

The Village of Heworde

Wulfhere had spent two days in the village of Heworde watching and waiting for an opportunity to cement his new alliance with Imminric and his hloth. The village was only two miles north east of York and dangerously close to the Viking garrison but Imminric had insisted that they did not leave the immediate area unless forced to. There were those Saxons who seemed rooted to the area in which they were born. The fyrd was limited by this same reluctance to move beyond their local boundaries; they traditionally fought in the region where they were raised. There were many other Saxons, however, who felt no such ties and had the spirit to wander far and wide, frequently following in the footsteps of their ancestral enemies, the Vikings. Wulfhere counted himself as one of the latter, not least because he hailed from the south of England.

His concerns were relieved, however, to discover that apart from a party of Viking warriors on horseback who were doing a circuit of the immediate area to inform the people that they had a new king, Harald Hardrada of Norway, and that they were invited to join his banner, nothing else was seen of the Norsemen. He resided, therefore, at peace and indulged himself in passing the day in the only drinking shop the place had to offer, but he drank slowly and always with his ears open.

The village was typical of so many others that he had seen, being largely rural, almost everyone working the land. There were some tradesmen working in wood and pottery, and a smithy who handled anything that could be manufactured in iron but who lacked the skill to work in steel or bronze. The village had been governed by three lower theigns and one middle theign. Only one of the lower theigns remained now as the others had followed Eorl Morcar down to Fulford Gate and there, no doubt, wyrd had decided that their lives should end gloriously on the spears of their enemies.

The place was rank with fear. It was etched in the faces of the people as they went about their daily business; they were uncomfortably close to the Viking garrison. It made them furtive and yet loose lipped as if talking about their concerns to each other eased their fears, which in turn made them vulnerable to a man like Wulfhere. They freely indulged their need to speak in the ale shop and as a result they spoke too liberally and too loudly to one another. He was a keen listener even though he seemed

to the other customers simply to be a fallen warrior lost in a drunken haze. Of course that was his intent.

In this manner Wulphere overheard a clothes-seller complain about having to go out into the forest to conduct some business. Some of his companions at the table in the drinking shop offered to accompany him but he insisted that too large a gathering would only attract unwanted attention and that this was something that he should do alone. It was not difficult to guess what need pressed him so hard and why he would be so secretive as to deny the company of acquaintances. The man drank some more, no doubt to put a little mettle into his resolve, before departing. Wulphere gave him a few minutes after he eventually left before slowly getting to his feet as if it took a great effort to do so and left the table.

“I need a piss!” he announced in an uncouth manner and then staggered out of the shop.

He followed in the footsteps of the clothes-seller, an observer might note how sure and confident his footsteps were. Wulphere saw that the man was heading north-west out of the village. Across the street idled Egbert, he was the youngest of the outlaws and the least likely to attract any attention. Seeing Wulphere leave the drinking shop he sidled across the street and came up behind him.

“Alms sir? Alms?” He begged in a whining voice and with an open palm extended. Wulphere turned on him seemingly angry and grabbed the front of his tunic and drew him close.

“The clothes-seller is heading into the forest, bring Imminric,” he whispered. “Alms! alms for a motherless cur like thee? Get thee gone before I show yer the edge of me langseax!” he roared in a wonderful display of mock anger as he shoved Egbert from him and continued up the street towards the edge of the village.

Egbert cursed him loudly, knowing that some would be watching this altercation. He then turned on his heel and set off at a trot, leaving the village by another route and looking to bring his fellow outlaws round to the north-west of the village in time to join up with Wulphere again.

For his part the butescarl sobered up quickly as he left the nearest house behind him. He stayed behind the clothes-seller but was keen to avoid being noticed as the man checked repeatedly to see if anyone was following, and in this art the butescarl was well practised. The men in the drinking shop knew what the clothes-seller was about and so did Wulphere, not only might it improve his own wealth but it would

prove to Imminric that he had not spoken falsely when he had won the hloth over to his plan.

The forest was stifling. It seemed that the trees caught and retained the heat of the day within their branches and were determined to hold onto it as the evening approached. The clothes-seller followed a faint track that wended its way half a mile to a small clearing made by the fall of an oak tree. He paused for a moment, looking around the forest; making sure that he was quite alone. Wulphere felt confident that he was safe from the villager's eyes, it was sound that would give him away in here but he was as silent as a stalking cat when the need was upon him. After a few moments the clothes-seller seemed satisfied that he was indeed alone and approached the remains of the once great tree. He crouched down before it and began to work at the earth immediately beneath its massive trunk.

