

The Town of Tadcaster

There would never be enough men, that was the truth that was known to one and all, and yet only two days ago Coenred had dared to think that there were indeed enough Saxon warriors to hold the walls of York against the largest Viking army ever to set foot in England. If only Edwin and Morcar had been able to reign in their all-consuming envy of the Godwins.

If only!

If only he had been able to exert the proper influence over the sons of Aelfgar. These musings were tainted by regret, however, and Coenred had no time for such an indulgence. He consciously forced himself to stand up straighter, shifting the tall fighting spear that he had been leaning on into his right hand. The day was warm again and his armour made him feel hot and uncomfortable but he would not seek any relief other than a mouthful of weak beer. He was minded that he was the leader of these men now and he must act the part.

Tadcaster was filled with the sound of men training in the arts of war. Coenred had brought the four hundred men who had stayed with him following the Battle of Fulford Gate, swelled by another fifty ceorls that had joined the war-band on its march south. Aethelwine and his brother theigns had another one hundred and fifty warriors with them, all that had escaped from Eorl Morcar's left flank before the Army of the North had been destroyed by the Vikings led by King Hardrada; the old War Wolf.

Although Aethelwine, as a Royal Theign, out ranked Coenred, he had given over his warriors to the huscarl to train and prepare for further battle; they all expected another encounter with their ancient enemy. Aethelwine was still recovering from his wound and also distracted somewhat with the demands made upon a high-theign by men of a lesser station. So it was that under the warm sun nearly six hundred men in full armour practiced drills with spears, axes, and swords.

Sigbert was exercising a group in the art of launching throwing spears. They practiced out in the meadow just to the west of the town, learning how to throw whilst walking with a heavy shield on their left arm. Young boys were employed in fetching back the heavy spears after each volley was cast, a task that they treated like a game. The fyrdmen learnt by constant repetition, each carrying three angons and commanded to hurl them at an imaginary enemy one after the other. They rested only

when their third throwing spear had been launched but soon found themselves sweating beneath the hot sun and their right arms ached with the effort that Sigbert demanded of them.

Coenred himself was overseeing the theigns and younger huscarls who were practising with their swords, trying to discover how to get past the large shields that each carried and to deliver a killing blow. It was not easy as their weapons were sharp and deadly, their armour heavy and restrictive, but the skill was learnt by repetition and the point of a sword was an excellent means of keeping a man's attention on what he was supposed to be doing.

Thrydwulf had command of most of the ceorls and he was responsible for teaching the basic, and perhaps the most important tactic of Saxon war-craft; how to keep a shield-wall. He had the peasant warriors formed in a line three deep with the men in the front rank holding their shields up and interlocked to present a seemingly impenetrable barrier. The second row contained men armed with the large double-handed Dane-axe or langseaxes, and behind them the third row were armed with the long fighting spears.

The fyrdmen were tasked with keeping the integrity of their shield-wall while still being able to launch vicious attacks of their own with both the axes and the spears upon their imagined enemy. Their success on the field of battle would depend totally upon this ability and to make the training more realistic Thrydwulf and several other huscarls in full armour attacked the shield-wall with gusto. They used their shields and heavy pieces of wood cut to the length of a sword to try and beat down the resistance of the peasants while the fyrdman tried to fight back with their own weapons. In the heat of the September sun the peasants discovered first how hard it was for a man in armour to fight for anything more than twenty minutes in such conditions, and second, how strong, determined and seemingly unafraid of pain their tutors were.

Thrydwulf himself was without doubt the most tenacious and violent of the teachers, throwing himself bodily against the arrayed shields, trying to force a break in the defence. He hit any exposed part of a man that he could find, delivering painful blows to heads, hands, arms and even legs. Eventually tiredness began to tell and he knew from experience that the men would suffer injuries more serious than bruises so he called a halt to the training and told them to have a breather. It was welcome to the huscarls as well, who removed their steel helmets, a protective luxury that most of the

fyrddmen lacked, and let the slow moving air cool down their heads. Like the peasants they slaked their thirst with weak beer brought to them in pitchers by young girls who smiled at the warriors and laughed at the injuries suffered by the ceorls.

