

The Vale of York

The September sky was magnificent, a deep summer blue painted sparingly with soft white clouds. The weather spoke of another glorious day and the landscape around them was very much alive with crops waiting to be harvested, grassland sweet and good for the grazing of oxen and sheep, forests rich in all the shades of green, and all the animals and birds that inhabited this plentiful countryside continued to survive another day and paid the lives of men no mind whatsoever. The spirits of those men, however, were not in harmony with those of the birds and beasts that inhabited the land; they found no inspiration in the natural world around them to which they were invisibly tied.

Coenred rode his horse at the head of his small troop of battle weary warriors. He still wore his battle harness, almost to spite the warmth that the day would aspire to as much as the enemy that had defeated them. He had with him most of the one hundred huscarls who had fought under his direct command at Fulford Gate. Some had elected to stay with the eorls, their pay-masters, but others knew that the fight was as yet unfinished. Many of the fyrdmen had kin living in and around York and the thought of retiring to Ripon, and then perhaps Durham, to sit and see what the enemy might do to their loved ones did not rest easy with them.

The huscarls went on horseback, as did many of their retainers, and they were followed by nearly three hundred fyrdmen on foot. These were local warriors raised according to the law by landowners, the theigns, to form a defensive force that traditionally fought locally too. They were mostly lower theigns and freemen, most of the higher ranking men had died under Viking blades at Fulford Gate as they stood bravely in the front row. This remnant of the fyrd could have dispersed and looked to return to their homes after the loss of the battle, and no doubt many other survivors, scattered from what had once been the main body of the army, had done just that, but this core of men had not yet surrendered and looked to follow the huscarls who still wore armour and carried banners with grim intent. Their spirits may not have been high but their resolve still remained.

Coenred had met up with them just north of York after he had left Mildryth in her little house in York, barely before dawn had broken. His intent to discover what the immediate plans of the Vikings in the city were had been satisfied and his escape affected. He had been of service to others too, such as Eadgyd, the woman of brave

Hereric, his friend and companion who had stood with five hundred huscarls and held back the blood stained host of the enemy so that Coenred could spirit Eorl Morcar to safety and freedom. He had broken her heart with his words no matter how glorious he had made the death of her man seem. There had been other such missions, not always intent on bringing bad news because some warriors, such as Sigbert, had survived and their families were glad to hear of it. Finally he had performed one last act for himself in ensuring that Mildryth was as safe as she possibly could be whilst remaining within the captured city.

Three days ago he had been a man convinced that a wife and a family were unnecessary burdens for such as he; a professional warrior. He was honour bound to grant Mildryth the protection that she had asked of him, but he had not expected to lose his heart to her as well. Perhaps an even greater surprise was learning the true depth of his strength when the time came to leave her there in York. He had buried the softer feelings that she had inspired in him, feelings that went much deeper than anything he had ever felt for a woman before, and become something new even to himself. He was more than just a warrior now, he was a force for vengeance, steeled by long years of training in the martial arts of spear and sword and axe, he was fired by a passion that went beyond the normal desire to be seen as worthy by one's lord. He thought no longer of the absent eorls, only of the destruction of his enemies because he knew now that only then could he soften and become a man again; the kind of man, at least, that Mildryth considered worthy of her love.

With the captain of the huscarls at their head the small war-band had, after leaving the village of Ovretun, forded the River Ouse and headed first west to maintain some distance between themselves and the enemy before then turning south, keeping the river to their left as they headed for Tadcaster. They had drifted like ghosts past the west wall of York in the early morning light, almost within reach of the hated Vikings but careful to go unnoticed all the same. Just south of York they picked up the old Roman road that led southwest towards Chester and the Welsh Borders. The road crossed the River Wharf at Tadcaster so at least they would have a bridge to keep their feet from getting wet again, but it would be a day's travel before they reached their safe haven.

The men were mostly quiet; they had little to talk about but much on their minds. They had been able to gather just enough supplies for their short journey so no one

was overburdened. Carrying weapons and armour was considered the most important duty as these were by far the most valuable items that they possessed.

During the first few hours of their march they saw no one else, either on the road or in the fields of the few settlements that they passed, but then the day was early and the news of the defeat of the Army of the North at Fulford Gate would still be on the minds of many, along with the fear that it would instil. However, as they left York behind them they came upon small groups of men, mostly fyrdmen but also some villagers as well, possibly residents of either Fulford Gate or Fulford Water who had fled the battle. Tentatively at first, perhaps worried that the eorls had somehow reversed their fortune, won the day, and then sent out a party of warriors to punish the deserters, the dispirited men approached the war-band.

