

The City of York

The city transformed itself within a heartbeat of learning that brave Saxon warriors had overcome the Viking garrison in preparation for the approach of the King of England. Households roused themselves at the news and began to flock to the walls of the southern gate, to line the street leading up to Royal Theign Aethelwine's mead hall, and to surround that building also. The gates to the city were thrown open and an honour guard of surviving northern fyrdmen posted.

The excitement rose as the army was sighted to the south, their steel helmets and spear-points gleaming in the sunlight. The people lining the wooden palisade waved banners and bits of cloth to celebrate the coming of their king. At his imminent arrival the people rushed to the gateway. The King's Royal Companions rode in advance and had to use the bodies of their horses to clear a path through the throng. Harold warned them to be careful, he had not rescued the city from the scourge of the Vikings to have its' citizenry trampled under the hooves of his own huscarls's steeds. The atmosphere was one of relief over-spilling into excitement, however. The crowd was made up of every class to be found within the city walls and their emotion was as sincere as it was vocal.

Their king was their hero!

Slowly the royal party made their way towards the great mead hall of York. As they approached they were met by Aethelwine and his fighting men, still stained with the blood of their enemies; they wore it like a badge of honour.

"My Lords, welcome to York," Aethelwine declared in a loud booming voice. A huge cheer went up from the assembled people.

"My High-Theign, it pleases me greatly to meet with you once again, in your proper place and stained with the blood of our enemies."

The crowd cheered uproariously. Gyrth noted how Harold's eyes shone, how he loved every moment of this triumphal return to Northumbria.

"Good people of York, we come now to your fair city only to leave you, we are on our way to exact a vengeance on the trespassing King of Norway. Much harm has he done to you. Many good Saxons has he put to the sword. We will pay him back thrice-fold."

The crowd cheered again. Hounds barked and children ran between the legs of their elders, trying to get a better look at the man on the horse dressed in such fine armour and surrounded by many stout warriors who glared so defiantly at the world.

"You have suffered one battle and it was hard and bloody, but be there any amongst you who are trained in war, your king would welcome you to his banners." As Harold spoke his banner-men unfurled their charges. The King of England marched with two banners. One was the golden Wyvern of Wessex, rampant on a red background. The other was his battle flag, a stylised figure of a fighting man with a sword and shield, executed in the stylisation of Saxon art. There was little wind to catch the banners so the huscarls responsible for carrying each had to wave them through the morning air so that the people could see them to their best advantage. "Good people, I know that you would all follow me to fight the enemy, and I would welcome you to my banners, but as I want you safe and prosperous I will take only those who are weapons-men, hale and hearty. The rest may stay here with no shame for they do it at my wish and my command."

Almost immediately there was a motion within the crowd and men began to separate themselves from the throng. Strong men with determined looks in their stern faces stepped forth. None wore a battle harness or carried a weapon but they all wished to show their loyalty to the king who had marched so far so soon to come to their aid.

"If you have war-gear go and fetch it now. We march for Stamford Bridge and where we go you may follow as one of our brethren of the sword," Gyrth declared loudly. He turned to his brother. "It will take some time to get the army through York and out of the eastern gate, enough time I think for these volunteers to get into their battle harness, and for Coenred's raiders to join us as well."

Harold nodded his agreement.

"Let us lead the way to meet the War Wolf, and let brave men follow; we go to tan his hide!" Harold spurred his horse forward and the party started walking again, making understandably slow headway against the crowd but with no intent of forcing the pace if it risked endangering the many people who came to express their thanks to him.

Berctuald watched the passage of the king and his armoured company from within the throng. He felt and shared the joy of the people of York but it was not enough. His

fingers traced the silver cross that hung from a leather thong around his neck. He was dressed like the other men around him, simple linen tunic and trousers, and a modest woollen cloak, but he was indeed different to them; he was a deacon. The call of the Church of the Christ had come to him somewhat late in life but it had come all the same. His training to become a priest was far from complete and the recent turn of events had effectively put its' completion in doubt. Mayhap that was why he felt an old urge come upon him as he watched the armoured theigns and huscarls pass by? He too had been a warrior before he had heard the word of God. He remembered well the way of the fyrdman. He recalled well the feel of the ash-wood shaft of the spear, the weight of the padded jacket, the comradeship of his fellows.

