

The Castle of St. Valery sur Somme

Claude Brinon walked ahead with the large ring of keys in his hand. The sound of clinking metal kept time with his gait; it was almost melodic to the ear. He led the way towards an apartment situated in the east of the great tower. The flames of the torches still flickered as the constant wind found ways into the stone passages of the castle. The flickering annoyed Duke Guillaume of Normandy who followed the warden. It seemed that nature was intent upon reminding him everyday why he was still here, bottled up in St. Valery sur Somme, and not striding over the green lands of England. For all his power he was still subject to the insentient caprice of the elements.

They came to an unremarkable door crafted from thick wood and supported with iron fittings. Its' appearance was the same as every other door that they had passed within the castle. Claude Brinon stopped and began to search through his large number of keys.

“He was in good humour when last I spoke to him, My Lord,” Claude said as he worked to find the correct key.

“He had a comfortable journey then?” Guillaume asked as he waited patiently for the castle warden to open the door.

“By all accounts, My Lord,” he looked meaningfully at the Duke. “He may have got it into his head that he’s going home.”

“Has he?” The Duke looked surprised at this information.

“Well, he has certainly moved closer to England,” Claude observed.

He singled out a key and placed it in the lock. The bolt was drawn back with a solid clunk. Claude opened the door and stepped aside to let Duke Guillaume enter the room beyond.

The apartment was comfortably appointed with furniture and wall hangings. It was more spacious than a prison cell but then the occupant was confined here simply because of the accident of his birth that gave him a political value and not for any criminal act.

Wulfnoth Godwinson sat at a table apparently reading a bible. He did not stand as the Duke entered, which propriety would have normally demanded of him. He was twenty-six years old but had spent the past fifteen years as a hostage of the Duke of Normandy.

“You are well I trust?”

Guillaume ignored Wulfnoth’s intended display of bad manners as he walked into the room. He had gotten used to such exhibitions over the years. It did not trouble the Duke unless such poor grace was enacted in public before others.

“As always,” Wulfnoth replied. He looked away from the bible and turned his attention to Guillaume. He knew from experience that this would not be just a friendly visit. There was always a more complicated reason behind the Duke’s irregular whims to call upon him. “Why did you have me moved again?”

“My plans are coming to a head and it seemed wiser to me to have you closer at hand,” Guillaume replied in a matter of fact tone.

“And yet you are still in Normandy,” Wulfnoth observed.

“I would avoid conflict with your elder brother if I could; you know this.” Guillaume walked casually around the room, affecting an interest in the furnishings. “I hope that an offer of your freedom might induce him to see reason.”

“You would use me again to attain your own ends?” Wulfnoth’s tone indicated no surprise whatsoever.

“Two years ago your brother came to Normandy with the avowed intention of freeing you; he even brought an impressive ransom with which to affect that release. Unfortunately the wind, the same wind that delays my plans, blew his ship onto rocks and he was captured in his turn by Count Guy of Ponthieu. The ransom was lost,” Guillaume smiled ruefully. “Fortunately I was able to persuade Count Guy to release Harold to my care and we spent many days in good company together.”

Wulfnoth knew very well that Count Guy had had no option but to surrender his brother Harold the moment that the Duke commanded him to do so.

“You enjoy torturing me with this memory?” Wulfnoth demanded with a hint of anger.

“No.”

Guillaume stopped his absent wandering and looked directly at the young man. Wulfnoth was dressed like a Norman but he wore his hair down to almost his shoulders like a Saxon. He spoke French fluently now and had been educated like a Norman lord, becoming adept at reading and writing. His company was not unpleasant and despite the restrictions that his captivity necessarily placed upon him Wulfnoth’s character was that of a likeable young lord.

“I made a promise to your brother that when I ascended the English throne you would be returned to him, given a title and lands of your own; all I asked in return was that he, Eorl Harold, support my ascension and bring about the Witan to approve King Edward’s choice of heir.”

“At the expense of his own claim?”

Guillaume only shrugged in response.

“I underestimated his ambition; it is true. He chose to sacrifice you to that ambition.”

“I was taken prisoner against my will many years ago by a priest, Robert of Jumieges, who abused his position at the Court of King Edward to bring me to Normandy,” Wulfnoth insisted. “I have had no part in the trials and tribulations of the English court. You claim that Harold sacrifices me to his own ambition but you use me to further your own too.”

