

HOUNDS
OF
THE KING

HENRY
TREECE

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*Other books by Henry Treece
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of the Bodley Head*

VIKING'S DAWN
THE ROAD TO MIKLAGARD
VIKING'S SUNSET
MAN WITH A SWORD
THE EAGLES HAVE FLOWN
THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

HENRY TREECE

Hounds
of the King

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Contents

About this Story, [7](#)

PART ONE

- 1 Harold Godwinson's Penny, [13](#)
- 2 The Strange Visitor, [22](#)
- 3 The Road to Wallingford, [26](#)
- 4 The House of the Carles, [36](#)
- 5 'Oh, my dear friends! ', [45](#)

PART TWO

- 6 The Visitors, [61](#)
- 7 Time of Trial, [71](#)
- 8 The Jostling of Sticks, [77](#)
- 9 'We ride to meet the rebels! ', [83](#)
- 10 Oxford, [86](#)
- 11 The Consecration, [93](#)
- 12 'God save the King! ', [98](#)

PART THREE

- 13 The Trap at Sandwich, [103](#)
- 14 The Trap Sprung, [109](#)
- 15 'Look through the window! ', [117](#)
- 16 Stamfordbridge, [124](#)
- 17 The Road to Sandlake, [138](#)
- Epilogue, [153](#)
- Notes and Comments*, [155](#)

About this Story

This is a story about two things—a proud family, that of Earl Godwin of Wessex; and a proud body of warriors, the Housecarles.

Godwin spent most of his life gathering power in England for his sons. In this he was extremely successful, for though one of them, Sweyn, was outlawed and died abroad, another of them, Harold, became King.

Yet honesty demands that one should not gloss over the fact that this Harold reigned for a mere nine months. In that short space of time he had little opportunity to do more than three notable things: he struck a voluminous coinage bearing his head, and showing him to be hard-faced and grumpy; and he fought two of the wildest and most inspiring battles our soil has ever known.

Stamfordbridge and Sandlake (which the Normans called Senlac and later generations called *Hastings*) must have been terrible affairs, judged by any standards. In the first, two great warrior-leaders were killed—almost by accident it seemed—and an army which needed three hundred ships to bring it to England shrank to such a size that twenty-four could carry it away. In the second battle, a hero-King and his two brothers died savagely on a hilltop—for the Age of Chivalry was still far away—and the finest flower of English warriorhood, the Housecarles, were wiped out to a man.

These Housecarles were a picked body of fighting creatures, who swore oaths to guard their King to the death. In a way, they were the descendants of the *comitatus*, or warband, of a prince in much earlier times. Under Canute, who reigned just before King Edward, these Housecarles were hammered into a highly disciplined order of warriors, whose traditional weapon came to be the axe. One needs hardly inquire any further concerning the nature of their warfare!

However, Edward was a saintly man, half-Norman by birth, who had little wish to use his Housecarles for their intended violent purpose. It was

left to Harold Godwinson, King Harold, to put them into the forefront of battle—and there at last, to lose them.

This book, then, tells of the rise and fall both of a great English family and of a great English warrior caste.

HENRY TREECE

PART I

1. Harold Godwinson's Penny

Two boys wrestled in the late afternoon sunshine, the thatched and oaken byre towering above them, the dust and chaff of summer swirling in whorls about their angry shuffling feet. One of the boys was tall and thin and dark-haired; the other small but squarely built, his face red with excitement, his fair hair glistening in the sun.

Round them a score of peasant-lads, of varying ages, but all dressed in rough hide or sheepskin, surged and elbowed here and there, shouting advice, waving their arms in the forgetfulness of battle, punching each other sometimes without knowing it, receiving blows themselves with the same indifference.

‘Beornoth! Beornoth!’ shouted some, the smaller boys. ‘Cryda! Have him down, Cryda!’ yelled others, who favoured the dark-haired wrestler. More shouted for Cryda than for Beornoth, for the black-headed boy was the only son of the reeve, whose father nightly ate with the thegn of the manor and was powerful. But the little boys did not consider such high politics; they liked Beornoth because he was both strong and kind and would always fight for them if they were being ill-treated, even though he might suffer as a consequence.

‘Beornoth! Put your leg behind him!’ the small boys shrieked at their fair-haired hero. ‘He’s tiring! Take your chance!’

There was far too much noise for Beornoth to hear their counsel; and he was far too excited to pay attention to it, even had he been able to hear it. Yet, by some freak of fortune, the short, square lad did exactly as they had said, and the gangling, dark-haired wrestler flew backwards, his arms flailing, into the damp straw-heap that had been built up, as the year ripened, beside the thick oak wall of the byre.

Beornoth stood panting and smiling above him, brushing his light hair from his wet forehead.

‘Shake hands and be friends, Cryda,’ he said. ‘We will wrestle as brothers next time, with no hard feelings.’

He went forward to the glowering Cryda, and tried to help him up. But Cryda, who feared he would never live down this insult, struck upwards suddenly with a sharp stone he had found among the heap.

‘Son of a ploughman!’ he said, sliding sideways and away from the other.

Beornoth staggered back, half-blinded with the sharpness of the blow. About him the voices of boys arose suddenly, some pitying, some gloating, and then died away as suddenly.

The fair-haired lad staggered from the shadow of the byre again, into the sunlight, shaking his head. He was very angry, not so much for the treachery of the blow as for the words which had accompanied it. Beornoth loved his father dearly and would have fought with anyone who spoke an ill word of him.

His arms swung out again, in self-defence, for he suspected that Cryda would take his opportunity now. But no one came to grasp him by the neck or by the leg; no one even shouted any more. The stack-yard was silent, with a strange and unnatural silence.

‘Fight on then, Cryda,’ said Beornoth. ‘I am ready for you now.’ He said that, but he lied, for he could not see clearly at all.

Then he heard a new voice, a man’s voice, speaking to him from a fair distance away; not a voice that he knew, but one which carried authority in its tones.

‘You are too late, warrior!’ the voice said. ‘Your enemy has run away and left you. Turn round and come to me!’

Beornoth turned and shook his head again. His sight cleared. He saw two horsemen standing there, over the low village stockade, at the edge of the stack-yard. They were looking towards him and speaking to each other, nodding and smiling. One of them was very tall and black-haired, his nose curved like the beak of an eagle beneath his high, pointed helmet. He wore a black cloak which floated behind him in the wind as the wayward breezes blew up the valley. The other was short and square, much like himself, and his golden hair swept out under his light mail cap. It was this one who had shouted. His face was hard, but there was a kindly curl to his lips as he spoke, ‘Come, come, warrior! Does Harold Godwinson have to ask a ploughman’s son twice!’

Beornoth looked about him. The boys had run away.

Beornoth went forward to the stockade, trying to smile, but angry within himself at the trick which the stranger had seen played on him, and also at the reference to his father as a ploughman.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘we are of good blood. My father’s folk once came with Aelle in small ships. But we have fallen. My father’s father had many sons, and they divided the land among them. My father was the youngest and so must often work for another since he has little enough land for his own family, my mother and my brother.’

The two men on the other side of the low stockade were silent for a moment or two. Then the golden-haired one said, ‘I was more fortunate. My fathers got themselves a bigger portion of land than did yours. That is all.’

Beornoth looked at the gold decorations on his belt, and dagger hilt, and cloak brooch, and he felt very proud to be addressed by such a great lord. But the other one gave a scornful laugh and half turned his horse with a vicious tug at the reins. It seemed that he wished to ride away now.

‘The young churl will get ideas above his station if you talk to him in such words,’ he said. ‘Come, Harold, we have far to ride today, and there are many who would pay enough gold to build an abbey for the mere privilege of catching us alone in such a deserted countryside as this!’

But Harold, the golden-haired one, ignored him, and turned once more to Beornoth, who by now was feeling a little overwhelmed by the majesty and apparent power of these two horsemen.

‘Tell me more about your family, lad,’ he said. ‘I have been occupied with killing men for so long, it seems, that it comes as a pleasant change to talk to them about ordinary things.’

At this, the black-haired man gave a snort of impatience and tugged at his long moustache. Harold heard and saw these signs, and turning, said in a low voice, ‘Go you, brother Tostig, and ride on along the hill. I will follow you when I have spoken with my young friend here.’

At this, Tostig gave another snort and said, ‘Don’t be a fool, brother! We must stand together if we are to live on in this land.’

He drew off a yard or two and reined in his horse to a standstill then, as though he knew that his brother would not be forced against his will.

‘Well, sir?’ said Harold to the boy.

Beornoth swallowed hard and tried to look the lord in the eye, though it was difficult. ‘My father farms a dozen hides of land, lord,’ he said, ‘and

when he can he helps the thegn who holds this manor. We are not slaves, you understand. But times have been hard, my father says. My grandfather's land had to be divided among so many of the kin that there is little enough left for any of us now.'

'It is well enough for the King's thegns,' Harold said, 'for they are great, and have many thegns under them. But for the little thegns, like your father, why, they are scarcely better off than the peasants in the fields. Has your father served with the fyrd, boy?'

Beornoth shook his head. He said, 'There has been little in this part of Mercia for a fighter to do, since good King Edward became our ruler.'

Harold shook his head, his hard face becoming stern. 'There is always fighting for the man who likes it,' he said. 'But perhaps your father is a man of peace?'

'I can assure you, lord,' Beornoth said, 'my father is no coward! Why, he rode fast enough with his lance and his sword when Godwin brought his armies to frighten the good King at Gloucester. But it came to nothing. The rebel knew when he was outnumbered!'

And when he had let out these words, he could have died with shame. Harold was looking through him, not angrily, but very seriously, and his harsh face had reddened. He spoke in a rough voice now, 'Yes, outnumbered, boy! I should know that. I was there with my father Godwin!'

Beornoth did not know where to put himself. Harold gazed at him for a moment and then said, 'I think no worse of your father for riding to aid his lord. I think no worse of you for defending your father. Yet, I must tell you, lad, that old women chatter much about chimney corners, and a sensible man does not give much attention to their babbling. And I tell you also that no dog loves a wolf and no lamb a lion!'

Beornoth smiled now and scratched his head. 'I do not understand you, lord,' he said.

Harold smiled back, but Tostig spurred a pace forward and said, 'Put your sword through the young whelp, brother. He is of traitrous blood. Come, we are already late.'

Still Harold ignored him, and leaning over the stockade he said, 'You are a good lad, whatever your name is. There are few grown men who would dare to tell me to my face that they were on the side of the good King, against the sons of Godwin! One day you may learn that Godwin was a good father to his people. He would not butcher them because some white-brained

old maniac wished it so. Godwin would stand against his own king if he was in the right.'

Beornoth said, 'My mother says that Godwin's too big for England to hold him and King Edward at the same time. She says that had he lived, we would not have all these Normans at court.'

Harold now smiled almost gaily. 'Your mother seems a shrewd woman, lad,' he said. 'Is she a Mercian, like your father?'

Beornoth grinned and answered, 'No, my lord. She was born in the best part of the Danelaw, as she calls it, in Lindsey. She is of the distant blood of Cnut himself and could hardly speak a word of English when she married my father!'

The golden-haired lord laughed aloud then and slapped his thigh very hard until all his buckles and harness jingled with the blow.

'By Odin,' he said, 'I thought you must have Viking blood in you to make you fight so well! Look you, son, now you see me only a mere earl. Nothing else! But one day, mayhap, I shall grow to be something else, who knows? Are you listening?'

Beornoth looked up with a start, for the lord's face had become deadly serious and he was whispering now, as though he did not want anyone, no, not even the raven-haired man who fumed a distance behind him, to hear what he said.

'Look you, Viking,' he said again, 'I am of the blood of northmen too, and I tell you this; one day I shall need men like you, men who can fight all the better, the bigger their enemies. Will you come and fight for me then? Fight for Harold Godwinson, boy?' Beornoth gazed up at him, his head spinning. Then he shook his head so violently that his shock of hair fell over his face, hiding the tears that had come so suddenly into his eyes.

'Yes, Harold Godwinson,' he said. 'I will fight for you if you think I am good enough.'

A little twisted smile crept over the hard face that looked down on him.

'Give me your hand on that, man,' said the great earl, suddenly swinging his legs over his saddle and vaulting down on to the ground before the boy.

Beornoth knelt before him. He did not know what made him do it. But he knelt, as he had heard grown men knelt before their lord, and placed his hands, in the attitude of prayer, within those of Harold

Godwinson. And he noticed that they were very hard hands, and very cold; but he also noticed that they shook a little, too.

And then Harold Godwinson drew away from him and, feeling in his embroidered pouch, held something out to him. Beornoth took it, wondering. It was a penny. At first Beornoth half expected to find Harold's head stamped on the shining coin, but that would be impossible! No, it bore the solemn features of the King, Edward the Confessor; but a great cross had been scored over the face of the coin, as with a sharp dagger point, almost obliterating the face of the ruling monarch. Beornoth had never seen anything like that before. He looked up in bewilderment at the smiling face of Earl Harold.

'Now you are a bought man and may sell yourself to no other lord,' said the earl. 'Is that agreed?'

Beornoth nodded, and his eyes began to fill up again at the great honour which had been allowed him.

Harold Godwinson gave him a pat on the shoulder that almost sent him flying backwards. Then he made a light leap and, mounting the stockade, was once more sitting astride his horse.

He turned and said, 'Do not forget, Viking, I shall wait for you. There is a place among the Housecarles waiting for you when you stand as high as this stockade!'

Then he had swung his great horse round, and with a high shout had called his glowering brother to him. Together they set their chargers at the hill and with a swirl of cloaks, their hair flying out behind them, had galloped to the long shoulder of heath that stood above the village.

At the top, Harold Godwinson turned in his saddle and glanced down briefly at the boy. Beornoth, still clutching the damp penny, waved up at him, but the earl did not return his wave. Then they were gone.

Then, suddenly afraid of what he had done, Beornoth flung the mutilated coin into the pond that glimmered beside the barn. It sank with a little *plop*.

Later that evening he crept into his straw bed, unnoticed by his parents, who were arguing, their faces lined and worried in the candle-light, about the crops.

Beornoth's small brother, Cendred, was already asleep, wrapped in a five-year-old's dream of adventure, in which he was chasing a bear. Later

that night the dream came again; but this time the bear was chasing Cendred, and his little legs kicked off the threadbare blanket as he tried to escape.

Beornoth's dream was much less exciting. He was fumbling in the village pond, trying to find Harold Godwinson's penny.

2. The Strange Visitor

BEORNOTH was now fifteen. He had grown amazingly in the years since he had first met Harold Godwinson. Five years of hard work, in all seasons and all weathers, had broadened his shoulders and built muscles on to his arms and legs. He had the promise of great strength upon him, and his sun-bleached hair, which he kept close-cropped to save daily combing, and his tanned face, weathered by all the winds that blew across Mercia, gave him the appearance of one much older than he was. And now no lad in the village, or even along the valley, would take him on at fist-fighting or quarter-staff, if they could avoid it. Even Cryda had grown strangely polite towards him, but by now Beornoth had learned not to care, one way or another, what that sly creature did. There were other things to think about, more important.

The seasons had not been kind. For two years a cattle plague had swept the valley and reduced their livestock; harvests had been miserable ones; winters had been hard. Yet Beornoth's father still had to pay his feorm tax, to do his service on the lord's farm, though his own needed his care the more.

Then an unforeseen disaster struck the family. A distant relative, whom they had not seen for many years, a hasty man, quarrelled with another in Hereford market one day over the price of a cow and, blind with anger, struck down a reeve with his scramasaxe.

According to the law, the reeve's life was worth twelve hundred shillings, and Beornoth's father, the murderer's only known relative, must pay the fine if the latter was to live.

As they rode back from the Shire Court, the thegn twitched the oxen with his willow-wand to cover his sadness. The wagon creaked onwards down the dusty road.

'We'll never pay the fine in my lifetime,' he said to his wife. 'Beornoth may, or Cendred; but not I, my love.'

And no more was said about the matter. But from that time forward, the family worked as they had never worked before, rising earlier and going to

bed later than anyone else in the village. Now there seemed nothing more in life than work, work, work; whether the sky was dark, or the sun burning hot; whether the rain filled the furrows, or the frost turned fingers to aching stone. There was only work.

The little thegn never complained, but his wife and his sons saw that he was getting thinner and more bent. He coughed almost incessantly and cried out in his sleep.

One day Beornoth's mother called him to her and said, 'My son, your father is sick. We must do something for him or he will wear himself into the grave for his kinsman's crime. What can we do, my son? I ask you, for I am at the end of my wits, thinking of the matter.'

And Beornoth said, 'Life is hard in Mercia, Mother. Our new earl, Edwin, is little more than a boy himself. He does not know how to help his people. He is too busy trying to become a great man himself to think of us. Could my father not go to the King? He is a holy man, they say.'

Beornoth's mother smiled a little bitterly. 'My son,' she said, 'King Edward is so occupied in becoming a saint that he has lost the touch of ordinary humanity. He will spend his years and the country's money building his fine West Minster at London, but not a penny on his unfortunate thegns and their families.'

'But we are good Englishmen,' said Beornoth. 'He owes us his protection, Mother.'

She turned away, to stir at the iron pot that swung over the wood fire. There was no meat in it; only an oat porridge that must keep them going all that day, even young Cendred, who was nearly eleven and always very hungry.

She paused a while, and then, as an afterthought, she said, 'What help could the King give? What power has he in this land? The North is ruled by Tostig Godwinson, East Anglia is ruled by Gyrth Godwinson, the South is ruled by Leofwine Godwinson, and Wessex has its great earl, Harold Godwinson! Why, there is little enough left—only Mercia, which our own young fool of an earl holds, our silly Edwin, and Wales, where Gruffydd, the wild Welshman, roams and slays as he will. King Edward is like a man locked up in his own house by wandering robbers—he cannot help us.'