“Tha’d think we t’ enemy an’ not t’ Norse!” Sidrac complained as he sat on the hard packed dirt, sweat running down his face.

“Aye, they batter us so. Me ‘and is a swollen from a bang to it from that ‘uscarl’s wooden sword!” his friend Brinin lifted his right hand for all to see where he had been unlucky enough to receive a strike from Thrydwulf.

“They press us ‘ard,” Hutha agreed, “they in their steel armour and us wiv not’ing but leather to ward of ‘ard blows.”

“They don’t know what its like for us before their ‘eavy weapons, bloody ‘uscarls,” Sidrac added. “They live like lords and stride aroun’ in their finery while we work all the ‘ours God gives us and then turn out to be battered ‘cos the king says so. It aint right it aint.”

“Do you think I press you too hard?” Thrydwulf asked, suddenly intruding on the trio who were too busy feeling sorry for themselves to notice the huscarl wandering around the fyrddmen.

“You ‘it ‘ard!” Brinin replied with an expression that clearly indicated that he was sure that he was going to receive another beating.

“I don’t hit as hard as the enemy do,” Thrydwul told him with a grim face, “and they’ll be using steel instead of wood when you meets them. That blow I gave your right hand will hurt for a day or two but if a Viking had given it to you then you wouldn’t even have a hand to complain about.”

“Tha press us too ‘ard!” Sidric insisted.

“You’ll thank me for it when the time comes; a hard knock is a sharp teacher.”

“Them are fine words but tha don’t know what its like for us ceorls,” Hutha insisted. “Tha train us all day and expect us to work the night away fetchin’ an’ carryin’ like.”

“You’re fyrddman, this is your life, don’t bleat about it.”

“Tha might think different if tha ‘ad a taste of it!”

“What makes you think that I haven’t?” Thrydwulf looked each of the three in the face. “Is it this expensive armour that I wear? This coat of mail? This steel helmet? This fine sword that hangs at my side decorated with gold and silver?”

“Yer a rich man, like all ‘uscarls, you live an easy life,” Sidric replied.

“Think you so? Where do you think my wealth came from, my father? No, I earned it. I was once a ceorl like all of you,”

“Tha was a ceorl?!” Brinin voiced the disbelief that they all felt at this revelation.

“Aye, I was.” Thrydwul’s manner relaxed somewhat and he showed a small smile. “My father was a genetas, a good farmer, did well for his theign, and my brothers did well for him, allowed him to rent more land and plough more fields, but that was not for me. I never had the feel for crops and livestock; I loved the life of a fyrdman. I loved it so much that I was always chosen to fulfil the village’s obligation to send men to the fyrd for training. I had a knack for fighting, whether with a spear or an axe or a sword or wrestling or with an open hand, there were few men that I could not best.”

Thrydwulf squatted down to be at the same level as the men he was talking to and they became more attentive, already amazed at the story that he was telling them.

“The fyrd was not enough for me though, you know what its like, after each spell with them I would have to return home and work on the farm. I hated that, but then I got a call from our theign and he asked me to take up the sword for him and become his hearth companion. That was when I learned that there was a living to be made by the sword. When he died I became a butescarl and hired myself out to richer men. I did good work, protecting their property and their people. I even got to go to London to the court of old King Edward where I met my first huscarl. He told me that eoldermen were always on the look out for good weapons-men and he told me what I needed to be a huscarl. It were a steep price, to own a coat of steel mail, all your own weapons, two horses and their equipage, a shield carrier, and this sword of course, double edged and decorated with gold and silver.”

“That be money beyond our ken,” Sidric declared.