“It seems to be your fate to be treated thus. Your father, Eorl Godwin, surrendered you to King Edward as surety against his own behaviour. When he was exiled he seemed to have forgotten about you, or no longer cared for you, mayhap because you are only his sixth son? His invasion of England at the head of an army may have given Edward cause to have you executed, but he was denied that option due to the actions of Archbishop Robert. It might even seem that he saved your life?”

“A life spent as a captive!” Wulfnoth retorted angrily.

“Your father sacrificed you to his ambition and now your brother does the same. I do not,” Guillaume smiled at him. “I will set you free if Harold agrees to abdicate and acknowledge me as the rightful King of England. You must remain a captive here, however, if he chooses to go to war against me.”

“You do not have the right to take that which is not yours!” Wulfnoth insisted. “I am not yours to keep and the crown is not yours to own. Your sins will be held on account for you to answer for come your final day.”

“Mayhap. Politics is a more practical matter than theology, however. Fate has given me but two tools to use against your brother; you are one and my army is the other. I come to you now to say that I am moved to avoid any bloodshed. It better suits my purpose to ascend the throne in a peaceful manner than having to fight a series of battles against obstinate Saxons. You know that if it comes to that that I will win in the end don’t you?” He looked meaningfully at Wulfnoth. “You have seen my army and what we Normans are capable of with such power.”

“What is it that you want?” Wulfnoth asked in a more subdued tone.

“It is something simple. To avoid war and bloodshed I ask that you write to your brother Harold and ask him to consider your situation, my offer of your freedom, and the sparing of England from all the ravages of war by accepting, even at this late hour, my claim to the crown that he wrongfully wears?”

Wulfnoth lowered his eyes to the much read bible that lay before him. It seemed like a reasonable request was being made of him but he could see how untenable it might be to Harold.

Was the freedom of a brother worth surrendering a kingdom?

There were some who said that Harold had already sacrificed Tostig to his ambition to gain the crown, that having him deposed from Northumbria and exiled from England had left Harold’s path to the throne free of all obstacles. His time in captivity had not exposed Wulfnoth to the more violent activities of a Saxon nobleman; he had never known war personally. He had, however, heard at the Court of the Duke how the Normans had succeeded in places as far away as Malta, Italy and even the Holy Land. They were known to be ruthless, capable and fearsome warriors. In truth he knew little about his own people.

“I know not if my words will carry any weight with Harold,” he eventually told Guillaume.

“Neither do I, but I am willing to try. I will pay a fishing boat to dare the crossing with your letter if you will write it. They will hazard the temper of the sea to get your words to your brother. Mayhap that act alone might inspire him to see reason?” Guillaume spoke with feeling and Wulfnoth found that he wanted to believe him.

“You will reconcile yourself with Harold if he abdicates the crown?”

“In so far as I can. I will not seek to imprison him, or strip him of lands and titles, or in any way exact a vengeance against him if he swears loyalty to me; this I swear before you.” The Duke watched as the younger man’s internal conflict was reflected in his expressive face. “It is just a slight act that I ask of you yet mayhap it will save many lives, Norman and Saxon alike. You are a pious man Wulfnoth; would God not reward such an act?”

“I care not for myself,” Wulfnoth declared at last. “If by my written word I can save lives, as you say, then the thought of what is lost compared to what might be gained sways me. I will write to my brother.”

“And I will see the letter safely delivered,” Guillaume promised. He moved towards the door but turned as his hand fell on the handle. “Wulfnoth, you may yet prove to be the saviour of England.”

Claude Brinon closed and locked the door after the Duke. He followed him back down the passage that led to the heart of the castle. Robert, the Count of Mortain, awaited them at the head of the passage, standing patiently with his arms folded.

“Went it well, My Lord?” He asked as they approached him.

“I throw one more distraction before the usurper,” Guillaume answered. “If the boy’s words have any weight with his distant brother then maybe that will work to our advantage; if not then maybe we can turn that against him also. Either way I do not think that it will be a pointless exercise.”

“He is to remain here then, My Lord?” The castle warden inquired.

“For now. I would like to be able to release and honour him quickly if things go our way and Harold Godwinson yields; it might make the populace look more kindly upon us. Also, he might yet prove a valuable bargaining chip if needed. Keep him well Warden.”

“As you wish, My Lord.”