She turned her attention once more to the bubbling porridge, and Beornoth wandered to the door. The sun was shining very hotly down on the village. It was a harsh sun and would burn up the crops this year.

He turned back to his mother for a moment and said, 'Well, if the King cannot help us, mayhap there is one who can. He has power enough to do so, from what you say.'

But his mother did not hear him. She was deep in her own thoughts, wondering how she could feed three hungry men with that small handful of gruel. She never thought of herself.

Beornoth wandered between the wooden houses, full of anxiety. Almost as though he walked in his sleep, he went towards the stockade that surrounded the village. He was leaning against it when suddenly a strange thought came into his head.

'Why,' he said to himself, 'I never noticed that before. I have grown as tall as the stockade!'

Excitedly, he leaned against the wooden stakes again and felt over his head with the flat of his hand. Yes, he was as tall as the ash-fence, perhaps a little taller, even.

It was while he was thinking of this that another curious thing happened. The byre-pond had dried up in the heat of that summer, a thing which had not happened before in Beornoth's memory, and now he could see its cracked clay surface, littered with many cast-off objects—rusty sickle-blades, pieces of stone and wood, even a worn old shoe. But there was something else that caught the boy's eye. Something that lay in the middle of the dried pond and shone in the sunlight. He gave a little cry and ran towards it. Then he was standing upright again, rubbing the coin on his jerkin to clean from it all traces of its long immersion. Harold Godwinson's penny!

There could be no doubt now; this was a sign, an omen. 'Come to me when you are as tall as the stockade,' Harold had said. And now he *was* as tall as the stockade. Yet, he had not thought definitely of this until he had seen the penny again. Harold Godwinson was the man to help his family, that much seemed certain. But how could this be? What could one do to gain his help?

Beornoth was still thinking of this problem when beyond the village resounded the clatter of a horse's hooves. The boy went to the gate that led to the road and looked out. A man was riding towards him, looking neither to right nor to left, sitting erect in the saddle, his bare head held high. Beornoth had never seen a rider like this before in Mercia. This was a very strange visitor.

3. The Road to Wallingford

At first the village boys who clustered about the gate ran towards this rider, assuming from his close-cropped hair and long, plain habit that he was a friendly priest, who might give them some small reward for leading him to the church. But when they got nearer to him, their leaders drew back, for his hard face was puckered with old scars that showed white as ivory against his leather-coloured cheeks and brow.

He did not smile and his light grey eyes stared past them as though they were wisps of mist.

The silent crowd parted to let him ride through the gate. He did so without giving the slightest sign that he had seen them.

‘That is as strange a priest as any I did see,’ whispered a boy called Ulfig. ‘Look at his spur-rowels! They are of silver. And see, his saddle is embossed with big red corals!’

‘I saw the gold bracers on his wrists,’ said Beornoth, ‘and I think he carries a sword under the skirt of his robe. Shall we follow him?’

Ulfig answered, ‘You may, if you please, but I do not like the look on that man’s face. He is such a one as might ride a boy down, and without thinking twice about it.’

‘Well, I will go,’ said Beornoth, who was by now so curious that he would have dared face even Grendel—almost!

The others had withdrawn into small groups and, after some argument about the identity of the stranger, had momentarily forgotten him in favour of their talk about crops and herds, and all the other country matters which occupied their minds to the exclusion of everything else.

The man rode on past the tall byre with Beornoth a few paces behind him, making no attempt to hide his curiosity in this unusual visitor.

Yet the boy felt a shock of surprise when suddenly the man spoke, without turning in his saddle. ‘You, boy! Lead me to the smith’s forge. Don’t hang about behind me. Come in front and move your lazy bones!’

The man's voice was as hard as his face. It was a voice that showed authority and would not be disobeyed. Yet somehow beneath the words he spoke there shimmered the strange impression of a sort of firm kindness.

Beornoth hurried forward and would have taken the horse's bridle, but the rider shook his head sternly.

'Keep away from my horse,' he said. 'He knows only me. He would savage you. Do you walk in front. I will follow.'

So in silence they reached the forge at last.

Now, Ceolric the Smith was a fat man with a bad temper. He had lost an eye when a piece of hot iron had jumped from the anvil one day into his face, and had ever afterwards borne a grudge against the world. No boy would work for him, blowing the bellows or holding the horses, and so Ceolric was forced to use slaves for these tasks when they were not required by their owners on the land. Perhaps it was a fair indication of the smith's state of popularity in the village to say that no stray dog ever went to his forge for scraps.

When the stranger reined in his horse before the half-door of the forge, Ceolric was sitting in the sun, scratching himself and drinking from an earthen mug. He looked up suspiciously out of his solitary dark eye and said, 'Go away, stranger, I have no wish to serve you. Go away. The next village is not more than five miles distant up the valley.'

Beornoth, looking up, saw the rider's jaws clench hard, making the muscles of his thin face stand out. A little vein in his temple began to throb. Yet when he spoke, his voice was under perfect control.

'My horse has cast a shoe,' he said. 'It must be replaced. I cannot ride him five miles without a shoe, smith.'

Ceolric put down his mug and struggled to his feet, wiping his great hands down his greasy apron. His face was that which he normally used to frighten little boys, for Ceolric was a bully.

'Must! Must!' he shouted. 'No one tells Ceolric when he *must* do a thing!'

The rider looked down at him, expressionless.

'Then my orders will be a change for you,' he said. 'I tell you my horse *must* have a shoe. And when you speak to me, I beg you not to raise your voice. You will have a heart attack. Either that, or I shall become very angry

with you; and if that were to happen, I might forget myself and do you a severe injury.'

Ceolric was now beside himself with rage. No one but the lord of the manor and his reeve would dare to speak so to him. He took a pace forward, intending to grasp the rider's ankle and pitch him from the saddle, an old trick of his.

But even as he reached out his hand, the rider leaned and took it in his own.

'Thank you, smith,' he said calmly. 'You are a courteous man at heart, I see, wishing to help me down from my horse.'

But Ceolric was groaning and the sweat was pouring down his face. The rider's grasp on his wrist was so strong that Beornoth saw the smith's own hand go ashen white with the pressure. Yet the rider never moved in the saddle, nor did his face change.

At last, when the tears flowed from Ceolric's eyes and he began to cry out for mercy, the rider flung him backwards, against the rough wall of the forge.

'Thank you for your help, smith,' he said. Then he vaulted lightly to the ground. Beornoth heard the clink of a mail shirt beneath the long dark purple habit. This one was no priest!

Ceolric tottered against the wall. 'How can I shoe your horse,' he said, 'when you have crushed my hand?'

The stranger gave him a curt smile as he strode past him into the smithy. 'It is no loss,' he said, 'I shall do the job myself.'

He took a finished shoe from a hook on the wall, looked at it scornfully, and then flung it on to the heap of iron that lay by the furnace.

'If you can do no better than that, it is perhaps as well that your hand will keep you from botching up good iron for a week or two!'

Ceolric glared at him in frustrated anger, but did not dare to speak.

The stranger turned to Beornoth. 'Can you blow up the fire, boy?'

Beornoth nodded, with a smile, and soon the two were working like old comrades, the man with his long sleeves rolled back and his strong-thewed arms ruddy with the reflection of the glowing fire, the boy red with the exertion of pumping away at the old leathern bellows. The man worked with

the quick skill and certainty of one to whom this was an old task, much practised and made easy by the years.

Ceolric, leaning against the door-post, stared at him in wonder. 'I have never before seen a man twist a bar of iron so smoothly,' he said. And this was great praise from the grudging blacksmith. The man in the long habit did not answer him, but went on working at the iron until he had produced a fine curve of metal, thin and beautifully finished.

He looked across the anvil at the boy and said, 'A fine horse needs must wear fine shoes. One day I will shoe him in silver.'

Both Beornoth and Ceolric gasped at this. Then the man turned abruptly to the smith. 'Go, fetch a bucket of water to cool the iron, you lazy oaf!' he said, roughly, as though speaking to a savage dog.

Ceolric's eye started out of his head. At first it seemed that he would fly at the man again; but he controlled himself and went meekly to do as he was bid.

When the horse was shod once more, the man rolled down his sleeves and said, 'Boy, you have good arms. They should be used for other tasks than guiding a plough across this miserable land. Would you not like to travel and carry a weapon?'

Beornoth nodded, wondering what this man knew of such things.

'Is there wealth to be made, sir?' he asked, fearfully.

The man regarded him for a moment with those stern grey eyes, as though testing him. Then he said quietly, 'The best soldiers fight because that is the only thing they want in life. Yet, for those who set store by gold, there is gold to be had. Sometimes much, sometimes little. It depends on the luck of the battle.'

He sat down on the bench outside the forge and beckoned the lad to sit beside him. Then he drew a silken wallet from beneath his full garment and spread out a small cloth on the oaken bench. From the wallet he took bread and a slice of cheese. From a thong about his neck he took a flask made of green glass, protected by basket-work of silver. He drank from the flask and after wiping the neck passed it to Beornoth.

'Drink with me, boy,' he said. 'You helped me well.'

Ceolric hung about behind them, resentful that this fine visitor should ignore him so.

‘Where could I go to become a fighting man?’ asked the boy, shuddering at the sharp tang of the red wine in the flask. The stranger grinned at this grimace and said, ‘Doubtless somewhere where the wine is sweet! This is a rough Welsh brew, I fear.’

Beornoth stared at him in wonder. ‘Are you a Welshman, then?’ he said, hardly knowing what he should do if the answer were ‘Yes’.

In answer the man spat on to the dusty ground. Then he shook his close-cropped head. ‘No, boy,’ he said with contempt, ‘but I ride from Wales, and this is the best they could fill my flask with. Yes, there have been great things done in Wales, my boy! Earl Harold and his black brother Tostig have dragged the Welshman down at last! Gruffydd ap Llywelyn died on August 5th, by God’s Grace, and both his head and the prow of his ship follow close behind me, spoils of war for Holy Ned in London!’

Beornoth had never before been spoken to as an equal by a man like this; nor had he ever heard the King called by such a term of contempt. He felt elated and shocked at the same time.

Just then Ceolric, whose courage had returned somewhat, pushed forward and said, ‘Come now, traveller, and what fee do I get?’

The man looked up at him with a smile. ‘What fee can you expect? You did no work.’

The smith glowered down. ‘Well, you used my forge and my iron,’ he growled.

The man said lightly, ‘Would you like to stand before the Shire Court, my man?’

‘Why should I do that?’ asked the smith, blustering, though a little taken aback.

‘Because,’ said the man in the long robe, ‘you are demanding a fee from me, and so are breaking one of the oldest laws.’

Ceolric said, ‘Don’t talk in riddles, man! You can’t baffle me with such nonsense. What law am I breaking?’

The man said, ‘A King’s messenger must not be meddled with. He has a right to the best the land can give, without a farthing’s payment, just as the King himself has. Do I make myself clear?’

Ceolric walked away, grumbling that the land was full of fine gentlemen who were nothing better than fine thieves when all came to all.

A red flush spread over the man's face, and his fingers twitched. Then he seemed to recollect himself and called after the man, 'Here, smith, catch! This is your reward!'

He flung something to Ceolric, who bent with alacrity and caught it, despite his injured hand. It was a mutton bone. He flung it to the ground in anger and went into his smithy. The man laughed in contempt and then turned to Beornoth.

'Well, my friend, this was a short meeting, but you have been a help to me.' He began to feel in his pouch as though for money, but Beornoth took his courage in both hands and said, 'Please, lord, do not make me into a beggar. I am the son of a thegn, though a poor one. I once shook the hand of Earl Harold himself, when he came here. I am no beggar.'

The man regarded him closely for a moment. 'A thegn's son with muscles like yours and the wish to be a fighting man. . . . Why did you not tell Godwinson that? He would have liked to hear you say that.'

Beornoth took the defaced coin from his pocket slowly and held it out, in his palm, for the man to see. 'I did tell him, sir,' he said, 'and he gave me this and told me to come to him one day, when I was big enough.'

The fine lord looked at the coin and then gave a great laugh, slapping his hand down so hard on the bench that Beornoth almost fell to the ground.

'By God's little body!' said the man. Then he reached into his vestment and drew out a long gold chain, on the end of which another penny hung, bearing the head of Edward the Confessor, and scored across with the sharp point of a dagger, like the one which trembled in the lad's hand.

Beornoth stared at it and then at the man.

'Who are you, sir?' he said. 'Who are you, I beg?'

The other took him by the shoulder gently but firmly. 'I am a Housecarle, my lad,' he said. 'And by the coin you hold in your hand, a fellow-conspirator! May Edward fall and may Harold sit in his chair! That is the oath, is it not, boy?'

Then Beornoth began to tremble in every limb, to think that in taking Harold's hand, he had pledged himself against King Edward.

The man slapped him hard on the shoulder. 'Well, lad,' he said, 'we are on the right side, we two, for the family of Godwin rules this land, even though that old fool in London has not yet realised it! But he will, my son, he will! And before very long.'

The man got up from the bench and buckled his belt tightly about him.

‘I must go now,’ he said. ‘Guard that penny well, and do not show it to every traveller you meet! Otherwise they will be carrying your head to London as they are poor Gruffydd’s now!’

When his foot was already in the stirrup, Beornoth ran out to him and said earnestly, ‘Take me with you, Housecarle, and let me serve Earl Harold when the time shall come. I will go to my mother and tell her that I am off to seek my fortune, if you will but let me ride behind you.’

The Housecarle looked down at him for a space and then said, ‘I do believe you are an honest lad who might come in time to serve well, when they had taught you the trade. And if what you tell me is true, then Earl Harold has taken a fancy to you, too. But I go to the House of the Carles at Wallingford, near Oxford, and then on to London to the King. I do not know whether I should do right in taking you with me.’

Beornoth looked into his face anxiously and saw kindness flickering for an instant in the light grey eyes.

‘Wait for me a few minutes, sir,’ he said, as he ran away down the narrow little street.

‘I will count two hundred,’ said the man, ‘and then I shall ride on.’

But Beornoth was back with him before he had counted past one hundred and seventy, his face flushed with excitement, a smile on his lips. The man made a grimace, then leaned down and swung the lad up behind him on the big horse.

So they passed out through the village gate. The boys clustered round the horse, staring up at Beornoth in surprise. Some of them wished him well, wherever he was bound for. The man said over his shoulder, ‘Who is the tall black lad, who wears a sneer on his pale face?’

‘That is Cryda, the reeve’s son,’ said Beornoth.

‘I do not like him,’ said the Housecarle.

Beornoth laughed then and so quite forgot the tearful look on his mother’s face. He did not recall it for another mile.

4. The House of the Carles

THAT night they stayed at the house of an ealdorman, more than a score of miles from Wallingford. It was a splendid hall of new wood, with a high stockade built about it and guards at the door. Beornoth noted the kingposts of the hall, each one painted with thick gold leaf, and the cloth hangings that kept out the draught from the double doors that led directly on to the courtyard. These curtains were of thick woollen cloth and each embroidered with scarlet and black silks, intermingled with delicate silver and golden threads. They told a story of ships coming to a place, and then sailing away once more, leaving a hall burning behind them. Beornoth wondered what this story was, but did not dare to ask. Instead, he sat where he was put, at the far end of the long table, and listened to a singer who had come in from the village nearby with his small harp.

As for Beornoth's friend, the Housecarle, he sat at the head of the table with the owner of the house, talking in Latin. This surprised the boy, as he thought this language was only used for prayers. Yet these men spoke it easily and without much hesitation, sometimes putting in a Saxon word when there was no corresponding expression in the Latin. Beornoth heard them using the word 'king' and 'earl' many times, and often he caught such names as 'Harold,' or 'Tostig' or 'Gruffydd,' and even the name of his own earl, 'Edwin'.

It seemed, however, that they spoke on weighty matters, which they did not want the others at the table to overhear. Beornoth tired of it all after a while, and as soon as he could, went to the bed-place allotted him. He slept soundly that night for he was tired and the ealdorman had made him eat a heavy meal. All the same, before he fell off, he thought of his mother's last words to him: 'Go then, son, if you are so minded. Bring back a fortune if you can, to pay off the debt of our kinsman and let your father hold his lands free again. Go with my blessings. I will tell your father and your brother what you have done.'

No doubt Cendred would cry at losing his playmate; and the little thegn would shrug his shoulders and wipe his nose, and cough before he went out to work in the fields once more, covering up his feelings as he always did.

Beornoth felt that he loved his father dearly then; his was not the obvious bravery of the battlefield—it was something even more important. It was the slow and persistent courage that makes a man work on day after day, day after day, without complaining, and often without hope.

In the morning they set off once more, and when it was midday and they were almost within reach of Wallingford, the Housecarle reined in the horse and tethered him by the roadside where a clump of willows grew. He led the way down to a little stream and there the two of them dangled their feet in the cool waters.

‘I am in a great hurry,’ said the Housecarle, ‘but never in so much hurry that I cannot spare the time to sample the freshness of a stream!’

Beornoth looked up at him in great admiration. In all the halls and villages of England, the Housecarles were looked upon as being the bravest warriors of the times, perhaps of all times. And here was one of them, a nobleman himself judging by the respect with which the ealdorman had entertained him, splashing about in the water with simple Beornoth Ulfson, just like a village lad.

The boy smiled and then said this to the warrior. The Housecarle smiled too, though a little grimly. ‘Enjoy it while you may, my son,’ he said, ‘for it will never happen again. In the days to come you will hear many things of me, and if you go to London you may even see me, for I am a King’s Housecarle—but we shall never play together again—unless it be on the battlefield.’

Beornoth looked at him with such a change of expression at these words, that the man seemed to soften a little. ‘Look you,’ he said, ‘men consider me to be one of the important Housecarles, you understand, and I must not go playing with the new recruits, now must I? But I shall always remember our game together. Let that console you, Beornoth.’

Beornoth nodded, a little sadly, for he wished that this man might be his comrade, his brother, in whatever trials might come.