“So I thought but it is passing strange how not spending every penny that comes your way soon gives a man a purse that jingles,” Thrydwul smiled at them. “I worked hard at becoming a good weapons-man, put myself at the front of every shield-wall and did good work. I only spent my money on what was necessary, the tools of my trade mostly, and one day I presented myself to Eorl Aelfgar of Mercia, an ambitious eolderman he, and he bade me swear my first death-oath to protect his life or die on the field of battle before his enemies. He made me a huscarl.”

“An’ thee a ceorl like us?”

“Aye lad, which is why I am a hard teacher to you today, not because I am a huscarl and a rich man, but because I was one of you once and I know that the lessons I give you today will spare your lives when you stand before the spears of our enemies.”

“Thee give ‘ard knocks all the same,” Brinin complained still.

“I save my worst for the enemy, be sure of that, but I have been known to break the heads of fyrdman that don’t train hard when I task them.” Thrydwulf rose and replaced his helmet on his head. “Now up and at it lads, this day’s war-work is not yet over and I’ve a few more knocks to give you!”

With that Thrydwulf turned and strode amongst the relaxing peasants, commanding them to get back up on their feet and reform their shield-wall once more.

“Does thee think he tells the truth?” Hutha asked of his two companions.

“I’ve ‘eard a similar tale from a fyrdman who fought with ‘im at Fulford Gate,” Sidric replied, “but I paid it no mind ‘cos you ‘ear such tall tales around t’ campfire.”

“I believe ‘im,” Brinin insisted. “He talks finer than us but not so fine as some of t’ other huscarls, his voice sounds as rough as a hog’s back next to them that are the sons of rich men.”

“Then I ‘opes ‘is training is as good as ‘is words ‘cos I don’t wants to be lying dead afore a Norseman’s axe.”

Once again the tired ceorls hefted their shields into position and prepared to receive the heavy blows of the huscarls, giving little more thought to what the day would bring other than to consider what they may be given for their supper and how soon they might be allowed to lie down and sleep again.

Aldfrid had been training with Hengist and Aethelmaer before they took their break and accepted the drink brought to ease their dry throats. The girls came from the mead hall of Tadcaster and he was pleased to see one in particular amongst those carrying refreshment. She looked to be about seventeen years old, only a couple of summers younger than himself, and she was blessed with long dark hair, plaited in the popular fashion, and warm brown eyes. She approached him in particular, carrying a pitcher and a cup, her eyes never leaving him and a smile growing as she came closer.

“My Lord, my father, Theign Wilfrid, commanded that refreshment be brought to the brave weapons-men who work so hard to ready themselves to meet our enemy,” she spoke in way of introduction.

“My Lady, you honour me,” Aldfrid smiled back, removing his helmet and placing his spear and shield on the ground.

“There is honour in being a cupbearer to a hero.”

“I am no hero; I am Aldfrid, humble huscarl to Eorl Morcar.”

“I am Eawyn.”

She poured the weak beer into the wooden cup and gave it to him. Aldfrid took the cup and emptied it in one draught, never taking his eyes from her fair face. He handed the cup back to her and she refilled it. When she returned the vessel he purposefully wrapped his hand around her fingers. Eawyn glanced up into his face and smiled.

Aethelmaer stood with Hengist and watched the two young people talking to each other without relying upon the spoken word to express what either meant. He nudged Hengist and nodded towards their friend.

“It seems in this time of war someone is making a conquest,” Aethelmaer commented.

“His defence were never his strongest point,” Hengist responded.

“Nor his attack as his weapon is known to be a little lacking!”

The two huscarls fell to laughing. Aldfrid shot them a quick look of disapproval but quickly returned his attention to Eawyn.

“My friends talk of a kind of work, it something of which they know little,” he told her with a smile.

“I care not; they have the look of men who beat their own weapons for want of finding opportunities to use them otherwise.”

“She speaks with a tongue that is much older than her teeth,” Hengist observed in affected shock.

“Then that would be a tongue that knows how to render a warrior’s stiff pole into a sapling!”

Hengist scowled again at this friend’s comments but refused to look at anyone but Eawyn.