Coenred understood their fear, both of the eorls and of the Vikings. He held little sympathy for them in respect of their lords and masters. Saxon society had operated under the same system of duty owed by each class to the other for generations, it worked because the obligation was generally accepted by one and all. The enemy were a different matter however. Seeing what had befallen these people, their loss of life, home and property, made his purpose all the more clear to him, but he was loath to tarry. The groups they encountered always had wounded with them and they could not be expected to move fast. Coenred did not demand that any of those that they met join him although some volunteered to do so, perhaps finding some comfort or security in a larger party of warriors. He had little to spare so gave only to those with seriously wounded men to care for and it did not please him to leave any of them behind as they continued their march south.

“What will happen to them?” Edwin, his young retainer, asked.

He rode the packhorse just behind Coenred, as custom dictated, but close enough for them to talk easily with one another. His newly acquired shield hung from the saddle horn and he held a spear in his right hand, resting the butt on his stirrup. A simple conical steel and leather helmet, also newly acquired, sat on his head, stuffed now with cloth so as to make a tighter fit than it had yesterday. It no longer fell over his eyes when he moved his head.

Edwin glanced back over his shoulder at a forlorn group of fyrdmen and villagers who in their turn watched the war-band leave without a word or gesture, exhibiting an air of total resignation. Their eyes were sunken and their faces haunted. They looked

like the ghosts of the men that they had once been. This was what wyrd had decided for them.

“They will either return to their homes or follow us to Tadcaster,” Coenred answered simply.

“But what about the wounded?” Edwin pressed, revealing his true concern.

“We have nothing more to give them, without a healer they will probably die.”

Edwin stared at Coenred’s back and wondered how his master could be so cold and seemingly uncaring about the deaths of other men. He had not seen this side of the huscarl before but then their association as master and servant was not a particularly long one.

“We should do something!”

“We are doing something,” Coenred told him. He understood what was going through the younger man’s head. He was not immune to the sufferings of the wounded Saxons, as it might seem, but he had seen it many times before and on a much larger scale. From experience he knew that there was nothing that he could do for them; other than to seek revenge. “What little food we can spare we have given them. We have no healer ourselves; there is nothing more for us to do. When we meet up with the king’s army we will tell them of what has occurred and what force they will meet. We will then march under the king’s banner and we will pay back thrice-fold the injury that the Norse have inflicted upon our people. We are warriors, we can do nothing more.”

Edwin sat on his horse in contemplation, his body rocking to the gentle plodding motion as the beast walked down the Roman road. He thought back to the night when the raiders had attacked his family’s small-holding near Inderawuda. Edwin had gone out some moments earlier to relieve himself. He remembered distinctly how warm the night air had felt. Standing behind the tree and enjoying the stillness of the summer evening resulted in him being the only member of his family not to be caught inside the small dwelling. Men had come like shadows to steal but they had also set fire to the house even though there was no reason to do so. The thatch roof was dry, the summer had been so long, it burnt quickly. The raiders had run off with their oxen and hogs, leaving the family to die horribly, trapped within their own shelter. All Edwin had been able to do was to stand within the shadows of the tree and watch helplessly.

In the days that followed Edwin had sought help from others but no one had raised a hand to assist him. He knew not the names of his attackers or where they had come

from, and therefore could not make a complaint to the Hundred Court. The Tithingmen were not interested in pursuing raiders unknown from a location also unknown. He had been cast into the world an orphan without friends and without means. It occurred to him that at least those fyrdmen that they had left behind had each other, and that the wounded would not be abandoned to die alone. For several days he had been very much alone until the opportunity of replacing Eanfrid as Coenred's shield bearer had arisen.

"I wish to learn how to fight!" he stated emphatically.

Coenred turned in his saddle, somewhat surprised by this sudden announcement, and looked at the earnest face of his young retainer.

"Despite what you have seen?"

"Because of what I have seen. I want to be able to defend others. I want to be able to stand against my enemy. I don't want to be afraid."

Inevitably Edwin thought back to his fight with the butescarl called Wulfhere in York when that villain had tried to steal the Lady Mildryth away. Despite carrying the langseax at his side he had been practically helpless to carry out his duty and defend her. If it had not been for Branda's intervention with a sweeping brush then he may never have had the opportunity to rescue his master's lady. He wondered if he possessed the mettle necessary to deliver a telling blow on another person, even one as cowardly as the butescarl. He now wore Wulfhere's war-gear but in his heart he did not feel as if he had won it in true combat. He did not like the way this made him feel about himself and he wanted to be rid of it.

"Knowing how to fight won't remove your fear," Coenred told him, "but I understand what you mean. There has not been much time for me to begin your training, Edwin son of Octa, but once we are in Tadcaster I will become your teacher in the art of war."

"That will be good," Edwin told him.