At last the Housecarle, who had been silently contemplating the water for a while, said, ‘Look, lad, you go to Wallingford of your own free will. No one would know if you turned round and went home again.’

Beornoth stared at him with wide-open eyes. ‘But why should I go home?’ he asked.

The man flung a little pebble into the stream and watched its ripples disappear before he answered. Then all he said was, ‘It is hard there, but I

think it is worth it—if one is hard, too.’ He waited for a while, and then gave the signal to be up and moving again. They reached the House of the Carles within half an hour.

‘Now you must walk, my son,’ said the Housecarle, as gently as he could. Beornoth got off the horse and stared at the great house before them.

It was high-gabled and bigger than anything he had seen before. About it stood other much smaller houses, and the whole was enclosed by a stockade which covered many acres. The top of the stockade was armed with numerous sharp iron spikes. It would not be an easy place to break into—or out of, Beornoth thought grimly.

Even as they approached, a small window in the great gates opened, and a face looked out at them. Then the window shut once more and the gates swung wide to let them in. The guard who stood within the entrance grounded his javelin and stared in the air, stiffly, as they passed. Beornoth’s eyes almost popped out of his head at the magnificence of the man’s equipment—a horn helmet, reinforced by broad strips of steel, so highly burnished that it shone enough to blind one in the sunlight; a short hauberk of chain-mail, every other link being gilded, so that the effect was of untellable richness; a broad red leather belt, studded with bronze studs, from which hung on one side a broadsword, and on the other a short dagger. And the whole set off with a cloak of deep purple, such as his friend wore, that reached down to the ground. Beornoth felt a little frightened at seeing such splendour—frightened and yet proud. If only they would let him wear such things. . . .

The horseman shook him from his daydream. ‘Clothes do not matter, my boy,’ he said. ‘It is the spirit that counts. The Carles do not always dress up so beautifully, I can tell you! See them at their exercise and you’ll see a man without a shirt, in filthy breeches and shoes that a slave would be ashamed of! But their axes—their axes must always be kept splendid and bright. The Carles are axe-men, my friend, not sword-men. We think poorly of the sword, as but a makeshift thing. Good enough for boys and women, but a silly thing for a strong man to play with!’

And then they passed within another, lower stockade, that gave on to a great open space before the hall. Now Beornoth gave a great start of surprise, for it seemed that there were men everywhere, men of all sorts, but all strong men, even frightening men. These were the famous Carles!

Some of them were dressed in splendid mail shirts, others, their brawny bodies burnt black by the sun, were naked but for a pair of cross-gartered

breeches or a strip of linen wrapped about their waists. Many of them sprawled against the low wall that enclosed their parade ground. Some knelt down, some lay with their head on their hand, some stood together, leaning against each other, their arms interlocked as those of close friends might be. And they were all talking, smiling, singing, demonstrating axe-cuts with their hands or with willow sticks. Beornoth gazed at them with a fearful admiration, for they were such men as he had thought could only live in the ancient pagan Valhalla.

He looked up at his friend, to find that the man's eyes were already on him, searching him, and he was smiling gravely.

'Ceolric the Smith is not a very frightening man now, is he?' the rider asked.

Beornoth swallowed hard and said, 'Now I have seen what strong warriors look like, I would willingly go back and fight Ceolric!'

The rider shook his head. 'Now you are here, you stay—at least, if they want you. I gave you your chance to go back when we were paddling. Do you remember?'

Beornoth felt that the man was accusing him of cowardice. His anger rose a little. 'I will stay,' he said. 'And they *shall* want me, never fear! I will become a Housecarle, sir, or die.'

The other's face creased about the mouth, though one could hardly call the movement a smile. 'We shall see,' he said. 'Aye, we shall see! Perhaps you will do both! Who knows?'

Then he swept out his hand in a wide gesture, as though indicating all the many men present in that broad space of beaten earth.

'These are wild beasts,' he said gently. 'Beasts trained only to obey their lord and to kill. But they are all of noble blood, for they are descended from the men who were once the King's own band of friends, his guard. Even today, a Housecarle may call a king by his first name. He has that right. Yes, these are the King's hounds! Some of them will gain great glory and great riches—though already most of them could buy ten villages such as yours without noticing that their coffers had suffered in the dealing. Yet most of them will not be satisfied until they gain death in battle!'

Beornoth saw again the deep white gashes on his friend's face, some of which extended across his head, into the close-cropped hair. And he recalled that when they had paddled in the stream, he had observed that the man's legs and feet were puckered and pitted with many old scars.

The boy said, 'It is a man's fate to die or to gain riches.'

The rider grunted, but did not answer him. They passed a small group of Carles who were prancing round in a ring, on their toes. These men recognised the rider and waved to him solemnly before they went on with their prancing. Beornoth could not resist smiling at them, but the rider said, 'That may look like a spring dance to you, boy, but try doing it for hour after hour, with your feet bare on the hard ground. You would wish to die after three hours of it. They do it all day. It hardens the feet and makes the legs strong. And when they have finished that, they will plunge into the river and swim for a mile with their mail shirts on and their shields strapped to their backs. Now is it funny?'

The boy said, 'I am sorry, sir.'

The rider clucked with disapproval. 'That is a thing you must never say, that you are sorry. No Carle must ever be sorry, for what he does or what he says. He may make a mistake, but he must not say that he is sorry.'

The boy stared up at him, bewildered. This was not what his gentle father had taught him.

'What must he do, then, sir?' he asked.

The rider gave a grim little smile. 'If a Carle makes a mistake, then he must find a way of doing something to make up for it, or he must be prepared to die for it. That is all. It is very easy, once you have grasped the idea. It is better than telling lies, as most men do, when they say they are sorry, without feeling sorry. Most men say they are sorry because they are afraid, and a Carle must never be afraid. A Carle must be willing to face anything at any time. A Carle must never refuse battle to anyone—though he may decide himself whether he shall kill the man he fights. I did not kill Ceolric, but I was required to fight him—in the appropriate way.'

Beornoth recalled the smith's expression of consternation when the man had leaned down and taken his hand. He smiled at the memory, for this paid off many old scores with the bully of the forge.

'Above all, remember this,' said the rider. 'He who is to die early must step proudly. That is our catch-phrase. A Carle must never show that he is tired, or grieved, or even fearful. He must step proudly.'

Beornoth remembered how this man had ridden into the village, looking neither to right nor to left, his head held high. He nodded, for he thought that he understood now. He even tried to walk proudly beside the great horse, his

own head thrown back. The rider noticed this and nudged him with his foot, as though in approval.

Then they were outside the great door of the hall, a massive oaken door, strapped here and there with blackened iron-work, carved with the figures of dragons and spouting whales, of gryphons and of immense coiling snakes. Beornoth stared at the door in wonder. He had seen nothing like this, not even in the great churches his father had shown him when they were travelling afar to seek their lost kindred who might help to pay the man-fine.

‘One last counsel,’ said his friend, as he hammered on the great door. ‘Find yourself a friend, and stick to him for ever. Be at his back in battle, at his side in the hall, beside him in the straw. Never leave him. Only so may you survive. Death comes soon to the single warrior. And do not forget, they will test you hard here. They will try to make you weep, but you must not weep. They will try to make you afraid, but you must not draw back. It is their way. Only so can they be sure that they have taken a man into their company. Their own lives depend on that.’

The boy nodded. ‘I will do as you say, sir,’ he said.

Then the rider said, ‘I shall hand you over to the captain on duty here, and then I must be off about the King’s business and you may not see me again.’

Remembering the mutilated coin, Beornoth said, ‘Which king, sir?’ He had meant it to be a sort of friendly jest, but the man looked down upon him with a face of stone.

‘There is only one king, boy. Have you lost your senses?’

Beornoth trembled as the great door swung open.

5. 'Oh, my dear friends!'

THE months had passed, at first dreadfully slowly, and then faster and faster; and now it was summer once more. The summer of 1064, called by many men 'The Fatal Summer', for so many things happened in that year.

Beornoth sat in the great hall of the Carles, brown-bodied, hard-handed, crop-haired, looking much older than seventeen now. He was tired after a long day's running, and fighting with staves, and climbing trees, and swimming fully armed in the river that flowed beyond the vast parade ground. He gazed about him, almost vacantly, for the hard exercise of the day left a man with little energy for deep and connected thought. His eyes rested on the various things about him in the hall, his home now; the only home he could think of—even though it had frightened him when he first came, nearly two years ago!

The hall of the Carles was vast—long and broad enough for six hundred men to sit at the long oaken tables that stretched from end to end of it, on either side of the great central hearth, on which blazed a roaring fire the smoke from which rose among the high rafters and finally lost itself through the chimney-hole in the steeply-pitched roof.

Along either side of the hall, thick posts rose to support the roof, finely carved and painted with many colours. These posts were adorned with the skulls of bears and the wide antlers of stags, to which iron brackets had been fastened so as to hold torches or rush-lights.

Down the centre of the hall the tall kingposts rose, each one gilded with thick leaf, splendid in the firelight. The walls on every side were gay with tapestry, cunningly embroidered in many colours, and rich with gold and silver threads.

And along those walls, behind each warrior as he sat at the board, hung the shields, round and of hard wood covered with stretched oxhide, painted in many colours and designs, so that each man might recognise his own without loss of time, should haste be necessary.

And below each shield hung the warrior's fine array—the conical horn helmet, strengthened and decorated with bands of iron and of silver; the

thigh-length chain-mail shirt, its links of gold and silver and of iron; the heavy, bronze-embossed belt, almost two hands' breadth in thickness, on the hooks of which were hung the short, broad-bladed scramasaxe, the slashing sword, and the crescent-bladed axe. These were the Housecarle's tools, by which he followed his trade, and they must ever be ready to hand.

Beornoth glanced back at his own weapons and felt proud. Yet he had not always felt so proud! Many times he had remembered that he was young Beornoth Ulfson, whose folk lived in Mercia and could not make a good living. He had wished he could see them again, and had even hung about under the high stockade, hoping for a chance to scale it at twilight, and then run all the way back home.

But the feeling had passed, his pride had returned, and he had stayed until now at last he seldom wanted to leave the Place of the Housecarles—only perhaps to glance in at home, and see how his mother was faring, and how his young brother was getting on. He often wondered whether his father was feeling better, whether his cough had left him now that the summer had come again. He wondered these things at night usually, just before sleep came, as he lay on the soft hay beneath the tapestry, beneath his own shield, in the flickering firelight. For the youngest of the Carles both lived and slept in the hall. Only the oldest of them, who had many wounds and had fought valiantly many times in battle, were allowed to live outside the hall.

The old Carles reared their families in their own houses, built here and there on the fifteen acres of Crown land which the King had allotted to the Carles at Wallingford. They did fewer duties than the younger men, but were always liable to be called out for service should the King require them, though these older ones were mainly used for giving added strength and courage to the bands of ordinary militia or the fyrd, the army of civilians which was called out in times of national emergency.

Beornoth had not seen his friend, the solitary rider, since the day he had brought him to this place. Yet often he had heard him mentioned with respect and even awe by the men about him. It turned out that he was Earl Cynwulf, though he had surrendered his earldom to a younger brother, so that he might devote his life to battle. His father had hoped that he might one day become a great churchman, and so had had him educated in Latin and even Greek; but Cynwulf had not taken well to this design, and as soon as his father had died, had joined the Carles.

It was said of him that only he might have contested the growing power of Harold Godwinson, had he chosen to, for he had every quality of a great

leader and came of a family every bit as noble as did Harold. But Cynwulf had no wish to rule a country; he wished only to pledge himself to a worthy lord and to serve that lord to death. Though many men smiled behind their hands at the thought of this and whispered to each other that Cynwulf's allegiance had been given to Harold, and never to Edward the King. When Beornoth heard such things, he smiled inwardly, for he remembered the penny which Harold Godwinson had given him that day at the village, and he thought that he too was such a man as Cynwulf in that respect. How many of them there must be among the Carles no one knew, or dared to ask; but they all spoke of Harold with respect and of Edward with an easy familiarity and even contempt.

Beornoth looked down the long table at which he sat. He saw the many men he knew, men with black hair, red hair, golden hair, brown hair, all his comrades. So many of them, it seemed, bore the names of northmen—Ase, Grim, Stainbid, Agmund, Ofram, Thori. . . . He felt strangely akin to them, for his own mother had come from the Danelaw.

The man at his right hand, a squat, heavily-muscled man with a black curly beard, suddenly dug the boy in the ribs. 'What are you thinking of, Beornoth the Suckling?' he said.

Beornoth dug him back in the ribs, even a little harder, and the man gave a grunt and pretended to stab him with his meat-knife. He was Beornoth's axe-friend, such a man as Cynwulf had advised him to find and cherish.

'I am thinking that you are a greedy hog, Finn,' said the boy, 'for you have eaten five plates of meat since we first sat here!'

'That is because I have worked hard today,' said Finn, slyly, 'digging ditches and planting new stockades. Not like some I could mention who have been playing girls' games with little quarter-staves, and wetting their lily-white bodies in the stream!'

Beornoth rubbed his head, where there were some great lumps. 'I would like to see the girl who could take the knocks we gave out today!' he said. 'And as for wetting our bodies in the stream, we swam a mile against the current in full armour today. Can you do better?'

Finn said, 'I have swum three miles in the sea, with stones tied to my feet and three men on my back!'

Beornoth said, 'Only a Viking pirate could lie like that! You give yourself away, Finn!'

The man, who was ten years older than Beornoth, nodded gravely. 'I once killed a dragon with one blow of my fist, when I was Captain of the Guard at Byzantium. Did I ever tell you about that?'

Beornoth said, 'No, nor have you told me about the time when you moved a mountain in Africa with one push of your shoulder, or when you got so hungry marching through Frankland that you ate a whole bullock and washed it down with a barrel of ale! Get on with you!'

Finn put on a long-suffering expression. 'A truthful man is never believed by fools,' he said, cutting another great slice of beef from the joint that stood before them on the oaken board.

Beornoth said, 'If you eat any more, I shall be able to fight you with one hand tied behind my back!'

Finn grinned and answered, 'That you could never do, even if I ate a loaf as big as a hayrick!'

The boy smiled and recalled his first fight with Finn. That was during the early months of his trial at the Place of the Carles. They were out on the parade ground when Finn had deliberately jostled him, as the practice was at that stage. Beornoth had pushed him back and then the black-haired Dane had calmly handed the boy a quarter-staff and had courteously indicated with a wave of the hand that he should step into the middle of the compound and fight with him.

Beornoth, who was more than a match for any man of his village with the stave, had smiled at this and had accepted gleefully. He had even been daring enough, or foolish enough, to let a smirk pass over his face as he observed the loose way in which Finn held his staff, when his own was gripped firmly in the middle; and the tip-toe stance of the man, when his own feet were spread wide apart in the usual manner.

The fight lasted exactly a quarter of a minute. After three quick passes, intended to test his opponent's defences, Finn had swung wildly at the boy's head, grasping his staff with one hand only. Beornoth saw the blow coming, and ducked, grinning as the heavy stick passed over his head. Yet his grin did not last long, nor did the stick travel far past him. Finn's iron muscles stayed it in mid-air, and then the staff was travelling back, to catch the still-stooping boy under the ear.

The group of men who had gathered about them cried out, half-derisively, 'Old fox! Old fox! Still at it with the axe-blow!'

Beornoth fell forward on to his face and lay still until someone flung a pannikin of water over him. They left him lying in the middle of the square until the meal-time, when Finn came out and led him to the table, sitting beside him now.

‘I will teach you that stroke one day,’ he said. Then he poured out some mead for the boy. ‘Drink this,’ he said, ‘and we will fight again afterwards. You need practice.’

Long afterwards, Beornoth learned that Finn was a great axe-man and had taught that blow to Harold Godwinson. It was the blow with which Godwinson was to kill his own brother at Stamfordbridge.

In the weeks that followed, Finn taught him much, always sitting beside him at the table and sleeping by his side at night. So they became axe-friends.

Those weeks were something of a torment to the boy, for any Carle had the right to test him, until such time as he had been judged ready to take the Oath of the Carles.

Once a grizzled old warrior whose right arm hung useless by his side from an axe-blow had dragged an iron spit from the fire and had said, ‘Here, take this, Housecarle, to the other side of the room.’

Beornoth had grasped the glowing iron and had done as the man told him, resisting all desire to let the spit fall, or to run, so as to make the journey quicker. And though the Carles did not usually show any sign of feeling, this time a little rustle of admiration went down the hall.

The grizzled veteran came to him afterwards and said, ‘I lost my son years ago. He died fighting in Norway. I will take you as my son, young Carle, if you wish it.’

Beornoth, whose hand had begun to hurt him now that the ordeal was over, shook his head and made himself smile.

‘I have a father, sir,’ he said. ‘He waits for me in his house in Mercia.’

The old man shrugged to hide his disappointment. ‘Such a son deserves a warrior father,’ he said.

Beornoth said, ‘My own father is brave enough for me, sir.’ For a moment he was so angry that he would have challenged the veteran to fight, but for that dangling arm. The warrior smiled at him then and, reaching into his pouch with difficulty, drew out a great cloak brooch of gold, studded with pearls and with a garnet in its centre. He held it out to the boy.

‘Send this to your father,’ he said. ‘It will buy him a new house, should he need it.’

Beornoth’s eyes filled with tears and he almost turned away from the gift; but then his common sense overruled his emotion and he took the brooch, bowing before the old man and promising to serve him in battle if ever he were needed.

The old man turned from him without another word, and never afterwards addressed any remark towards him.

Then, on another occasion, the Captain of the Guard sent for Beornoth and told him to put on a shirt of mail and a helmet for he was to mount guard over a precious casket that night.

The boy ran to Finn and borrowed from him a shirt of mail. Finn grumbled to lend his own armour and said, ‘This is a fine shirt. It was woven by an Icelandic witch and will turn away even the stroke of a lion’s paw. Lending it to an untried youth will take away its virtue. After you have worn it, it will not turn aside the blow of a kitten. But there, what must be, must!’