He was a priest in training and bloodshed was forbidden to him now but there had been a service that he had been able to administer after the battle at Fulford Gate; that of a healer. With herb-lore and prayer he had tended the wounded and it had felt good. There were many that he could not save but he had been there at their passing so that they did not die alone. It was a comfort to them, to their families when they came to claim the bodies, and also to himself if he was honest. The last had surprised him. He had expected a surge of vengeance to take him, the blood-lust of old, but it had not. He felt no particular hatred for the Norsemen now, only compassion for those fallen in battle trying to protect their own. He looked upon these Saxon warriors marching before him, so much like himself of old, and it occurred to him that they would have need of a healer also.

Over one shoulder he carried a bag made from linen. He glanced inside to check the store of herbs, the bandages of old cloth, and the sacred relic of St. Peter that he had been carrying with him habitually since last Wednesday. In his belt there was also a scramseax, and he carried a bottle of weak beer too. He was ready to go at a moment's notice.

The pull of the fyrd was strong upon Berctauld and he could not think of a reason to resist going where he felt God was directing him. There would be no time to report back to St. Mary's Church to tell them of his plans and, indeed, he feared that someone may either try to dissuade him or even command him not to follow the army. He pushed his way to the front of the throng and without a moment's hesitation he stepped into the column of fighting men. His arrival elicited no comment for he was not the only one to step out of the crowd and follow the king's banner, although he was one of only a few to do so without any war-gear.

"And now you must go again," Mildryth said as she watched King Harold's army pass them by.

Coenred looked at her. She had dressed quickly and thrown a shawl over her head as she had had no time to prepare herself for going out of doors. She stood with one hand gripping the shawl and the other holding onto Coenred's left arm.

"Ever do you look to make these partings easy," he commented, "and yet every time it feels like my soul is being rent."

She smiled, a little too quickly, the anxiety evident in both her face and her eyes as they flitted from the weapons-men to him, then down to look at her leather shoes, and finally back to his face again. He could read her disquiet clearly even though he knew that she was trying to hide it, to be brave before him. He felt the need to calm her fears. It had suddenly become important to him to do so.

"I will come back again," he promised her in the most confident tone that he could summon.

"This time to stay." Her tone suggested that she already knew the truth behind that dream.

"I hope so," he replied with sincerity, but in reality he did not know; he could not know.

A little voice inside his head reminded him that this was the very reason why he had not sought a lover previously. He could see the fear and doubt that threatened to overwhelm her and even though he knew it was the unknown that troubled her most, that she did not doubt his martial abilities, he could not help but feel that he was in the wrong for being the cause of this concern. For a moment he doubted the wisdom of surrendering his heart so quickly to Mildryth, not for any pain that he might feel on his part but simply because he could not bear to see the hurt that he was causing her.

The Royal Companions passed by to be followed by the mounted huscarls, the armoured theigns, and all of their retainers. The wealth that they wore upon their persons was glorious to behold. They waved to the crowd that continued to cheer, from the looks of the faces on many of the warriors it was very much a new and exciting experience.

"Lord Coenred!" a familiar voice called.

They turned to see Edwin on the edge of the marching column. He rode the pack horse and trailed Coenred's steed with its' fine saddle and bridle, weighted down with

his spears, shield, axe, byrnie, and helmet. For his part Edwin wore his own war-gear now as if he were used to it. He had had only a few days training but he had worked hard and listened intently to anyone willing to instruct him.

Coenred turned to Mildryth but did not know what to say, he had never had cause to take leave from someone he loved before riding off to battle before. He simply looked at her with searching eyes, studying her face as if attempting to commit it to memory.

"Go my warrior," she spoke softly, hoping not to betray the feelings that threatened to engulf her. She could not show him any weakness, not here in the street, not in front of all these people, not before he marched before the spears of their enemies. "Know that I love you."

Several people murmured as he leant close and kissed her once, very gently, but they only expressed their approval. Without another word Coenred mounted his horse with an athletic bound and followed the army out of York. He looked backwards over his shoulder, however, until he could see her no more, her beautiful face lost in a sea of faces. Mildryth remained there even when all of the huscarls had disappeared towards the eastern gate, her left hand holding tightly onto her shawl as an unseasonable coldness descended upon her. She stood within a multitude of people but at that very moment she felt totally alone, as if her reason to live had just departed.