheese and dried meat set out before them, in the centre of the small ring that they formed. Hardrada held a beaker of weak beer in one massive hand. He was very much at ease and obviously pleased with the way that the campaign had gone so far. Tostig Godwinson was less so.

"Why do we wait?" The Saxon demanded testily.

"The northern army is put to the sword. Jorvik has surrendered. What more would you have me do?" Hardrada asked.

"York has fallen but Northumbria has not," Tostig pointed out. "Edwin and Morcar may yet raise a levy against us, they will head either north to Durham or southwest to Mercia to call more men to their banners; and we know not where Harold and his army are."

Prince Olaf glanced from the Saxon nobleman to his father. In truth this question had been on his mind also. Having so resolutely defeated the Saxons at Fulford Gate yesterday, as his father had said that he would, Olaf was somewhat surprised at the King's apparent lethargy. The Prince had imagined that sections of the army would be sent out to energetically consolidate their hold on the region; takeover other settlements of note within the Vale of York for instance, but nothing of the sort had happened yet. A few riders had gone out to spread the word of the Vikings' great victory, but that was about all.

"And there lies the problem," Hardrada answered his ally. "I know not where my enemies are. It would be easy to send out parties of men to scourge the land, pillage and burn as we were once want to do, but I didn't come here for Danegeld; I came for a crown!"

"The advantage is now ours," Tostig pressed. "There is none to oppose us in the north. As King Malcolm is a friend and ally of mine Scotland will protect your back, let us march south and catch brother Harold on the open road."

"In truth your words have merit," Hardrada conceded, "however, I was not expecting a pitched battle yesterday, such was not what you told me the men of Jorvik would do. My warriors need to rest and recover from their injuries; those that can at least. We have dead to honour too. I have raised my banner and called for the men of the north to join me, their Viking blood will steer them true. When they come they will swell our numbers beyond Harold Godwinson's reckoning."

If they come!

Tostig pulled at his lip absently. He did not like this situation. Hardrada came with a reputation for action, a man of the moment who had a bag of clever tricks and stratagems with which to fool the enemy; any enemy. His adventures were legendary but now he seemed much less inclined to action. Tostig wondered if the long and fruitless war with Denmark, only recently concluded with a less than honourable peace treaty, had been one war too many for this famous Viking?

"And what of Edwin and Morcar?" Tostig asked.

"You have a quarrel with them, we all know that, but it is not mine," Hardrada told him. "Besides, they have no power to bring against us; we destroyed it outside the walls of Jorvik. I do not fear them. Even if they do raise another levy it will not be of the same quality as that which they put before us at Fulford Gate yesterday. It will go

the same way as before only, if they do dare to take the field against me once more, I will not let them escape again."

"It coincides with our purpose, however, that we must deal with them," Eystein Orre observed. He glanced at his king. "But we must place them low in our list of dangers. They gambled and they lost heavily, the people will be mindful of that even if the lords, in their youthful arrogance, are not."

"I do not understand why we wait for victuals and hostages from Jorvik?" Erlend Thorfinnsson, one of the young Jarls of Orkney, said. "Should we not have stayed in the city?"

"I would have counselled so," Tostig answered quickly.

"I know that you would, My Lord Tostig," Hardrada admitted with a cool tone. "I have no love for the cities, especially the cities of my enemies, except for the treasure that they might hold. Jorvik surrendered to us but it hasn't been conquered by us. Not yet. Besides, the army is better controlled here, alongside the ships of the fleet, and away from the distractions that cities hold." The King directed his gaze towards the three young men as if he were now a teacher and they his students. "If I treat Jorvik with the hand of a man who would be king instead of a reaver and a pillager I hope the men of the north will then look to me and see one worthy of their kingship. This is not a raid from days gone by. I will not have the country that I look to rule put to the sword and the torch like the weak lands of the east."

"Many were the times we did just that," Eystein Orre smiled in remembrance. "Then you had not the cares of a kingship but the freedoms of a war chief. Then we knew some rare sport."

"The men deserve some sport," Prince Olaf broke his customary silence.

"And they'll get it," Hardrada answered him, "when the task is done and the crown is mine. Until then we are on campaign and we will keep our swords at hand but in their scabbards and our eyes open for the enemy."

Those were fine words but they did not put Tostig's mind at rest. He thought back to the Royal Companion Jarl Siward; that man had enjoyed an unrivalled relationship with King Hardrada. Obviously they had been friends for many years, fought many battles together, and travelled the far world like only Vikings do. Siward had been a great war-captain, beloved by the men for his undoubted courage and his unfailing generosity, but Siward had been getting old like King Hardrada and now he was dead, killed in single combat by a Saxon huscarl they said.

Tostig calculated Hardrada to be a least 50 years old and Siward had been barely his junior. Eystein Orre was their contemporary. The sun of exotic climes had burnt the Norwegian's skin, wrinkled his face and bleached his hair. Not all the threads in his beard were light due to the sun however, some were silvered by time. He had reached a good age for a man of his persuasion and like King Sweyn of Denmark, recently his enemy, now might be a time in his life for sitting back in his Nordic palace and enjoying the advantages of kingship as he entered the late autumn of his life.