The casket which the boy had to guard turned out to be a stone coffin, placed in the vault of an ancient church far away from the hall, and very lonely. Before the captain left Beornoth, he raised the lid and showed the boy what lay inside. Beornoth felt himself shrinking back in horror, but noticed that the captain was watching him intently. He disguised his fear and even straightened the cerement on the body.

Then the captain left him and Beornoth stayed in the vault all night, until the dawn. He almost screamed out in fright when rats ran across the floor, or when owls shrieked in the dark above him, but somehow or other he conquered his fear and in the morning, when the captain came to visit him, he smiled and said, ‘That was well done, Beornoth. There have been men watching you all night to see that you did not run away.’

That day the King sent a coffer of presents for his Carles. It was an accustomed action with him to reward them like this on most Saints’ Days, and sometimes on ordinary Feast Days, for by regular gifts he hoped to keep these warriors of his loyal to him.

On such gift days, the Carles were assembled in the great hall and the King’s coffer placed on one of the strongest of the tables. The Carles then stepped forward, without any order of rank or precedence, and each plunged his hand into the coffer and took the thing that came first to his fingers. But whatever luck guided their hands, no man ever expressed any feelings about

his present, good or ill. That day Beornoth became the possessor of a golden chalice, set with precious stones and inlaid with fine enamel. This was worth more than the farm would make in five years of hard work, he knew, and now he resolved that he would one day provide his family with such an estate that they would bless the day he had found Godwinson's penny again in the byre-pond.

He placed this cup, together with all his other treasures, in a large skin bag, and then hung it below his shield in the hall. Each Carle had such a bag and no man might as much as lay a finger on it. That was one of the strictest rules of the House, that no man's rightful property must be touched by another without his leave. Only once since the hall had been built had a Carle stolen another's rightful chattels. He was drunk and had taken a knife that he admired, in full view of its owner. There was no secrecy about the affair, and the man had openly said that he wanted the knife and would pay good gold for it. Yet all the same the King's judgement fell on that Carle and he was thrown into the river with his hands and feet tied together, after first being proclaimed *nothing* through the land.

There was not a Carle in that hall who would not sooner have been drowned than be declared *nothing*, for that meant one without any honour, a paltry coward, a man whose word no one could trust, one who stood beyond all decency and law. Even King Edward, the Saintly One, still held to the old Scandinavian punishment and there were yet Carles at Wallingford who had been present when the King had declared Sweyn, the eldest son of Godwin, *nothing* for his part in the treacherous murder of Earl Beorn. Such a declaration meant the end of a man throughout the world.

So it was that Beornoth gradually became fit to serve with the Carles, and to be given his shield and weapons, as tokens from the King.

The night of his initiation was a solemn one in the great hall and most of the Carles were present. A great table was laid out with the shield, the helmet, the shirt of mail and the weapons, and above them was placed a painted wooden crown. The captain on duty stood behind the table, with his hand on the crown. Beornoth stood before the table, his clothes stripped from him, his head freshly shaven. He had stood there for two hours, alone, before the ceremony, for that was the command. No one in the hall during that time had spoken to him. No one had even glanced at him. It was as though he had no identity.

Then when all men were assembled and waiting, the captain had blown three times on the great war-horn that hung from the kingpost nearest him

and with his hand on the crown had proclaimed: 'I speak for the Crown, for King Edward, who has no tongue but me this night in this hall. Housecarle, will you obey the King's will in my mouth?'

Beornoth, who had been schooled in this by Finn, answered, 'I will obey the King's will in your mouth, captain. Speak on, I am listening.'

The boy tried to make his voice as loud as he could, but even so it sounded very weak in the great hall, especially as he had not eaten or drunk for twenty-four hours before, according to the custom of the Carles.

Then the captain said, 'Then listen well, Beornoth Ulfson, for the words are never spoken twice. A good hound hears the first time when his master calls.'

Beornoth said, 'I listen well, captain, and hearken to the voice of my master.'

Then the captain said, 'A Housecarle must never raise as much as a finger-joint against his King. A Housecarle must never refuse combat of any creature on two or four legs. If he should do either, he is *nothing*, without all honour, and is any man's to kill without fear of law. Is that understood, Beornoth Ulfson?'

Beornoth, whose head was beginning to swim, said weakly, 'That is understood, captain.'

Then the captain said, 'In return, your King shall feed you, house you, and give you weapons and gifts, and should he turn against you, his dog, may doom come upon him before a priest can shrive him. Is that understood, Beornoth Ulfson?'

Beornoth managed to say, 'That is understood, Captain.'

The captain said, 'Now place your two hands upon this crown and say these words after me: "I am the King's dog. I eat his bread and drink his wine. He is my master to do with as he wishes in all things. I am as a table, a sword, a trencher or a truss of hay, no more. If I break faith with my King may fire burn me, water drown me, air choke me and earth have me. Then may the lightnings of Heaven break open my false skull and the dogs of doom quarrel over my false heart, which was once worth a king's trust and is now worth nothing."'

The soldier's great voice strode on through the ancient oath, and the boy's weak voice followed, limping with fatigue. For a time Beornoth was afraid that he would never be able to finish the oath, and that, he knew,

would be the end of his hopes, for no man might take the oath twice. He would be turned from the place as a fallen Housecarle, and no man might give him work after that, under pain of the law.

Yet, by a great effort, the boy finished the oath, and then the captain came round to him and dressed him in a fine white linen tunic, over which he put the shirt of mail. Then he placed on Beornoth's head a close-fitting cap of silk, embroidered with Christian symbols, and on this he fastened the tight helmet of horn and silver and iron. Then about the boy's shoulders he placed a heavy woollen cloak of rich purple, and round his waist he buckled the broad leather belt, which supported his scramasaxe, his sword and his great axe.

And the moment the belt was put on him, the hall resounded with the cries of the assembled Housecarles, who greeted him as one of their number. The noise made the boy dizzy, and he would have fallen with fatigue and the weight of his armour had not Finn come forward and held him about the body.

'Wait a little before you die, young friend,' he said, smiling. 'They have presents to give you!'

And then the Carles filed past him, one by one, each laying on the oaken table, beside the painted crown, a gift for the new warrior. Soon many precious things glinted in the light of the torches, and as each was laid before him, Beornoth shook hands with the giver and thanked him. Now, as it seemed to him, he was rich beyond all hoping! The table seemed to groan with the weight of the treasure that was his. Now did he understand what a thing it was to become a Housecarle. Only such a man would see gifts like those that lay thickly on the oaken board—gold and silver and ivory, jade and jet and precious stones, daggers and bracelets that would buy a fine herd of cattle without any other help, combs set with coral that a queen would feel proud to wear in her hair, rings that the greatest earl would not despise.

And at last the boy grew almost delirious with the splendour of it all. He could have laughed aloud at the fantastic richness of the hoard that lay before him.

Finn sensed the laughter in him and pinched his arm to make him sober up again.

'This only happens once in a man's lifetime,' he said, 'unless he robs the vaults of Byzantium, as some I know have done! Take care of this treasure, my friend, for it is your worldly wealth from now on, unless we gain great victories in battle and conquer a kingdom!'

And when it was all over, and the gifts had been put into a stout chest and bound round with iron, so that they might be sent back to the boy's home when next a wagon went that way, the feasting began.

Now Beornoth was a Housecarle. He looked about the hall as he sat feasting with Finn at his side, and saw all the men who had accepted him as one of them, and he could not resist weeping, and calling out, senselessly, for all to hear, 'Oh, my dear friends! My dear, dear friends!'

And well he might, for these men had saved his home, his family, his father's honour.

And then, when the feasting was at its height, and the Carles were chanting the old poem, *The Battle of Maldon*, Beornoth felt that his cup of happiness was overflowing. He gave no thought to the blood that must be shed after this night.

'Thought shall be the harder, heart the keener,
Courage the greater, as our strength faileth.
Here lies our leader, in the dust of his greatness.
Who leaves him now, be damned for ever.
We who are old shall not leave the battle,
But lie at his feet, in the dust with our leader!'

And when the chanting was at its loudest and the harpstrings were throbbing again through the great hall, a messenger almost staggered into the room, a young Housecarle, caked with dust and ashen pale with exhaustion. He swayed for a while by the great hearth-stone where all messages must be given, and called out in a voice cracked with weakness.

'Housecarles,' he croaked, 'I bring bad news! Harold Godwinson has betrayed us! He has taken the oath at Bayeux to make Duke William our King!'

Men rushed to him, to ask him details of the oath, but the messenger who had ridden from the south coast that day was almost unconscious with fatigue. He swayed on his feet. The Captain of the Guard tried to force a horn of warm wine between his lips, but the man fell forward, senseless, and it was as much as men could do to save him from burning himself in the fire.

Finn stopped still, his drinking-horn half-way to his mouth. 'Bad news,' he said. 'Well, some might call it good news, for at last we may have a chance to fight with swords instead of with sticks!'

Beornoth looked at him with wide eyes. ‘Whom shall we fight?’ he asked.

‘Whom?’ asked Finn, in pretended innocence. ‘Oh, anyone! That is, anyone who gainsays the right of Godwinson to sit on the throne in London!’

And every Carle in that hall was saying or thinking the same thing.

Then a red-haired warrior named Grim passed by the table where the boy sat, and leaning over said, ‘You got your weapons just in time, brother! But see that your treasure goes home without delay, for when there is fighting to do a man’s mind must be rid of such baubles.’

That night, despite his great weariness, Beornoth hardly slept a wink. Too much had happened that day for sleep to come easily to his excited mind.

At last he was a warrior, and a rich one, too!

PART II

6. The Visitors

YET war was not as close as it had seemed. That day and the next were spent in a state of quick preparation and of impatient waiting, but no riders galloped in with the summons to arms, and the Carles settled back to waste time, some of them playing at dice or knuckle-bones, some of them wrestling or competing with each other at lifting great stones along the river's edge.

Beornoth was fortunate on the second day to be on watch at the great gate when a heavily laden wagon surrounded by a dozen mounted guards halted in the road outside. From their dress he saw that they were Housecarles, though the colour of their cloaks showed them to belong to a different House. They wore blue, which signified the Carles of Smith's Field, outside London. These men were notoriously loyal to King Edward and jealous of Godwin's family. Yet they were Carles; that was the important thing. They obeyed the same oath as any other House.

As they ate the bread and cheese and drank the mead which Beornoth brought for them, they told him they were carrying gifts to Earl Edwin of Mercia from King Edward. Beornoth knew that they must pass close to his village and asked their captain if they would take his treasure-coffer with them and deliver it safely to his mother.

The captain smiled and said, 'We shall guard it with our lives, Housecarle. It will reach your mother as safely as Edwin's gold reaches him. Is that good enough?'

Beornoth could only answer that it was, though at heart he wished the Carles had been of a House that supported Harold Godwinson. Yet there was nothing for it, and he saluted the captain as the horses swung into line again and the great wagon trundled away.

Finn said at supper, 'To find and to lose a fortune in twelve hours—that is living richly, is it not!'

But Beornoth knew that he was only teasing and paid no attention to him.

The next day, shortly before mid-morning, trumpets screamed outside the great gates and there was the clatter of many hooves. The Carles hastened to buckle on their axes, and though they then stood negligently about the parade ground, their hearts beat fast with the scent of approaching battle.

The gates opened to admit a party of London Carles, followed by a long gilded litter with dark-blue silk curtains. A veiled woman who looked like a nun rode beside the litter, her face pale and sad, her eyes on the ground. Fifty Carles followed her, their axes held at the ready.

Beornoth noted that ten Carles of London had dismounted at the gate and had taken over guard there, leaving the gates wide open.

Finn said wryly, 'That is in case they wish to leave quickly. Edward is a very timid man. He wishes to die in bed.'

Beornoth gasped at the news that King Edward had come. His amazement turned to disappointment when the litter was set down gently and a frail, stooping old man hobbled out and sat panting on the gold chair that had been brought for him. The King's hair was very thin and white, and dangled from under his little brown cap like that of an old woman. His face was very grey, yet it was fine-featured, almost childlike. Two bright spots of feverish colour burned in his thin cheeks. He coughed a great deal and held a strip of silk to his mouth. It was long before the Carles could hear what he said, though they had fallen to silence the moment he had seated himself.

The woman dressed like a nun stood behind the King, her hand held out to steady him when he coughed. She seemed spiritless and defeated. This was the Queen, the sister of Harold Godwinson.

A Carle near Beornoth whispered, 'She'd rather cut his throat than wipe his nose, for all her meek looks!'

One of the Wallingford captains gave him a dry look and he said no more.

'My comrades,' said the King, in his high voice, pausing often to regain his breath, 'I come to set your minds at ease. The lying tongue of rumour has been wagging abroad, threatening war with Normandy. But have courage, my friends, Duke William is our friend—your friend and mine. There is to be no war!'

The Carle who had whispered before said aloud, 'He is no friend of ours, Edward. He may be a friend of yours though.'

The captain did not quieten him this time. Instead, without a word, he unhitched his axe and deliberately decided which of the London Carles he would make for if the spark flared up. And all men did the same. Beornoth felt his pulse racing at the suddenness of the incident.

Yet the tension eased itself just as rapidly. The King was overtaken by a fit of coughing and affected not to have heard the remark. At last he went on again, 'Duke William will not come here, I promise you.'

Another Carle, a raw-boned man of the north, shouted out, 'Do you give your kingly word for that, Edward?'

There was a rustle among the London Carles, who regarded this as an undue familiarity, for in London the King had forbidden them to exercise their old rights of free speech.

The King smiled at this, a cold, wintry smile. He half turned towards the direction of that rough voice and said, 'Will the man who spoke step forward? Come on, my friend, do not be afraid.'

The Wallingford Carles gave a great laugh at this, and the man who had shouted out pushed his fellows aside so as to get to the King. One of them whispered as he passed, 'We shall strike, Olaf, if they close on you.'

Then the northman stood before the King, smiling easily, his thumbs in his belt.

The King surveyed him with a strange look. 'I could do with stout hearts like you nearer at hand. Will you come to London, Carle?'

The Carle shook his head. 'Nay, Edward,' he said, 'I'm happy here, thank you. But what of my question?'

Edward shuffled in his chair, a frown crossing his face now. He coughed again and let fall his strip of cloth so that the Queen had to bend and pick it up for him. Then he looked at the smiling Carle with a cold eye and said quietly, 'I gave my promise. That must suffice you, man.' He signalled with his thin hand that the audience was over. The Carle swaggered back, shaking his head in ridicule. There was a tense silence all over the great parade ground.

Edward the King left an hour later, when he had eaten in the courtyard surrounded by his London Carles. He ate from food which he had brought in the litter, and drank from a flask which the Queen held to his lips. She neither ate nor drank.

They left as suddenly as they had come. This time there were no gifts. Finn said, 'Nor are there like to be for a long time.'

Later the captain on duty called the Carles together in the great hall and said that the King had left two commands. Henceforth the Carles were to meet morning and night and kneel in the parade ground to pray for the safety of England and for the welfare of Duke William. Moreover, the Carles of Wallingford were commanded to observe the state of Lenten abstinence from Twelfth Night to Easter.

Great roars of indignation followed these announcements, and these were swallowed up almost immediately by gusts of incredulous laughter. The captain did not join in the laughter. He said, 'That is the King's will, brothers. I do not think he will be King when the Twelfth Night comes and you will be absolved therefore. Yet we shall pray as he commanded. That is our duty.'

So for some days they did as the King bade; they kneeled in the courtyard at set times, though the words of their prayers were hardly those which the King had expected. He would have been both shocked and angry could he have heard them.

Four days after the King's visit, while the Carles were kneeling, towards sunset, there came a great commotion of voices and hooves at the gate, and a party of a dozen laughing horsemen cantered into the parade ground, their cloaks flying, their helmets hanging from their saddle-horns.

Finn jumped to his feet. 'Look! Look, Beornoth!' he yelled. 'The sons of Godwin! They have come at last!'

Merry with wine, the four great earls rode at the head of the cavalcade, followed by their men-at-arms. They were all laughing and slapping each other on the shoulders. Harold rode a pace before Tostig, and was the first to see the Carles kneeling. He stopped the horsemen with a wave of his hand and they rocked in the saddle at the sight of the praying warriors.

Harold shouted, 'Go at it, Carles! This is a sight for Satan to weep at—weep with laughing! More, my merry hounds! More prayers! Come on, we'll join you!'

Then the sons of Godwin jumped from their horses and kneeled before the Carles, Harold at their head.

'Lead the prayer, Harold,' shouted a Carle. 'That is, if you're sober enough!'

There was a great gust of rough laughter over the parade ground.

Harold shouted back, 'I'll give you the shortest prayer in the Missal of Revenge. Say it after me, brothers! Here it is: Duke William—may he rot!'

The Carles repeated this prayer in high glee, and thereafter it was the prayer they said night and morning in obedience to King Edward's command. He would have been well satisfied if he could have seen them kneeling!

When Harold had spoken this prayer, Tostig, Earl of Northumbria, whispered to his younger brothers, Gyrth and Leofwine, and they began to giggle like young girls.

'There is some mischief afoot,' whispered Finn, 'when the sons of Godwin laugh like that!'

Quickly the young earls wrapped a cloak about two spear-shafts, and held it like a stretcher, one at each end of it. Tostig jumped on to it, and sat coughing and nodding, as his brothers carried him round the courtyard. From time to time they stopped, and Tostig pretended to make a speech in a high-pitched voice, punctuated by wheezes and groans. The Housecarles loved the cruel imitation and would have had the brothers continue doing it, but Harold's face had grown serious and he gave a peremptory signal that the farce must stop. Tostig made a wry face and began to invent a prayer in mock-Latin, but his two brothers flung the improvised litter down on to the hard earthen floor and went back to their places, leaving him to struggle free of the heavy cloak which enshrouded him for a time.