"You might not think it later," Coenred smiled grimly. "You will find me hard and unforgiving in matters of the sword, but no more so than your enemy."

"I was thinking but a moment of Hereric," Aldfrid spoke out, breaking the silence that he and his brother warriors had ridden in. "He was a fine man."

"That he was," Aethelmaer agreed.

"I never knew him long but he always gave me a fair greeting and was ready to teach me in anything to do with war-work." Hengist joined the conversation.

Both he and Aldfrid were the youngest of Coenred's huscarls, although only a couple of years younger than Aethelmaer himself, and had often been the object of the older warriors' humour.

"You should all aspire to be like he was," Thrydwulf told them in his gruff voice, "he was well versed in battle, a true brother in the shield-wall. No matter how hot the fight became he had a cool head. He drank well, loved well, and played well. His death at the spears of the enemy weighs heavy with us but you can be sure that he accounted for many Norse lives before he breathed his last."

"Perhaps it's my lack of years but I struggle to see an end to this," Aldfrid declared.

"An end to what?" Aethelmaer asked.

"Despair!" Aldfrid glanced back at the last group of haunted men that were receding behind them. "The air is heavy with defeat, it seems to taint everything I see or taste or smell. So many men look to have broken spirits, to have given up already. So many have died. I see faces that I once knew now turning pale before me."

"It is always like this after a battle lost," Thrydwulf told him. "I have not known many such but this is like all the rest. Defeat is a heavy cloud under which we must labour, but it is not the end of all light."

"It is not even a day yet since we began the battle at Fulford Gate," Aethelmaer observed.

"We should have stood firm along the beck as Lord Coenred suggested," Hengist offered. "It was a mistake to surrender the advantage and move to the attack."

"The Vikings were still forming their lines and had many more swords to call upon than we, at the time when Eorl Morcar thought he saw the advantage offered it may have seemed too good a gift of wyrd to be ignored," said Aethelmaer.

"So often we are wise after the event," Thrydwulf added, "or seemingly so when we do not have all the considerations of the lord who gave the command in the heat of battle."

"If Lord Coenred had had his way mayhap we would even now be behind the walls of York and hurling our angons down upon the Norse." Hengist smiled at the thought.

"True enough, but the eorls craved glory and fighting old Hardrada seemingly offered it to them," Aethelmaer suggested.

“That night in mead-hall of High Theign Aethelwine now seems so distant to me,” Aldfrid admitted, “when the fires burnt bright, the food was good, and we drank the ale together at one table, one company; one brotherhood. I could not have imagined then that a man as mighty as Hereric would not survive the day. How the scop spoke fair words and won such praise from the crowd that seemed to fill the hall to bursting. We ate and drank well that night brothers!”

“Aye we did and you should hold fast to such remembrances young Aldfrid, for they are what make this life worth living,” Thrydwulf told him.

“Our lives seemed so vibrant then as if defeat at the hands of the War Wolf was not a thing to be considered. How wrong we were.” Aethelmaer himself now seemed gloomy.

“There was reason to consider our doom, Coenred foresaw it, but the eorls saw only glory, a chance to win a victory that would, in their own eyes at least, raise them to be the equals of the Godwins. We are but servants to the eoldermen at the end of the day; we do their bidding no matter how high our station might be in respect of the peasants. All this is in the past my friends, we have still tomorrow to look to and believe me, young Aldfrid, this despair that you see all around you will disappear like a mist before the rising of the sun. In Tadcaster we will reform and call fresh blades to our banner. The king will send his army north and we will stand with them before the spears of our enemies once more and it will be wiser heads than our two young eorls who will form the plan of battle. We will have our revenge on this Norwegian Viking King. Hereric will not be allowed to have died in vain.” Thrydwul finished with an emphatic note to his brief speech that was not lost on the spirits of the younger warriors he rode with.

In the late afternoon they happened upon another band of men that were entirely a different matter to those whom they had so far encountered. They came upon them when they were only a mile or two from Tadcaster itself. Edwin spurred his horse up besides Coenred’s and muttered quietly;

“Men in the trees ahead!”

Coenred scoured the tree-line before them, which was all deep shadows due to the angle of the sun. He only saw the danger when figures moved and he was grateful to Edwin that he had acted with such presence of mind so as not to excite the rest of the men unnecessarily.

“Stand!” Coenred ordered, reining his horse to a stop.

“What do you see?” Asked Sigbert allowing his horse to walk up alongside Coenred’s.

“Armed men ahead,” Coenred told him, “a fine place to lay a trap for the unwary too.”

“What do you want to do?”

Thrydwulf had walked his horse up to join his brother huscarls. Sigbert moved in his saddle. He was uncomfortable in the heat and a little sore from the ride that had now taken them several hours. Coenred turned his horse so that he could see the men behind him.