“I must apologise for my brother huscarls, they were raised by hounds and know no better than such.”

“Mayhap you can prove yourself their better then at my father’s table tonight?”

“Gladly!” Aldfrid realised that he replied too quickly and too loudly but Eawyn only broadened her smile further. He finished the second cup of beer and handed it back to her.

“Until tonight then, brave warrior.”

So saying she gave him one more smile before turning and walking back towards the long-hall well aware that Aldfrid’s were not the only eyes that watched her hips sway as she moved in an unhurried manner. She was modest enough not to show it but in truth she enjoyed the attention of the young men with every step that she took.

“I hope your mettle be up to it when she puts you to the task,” Aethelmaer commented as came close to Aldfrid.

“A man cannot have a civilised conversation with a maid when the likes of you are around!” Aldfrid complained, retrieving his shield and weapons.

“As for thee villain, I have a payment for you for that hound comment!” Hengist warned his friend as he purposefully barged into him, shield to shield, and made him stagger back a step.

“Aye, let’s see thee act the brave warrior now!” Aethelmaer goaded and the two of them turned on Aldfrid in a sudden eruption of boisterous youthful vigour.

Coenred smiled at their antics. Others might consider their behaviour reprehensible considering the danger in which they all found themselves, and perhaps not least in consideration of all the Saxon who now lay dead at Fulford Gate, but his was a different perspective. As a leader of warriors Coenred was well experienced in the aftermath of a violent encounter and how it could dull the senses, lower the spirit, and remove even the will to fight again. In Tadcaster the men were had found a degree of normality that they had not expected; it reassured them. Perhaps even more it bolstered their reason for continuing the fight. The young huscarls had an influence on the spirits of the fyrdmen as well. They were looked to for leadership. Many would take heart knowing that the huscarls were still interested in life and resilient to the threat of the Vikings.

“Lord Coenred?”

He turned to see a man in good quality clothing with his left-arm in a sling and a cut on his forehead, perhaps caused by the edge of an axe.

“I am.”

“My name is Ceneric, I am the Theign of Ovretun, I am told that you have been there recently?” The man’s face was pale, his eyes dull, and he was clearly in pain from his wounds.

“Your wife is called Leofe?”

“She is, My Lord.”

“Then I happy to tell you that we left her hale and hearty still when we passed through your village.”

“I am told that a Viking laid hands on her?” The expression on his face was raw and unguarded, revealing his worst fears and his emotions clearly rising to the surface.

“One tried but I put a spear through him.”

“Then she is safe.”

“She is, though your servant died before I could intercede.”

“Ina? I never took him for warrior.”

“Circumstances make more of us than mayhap anyone stops to consider.”

“So true, My Lord.”

“You were hurt at Fulford Gate I take it?”

“Yes, My Lord. Eorl Morcar commanded me to the left wing to stand with High-Theign Aethelwine; we both took a hurt in breaking through the Norse lines there.”

“Then rest yourself Theign Ceneric, you have a wife to go home to and she will be mightily relieved to see you back again.”

“I should be looking to fight with you and your men.”

“I ask only for those without serious injury to join the fyrd, your war-work was done at Fulford Gate. You serves us all the better by recovering from your wounds and taking your place at our side when you can strike fear into the hearts of our enemies again.” Coenred placed a hand on the other’s shoulder in reassurance. “Go now Ceneric, seek the help of a healer and think no less of yourself for there is not a man here who does not look upon you and admire your bravery.”

Ceneric managed a weak smile, relieved to hear the words that assuaged his feelings of guilt at no longer being able to raise a spear in defence of his people.

As Coenred watched the wounded man return to the village he felt a justification for his own actions. Coming to Tadcaster had been the right thing to do. Training these men for another encounter with their ancient enemy was also the right thing to do. Leaving Mildryth as Ceneric had left Leofe was the right thing to do also because it was the only action that promised them a future together free of that enemy. He replaced his helmet and called the theigns and huscarls to training once more.