Later, in the great hall there was much feasting. Harold joked with all who spoke to him and shared any man's drinking cup.

Beornoth wished he dared speak with Harold Godwinson to remind him of that meeting long ago, but whenever he drew near this grim son of Godwin, his spirit failed him and he went back to where Finn sat, singing and beating time with his great fist on the oaken board. The Carles were happier than they had been for many months, now that their earl had come to them again.

When it came to the time for grievances to be aired, an old Housecarle stood up and said, 'I have only one grievance, Harold.'

Harold smiled lazily and winked at the Carle nearest him. 'What is it, grandad?' he asked. 'Don't accuse me of causing the rain or making your breeches wear out. There are some things I can't answer for!'

The grey old Carle said, 'Laugh on, Godwinson, but I remember when you were a little lad no higher than this table. And I remember when your old lion of a father laid you across his knee and smacked a bit of humbleness into you. That I do! I caught you for him!'

Harold rose at the table and said, 'Carle, I beg your forgiveness. But now I know the answer to a question that has troubled me all my life! I always wanted to know who it was who caught me that day! I give you long life and a death with the axe in your hand!' He raised his drinking-horn and toasted the old Carle. Every man there drank the toast and hammered on the table with his empty horn.

The old Carle stood, his face still smiling; his eyes grim. 'You won't get round me with that sort of talk, Harold,' he said. 'I want to ask a question, and no toasting will put me off.'

Harold called up the table, 'If you don't ask it soon, I shall fall asleep, you old bell-wether!'

Then the Carle said, 'Why did you not take us into Wales with you? Why have we not fought with you these five years? Why have we been kept here like cattle waiting for the butcher's poleaxe?'

Tostig gave a grim, dark smile and said audibly, 'Because that is what you are, my friend!'

Gyrth and Leofwine turned away from him, afraid, and Harold gave his brother a black look before he stood to answer the questions.

His voice was calm now and sincere. His jesting manner had melted away as he listened to the old man's grievance.

'Look you, Ralf Raven,' he said, smiling slightly at the start the old man gave to hear his name spoken. 'Look you, if a man has a fine-bred stallion, does he set him to drag a plough? If a man has a fine-ground war-axe, does he take it to cleave wood for the fire? You of Wallingford are fine-bred stallions, war-axes; you are not oxen and kitchen-cleavers, my friends!'

There were great shouts round the echoing hall. Harold went on, 'The men who were in Wales with me were Edward's men mainly. I took them for a purpose. I wished to use them up, my friends! I would have been a pretty fool to take you over there and get you killed, my dear friends, wouldn't I? No, Vikings, a better fate waits for the Carles of Wallingford, that I promise you! When you ride it will be to save a kingdom, perhaps to gain a kingdom, but not to clear the crowing rooster off some village dunghill!'

He sat down. The hall re-echoed with the shouts of the warriors. Some men wept. Others began to chant *Maldon*:

‘Who leaves him now, be damned for ever!’

Harold smiled at them and suddenly began to look very tired.

The next day, when Harold had gone, Beornoth said, ‘What did he come for, Finn?’

Finn scratched his head and said, ‘Perhaps he wanted to be sure we had not gone over to Edward. He is a crafty one, Harold Godwinson! Though I doubt his brother Tostig is craftier!’

Beornoth said, ‘Oh, Harold will keep him in his place, have no fear.’

And Finn replied, ‘Do you think so, then? Do you think so?’

But all Beornoth could say was, ‘I wish I had spoken to him, Finn. Even if it had been just one word.’

The other turned from him and muttered, ‘Who talks with a lion must needs stand behind a fence. Stay as you are, son, with a head still on your shoulders!’

But Beornoth would gladly have lost his head for Harold Godwinson after that meeting, such was the earl’s attraction to a young warrior.

7. Time of Trial

THE year wore slowly on and many disturbing rumours travelled the length and breadth of England. Some men said that Duke William had already sent to the Pope in Rome, asking him to excommunicate Harold Godwinson. Others said that King Edward had secretly named Duke William as his successor to the throne. Still others said that King Harald of Norway was planning to invade England and take the crown himself.

No man knew what to believe. All they knew was that between Tostig of Northumbria, Edwin of Mercia and Harold of Wessex, England was so divided already that King Edward's only solution to the problem would either be to enter a monastery or to die.

The land lacked unity, and now all men thought of their families and themselves first. Such news as came into the villages was always exaggerated and frightening, and the country-folk lived in a state of almost continuous tension now.

As for the Carles of Wallingford, they waited like hounds before they see their quarry, panting on the leash. They rode out in parties, hunting in the forests of the upper Thames, or hawking in the hills near their House. Many of them were devoted to the various hawks in their falconry. It was almost as though they sensed some family kinship, these hard-faced men, these savage birds of prey.

Yet often as the Carles rode out, they were met at the entrances to villages by angry peasants who screamed abuse at them, and sometimes flung stones and rubbish on to them from above, shouting out that the Carles were lazy lapdogs who lived like lords while the poor country-folk lay at the mercy of any invader.

'Who pays the taxes that keep you in idleness?' yelled the villagers. Then they answered their own question, 'Why, we do!'

The Carles rode on with set faces, ignoring them and talking only to the hawks on their wrists. It would be a bad thing to forget oneself and ride a man down—though even more expensive for the villager who made the mistake of throwing too hard and killing a Carle. The life of a Housecarle

was valued at such a high rate that a peasant would have to work his lifetime out paying it off, and even then might not be able to achieve it.

It was a very hard winter, and many of the villagers who had shouted the loudest against the Carles begged the hardest at their hall gate for bread and meat. These the Carles gave freely, for in accordance with the King's command, they were kept on a poor diet until Easter, and so had much food to spare.

The only bright spot for Beornoth came when a tall captain in a blue cloak met him at the gates one morning and told him that the treasure chest had been delivered safely to his family in Mercia. Beornoth asked how his mother and father looked, but the captain shrugged his broad shoulders and turned away disinterestedly.

'I do not notice such things,' he said. 'I would notice if an axe-shaft needed re-binding or a bridle rivetting, but I do not observe how people *look*. To me they are either alive or dead—and I can only say that your folk looked alive. They were pleased at their good fortune, that is all.'

He began to mount his waiting horse. Then he turned, his foot in the stirrup. 'Oh yes,' he said, 'your father said that he would buy land and build such a house that you would be proud to return home again one day. He sent you his blessing.'

Beornoth ran towards the horse. 'How is my brother Cendred?' he asked anxiously.

The Carle swung his great horse round impatiently, in a flurry of mud that spattered Beornoth from head to foot.

'There was a boy who held my horse,' he said. 'A quiet boy. That is all I know.'

He cantered away then to overtake the empty wagon on the road towards London.

Beornoth thought much about his family after that, but shortly something else happened to take his mind off them with a vengeance. One night, at dusk, a man somehow scaled the outer stockade and ran across the parade ground. He was followed closely by another man, who overtook him and struck at him with an axe. The blow fell short in the uncertain light, whereupon the first man turned, as viciously as a hunted animal, and dispatched his pursuer with a swift thrust of the knife.

Then he staggered to the great hall, where the torches already burned, but fell in the doorway, exhausted and bleeding from a deep wound in the side.

When the Carles turned him over, they found that it was Earl Cynwulf, though he was dressed in rags. The man he had left lying in the courtyard was one of the London Carles, a notoriously ruthless warrior, who had accomplished many hard tasks. Three of the Wallingford Carles quickly carried this body down to the deepest part of the river and, having weighted it with stones and pieces of iron, flung it into the middle of the stream.

Earl Cynwulf recovered consciousness and stared about him. 'Hide me under the straw in a barn, my friends,' he said. 'Soon, others will come to finish me off.'

So they carried him to a deserted byre and, having dressed his wounds and made him as comfortable as they could, left him. All night five Carles guarded him at a certain distance from the byre, lying hidden in bushes, but no one came.

In the morning, shortly after dawn, the captain on duty went to him with food and drink and Cynwulf told his story. He said that he had been sent secretly to Normandy by Harold, his sworn master, to put an end to Duke William. He had travelled as a begging monk, and had got within a knife-thrust of William, but when he made his blow, the Duke had twisted round and the knife had shattered against his iron shoulder-plates. Cynwulf had fought his way from the Duke's hunting-lodge, beating off his attackers with the trestle of a table, and had got back to England in a pirate ship. They had not dared bring him into port but had pitched him overboard off Dover and he had almost drowned in a cross-tide.

But the news of his attempt had travelled before him and Edward's Carles, under Norman officers, had hunted him to the gates of the House at Wallingford.

He said that he thought he had killed four of them, on his way up from the coast. He would have managed more, he thought, but his only weapon was a soft-bladed knife he had snatched from a fishwife's stall outside Dover. He said he had lost much time having to straighten the blade out each time he used it!

When the Carles heard this they laughed loud and said that they would be revenged on the London Carles. Cynwulf said gravely that it would be a bad thing for England if the Carles declared war on each other.

‘But you might have a battle of sticks,’ he said, smiling. ‘You could always pretend that it was preparation for the bigger war that must surely come, for Duke William is already building a mighty fleet of ships to sail across to us.’

As soon as he could travel, the Carles put Cynwulf into a boat, and six of them went with him up river, disguised as peasants. His only hope now lay in finding Harold Godwinson, for the King would no longer give him shelter.

Yet even while the boat was in sight of the House, a great party of London Carles hammered at the great gate for admittance, calling out that they came in the name of Edward the King, and must not be hindered in their duty.

They were admitted without delay and were met by a multitude of smiling Housecarles in the parade ground. The captain of the London force demanded immediately the body of Cynwulf and of the Carle who had followed him to this House, but the Wallingford captains expressed great surprise and said they had seen no visitors. They told the London Carles that they might search everywhere without let or hindrance, for they were sure that no one was hiding at Wallingford.

The captains of the London force looked at each other grimly, knowing full well that they had come too late. They turned to go, but a Carle of Wallingford stepped forward and said, ‘Brothers, you save us the trouble of sending a rider to you. As you see, we are suffering the rigours of Edward’s Lenten Fast—though by your well-fed looks, he did not impose the same strictures on you. . . . Now, we have a mind to celebrate the lifting of the Fast, and at the same time to prepare ourselves for something less kind even than fasting. Will you meet us on the Monday after Easter Day, in a Jostle of Sticks?’

The London captain saw well enough which way the wind blew. He knew that this was a serious challenge, growing out of the steadily increasing enmity between the two great Houses of Carles. He knew also that the Wallingford Carles would leave as many dead upon the jostling ground as they could. Yet no Carle might refuse a challenge.

He bowed from the saddle, and said, ‘Brother, we are always at your service, day or night. We will play five hundred against five hundred, with quarter-staves and masks. Is that agreed?’

All men shouted that it was agreed. Then the London Carle said, ‘Our oldest captains shall meet and decide upon a meadow outside Saint Albans,

unless you think that is too near to London?’

The Carles yelled out that they agreed, and that they would come into London itself for the contest. At this the others smiled with good-humour and made their way through the gates.

When they had gone, a Carle said, ‘Now Cynwulf shall be revenged, and Edward will find himself without half of his lapdogs!’

Finn said, ‘Speak not of cooking the deer till you have put your arrow into her, my friend! We shall be weak from lack of food, while they feed on the fat of the land.’

The other Carle said, ‘You need not fight, Finn, if you are so timorous.’

Finn answered, ‘I would fight any ten men who said I might not go to Saint Albans on that day, Thori. But all the same, I say that we shall suffer more than we might wish.’

The other said, ‘Who cares, if only we can wipe the smile off the face of London?’

Beornoth, who was present and heard these words, thought that it was a foolish thing to weaken oneself merely for the pleasure of making a fool of another, but he said nothing. He hoped that he would be allowed to wield a quarter-staff at the Jostling of Sticks. Nor was he disappointed.

8. The Jostling of Sticks

IT was the Monday after Easter Day. A thousand young men stood waiting in a great meadow that lay along a hillside beyond Saint Albans. Five hundred stood on one side of a line of stones, five hundred on the other. As they waited for the signal to be given, they spoke with each other, jesting and exchanging news.

Each Carle was dressed much like another, in a short tunic held into the waist by a hide belt, light calf-skin shoes, and a thick horse-hide helmet, conical at the crown, with a visor to protect the face and a back-flap to cover the nape of the neck. It was impossible to distinguish one man from another, save by his build. Each man carried a thick ash-staff, of about five feet in length. The rules forbade these sticks to be shod with iron, yet even so they were dangerous enough weapons, wielded in expert hands.

Finn stood next to Beornoth, in the third rank. He said to the younger man, 'When the horn blows, run forward with me; do not go too fast, or you will outstrip me, and do not go too slow, or you will get in the way of the Carles behind you. Remember, they wish to strike a blow as much as we do. And do you keep an eye on my battle, and I will keep an eye on yours. If I go down, knock my man sideways before he can strike at me on the ground, and I will do the same. They are the dangerous blows, those you get when you are on the grass and defenceless. I have known too many ribs to be stove in to like being caught on the grass!'

Beornoth made himself smile, though his mouth was very dry. 'We shall do the staving today, my friend,' he said. And then the horn blew.

All along the waiting hillside there rose the sound of men sucking in their breath between clenched teeth, and then a great shudder seemed to go through the thick ranks of Carles as they began their movement forward.

Beornoth ran alongside Finn and they reached their opponents at the same time. Finn swung his staff clumsily; his opponent laughed and ducked down; Finn struck him on the rebound, below the jaw, where his helmet provided no protection to him. The man fell senseless on to the grass. 'Come on,' yelled Finn, 'I'm ready for another!'

Beornoth grinned and, shortening his staff, used it like a spear, digging his opponent below the ribs so sharply that he fell to his knees gasping, his own staff three yards away, trampled on by the milling warriors.

The boy joined Finn, who had already engaged with another Carle of London. Once more he did the same thing. The man fell backwards, taking another with him. Finn hit the other before he could rise, at the back of the neck, for his helmet had fallen off in the tumble he had taken.

‘Three!’ shouted Finn. ‘You are two behind!’

‘No!’ laughed Beornoth, suddenly bending and rapping his staff hard across the other man’s shins and then bringing it down lustily on his neck as he doubled up in pain.

So easy had the contest been up to this point that the two men had pushed well ahead of their own first rank. Beornoth began to laugh aloud, in his berserk excitement. Finn lifted his helmet to warn him that such laughter would attract attention to himself, and that a gang might decide to set on him.

But before Finn could pull his helmet into place again, a Carle behind him, turning and seeing an enemy thus exposed, swung out and took Finn at the base of the neck. It was not a damaging blow, but its force paralysed Finn momentarily and he dropped his staff. As he bent to retrieve it, a Carle before him carefully poked his helmet to one side and measuring his man, aimed a great blow at Finn’s head.

His friend Beornoth saw it coming and warded it off, taking the main force on his own wrist. He was incapable of dealing a blow back at the time, and his opponent began to close with him. But Finn, already bent to knee-level, suddenly found strength to reach forward and take the man’s leg as he struck at the boy. He gave a great heave and the London Carle was stretched out on the grass, the breath knocked out of him.

Finn had his staff again now. ‘We’ll share that one, brother!’ he said. ‘Thank you for the ward-blow.’

Beornoth had no breath left for talking now, and was dealing great scythe-like strokes at a tall, thin Carle who slipped from side to side like an eel.

Finn was short of an opponent for a moment and leaned on his staff to watch Beornoth’s battle. It finished when the thin man raised his staff above his head, thinking to bring it down on the boy’s head; but Beornoth moved like a snake, striking a cross-blow which took the thin Carle over the

midriff. He gave a yell and crumpled up, his hands clutching his stomach. Beornoth was too tired now to finish him off but stood gasping by Finn's side. Finn was laughing grimly. 'I shall stand close to you when it comes to axe-play, my friend,' he said.

And then the horn blew again to denote a resting-space. The Carles drew back behind the line of stones, such as could move, the others being carried to the side of the field, for they were now out of the jostling for good.

During this resting-space, many of the Wallingford Carles enviously watched their opponents drinking from mead-horns, but the Wallingford captain had forbidden any such refreshment. They had been on so strict a fast for so long that he knew they would suffer if they drank much now.

'Have no doubts, my friends,' he said, 'it is they who will go down, not you. Better be parched than senseless, eh?'

And when the horn blew once more, his words were proved correct. The London Carles, their lips still wet with mead and ale, fell left and right before the vicious onslaught of their opponents. And now someone from the House at Wallingford began to chant *Maldon*. It spread like wildfire across the sloping field, as though a real battle were in progress. And when the horn blew for the second time, many men lay on the trampled grass, beyond all waking.

During that resting-space, Finn said to Beornoth, 'Now it is serious. They are striking to kill. We must take good guard and watch for each other. This is the last jostle. No man could stand more.'

They clasped each other's hands before they ran forward and then pandemonium reigned about them. Now it was every man for himself, and some Carles had even thrown away their helmets and shirts and ran berserk hither and thither, striking wherever they could, until they were smitten down by cooler fighters.

Finn's blood was raised and he began to pull at his shirt, the berserker in him taking control. Beornoth yelled at him a time or two, but he did not hear. Then suddenly Finn gave a great cry and flung his helmet to the ground. A massive hunch-backed Carle to the side of him screamed with fury and drove his stick into the nape of Finn's exposed neck. He fell without a sound, his eyes rolled back, his mouth wide open. Beornoth turned from the man he was fighting and swept his own staff across the hunch-back's face. The man flung up his hands to ward off the blow, and Beornoth struck him under the left arm, a crushing blow, which knocked the big man sideways, into the thick of the crowd. Beornoth did not see what happened

to him. He had only time to turn to his own man, and then blackness fell across his eyes like a cloak. His defence of Finn had been ill-timed, for his own opponent had been working in conjunction with the hunch-back and had laughed aloud when he saw the boy fall into the trap.