“There is plenty of room to draw up a shield-wall and they could not cover the ground so quickly so as to be able to meet us before we were ready,” Thrydwulf observed.

“It seems unlikely that they would be Vikings all this way south of York though,” Sigbert suggested, “especially if the words you heard were true and Hardrada is camped at Riccall still?”

“He’s at Riccall, I am sure of that,” Coenred answered him. “I too doubt that they are Norse but in these uncertain times we would be wise to know to whom they owe allegiance?”

“There are many Dane-folk in Northumbria; mayhap they look to join the War Wolf’s banner?” Thrydwulf suggested. Coenred nodded his agreement.

“Be aware, there are fighting men ahead but whether Saxon or Norse we know not,” he told his war-band. The warriors muttered and started to ready their weapons. “We’ll ride ahead and know them for what they are. Huscarls remain mounted for the moment, fyrdmen stand and wait prepared.”

He turned his horse back to face the unknown danger.

“You said we?” Sigbert pointed out.

“That I did. Thrydwulf keep command of the men. Edwin, stay here whilst we go and know these fighting men for what they are.” Coenred gave Sigbert a meaningful look and then spurred his horse into a trot.

“Why didn’t I stay in the column?” Sigbert asked himself as he encouraged his own horse on to catch up to his friend’s.

They had very little ground to cover before they came within throwing spear range of the strangers. As they slowed their horses to a walk several men warily stepped

from under the shadows of the trees. The moment that they came into the warm summer light, however, the tension evaporated for each party knew the other for what they were there and then.

“Well met huscarl,” shouted one of the strangers, dressed in good quality armour. “I am Theign Andhun, what be your name?”

“I am Coenred, huscarl to the Eorls of Mercia and Northumbria.”

“Coenred!” a voice boomed from within the tree shade.

There was a sudden commotion and a man separated himself from the shadowed press of the other Saxon warriors. As he came into the light a large bandage was revealed on the left side of his face. It covered his eye and was stained with blood.

“Aethelwine?” Coenred swung down from his horse and went to grip the forearm of the High-Theign of York. “I had heard that you might have survived but my heart is no less happy to see that it is true.”

“And I’m no less happy to see thee here also.” They greeted each other warmly and the High-Theign even went so far as to clap the huscarl on the back. “We had thought ourselves abandoned here, waiting for the king’s army. Where are the eorls?”

“At Ripon, perhaps heading for Durham. They will not come to Tadcaster; we are alone in this matter.”

Aethelwine’s face hardened visibly in response. Although he preferred the rule of Morcar over that of Tostig Godwinson, whom he had replaced, Aethelwine retained a disdain to the nobleman’s lack of years.

“I knew it,” he swore spiritedly. A general murmur of disquiet rose from the men gathered around him. “Still, you are here and with fighting men too.”

“All that I could bring.” Coenred indicated the war band with a wave of his hand. “Not as many as I would have liked but everyone here by their own will and at no one else’s command but mine. They have the spirit to fight and my trust in them to do so.”

“This is good,” Aethelwine told him. “We retired to Tadcaster after the battle and have sent out runners to fetch others there. There’s a goodly number assembled now, not enough to challenge old Hardrada mayhap, but you and your men will be a welcome sight. Their hearts will be lifted knowing that huscarls still look to draw their swords as well.”

“So what do you here away from the town?” Sigbert asked.

“We heard that a group of Vikings were heading this way and sought to meet them in the field,” Andhun answered. “There have been many such tales of raiding parties but we’ve not seen anything of them yet.”

“I do not think that you will. Hardrada has York under garrison and curfew but his men are kept on a short leash. Even Fulford Gate and Fulford Water have been spared the torch and the sword. Hardrada means to own them,” Sigbert explained.

“Is this true?” Aethelwine demanded.

“Aye, I was in York but last night. They occupy your mead hall, take what they want in way of food and drink but the Norse King has forbid them the right of pillage,” Coenred confirmed. “Even now the King of Norway resides at Riccall with his fleet and the greater part of his power; no doubt enjoying the best of our late English summer.”

“Then there’s no point in us waiting here for an enemy that will not show,” Andhun declared.

“True brother theign, let us to Tadcaster.” Aethelwine agreed to popular approval.

With spirits lifted the Saxons turned south and headed for their stronghold, the two parties merging into one and the spirits of all the men rising accordingly. No one was fooled into thinking that they had an army with which to challenge the mighty King of Norway, that was not their thought, what they did know, however, was that the Saxons remained upright before their ancient enemy and that together they formed the seed of what might grow into a genuine power that would one day soon take to the field of battle once more.