

The City of York

It was but a chance meeting and yet Thorald found himself delighted with the encounter. The Saxon woman had avoided giving him her name or the location of her house, but that did not concern him. In truth he understood her reluctance; Norsemen had rarely been kind in their dealings with Saxon women in the past.

She was walking down the main street heading north. She wore a cloak of deep green that looked to be of good quality. Her head was uncovered, a style that she seemed to prefer over the current trend for women to wear headscarves. There was nothing submissive about her demeanour but neither was she parading herself to spite the Viking watchmen. Obviously his first impression that her station was higher than that of a peasant was correct.

Thorald walked across the street at an angle and a pace that was calculated to intercept her but not to look too obvious. He had enjoyed their previous conversation even though she had been quite guarded. Again, he could not blame her for that considering that she had been the object of unwanted attention from three Danes who had only one thing on their minds, and that had not been friendly conversation.

“Good day to you, My Lady!” he called out when within ten paces of her.

She turned and looked at him; a flicker of recognition crossed her face.

“The Norwegian,” she said simply, slowing her pace.

“The very same,” he smiled warmly. “I trust that I find you in better circumstances this day, unlike the last time we met?”

“Indeed. I would thank you for the service you rendered me then.” Her manner was much more relaxed than previously.

Thorald moved alongside her but not so close as to cause her any apprehension, he felt that she had accurately judged his character and knew that he did not pose a threat to her.

“In truth I wish that it had not been necessary,” he admitted, “there has been no further trouble with the watch I trust?”

“None concerning me, I am glad to say.” Mildryth glanced at him. She wondered why he was paying her this attention. He seemed quite at ease, he even had a piece of wood in one hand and a small knife in the other; it seemed that he had been carving something. “You keep yourself busy I notice.”

“For my son,” he told her with a smile, “I’m not sure if it will be a horse or a bear.”

“Horses are popular,” she offered.

“In truth I am not very good at carving and horses have long legs. I think it will be a bear for I find it easier.”

“I’m sure your son will be happy with whatever you choose to give him.” She remembered him telling her previously that he was married and had a family back in Norway. “You miss your wife and children?”

“Every day, I miss talking with my wife before the hearth. She is very good at talking.”

Again he smiled and looked so far from being a Viking warrior that it was not difficult for Mildryth to see him as the farmer that he had said he really wanted to be. The fact that he wore no armour and that his cloak hid the sword at his side helped in that respect.

“Mayhap you will be together soon then?”

“I pray every night that it will be so. Leaving Norway on this adventure was not the best decision for me I think.” His face appeared quite open and honest.

“You regret coming to England then?”

“I do. Our priest tried to talk many of us out of picking up the sword again. He talked of Jesus Christ and the path of peace. I fought before your city’s walls in the front rank of our shield-wall, there are many who would brag of such but I take no delight in what I did.” Unconsciously he raised his hand to the poultice that sat on top of his wound just below his collarbone on the right-hand side. “You have some good fertile land around Jorvic; every time I see a field I think of how my farm in Norway will be at this time of year.”

“You are an uncommon Norseman,” she declared.

Mildryth found herself in two minds about this man. On the one hand she wanted to hate him for what his countrymen had done only a few days ago, and for the generations of slaughter and ruin that they had visited upon her people. On the other she was taken by how much they had in common. In truth he even reminded her of Coenred to some degree.

“Am I?” His face reddened slightly. He seemed almost bashful and that realisation made her smile in her turn.

“I have known those of Danish descent who settled in Northumbria and owed loyalty to my husband who was a theign. I am of Viking descent too, but my heart is

Saxon. Living in peace together has brought many to see that we have more in common than might first be obvious; Saxons and Norse are not so unlike.”

“So teaches our priest.”

“This middle-earth has changed since the first Saxons set foot in England.”

“The world changes Indeed. Perhaps we Norwegians, being a step further towards civilisation than the other Viking peoples, are becoming more in like other Christian people and losing the spirit to wander and fight?” He speculated.

“May I ask why you talk to me in this fashion?”

“Because you remind me of my wife, you look a little like her as well, and talking with you seems to come easy to me as it does with her. You remind me of home and everything that I have there waiting for me. You also make these feelings of regret that I hold in my breast seem more worthy. There are some amongst my countrymen who would deride any sympathy I might feel for your people but in my heart I do feel it for you.”

“That you invade our lands with sword and axe again?”

Thorald nodded in response and looked somewhat pensive. He was lost to thought for a moment before continuing their conversation again.

“I place no faith in King Hardrada’s claim to the crown of England; we are both selfish men in that respect, but whilst he comes to take the throne I came only to earn enough gold to buy the seed and cattle I need. The price of that coin seems too steep now; it has been washed in too much blood.” His face was shadowed in regret.

“King Harold will send a power north to re-take this city. Even with Guillaume of Normandy sat across the whale-road to the south he will not let us remain in the hands of your king. There will be another battle.” As she spoke the words the remembrance of Coenred came back to her and she found herself believing in what she had said without question.

“I know it, just as I know that my wound will have healed by the time your king’s army arrives, no excuse then for me not to take my place in the shield-wall again.”

“You could follow your heart?”

“If I were a lone warrior then I might hazard my king’s anger and punishment by doing just that, but I have others to think of. I must protect my family first above all else.”

“Then my wishes are at odds with each other, I must hope that the king’s army prevails in the next clash with your own war-band, but I find myself also wishing that

you might escape any further hurt and return to your family whole and with no more blood upon your hands.”

“If that were to happen, if I were to return to Norway without further hurt, then I would turn my sword into a tool for the farm and never leave Norway or my family again,” Thorald answered her with a conviction that she found herself believing.

“But I must take my leave of you sir,” she told him as they neared Branda’s house. “My friend has no love for the Norse since they took her husband off on the point of a spear. I would not see her hurt by the remembrance that your presence would provoke.”

“It seems fitting with my change of heart that I should respect your wishes. Farewell, My Lady, if I see thee again I hope that you might think of me as more of a farmer obeying the church and less of an enemy?”

”It would be easier for me to do so if you were indeed returned to Norway and in that respect I do wish thee well!”

He smiled at her once more and performed a polite bow that was as sincere as it was brief before leaving her where she stood. In her heart she knew that he was a lonely man who had travelled too far from home and hearth, perhaps just once too many times, and that all he had been looking for was a polite encounter with someone who reminded him of his wife, whom he clearly loved.

Saxons and Norse were truly not so unlike.