Beornoth sank down slowly on to the body of his friend, trying to strike out to the very end. His opponent was too kind to strike him then, but drew back, and then fell senseless himself from exhaustion.

The friends did not wake until they were being loaded into the long cart that held the wounded. Another cart by its side was for the dead. A Wallingford Carle smiled and said grimly, for he had lost the teeth at the front of his mouth, 'You came round only just in time. We almost threw you into the other cart.'

Finn groaned and said, 'Who had the most left standing, friend?'

The other said, 'We did! We won by three only though! Yet we have punished them more severely. They will be fortunate if three hundred Carles ever ride again out of their five.'

'And what of us?' asked Beornoth.

The man said, 'We have not sorted them all out yet. But we have not lost more than a hundred, at a guess.'

So ended the Jostling of Sticks, meant to avenge the attack on Earl Cynwulf, and to put the Carles of London in their place. This entertainment cost England over three hundred Housecarles, valuable trained men, who would have been very useful a year from that time. And once gone, they could never be replaced, even though the fate of England depended on them; which it did.

The day after the Carles reached Wallingford, a message came from King Edward that they were all under House arrest, as were the London Carles, for breaking the peace in such a barbarous manner.

He said that they would be told when they might leave the precincts of their House again.

Finn said, 'He need not worry. There's not a Carle who jostled that day will be fit to stand in battle again for six months! We shall welcome a rest after that, and after his Fast!'

So exhausted were most of them that had William landed at that time, he would have marched through southern England with no more trouble than it takes a horse to push his way through bracken.

9. ‘We ride to meet the rebels!’

THE summer passed without further event, though outside, in the Shires, men were strangely agitated, as with the advance news of some great calamity. Within the Hall, Carles must possess themselves with what patience they could find, which for most of them was not much, trained as they were for a life of sudden and violent action.

They sat or lay about like hounds licking their open wounds after some fierce encounter with a wolf or a wily badger. They passed much of their time singing the old songs, often Viking songs, or in retelling the sagas, tales of fierce men like themselves. One of their favourite pastimes as they lolled about at the great table was to ask each other difficult riddles, of which they had a great and bewildering store.

But the time pressed so heavily on their shoulders as summer turned to autumn that they gave themselves to foolish practices. Many of the younger men, including Beornoth, had their faces and their arms tattooed. The blue and red dyes which were rubbed into the open scars on their cheekbones gave them a savage look, which amused these warriors greatly as they grinned at their reflections in the polished steel mirrors.

And then something happened which the Carles had never done before—they began to quarrel with each other, out of sheer boredom and frustration. Each day a man was hurt, though no one was killed.

When this news reached Edward, one of the Witan, a sour old man, said, ‘So much the better, King. Leave them alone for a little while longer, and you need never fear the Carles again!’

But Edward was greatly concerned and even wept. Then he sent four of his own priests to talk to the Wallingford Carles, and to bring them back to their Christian senses.

These priests came galloping back within three days, with fear in their eyes, saying that they had no hankering after martyrdom as yet. They begged to be sent to any place but the hall of the Carles.

One night a spy dressed in a tinker's rags clattered on to the parade ground. Men ran to greet him. He was an old Carle named Ulfketyl, who lacked an eye from an early battle in Wales. Yet he saw more with that remaining eye than did any two men with their four. Ulfketyl brought good news and bad. His good news was that Cynwulf had got clear away from his enemies and was in Cornwall until such times as Harold should need him. His bad news was that Tostig was plotting with the King, to gain his favour and to overthrow his brother Harold.

The Carles were furious when they heard that and wished they might find the traitor and slay him. But Ulfketyl laughed and said that Tostig's fate was already in the balance. The thegns and folk of his earldom of Northumbria had come to hate him for his injustice and his cruelty, and were already killing his supporters and saying they would do the same to Tostig Godwinson, when they could lay hands on him.

A week later fresh news came that Northumbria was ablaze with rebellion. All who stood for Tostig had been slaughtered and the rebels were moving south, drunk with victory, killing as they came and setting fire to the standing corn.

This was more serious, and especially so when the rebels declared Tostig to be no longer their earl and when they chose a new one—Morcar, brother to Edwin of Mercia. Now the Midlands and the North lay under the rule of those two brothers, while Harold Godwinson held the South.

‘And he will not hold that long if those rebels come down here,’ said Finn.

‘Why does not the King raise the levies and let us fight these Northumbrians?’ asked Beornoth.

‘Perhaps he wants them to break the power of Harold,’ said Finn. ‘Perhaps he is tired of being the puppet of the Godwinsons.’

A Carle who had brought this latest news said, ‘No, that is not it. Edward is not concerned one way or the other. He is already a dying man and his only prayer is that he may live long enough to see his Abbey of West Minster consecrated. When that is done, he will not care who reigns in England—Harold, Morcar or William!’

Hardly had the speaker finished his words when a captain of the London Housecarles hammered at the gate.

‘Open in the name of the King,’ he shouted, beside himself with impatience and excitement.

When the gates had swung open, he galloped into the centre of the courtyard, swung his horse round with a great scattering of dust, and standing in the stirrups, shouted, 'Carles of Wallingford! Make ready to ride with the King. Waste no time. The King comes here tomorrow. We shall ride with him too, we men of London, and give welcome to such warriors as you. Make haste, there is no time to lose. We ride to meet the rebels!'

Then he swirled round once more and was gone through the gates, bent low over his horse's neck, his blue cloak floating out behind him.

The Carles of Wallingford howled like dogs that scent a fox. Then they ran to put edges on their swords and axes.

10. Oxford

KING EDWARD rode with his chin on his breast, silent, hardly able to keep his seat on the docile pony. Archbishop Stigand of Canterbury supported him on the one side, Aeldred of York on the other. Now his face was leaden. The bright spots which had burned on his cheeks were extinguished.

Harold Godwinson rode beside them, his hard face grim and foreboding. His brothers, Leofwine and Gyrth, pressed closely behind him, not talking to each other.

Two thousand Housecarles rode behind the King that day and not a man among them but begged for slaughter.

When they were yet many furlongs from the city of Oxford, a great noise came to them on the morning air, the sound of a multitude of men, shouting and singing and blowing trumpets. A captain of the Carles rode alongside Harold and begged that a strong body of horsemen might ride before the King, to turn aside any attack that might be made on him; but Harold frowned and spoke to the man harshly, telling him to remember his place. The Carle rode back white-faced to his fellows. One of them said, 'It would suit Harold if the King *were* dragged from his horse and clubbed on the ground.' The captain vented his own anger on that man, turning in the saddle and striking him across the face. 'Know your place, dog!' he said. 'Speak no ill of Harold Godwinson!'

They rode on towards Oxford, but did not enter the city, for, in a great meadow by the river, the hosts of Northumbria and Mercia were already gathered, waiting for them. The fields were black with folk, and the noise they made ever grew more deafening. Many pavilions had been set up, and flags fluttered in the autumn breeze that blew up along the river. Beornoth pointed out to Finn the pennant of his own former earl, Edwin of Mercia, close by that of his brother, Morcar.

'He is a treacherous dog,' said Finn.

Beornoth nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'He is as you say.'

Then the captains of the Carles grew anxious, for the King had given them no orders and Harold had not spoken to any man, even his brothers whom he loved, since they set out. Some captains were for spreading out, lest the rebels surrounded them and caused the restive horses to stampede, and trample or crush one Carle against another. Other captains said that they should dismount and walk towards their enemy, as they always did, their axes at the ready. But Edward gave no orders and they rode on slowly behind him, wondering what the outcome of this day might be.

And when the rebels saw the Carles approaching, they became silent and the royal party rode down towards the tents by the river in the thick atmosphere of wonder and suspicion.

A table had been set in the meadow before the pavilions, and many pennants and gonfanons fluttered about it. Edwin and Morcar stood proudly by that table, their arms folded across their breasts, smiling at the sick King and at Godwinson's angry face, which he made no effort to disguise by pleasant looks.

Harold turned in the saddle then and said quietly to the Carles, 'I shall go forward with the King to speak with these rebel earls. If a finger is raised against us, do as you please, but see that Edwin and his brother do not go alive from this field.'

The Carles fanned out in a great semicircle, fifty yards from the table where the earls stood; and there they sat grimly, their axes ready, half hoping that Edwin might offer some insult to Harold Godwinson.

But the meeting started peacefully enough. Stigand and Aeldred stood behind the King's chair, their tonsured heads bowed. Harold strutted up and down for a while, but was at last prevailed on to seat himself on a stool that placed him lower in height than the King. He tried it, then rose and kicked the offending stool away, calling out in a loud voice for a man's chair. Morcar made some jest about this which the Carles could not hear. But then a man came running with a chair rather more splendid than the one in which lolled the King's fevered body.

Finn and Beornoth strained forward to hear what words were to be spoken then. Yet they need not have concerned themselves, for soon the rebel earls were shouting as loudly as Harold, and he back at them, so that most men within a hundred yards soon caught the drift of the heated conversation.

Edwin said, 'Your brother Tostig has shown himself unfit to rule his earldom and has been deposed. That fact is not hard to understand, is it?'

Harold answered, 'You have no right to depose an earl. That is the King's prerogative alone. You over-reach yourselves.'

Morcar smiled and said then, 'We do not depose Tostig, Godwinson. The good folk of Northumbria depose him. And if you or the King try to place him back again in his earl's chair, the good folk of Northumbria will slay him—unless you are willing to send all your fine Housecarles to the North to keep Tostig safe.'

Edward nodded in his chair. Harold turned towards him angrily, inviting his support, but the King merely smiled simply, with the weakness that came from his long illness.

Harold swung back on the earls. 'By what right do you take the Earldom of Northumbria, Morcar?' he asked. 'It has been in my family since the death of Siward.'

Morcar's dark eyes smiled back at him. 'By a right which the heirs of Godwin should never question,' he answered insolently. 'I take it because I am the only man strong enough to take it—*and to keep it!*'

Harold started back in fury at this answer. Gyrth and Leofwine half turned in their saddles, glancing at the Carles, whose feet were poised to clap spurs into their horses' sides.

Edwin saw this too and hastened to say, 'Patience, Harold Godwinson! My brother speaks rashly. It is for you therefore to listen tolerantly. I will tell you that Morcar is elected Earl of Northumbria by the will of the northern folk. They say that they will have him and no other. Now what says the King?'

All eyes were turned on the shivering monarch. He gazed up at Edwin and made several attempts to speak. Aeldred regarded him with great concern and held a small phial to his nostrils. Then at last, when his voice would obey him, the King said weakly, 'If it is the will of the people, then so be it, for no just King may gainsay it.'

A gasp went up from the assembled Housecarles, but it was quickly drowned by the great gust of applause that rose from the massed rebels. Trumpets blew and drums began to beat. Men danced about each other and sang. It was some time before order was restored.

Edwin held up his hand for silence then. The gay rings glistened on his fingers in the sunshine. 'The King has spoken,' he said. 'Who goes against the King's word is an outlaw. The King confirms my brother Morcar as Earl

of Northumbria. Does the King also say that Tostig Godwinson is outlawed from this land?’

Harold’s eyes almost started from his head at this daring question. Edward knew that he had come to the ravine of decision. He must either jump across it or fall into it. He began to cough and to shake violently, trying to grip the table edge with his frail hand and failing. It seemed that he could not speak. At length Stigand, who had bent his head to the King, rose and said, ‘The King says that he names Tostig outlaw, if that is the will of the people.’

Harold jumped up and turned on Stigand as though he would strike him; but the churchman said gently, ‘I have always served your family well, Harold Godwinson. I would not wish to do it a disservice now, but I must interpret truthfully what our King decrees.’

Now Harold knew that his hands were tied indeed. The King had let himself be forced into this declaration and so it had become law. If Harold fought against it now, he would be fighting against the law and against the King. Thus he would stand in danger of being outlawed himself.

Morcar leaned across the table, his dark face twisted with irony. In a loud clear voice he asked, ‘And does Earl Harold agree with his peers that his brother Tostig Godwinson is an outlaw?’

Harold sat back in his gilded chair and drummed viciously on the table with his blunt finger-tips. Men saw the muscles of his face working spasmodically.

‘Well,’ went on Morcar, ‘what say you, Harold?’

Harold’s body seemed to writhe in misery. ‘What more can I say, after what has been said?’ he muttered.

Then a great cheering broke out all over the meadow. Aeldred of York spoke sternly to the two rebel brothers. ‘Take these men of the North back to where they belong, my friends,’ he said. ‘Let them do no harm to any man and no harm will befall them. I speak with the King’s licence. Go now, Earl Edwin and Earl Morcar, and may the peace of God travel with you.’

Then Harold rose and stumbled to his horse, his hand over his eyes. He did not look round once to see if the King needed support.

So ended the affair of Oxford. So Tostig’s star fell, almost bringing that of his brother Harold down with it. So Morcar’s star climbed.

Finn said, 'God save us now. We have no King. A dog without a master is a pitiful sight.'

Beornoth said, 'Have patience, brother. Harold Godwinson is like a man who takes a very hard blow on the head with a quarter-staff. It will be a little while before he gains his senses, but he will gain them, and then some men in this land will do well to look out!'

That night the guard called out to Beornoth as he strolled with Finn in the courtyard, saying that there was one outside who wished to speak with him. Beornoth went into the street beyond the gate and saw a young man, wrapped in a heavy cloak, sitting on a fine horse. It was Cendred. Beornoth ran to him laughing.

'Hey, brother,' he said, 'you look like an earl yourself, you are so fine! Where did you get that cloak from? How much did that stallion cost, hey? Well, how goes it? What news have you from home? It seems that I have been away from you a lifetime!'

Cendred stared sadly down upon his brother. Then he dismounted slowly and stood before Beornoth, his head bowed.

'I come to tell you, brother, that our father is dead. Since you made us rich, he has been named as a thegn who must bear arms. And so he was bound to ride out when the northern rebels approached our village and they shot him with an arrow. This happened yesterday, just before midday.'

Beornoth felt the hot tears running down his cheeks. He made no attempt to hide them from his brother or to wipe them away. He stared blindly in front of him.

'Then the gold I sent has killed him,' he said at last. 'It is I who killed my father, not the rebels.'

Cendred said, 'Nay, brother, you must not torture yourself like that. You did what you could. No man can do more, unless he has God's knowledge of the future. But I come to tell you that you are the master of our house now. Will you come back with me?'

Beornoth shook his head sadly. 'I cannot come until the King releases me. That would make me an outlaw and I should be at the mercy of any man, without redress. That is not the way I would wish to live. Go back to our mother, Cendred. Tell her to be of good cheer. One day, when my work is done I will come back to comfort her. Guard you the house and the land, brother, until I can come and help you to make it great. One day it will belong to you.'

Cendred kissed his brother and rode away. Beornoth watched him melt into the October twilight. Then he turned away, punching one hand hard into the other. 'We have Tostig Godwinson to thank for this,' he said.

Suddenly he fell on his knees in the road outside the great gates. 'God heed me,' he said, 'and forgive me for what I shall do; but I must pay my debt to this traitor. I must take my revenge on him, or my heart will never again be whole.'

Finn came to him while he was still kneeling. 'Come, brother,' he said, helping him to his feet. 'You are wanted within the hall. Harold Godwinson has sent for you.'

11. The Consecration

HAROLD GODWINSON sat with his two brothers by the great fire in the hall of the Carles. The men surrounded him, clustering by his chair, looking over each other's shoulders to watch him and to hear him. He was smiling now and patting the head of a small dog, though by nature he did not love animals.

When Finn and Beornoth came into the hall, Harold looked up and called to them. 'Come nearer, brothers,' he said, 'I have that to say which you must hear.'

Then he looked Beornoth straight in the eye and said, 'Have you still got what I gave you on the day you wrestled with the reeve's lanky son?'

Beornoth flushed and stammered that he had, marvelling that this great man, with so many things on his mind, should recall so trivial an incident.

Harold saw the look in his eyes and said, 'I do not forget a face, Carle, even one that has been so decorated with red and blue as yours has been. Pray God you do not live to regret those tell-tale tattoo marks!'

Beornoth stared back at him now, having regained his composure. But Harold flung him into confusion once more when he almost whispered, 'I do not think you had those marks when I fought behind you at the Jostling of Sticks!'

He regarded the young Carle's startled face for a moment, a wry smile wrinkling his hard lips, then he turned away from Beornoth and told all the Carles around him that he had chosen twenty-four of them to go to London, in disguise as ordinary citizens, but wearing mail beneath their tunics, and to keep close beside him in the next few weeks. These Carles were to act as a personal bodyguard, and would be lodged in twos and threes at various houses near to his own. Strange things were likely to happen before the New Year, he said, and he had to be prepared for he had many enemies.

A Carle asked why they could not ride with him, as was their right, being the Carles of Wessex. He smiled at the man and flung him a brooch from his cloak. 'Wear this for me, Viking,' he said. 'Your heart is good—but your

brain is weak! The King, whose sad state you have seen today, would clap you all in irons if you as much as rode over the bounds of the city. I can promise you that. I tell you, that man is in mortal fear of giving offence to God these days. Yet, I know that at this moment London holds a score of men who would willingly give their lives for the pleasure of planting a knife in my side—and I must be ready.’

‘Who are these men, lord?’ asked the Carle who had been given the brooch.

Harold regarded him with a curling lip. ‘If I gave you a list of their names, you could not read it, Viking! No, they are men of Edwin, of Morcar, of William. Aye, even men of my brother Tostig, whom I love.’

No one questioned Harold after that.

But the upshot of the talk was that Finn and Beornoth among others were each given a sharp scramasaxe, a suit of clothes and a bag of silver. They were told to make their way within three days to London, and to stand watching the final preparations to the West Minster. A London Carle would find them and would secretly show them their billets. They were to trust this Carle, for he was one of Harold’s spies at the court.

