

The Village of Riccall

Prince Olaf of Norway could not comprehend it. He stood before his men, a handful of battered and beaten men; their commander now since the War Wolf had fallen. These were all that remained of the great power brought over the North Sea by his father. They stood with their fleet at their backs and the village of Riccall before them. There had seemed to be no reason why he should have accompanied his father to Stamford Bridge that morning. Indeed the chance to rest at leisure in the warm September sun had made avoiding that journey all the more attractive.

Olaf had not been at ease as he watched Eystein Orre lead the fittest of the reserve off towards Stamford Bridge at a trot. The Jarls of Orkney had withdrawn in dismay at not being allowed to follow the old war-chief and Olaf had been left alone to assure himself that there was nothing to worry over. His father was a great war-chief after all and undefeated in battle. He could beat a rabble of Saxons from Jorvik; calling for the reserve was just to guarantee that success.

Then they had seen the warriors coming back. Exhausted men, coated in sweat, and blood, and dirt. Many had thrown away their armour, their spears, and their shields. They were wild with panic. Some of Olaf's followers had commented at how stupid the Saxons were to run from the enemy on the field onto the spears of the enemy waiting by the ships. They had drawn their weapons in expectation.

Then they had realised that the fugitives were not Saxons.

Prince Olaf had ordered all the wounded put aboard ship; none were to be left on the riverbank. Those who could were urged to don their armour, draw their weapons, and form a loose shield-wall that would protect the fleeing Vikings from the pursuing Saxons; the Saxons that were ranged in their thousands before him now as the victors of the battle.

They were battle-worn but fierce with the spirit of victory. Sweat coated their faces and blood stained their armour and tunics. Their eyes burnt with the passionate hatred of the victor for the conquered. Several hundred horsemen confronted the last vestige of the once mighty Viking army and behind them were several thousand warriors on foot. All they waited for was the order to finish their enemy, even as their chests rose and fell with the need to suck in deep draughts of warm summer air.

There was no doubting the outcome.

Yet Prince Olaf stood alone in the space between each force. His mouth was dry and it was not just the summer sun that made him sweat beneath his armour.

The king was dead.

His father was dead.

The giant had been cut down to the earth.

Lord Tostig was dead.

Eystein Orre was dead.

Siward was dead.

The great adventure was to end in death.

He glanced behind him at the small group of Vikings. There stood Paul and Erlend Thorfinnsson, the young jarls of Orkney. Their faces seemed to reflect the emotion that the prince felt inside his heart. He was afraid. He did not want to die. He would not appear weak before the enemy but he would admit the truth to himself.

I fear to die this day!

"You, mayhap, would be Prince Olaf?" One of the horsemen spoke and broke the silence at last.

"I am," he replied. He studied the speaker but it was difficult to make out his rank under the stain of battle.

"I am Harold Godwinson of Wessex, King of England, and victor of the Battle of Stamford Bridge." He spoke in a tired voice but with a commanding air. Olaf saw no reason to doubt his claim.

"I concede the decision," Prince Olaf said, not knowing what else was expected of him.

"I have a proposition for you Prince Olaf," King Harold told him.

"I will listen if it be honourable."

"You will listen because you have no alternative," Harold insisted, "but fear not, there is honour in it for you and your people."

"Then let us hear it."

"You will depart these lands and vow never to sail for England again, as long as you shall live." Harold raised his voice so that all of the cowering Vikings could hear what was being said.

"And our fallen?" Olaf asked.

"I cannot allow you to venture from Riccall. We will treat with honour those men of rank that lay upon the field of Stamford Bridge. If there are any closer to where you stand you may claim them."

"Our arms?"

"Those that now carry arms may keep them. Those that they let fall now belong to me."

"The ships?"

"What you can crew you can take, the rest to be left behind to be pressed into my fleet; including the greatest of your longships."

"I would talk with my men," Olaf said and started to turn away.

"Prince Olaf!" Harold called him back. "There is little to bargain for. I give you the choice of life over death. The battle is ended and I have had enough of killing for one day, I would rather that you chose life."

"There are many in your host that seem to wish us only death," Prince Olaf responded, "and there are some in my company who seem to welcome it. I do not and I crave only the time to bend them to my will, King of England."

"Very well, just so that we are understood," Harold conceded.

Prince Olaf walked back to his men and was dismayed by their appearance. In truth they were already beaten but there were indeed some amongst them who looked prepared now only to accept death.

What would that achieve?

He thought of his mother and sisters waiting safely on the Isles of Orkney and how he was now their only hope for a safe passage home to Norway. He thought of his brother Magnus, sitting as regent on the throne of Norway, and how the death of their father might encourage the Danes to attack anew. He saw no glory in a final stand that could inflict precious little damage on the Saxons and achieve nothing for his family.

"What will you do?" Paul Thorfinnsson asked.

"Though it pains me deeply I will accept the King of the Saxon's terms," he replied.

Immediately that his words were spoken some objected with loud voices, but many merely cast their eyes down and let their swords and spears droop in resignation.

"We should avenge your father," a warrior claimed.