A sudden noise behind him attracted the butescarl's attention. He turned with a silent curse upon his lips and saw what he expected; one of his outlaws. He raised a hand and motioned for the other to halt and be quiet. Fortunately the thug had the sense to pass this instruction onto his fellows behind him who were even now arriving in single file.

The clothes-seller seemed not to have noticed the arrival of his impending doom, however. He was distracted by something that he had recovered from its hiding place beneath the tree. Wulphere always liked to allow others to save him from work if he could. He waited to make sure that the man had fully recovered the thing of value. When he was sure that there was no longer any need for hiding in the shadows he motioned the outlaws to join him as he stepped into the clearing.

"Just a few coins to see us through," the clothes-seller muttered to himself. "Just one or two coins to pay the way for we must eat and we must have drink."

"Can you spare one of those coins for a battle hero?" Wulphere asked suddenly. The man started and grasped a large clay pot to his chest as he turned to see who had spoken. A cold dread swam over his face.

"Who are you?" He demanded as he started to rise to his feet. "There is nothing for you here!"

"Now you lie to me, that's not friendly," Wulphere declared.

He approached the man and placed a hand on the other's shoulder, pushing him back to the earth again whilst circling round to the other side of the frightened man leaving space for the gang to fill, which they did with grim intent.

“What do we have here?” Imminric demanded as he lumbered into the clearing and took up a central position as befitted his status as leader.

The outlaws now formed a half-ring around the unfortunate villager who had the fallen tree to his back. They did not so much as threaten him with the weapons that they carried, not even showing them to the light of the day, except for one who toyed with scramseax, but violence was in the air all the same.

“A good man who wishes to ease our sorry plight,” Wulfhere told Imminric.

“This is mine!” the clothes-seller insisted, hugging the pot to his chest tightly. “It is nothing of value. It is of no interest to you.”

“I think otherwise,” Wulfhere declared.

“Then let us see for us-selves.” Imminric stepped forward and grabbed the lip of the pot and pulled with his brute of a hand. The clothes-seller refused to let go and was dragged along the ground. “Get him off it!”

One of the outlaws stepped forward and stuck his scramseax into the ribs of the villager. He did it unhurriedly, as if savouring the experience of the cold steel being pushed into the man’s flesh. The villager cried out and released the clay pot at last. The man who had attacked him withdrew the blade and stared at the blood stain on the pitted metal with a gory fascination.

Imminric looked into the pot and saw only a wad of cloth. He removed it and threw it to one side and then looked in again, this time he grinned.

“It’s his stash!” he announced to the others.

“Not his, ours,” Wulfhere pointed out.

“You kept your word,” Egbert said. “You brought us to more coin.”

“Aye, that you did,” Imminric conceded.

“And I will bring you to much more than this one cache,” Wulfhere promised them. “What are you about?”

He spoke to the thug with the knife in his hand. The man was repeatedly sticking his blade into the fallen villager’s body, in different areas but with the same slow, vicious delight. The clothes-seller was moaning as the pool of blood in which he now lay grew slowly ever larger. The villain turned a savage face to the butescarl.

“Sport!”

“He wears good clothes!” Egbert complained. “You spoil them with your sticking.”

He and several others pushed the knifeman out of the way and began to strip the villager of his valuable clothing.

“Leave the body for the wild pigs to eat,” Imminric told them. “We’ll return to our hideout and count this money out.”

“I will come by later,” Wulfhere informed him.

He turned his back on the sadistic Saxon with the knife. He had murdered others himself but he took no pleasure in torture of this kind. What blood he spilt he did so for profit, not for play.

“You do not join us?” Imminric sounded suspicious.

“There are many more such stashes as this scattered around, but you’d need the nose of a hound to find them. People are quick to bury their valuables in the ground when trouble looms. We can’t use Heworde again, this one will be missed sooner than later and I will be remembered here. I need to find a new place and a new mark. Once I’m done I’ll come and tell you where and when eh?”

The last was aimed solely at Imminric. Wulfhere couched it in such a way that it sounded as if he were asking the thug’s permission to do this thing.

“You speak well. Your share will be waiting you,” Imminric agreed. It was so easy for the man who relied upon his wits to control the man who had nothing to offer but muscle.

With their brief meeting brought to a successful and largely easy end they split up again. Imminric led his gang back to the homestead that they now occupied after killing and robbing the former owners, Wulfhere began heading north-west and looking to strike either the north road or another village like Heworde. There were still plenty of rich pickings to be had and as the Norsemen seemed happy to remain within York then perhaps this situation was not as dangerous as he had first feared. Besides, staying close to the city gave him a chance to see how things came about there and if there was an opportunity to visit that Mildryth woman again, well, he would be best placed to take advantage of it by staying in the neighbourhood.