When all arrangements had been made, the Carles feasted with the sons of Godwin. Much meat was eaten, much wine drunk, and many songs sung. The festivities were still going strongly when the twenty-four men set out on their way to London, so as to be there well before Harold. The cold dawn shone in their faces as they walked in small groups along the road, talking like country-folk. Though it was little enough that Beornoth could find to say. His heart was still heavy with the thought of his dead father.

The plan worked as Harold had foretold. Wherever he went about the city, they followed him closely, mingling with the crowds, watching the movements of all about them.

The winter seemed to come on them suddenly, and by the middle of December, London was thick with snow, which soon turned to slush under the trampling feet of the vast crowds which assembled to watch the Norman masons finishing their work on the King’s new abbey.

The consecration was due to take place on Childermass, December 28th, after the Christmas praying had been done. Many men waited in the driving snow, but the King did not come. Aeldred of York stood waiting, with the sons of Godwin, and the Witan. Many great noblemen stood beside them.

And at length, when the sky grew dark and it seemed that new storms might break, Archbishop Stigand came from the King's house with four of his priests, to tell the people that Edward was too sick to move from his bed but had given orders that the consecration must take place without delay. Men who stood nearest saw that the two great churchmen were suspicious of each other; each wished to have the honour of consecrating the great Minster.

At last they went in together, closely followed by Harold, who was acting for the King that day.

Beornoth and Finn, who stood near the great door, among the thickest of the crowd, had noticed certain signs of restlessness among the men before them, who were of the raw-boned northern type and whispered a dialect which did not belong to Wessex.

Finn glanced round at the various other Carles whom he had recognised in the crowd. Gently they pushed forward from all directions.

At last the trumpets sounded again and Harold came out with his brothers and the two Archbishops down the steps, into the space of open ground before the Minster.

The sons of Godwin were dressed simply and soberly as befitted the occasion, and wore no armour that day. They stood for a while so that the people should see them.

Suddenly one of the men at the front of the crowded square shouted out hoarsely, 'Death to Godwinson! Death to the dog of Wessex!' The cry was taken up among those immediately around him. The men of London drew back, uncertain, afraid of a general massacre. The thegns who stood by Harold were unarmed. Harold stared calmly towards the men who had begun to rush towards him, their knives out, their teeth bared in hatred.

Only one of these men reached the open space. The Carles had quickly closed in upon the others, and even this one was flung violently to the ground in a savage flurry of snow by Beornoth, and stabbed without mercy by Finn, almost at Harold's feet.

Harold did not seem to notice them. They dragged the body out of his path.

'Death to all traitors!' screamed Finn. The great crowd outside the Abbey took up this cry. Harold smiled at them and the procession made its way back unharmed to the King's house.

That night a hooded man came to the place where Finn and Beornoth lay. He was a London captain who spied for Harold.

‘The Earl is well pleased,’ he said, ‘but do not think to help him again in that way. Now your faces are known. Many men saw you standing there in the space before the Minster. Harold can only use a secret bodyguard, and you are no longer secret. Now you must rest indoors until your time comes again. Harold can take no responsibility if you are murdered out there in the street.’

The man left much money, a gift from Harold, and went out of the house, looking to right and to left before he mounted his waiting horse and galloped down the street.

Finn and Beornoth looked gloomily at each other. ‘This is a man’s reward for doing his work well,’ said Beornoth.

They lay down on the warm sheepskin pallet and went to sleep.

12. 'God save the King!'

THE time of waiting did not last long, however. On January 5th the captain came to them again. This time he wore his helmet and mail shirt for all to see. He was smiling.

'Harold is almost ready for you,' he said. 'Make your way quickly to Smith's Field and put on your armour there. Edward will not last the night out, they say.'

At Smith's Field the Carles of Wallingford were assembled about great braziers to keep warm, for the Carles' Hall there was not big enough to house the two great companies. Now there was no enmity between them, for these London Carles knew that they must join forces with their brothers of Wallingford or be crushed between the millstones of Northumbria and Normandy.

Finn and Beornoth were glad to see some of their old comrades, and put on their mail and their weapons once more. These had been brought for all the bodyguard in a great wagon. Even their own horses had been led to London for them.

Finn said to Grim, 'Who stays behind to guard our hall, then?'

Grim laughed harshly. 'The crows!' he said. 'There is no hall now, only a heap of blackened rafters. We burned it when we left. No other men shall ever live there, my friend!'

That night the bells in the city began to toll and the Carles looked at one another grimly. A man galloped into the camp, shouting out that Edward had died, but they did not need to be told that news. It had already sounded on the air.

They stood by their horses, waiting then, not knowing who would come to them or what the order he might bring.

Just before midnight four Carles rode into the camp, two on either side of a King's priest. The man stood in the firelight and prayed for a while. Then he raised his hand for silence and said, 'Soldiers of London, King Edward is dead. Harold is now your King. The Great Council of England

has elected Harold Godwinson. Tomorrow the Crown will be set upon his sacred head. God save the King!’

The Carles yelled and beat their axe-blades upon their painted bucklers. Some of them tried to make the priest drink the new King’s health in strong wine. He smilingly refused and rode away again on his mule as soon as he could.

Now the fires at Smith’s Field were banked high and all the men of Wallingford and London rejoiced that they had a King who would lead them against the enemy, a man who was as much of a warrior as they were themselves.

Many of them slept in the snow that night, in the light of the great braziers, their wine cups still in their hands, a strange smile on their lips. Beornoth and Finn lay together like brothers, their faces to the stars. The tears in Beornoth’s eyes glistened like raindrops in the flickering glow. He did not smile like the others.

The coronation of King Harold took place the following day at the newly consecrated Abbey of West Minster. Beornoth waited on his horse outside, next to Finn, in the solid phalanx of Carles which surrounded the Abbey. The great crowds seemed glad to have a strong king at last, even though he was not of the royal blood.

But one man near the Carles argued with his neighbour, saying that the little Atheling was the rightful King, not Harold. When this drew no response, he said that if Stigand had crowned Harold, then he was no true king, for Stigand was himself under the excommunication of the Pope. His neighbour then called the man a dirty Norman and punched him on the nose. Those who were concerned with such things sensed the way the wind was blowing and quickly spread the story through the crowds that Harold had received the crown from Aeldred of York, so as to avoid further disturbances.

While the Carles waited for the new King to appear, Beornoth was suddenly conscious of a voice he knew, sounding behind him urgently.

‘My son, oh Beornoth, my son!’

He half turned and saw his mother, her head wrapped in a thick woollen cloak, with Cendred at her side. She smiled up at him and began to say something.

Then the great Minster doors were flung open and King Harold appeared in his golden crown and wearing a scarlet cloak, heavily weighted down

with embroidery of gold. Though his face was white and drawn, yet he smiled and for a moment looked quite magnificent. Gyrth and Leofwine stepped behind him, gorgeously dressed. Aeldred and Stigand walked on either side of him. His sister Edith was not there. She was still mourning at the bedside of her dead husband.

The Carles swung round into line and the great crowds jostled behind them, like a sea-wave rolling in to the shore.

Beornoth looked round for his mother, but he could not find her now among so many shouting people, and his first duty was to the King.

He cantered knee to knee with Finn, new tears of joy and of sorrow in his eyes. These went strangely with the savage tattooing of his cheekbones.

Harold rode before them all, their warrior King, smiling gravely at the shouting people. Yet his heart was already heavy with doubts.

PART III

13. The Trap at Sandwich

THE weeks which followed Harold's coronation were glorious ones for the Carles. Now they reaped some of the rewards of their long waiting, for they were the masters of London, almost of England. They stalked through the streets now like princes come back to their dominion, splendidly dressed, greeted courteously by all men, even those thegns who, but a few days before, would have run secretly to Edward to conspire against them. But now London knew that Harold Godwinson had come into the inheritance his fierce old father had fought a lifetime to obtain for his sons, and that the Housecarles, Harold's darlings, would keep that inheritance intact for him against all comers, against any warriors in the world. And so the Carles walked abroad smiling, confident, treading all opposition down beneath their richly clad feet. And Edwin and Morcar, in their more northerly territories, fumed and fretted at this reverse of fortune, and though they did homage to King Harold, plotted already how they might find the occasion to drag him down.

Yet Harold had no intention of being dragged down by anyone. Aware of the preparations which Duke William's shipwrights were making, he too began to build a fleet, a strong fleet; aware that Pope Alexander had sent Duke William a banner, the Cross of the Apostle in silver and gold on a blue ground, as a sign that he supported his cause, Harold made much of his own churchmen, Stigand and Aeldred, and caused his mother, Gytha, the sister of King Cnut, to embroider for him a new banner to match that of William: a great flag which showed a man in the action of fighting, fit to float beside the giant Dragon of Wessex. Harold was in great heart now, for he knew that come what might, his fate had been fulfilled and he must abide by his position as King. And so, as though in defiance of the world, he caused coins to be struck, to celebrate his accession, at forty-four minting-places, from York to Exeter, from Chester to Romney. There could be no mistaking the challenge he sent forth to Duke William, or to any other who doubted his kingship.

Now all was a feverish act of preparation. Men who had never held a sword began to feel like warriors; and warriors felt like gods.

Yet both Harold the King and Beornoth the Housecarle had their secret heartache; Harold for his brother Tostig, and Beornoth for his father.

Things were now so peaceful in London that Beornoth began to wonder whether his absence would be noticed if he slipped away and rode to see his mother and his brother. He had been very anxious about them since that coronation day when he had lost them in the great milling crowd. He confided his idea to Finn, who said, 'If you rode fast and did not stay there more than a day, perhaps no one would ever know. I would say that you had a slight fever which kept you in your bed. That would absolve you from any duties and would keep inquisitive men from visiting you.'

Beornoth shook Finn warmly by the hands and said, 'You are a good friend to me, Finn. May we stay together all our lives.' Finn answered, 'Amen to that, brother! And if we must die, then let us go on that dark journey together. I would hate to have to wait for you at the feast table up there!'

This was said on the night of April 16th. Many men walked up and down in the streets, for the weather was fine that spring. Beornoth hastily made preparations to ride out that very night, and was in the act of packing a small bag to carry his gifts for his mother, when from the street came the sound of many voices crying out in sudden fear and foreboding. Finn ran to the window and looked up into the sky, following the gaze of the crowds below. Then he too drew back with a cry of amazement.

Beornoth looked out and saw a great comet in the sky, trailing behind it such light that it appeared to be an immense horse's tail, or a thick lock of hair. They had never seen the like of this before. Finn drew his hand across his forehead.

'This is a sign,' he said, 'and I do not think it is a good sign.'

But Beornoth had now made up his mind to see his mother. 'Bad sign or no,' he said, 'I go to see my family. Good luck until I return, friend Finn!'

He almost ran from the little upstairs room where they lodged and leapt down the stairs, three at a time. At the door, in the street, a man was waiting for him, wrapped heavily in a blue cloak.

'Well met, Beornoth the Carle,' he said. 'You save me the wearisome business of walking up those stairs. The King commands your presence and that of Finn the Carle. Go to him straightway for the King is in no mood to wait tonight.'

In a little room, heavily hung with tapestries to keep out the draughts, King Harold paced up and down impatiently, surrounded by a number of Carles, mainly those who had previously served him in secrecy as body-guards. Gyrth and Leofwine stood by the wall, biting their knuckles, white-faced.

Harold saw Finn and Beornoth enter. 'You are late,' he said. 'By God's Body, but must I hold up affairs of State while two hounds stop in the street to scratch!'

No one laughed at this rough jest. Harold turned on the Carles furiously. 'Well,' he shouted, 'will no one laugh at a King's joking?'

An elderly Carle, who had fought since his boyhood, stepped forward and put his hand on the King's shoulder. He was a strong man and Harold would have found it hard to draw away. He stood still and gazed hard at the Carle. The man said, 'Look you, Harold Godwinson, now our King, we will ride for you, starve for you, fight for you till our bones have lost all their flesh—but, Harold Godwinson, now our King, we will not be spoken to like market porters. Do you understand, Harold?'

Gyrth gave a little cry and ran forward with his dagger out. Harold turned on him with such a fearsome look that the young prince shrank back to the wall. Then Harold gently disengaged the Carle's hand from his shoulder and took it in his own hands.

'Old Leofric,' he said, 'I understand. I shall not do it again. I do not know what I should do if I had not such men to chide me when I need it.'

Leofric said, 'You would make yourself into a tyrant, and then some young fool of a Carle might forget himself and slip a knife under your ribs as you sat down to dine.'

Harold smiled grimly. 'Thank you for that advice, Leofric,' he said. 'I will see who stands behind me in future when I sit down!'

So his good-humour was restored. He bade the Carles sit down on the floor, for there were not enough chairs to seat such a gathering.

'Go to the door, Leofwine and Gyrth,' he said. 'See that no one except Stigand comes into this room until I have done.'

The princes saluted him and went out. Leofric said, 'It is a fine change for the Carles to be guarded by the princes! You have altered many things since you have become King, Harold!'

Harold laughed at this jest and then said, 'You are as dear to me as sons and brothers, so I have called you here for a family purpose. My brother Tostig, whom I love, is a bigger fool than I took him for. He has left his exile, where he was safe, and plans to raid the southern coasts, from the Isle of Wight to Sandwich.'

Finn said, 'If he meets William in his raiding, the two will come to blows, I have no doubt.'

But Harold said, 'Tostig's anger is so great that he cannot distinguish his friends from his foes. Have no doubts, Carle, he would join with William and then we should have a pretty tune to dance to!'

'What are we to do, Harold?' asked the Carles. 'Kill Tostig?'

Harold's face went ashen pale. He struck the wooden floor before him a great blow. He appeared like a man who suffers the pains of Hell.

'The man who hurts Tostig hurts me, Carles,' he almost shouted, his voice growing hoarse with emotion. 'No, I would not be known as the new Cain. I would rather give up my crown than harm my brother Tostig, fool though he is. He is my father's son and his blood and mine are like two draughts of wine drawn from one flask.'

Now all men sat silent, waiting for Harold to tell them what they must do. He rose and stabbed at the hangings about the room with his short hunting-knife, until his emotion had worn itself out. The Carles stared at the floor, silent.

Then Harold said, 'Go you all, in disguise of shipmen, to Sandwich, for there he will come at last. And there, go in twelve ships, two of you in each, as sailors. I will send a horseman to make arrangements with the butsecarles to let you sail, though they will not know your errand.'

'What is our errand, Harold?' asked Leofric.

'Tostig will capture as many ships as he can; I know the way his mind works,' said the King. 'He must capture you, and you must be willing to let him sail away with you. Then you must choose your opportunity and must make him fast, bind him, and bring him safely to me.'

'Nothing more?' asked Beornoth, innocently.

Harold turned his light grey eyes on to the young man. Then he said, 'No, Master Ploughman, nothing more. You will find that hard enough, I warrant you.'

Beornoth bowed his head, angry at Harold's thoughtless jest.

As they made ready for their journey, Finn said, 'Cheer up, Beornoth! You must not let Harold's jesting upset you. He means no ill. It is his fashion, nothing more.'

Beornoth said, 'It is not Harold I am thinking of. It is his brother. I shall never take Tostig alive while I have a knife in my belt.'

Finn said, 'There, put on your sheepskin jacket, it will be cold along the coast, lad.'

14. The Trap Sprung

WHILE the disguised Carles lay waiting in the ships at Sandwich, the rumour came to them that King Harold had married the sister of Edwin and Morcar, in order, it was said, to have them on his side at last.

The Carles laughed at this and said that Harold was a crafty fox, but Tostig was no doubt craftier, for although he had struck at many points along the coast, reprovisioning his ships, and stealing new ships to add to his war-fleet, he had not shown his face at Sandwich. It was almost as though he knew that there was a plot afoot and was keeping well outside the trap.

The Carles grew careless, and wished they were back in London with the King. Then, late one night, when the ships lay bobbing at anchor well off shore, the astonished Carles awoke to find strange men in their ships, standing over them with swords and axes, laughing. Tostig had arrived at last.

Before dawn Tostig's own light ship came amongst them and they saw him standing at the prow, his black hair and beard swept back in the wind, his barrel chest bare to the cutting spume that blew across the deck. He wore a black helmet, with ravens' wings at its sides. He stared about him with wild dark eyes, like a man who has taken leave of his senses.

'That is my man,' whispered Beornoth, feeling if his knife was still there. Finn pushed his hand away. 'Don't be a fool,' he said, 'one of his men is watching you.'

Close behind Tostig stood a man as tall as he; one whose thin sandy hair hung down above his red ears, whose head was covered with a little round woollen cap such as fishermen wear.

'I know that man,' said Finn. 'That is Copsi of Northumbria, who was sent into exile even before Tostig. There is not a better sailor than that man in the world—nor is there one so cruel. He will play the fox alongside Tostig's raven, and no mistake!'

A shipman who coiled a rope at Finn's feet looked up and said, 'There's dirty work afoot, my friend. Copsi has come down from Orkney with

seventeen ships for this foray.'

Beornoth scanned the horizon, counting ships. He saw at least sixty, bobbing up and down in a long column, just as horsemen ride. And many of them were Harold's ships, new ones. Tostig's surprise attack had netted him a good fleet. With sixty ships, a man might gain a kingdom, if he struck in the right place.

Beornoth said to the sailor, 'But if Copsi comes from Orkney, what does the King of Norway say to that? Orkney is his kingdom now, and Copsi must obey his rule.'

The sailor leaned over the side of the ship and rubbed his eyes, for the wind was sharp. Then he turned with as sharp a smile.

'The King of Norway, Harald Hardrada, does nothing but on the chance of making a good profit. He sets a sprat to catch a mackerel, as they say.'

Finn said, 'Do you mean that Hardrada has sent Copsi here to work with Tostig?'

'What do you think, Housecarle?' asked the sailor, looking away.