Had age tamed the fierce heart of the War Wolf?

Certainly he had not looked tame upon the battlefield yesterday, but then again he had let both Edwin and Morcar escape him. That was reckless. Although they may talk of a great victory Tostig was also aware that the Saxons had inflicted some hurt upon the Viking host; their position was by no means certain. And now here they sat, the victors, in the relative comfort of Riccall instead of pursuing their quarry. They loitered like courtiers to be waited upon by the cowed men of York.

“We need a plan,” Tostig counselled, breaking the uneasy silence that had settled upon them.

“What kind of plan?” Eystein Orre enquired somewhat disinterested.

“What shall we do next? We must prepare for the coming of my brother’s power. He will not sit by and do nothing; that much I know.”

“Even with the Norman bastard watching from the further shore?” Asked Prince Olaf.

“Our raids down the coast were as nothing compared to the fall of York. He will respond. He must respond.”

“And I expect him to Lord Tostig, verily I expect your brother, the usurper of my crown, to cross swords with us, but when he does it will be at a place of my choosing,” Hardrada insisted.

“Here at Riccall?” Tostig barely managed to keep the sneer out of his voice.

“Our victory yesterday deludes you like a heady wine,” Hardrada commented.

“Our victory was total.”

“Eventually, yes, but it was a close run thing too. The eorls almost got it right; they chose a good spot to defend. Had they had enough men of quality I think they may very well have succeeded,” Eystein Orre appraised yesterday’s battle succinctly. Hardrada nodded in agreement.

“They attacked like you said they would father,” Prince Olaf reminded him.

“Yes, and there was that. A more experienced chieftain might have held the line along the beck, made us do the attacking and paid the price in our own blood. I gambled that they would not, could not, resist the urge to attack. They did not disappoint eh?” Hardrada laughed. His companions joined him in his merriment, especially the younger men.

“We would have beaten them anyway,” Tostig insisted, feeling no compunction to treat the matter lightly.

He recalled how he had been placed on the right flank of the Viking army with his band of adventurers and mercenaries. Their lines had been thin, the ground soft and quickly stomped into a mire that clung to their shoes and made moving difficult. Hardrada had loaded the centre with the best of his own mercenaries and they had proved to be the pivotal point upon which everything had turned. As Tostig’s men had been forced back by Morcar’s advancing Northumbrians the centre had held and Hardrada had pushed back and then driven away Edwin of Mercia’s forces on the Viking left. It was a clever move but it had cost Tostig in many good men lost, by far the greatest number slain on the Viking side. He would not forget that he had been offered up as bait even if the trap had proven successful and led to the destruction of the Saxon army.

“Perhaps we would have beaten them but my plan was to drive the Saxons behind their walls and lay siege to York. I would have given us ten days to break that siege before Saxons from the south came to their aid. Ten hard days of lobbing spears and arrows over their high Roman walls, of lacing their waking hours with terror and a final plea for them to open their gates or suffer my terrible wrath. That was my intent but as things turned out we accomplished the task in one day, just one short day, and now we have nine more in which to rest and prepare for the coming of the usurper king.” Hardrada looked satisfied with his explanation.

“Then there really is little more for us to do?” Asked Paul Thorfinnsson, he did not look too disappointed at the prospect.

Unlike Tostig Godwinson Paul Thorfinnsson was not frustrated with the way the campaign had so far been conducted. A battle won, a city taken, and a Saxon army destroyed. Now there was time for leisure, which meant that he and his brother Erlend would have more opportunities to sway the King of Norway into considering them as future son-in-laws.

“There was much of arms and armour left upon the field at Fulford Gate,” Tostig pointed out.

“I have thought of that,” Hardrada replied. “Men will go out today with carts taken from the village and recover all that they can. The garrison will keep the people of York away until we are done. Afterwards the Saxons can burn the bodies of their fallen if they have a mind to.”

“Those weapons and that armour will be used by our own men when your brother comes calling, Lord Tostig,” Eystein Orre told him. “The huscarl armour is of good quality, as were their weapons, they will make our army even more formidable.”

“You see, I have thought of everything,” Hardrada claimed grandly.

Tostig nodded but still he found a gnawing doubt in the back of his mind.

Mayhap because I have been bent on revenge since October last year I still hunger so? Mayhap it is because I have allowed myself to believe that an alliance with this king would produce what I want more quickly?

Guillaume of Normandy had proved less excitable, more cautious of taking on a Saxon ally, even one who was brother to the King of England. Hardrada had seemed the embodiment of action in contrast and when Tostig had been presented to him at his court in Norway the King had seemed much more interested in Tostig’s plans.

Perhaps I am just expecting too much too soon?

“So be it, My Lord, let us enjoy this late summer sun whilst we can,” Tostig conceded, knowing that there was not much point in pursuing this topic any further once the king had made up his mind on it.