"How would your death avenge him?" Prince Olaf asked. "How would the death of every man left here achieve any degree of vengeance? Who would know the truth of the things that we have seen? Would you rely upon the Saxons to record truthfully our

victory at Fulford Gate? Would you expect them to tell of the glory of King Hardrada's stand against them at Stamford Bridge? Who will sing his name in the sagas? Who will remember the glory that he achieved from Norway to Rus or from Byzantium to the Holy Land? You would let him fade from the history of the world with your last breath, as the blood spills uselessly from your veins, let by the points of a thousand Saxon spears!"

A grim silence descended upon the Norwegians.

"I am Olaf, son of Hardrada, and I am not afraid to taste this defeat and continue. I will take my father's memory back to Norway, it will be his legacy, and I will sit in the mead hall and listen to the saga of my father in the dark winters to come, and we will know that once we trod the earth with giants."

"There is nobility in death when it is sought in the hope of achieving something," Paul Thorfinnsson added in support. "Nothing can be achieved here now. The Saxons have won and we have lost."

"Then we should die in battle!" a voice called from the throng.

"It would be no battle!" Thorald was seized by a sudden impetuosity to step forward and join the prince and the jarl in the small open space. He turned on his heel to look at the faces of the defeated men that crowded them. "There would be no fight. Their many spears would prick our life blood before we could hurt even one of their number. Look at them. Look at what victory has made of them and then remember how we behaved on the field at Fulford Gate. Those who have nothing to live for may seek a quick and merciless death before these beasts of war but I have a wife and a family waiting for me in Norway. I followed King Hardrada for ten long years of war for no profit. If the King of England offers me my life as my only payment for this adventure then I will take it. If my prince tells me to go home with honour then I will kiss his hand for my wife's sake. If the jarls of Orkney encourage me to put away the sword and row an oar then I will do so gladly. If you have nothing to live for then go ask the Saxons for the slaughter you seek. I am for life!"

"So be it," a warrior muttered after a strained silence.

He was joined by the general assent of many others. The urge to die had left them. They knew that the princes had spoken the truth and hearing it echoed in the voice of one of their own, a low born brother warrior, somehow made acceptance all the easier.

Every Viking looked to have his name recorded in stone and passed down to the generations to come through the sagas. If they all died here this day they would be denying their king that right. They would make the Saxons' victory over them total. They would surrender Harald Hardrada's last claim upon them to the enemy. Finally, they would abandon their families to fate by seeking a pointless death.

"We accept your terms." Prince Olaf said when he returned to stand before King Harold of England.

In resignation he put his left hand on his sword and started to withdraw the weapon. Harold raised his own hand, open palmed.

"Keep your sword Prince Olaf, as we agreed. My men will oversee your preparations for your journey. Provisions will be made available to you so that you do not feel the need to put in at one of our ports and attempt to take them. Go home in peace, Prince Olaf, and may better fortune meet you in distant Norway."

"So be it."

"And so it ends like this," Thrydwulf said with a hint of bitterness.

"Come man, we have won and they have many dead, not least their king, we slew the War Wolf; what other way would you have it end?" Sigbert asked.

He looked down on his brother huscarl from the advantage of his horse. Thrydwulf had not sent for his horse but pursued the Vikings all the way to Riccall on foot.

"Aldfrid is dead," Thrydwulf responded in a cold tone without looking up.

"Aldfrid?!" Aethelmaer's face paled.

"He was killed by a berserker. There was nothing we could do," Hengist explained.

Remorse was etched across his young face but in truth the loss of his friend had not yet sunk in, there had still been the pursuit to occupy him. For his part Thrydwulf looked despondent too despite always having maintained a gruff uncaring attitude around the younger warriors.

"He fought bravely. Not once did he retire from the front rank. It was wyrd that condemned him but he died like a warrior with his sword in his hand and his companions around him upon the field of battle," Thrydwulf told them with sincerity.

"We will recover his body and take it to York," Coenred said.

"We will do that," Thrydwulf replied and placed a hand on Hengist's shoulder in a surprisingly paternal fashion.

"I will come with you," Aethelmaer insisted.

“Yes, you should,” Coenred told him.

The three of them turned and headed back to Stamford Bridge looking surprisingly diminished from the formidable and threatening warriors that they had once been that morning.

“Another brother falls,” Sigbert commented.

“Hopefully the last for this year.”

“By the looks of thee that might not come true,” Sigbert said with some concern.

“I will live a little longer yet.”

“Can we go back to the city now?” Edwin asked in a low voice.

Coenred glanced at him and saw that he looked exhausted as he sat slumped upon his horse. As the danger and excitement receded a great tiredness had descended upon him, as it did on many other survivors of the battle. Edwin wanted only to find somewhere warm and hidden where he could lie down, not talk to anyone, and go to sleep.

“We will go back to the city,” Coenred agreed. “We must go by Stamford Bridge, however, our fallen lay that way and we owe them our respect.”

“’Tis meet with me,” Sigbert agreed.

They turned their horses and headed back the way that they had come. None of them gave the defeated Vikings a second glance. They had won the battle but a neutral observer might have been hard pressed to tell them as the victors on this bloody day.

Over Riccall the banners of the King of the Saxons now stood, the standard of the War Wolf was thrown down to the earth for evermore.