Finn stepped up so close to the man that only Beornoth saw that he pressed a knife to his side. Finn spoke through clenched teeth.

'Look, sailor,' he said, 'if you wish to live and take home many more catches, never speak that word again. It will be your last.'

The sailor did not even turn to reply. 'Have no fear,' he said. 'You are among friends in this ship. But we know you all right. You must pray to God that Tostig doesn't.'

Finn turned to Beornoth with a troubled look on his face. Then he smiled. 'Well,' he said, 'if he does, there's nothing to be done about it. We lie three miles off shore now and I couldn't swim so far. I'm out of practice after my lazy life in London.'

But he and Beornoth put their knives in the cross-gartering of their breeches then, so that they might drag them out more easily, should the need arise.

That afternoon Tostig's ship fell out from the lead, and drew alongside. He intended to inspect his new ships, now that he was well out at sea.

The two ships grated against each other, and Copsi helped Tostig to scramble over the bulwarks. He stepped lightly into the ship in which Finn and Beornoth waited.

As his foot touched the deck, he stumbled and fell, but rose, laughing, before anyone could get to him.

‘Tostig does not stay down long,’ he said, staring about him. Beornoth noted the strange look in the man’s eyes, and wondered then whether Tostig had indeed gone mad.

A rope was dangling from the main mast. It was caught by the wind and whipped outwards. It travelled quite slowly for it was a heavy rope. Any man might have avoided it, yet it struck Tostig full across the face. Men gasped, but the son of Godwin only laughed again and said, ‘Yes, and more than a blow like that to fell him!’

He then walked the length of the ship, looking at each man. He stopped before Finn and Beornoth and looked closely into their faces. His expression was a slightly troubled one. He looked like a man who tries to recall something but cannot.

Tostig said, ‘I seem to have seen your face before, shipman, though the one I remember had longer hair and his face was not marred by these scratches.’

Beornoth stared back at him, determined that if Tostig made any movement to have him arrested he would stoop and plunge his knife into the man’s heart.

But Tostig only scratched his chin and then passed on, shaking his head.

When he had gone back to his own ship, the Carles breathed a relieved sigh. It would not be well to start a fight in such circumstances. The dice were too heavily loaded against them.

They went to the ship’s side and watched Tostig. He had taken the bucking helm of his own ship and was steering her, like a man controlling a headstrong stallion, like a master. He laughed as his ship rode the new breakers, and as the light rain beat into his dark face.

Finn said, ‘Say what you will against Tostig Godwinson, yet he is a man among strong men.’

The old sailor nodded and said, ‘He is a true Viking, like his brother the King. Yet that does not make a man love him the more.’

Beornoth was troubled in his mind, for there was something he could not understand about Tostig, some strange difference which he had not noticed before.

Late that night, the fleet lay off near Burnham in Norfolk. Fiery beacons had burned along the coast as they went, giving warning of their approach, but still Tostig shouted that they would sail inshore and see what the men of Norfolk had for supper.

Beornoth nudged Finn. 'This is our chance to kill him,' he said. But Finn whispered, 'I swore to capture him, not kill him, my friend.' For a moment they stared each other in the eye. Then the problem was solved for them, since Tostig had changed his mind and was taking only a dozen ships shorewards for the raid. The others lay at anchor, waiting until the raiding party returned.

This they did, tired and laughing, in the small hours. They brought much booty with them, and a few prisoners, mostly men of military age who might be persuaded to fight for Tostig and Copsi.

The fleet did not set off again until the sun was up and shining warmly on the decks. Then they proceeded northwards with a good following wind at a very fair speed, for most of the ships were lightly built longships with a good spread of sail.

Tostig did not come aboard that day, and Beornoth began to despair of gaining his revenge. Finn said, 'Be patient, friend. You and I will have our chance before long.'

As evening fell, the fleet turned into the wide estuary of the Humber and the sailor who had spoken to them before said, 'He is going to land in his old earldom. That seems to be his plan.'

Finn said, 'Then he must indeed be mad, for the folk there hate him as they do William.'

'Even more,' said the sailor. 'But hate will not stop a man's ambition, friend.'

Yet when the fleet set course for the northern shore of the estuary, where the wolds of Yorkshire run down green to the broad sea-like Humber, fires sprang up, here and there, on the river bank, like a long necklace of blazing rubies.

Tostig's ship was alongside as this happened and the Carles heard him shout out suddenly, as though in great fury.

Then he quietened down and at last they heard him say, in a terrible grim voice, 'Yet I will come back, you dogs! And then . . . and then, you shall eat bones and be thankful for my bounty!'

He gave the order and the ships turned towards the flat southern shore. The sailor said to Finn, 'There are good lands to be ravaged in Lindsey, he thinks. But there are good men to defend them, men of the old Danelaw.'

Finn nodded and said, 'You do not need to tell me, friend. I have met them before. They are hard fighters.'

Beornoth, whose mother had come from these parts, was proud to hear these words, though he wished he had a better weapon than the short knife with which he had armed himself.

Shortly before midnight, the first ships grounded in a small haven, at the head of which a straggling village smoked, half a mile away. There seemed to be no guards waiting there. It was as though the fleet had crept upon this place without warning. Yet the Carles could not understand this, for the fires across the river had burned so brightly.

'We must take care,' said Finn to Beornoth. 'I do not like this.'

Beornoth's blood was up now. 'We must not draw back,' he said. 'This may be our chance.'

Tostig was the first to leap ashore. He stumbled thigh-deep in the Humber ooze, a broad-bladed axe in his right hand. Other rovers followed him closely. Copsi stayed behind to command the ships. Beornoth did not wait any longer but leapt over the side of the ship and waded to the little road that ran beside the haven. Finn was close behind him. They saw Tostig ahead of them, shambling along like a great bear and calling out hoarsely for his comrades to keep up with him. He sounded like a man who had gone berserk.

The two Carles now ran so swiftly that they outstripped the others and were close behind the leader.

'Let him get farther away from them,' grunted Finn, 'then we will take him.'

Tostig yelled back at them to hurry and for a while they actually ran alongside him, one on either side, laughing inwardly at their strange good fortune.

Then something happened which changed the course of events that night, changed perhaps the course of English history. A small ditch cut the path, before them. It was of perhaps a yard in width and was made by a little stream that ran down into the haven on their left.

The two Carles saw it well in advance and made preparations to leap over it. But Tostig made no attempt even to lengthen his stride. He pitched into the hole with a surprised grunt, his axe flying from his hand, and lay helplessly, clutching the edge of the ditch, his face turned upwards.

Beornoth's blood thudded in his head now. This was the chance he had waited for. He raised his knife, but the blow never fell. Finn had clutched his arm tightly and was pointing down at Tostig, whose face was now illuminated by the moon which had come from behind a cloud.

'Cannot you see, you fool,' said Finn, 'he is blind! You would not strike a blind man, would you, Carle!'

Tostig gave a strange shudder and then groaned hoarsely, 'Yes, almost blind! So strike, you dogs of Harold! I did wrong to let you live on, in the ship. I thought I recognised you.'

Finn tried to tell him that they were sent from Harold to protect him, but then the others had run up and surrounded them, and Tostig was screaming out that they were betrayed and that the two men who stood by him were Housecarles and would bring death on them all.

Yet before the men of Tostig could make a move towards the two friends, arrows whistled out of the dusk, and men fell here and there, clutching at the feathered shafts. A great galloping of hooves approached them down the path, and all at once the cry went up that they were betrayed. Finn and Beornoth found themselves in a sudden scurry of men, who struck about them blindly. It was impossible even to see the man who stood nearest, for the moon had gone in again behind a thick bank of grey cloud.

Beornoth felt out for Finn's hand, but he touched the hairy hide of a horse, and then he was struck a great blow at the side of the head. He felt himself tottering sideways, and clutched out once more, to feel a horse's shaggy side. He slipped down, the pounding hooves above him, and was dimly conscious of another blow landing somewhere on his head. Then he knew no more.

15. ‘Look through the window!’

FINN and Beornoth sat in a small stone cell, their ankles chained to a massive oak beam that lay on the straw-covered floor. It was a sad and disheartening place, for the earthen floor beneath the mouldering straw was deep in filth. Green moss crept up the grey walls, a grim tribute to the dampness of the prison.

The two men were so changed that it is doubtful whether their closest comrades at Wallingford would have recognised them. Now their hair had grown long again, and Finn’s had gone grey at the temples. Their faces bore the leaden greyness of starvation and long imprisonment without exercise. Both of them were thin almost to emaciation. They did not speak to each other, but only occasionally licked their pale lips, as though they were parched.

An old woman pushed open the heavy iron-bound door and shuffled towards them. She held a shallow platter of wood, in which was a small mound of grain, damp with skimmed milk. The two men looked up at her with dull eyes.

‘Ha,’ she said, smiling toothlessly, ‘so even the greatest spirits wilt at last! Well, eat this and then mayhap you will think you are fine warriors again!’

She put the dish down on the log before them and turned once again towards the door. Beornoth watched her go and then, when her skinny hand was clutching the door-ring, he said hoarsely, ‘How long have we been here?’

The woman half turned and cackled. ‘Ha, there’s one of you can still talk, I see! How long have you been here? Nay, that I don’t know. I cannot remember your affairs for you, I have a husband and twelve grandchildren to care for, without bothering my head with your madness.’

Beornoth’s eyes sank. He did not wish to ask again. His pride rebelled, weak though he was. But Finn spoke now, harshly, as though he hated the woman.

‘What month is it, you witch?’ he said, his mouth curling with disgust as he looked at her.

The old woman showed him a little more respect, though not much. She thought a while and then said, ‘September. Aye, that’s what it is, September.’

Then she gave them a mock curtsy and went from the place, saying that it was too damp for her rheumatics.

Beornoth said, ‘September, friend. Then we have been here for four months, chained like bullocks waiting the axe.’

Finn smiled grimly. ‘They feed bullocks better than they do us, friend.’

They ate the food with their hands, scooping it up and licking the last traces of moisture from their grey fingers. Then they sighed and leaned back against the cold wall. Soon they were asleep, in that strange and sickly half-sleep of physical exhaustion. Beornoth’s lips moved, speaking the names of those he had known: ‘Cendred’—‘Cynwulf’—‘Harold’—‘Leofwine.’ Even in his dreams, they seemed fantastic, these names, and the men they once described.

Finn did not speak. He twitched and struggled weakly, as though trying to break away from the crippling log.

Later in the day a big man with warts on his face kicked open the door and struck them hard across the shins with an ashplant.

‘Wake up, wake up, you dogs!’ he snarled, grinning viciously at them.

The two friends came back to their world of imprisonment with a start. Finn’s face bore a strange expression, as though he had been set free. But when he saw the man, his old grey look came back again. He closed his eyes and tried to turn away in disgust. But the man struck him again and said, ‘You ungrateful hound. Keep awake, or I swear I will leave you without a word.’

Beornoth said, ‘Then go, you pig. We do not need your words.’

The man smiled down grimly for a moment, as though he was wondering whether to strike this scarred and broken young man on the head with his heavy stick. But he restrained himself and said, ‘Look you, you pair of fools. I do this because I am a Christian, no more.’

He flung a rough file down before them, into the straw.

‘Go free if you can. I can do no more for you,’ he said.

They looked up at him in slow bewilderment.

He stood by the door and said, 'And remember—if ever the tables are turned, remember that it was Snorre Sigurdson who gave you your freedom.'

'What ails you, Sigurdson, that you do this?' asked Finn, making no attempt to find the file.

The man stared down at them strangely. 'God knows if I do right,' he said, 'but if Hardrada is coming here foraging, it seems only kind to give you a chance to run away from him.'

Beornoth said, 'We could not walk, much less run. We would not run if we could. We are not Edwin's men.'

Beornoth spat as he said this. The man's face flushed and for a moment he almost lost control of his temper.

But he went from the cell with a wicked smile. 'No,' he said, 'I do not think you will run away from him. I think it is too late. He will find you and roast you over a slow fire, no doubt. And a good end to such rogues.' Then he was gone. They heard him running up the street away from the river bank. Soon they heard other footsteps running too, and then the dull rumble of wagon wheels and the clatter of a horse's hooves. It seemed that the whole population of the village was going away.

Finn turned to his friend and said, 'Well, now we shall truly starve. There will be no one to bring us food.'

At length they remembered the file and slowly began to fumble for it among the rotting straw. It took them a long time to find it, for their hands were slow and weak, and it was difficult to reach down so far from the position in which they were forced to sit.

When at last they did recover the file, they laughed with weakness. It was broken and rusty, and the chain they must file was so thick. Nevertheless, they began to work at the sad business, handing the file back and forth to each other as they tired, which they did easily.

Their movements were those of dispirited men. They had heard strange reports in the months they had been prisoners—that the militia had deserted Harold, that his fleet had been broken up in a storm as it sailed between Sandwich and London, that William was ready to attack London almost any day, and so on. And never once had anyone come to find them. They had

been forgotten and left to die by their King, who surely could have traced them had he been so minded, they thought.

Beornoth felt Harold Godwinson's penny still dangling about his neck on its silver chain. If he had had the strength, he would have torn it off and flung it into the filth on the floor.

After some hours, Finn said, 'My leg is free, though I cannot get the iron ring off my ankle.'

He tried to stand up, but fell down immediately into the straw, laughing and crying at the same time. Then he began to help Beornoth, taking it in turns to file at his chain. Even so, it was dusk before the file had bitten through the second chain. The two friends stood up together, supporting each other, weak and dizzy with the unaccustomed effort.

Then suddenly Finn said, 'Look! Look through the window!'

The little hole in the wall gave on to the broad Humber, half a mile away. It was a clear view, with no houses or trees to provide an obstacle.

Beornoth gasped at what he saw. He had never seen the like of it before. In the last rays of the setting sun, a vast multitude of ships was slowly sailing up the river, longships with proud figureheads and pennants, ships of war, the sea-breeze filling out their striped sails to magnificent dimensions. They were sailing past the mouth of the haven, as though in disdain. They were bound for larger prizes than the Saxon hamlet of Beretun!

As the two men gazed at this great fleet with awe, it faded from their eyes, like a mirage, into a mist of weakness, and then just as suddenly, came back again. They rubbed their eyes and stared.

Finn said, 'These are ships from many places, my friend. I see the flags of Tostig—he is flying the Wessex Dragon—and the great raven of Hardrada! There's a ship for you! Yes, and the pennants of the Flemings, and of the earls of Orkney. I even see a ship from Iceland. It flies a pennant with a white bear on it. This is no foraging raid—it is an invasion! Tostig and Hardrada are invading the north!'

Beornoth said with a gasp, 'Pray God that William does not choose this hour to do the same in the south. If he does, then both Harold and England are finished!'

They stumbled from the cell like drunken men, and then stood in the open air, uncertain which way to take. They had moved a dozen steps before

Finn said, 'What shall we do? We cannot warn Harold in time, wherever he may be.'

Beornoth said, 'Harold is not such a fool that he will not know of this. Doubtless he is coming north with the Carles. He would not lose such a chance of meeting his brother again.'

Finn smiled grimly, swaying on his weak legs. 'Then we must go along the river,' he said, 'until we find a road that Harold might come up. There we must wait for him.'

Beornoth answered, 'Aye, unless he has already come north without our knowing. Then we might lie in a ditch and die without his knowing.'

So they set their faces towards the glowing west, and staggered on, over shingle and rough ground, through marshes and over shallow mud-filled creeks, always to the west. And as they went, the ships still came on, hundreds of them, stretching back towards the wide mouth of the estuary.

But before night had fallen completely and left them tottering in the unkind dark, the great fleet had passed them on its way up the Humber. They had counted three hundred ships before their eyes had misted, and there were still many more to come.

'Pray God we meet Harold and see one great battle before our ravens croak for us!' said Finn almost to himself.

But Beornoth heard him and said, 'Pray God that such comes to pass, and more. I pray that I can survive an axe-stroke from Tostig for ten minutes before this game is over.'

Then they lay down in a ditch to shelter from the night breeze, for it was impossible to go farther that evening. And as they lay, both sea gulls and curlew flew above them, crying out in their sad discordant voices as though this was the end of the world.

16. Stamfordbridge

IT was the evening of September 24th. Earl Morcar of Northumbria sat in his great hall at York brooding. His brother, Edwin, stared disconsolately through the window at the deserted streets below, his chin in his hand. Four days earlier, they had seen the flower of their fighting-men scythed down at Fulford Gate by the great armies of Tostig and Harald of Norway, Hardrada. Morcar was remembering the many brave men who had tried to bar the road to York, but who had been cut to pieces by the Norse axes or trodden into the marshes of the Ouse to drown.

‘This is the end of it, then, brother,’ he said to Edwin. ‘This is the end of our kingdom.’

Edwin gave a slow, secret smile. ‘Aye, brother,’ he said. ‘And the end of Harold Godwinson also. Tomorrow we give Hardrada the hostages he asks, and then we march south with him to turn the son of Godwin from the throne. That, at least, will please me.’

Morcar said, ‘Perhaps we could do worse than follow Hardrada. At least he did not burn down York when he had defeated us. He could have done that.’

Edwin smiled that smile of his again and thumped his hand bitterly on the grey stone window-ledge. ‘He knows better than to do that,’ he said. ‘He needs York. He will rule from here when we have helped him to destroy Harold.’

Morcar said, ‘Harold has betrayed us. We sent to him seven days ago, saying that Hardrada had landed. He has deserted us. We have justice on our side in acting against him now. He will not come. He is too comfortable in his warm house in London.’

But Edwin gave a sudden cry and peered from the window, leaning out.

‘By the Rood,’ he said, ‘but Harold *has* come. He is here, in the street, now! Come and look, brother.’

The two men gazed from the window astounded. They saw an army which they had never hoped to see, after their defeat. Harold Godwinson

rode at its head, his purple cloak hanging down across his horse's withers. His two brothers rode close behind him. The great standard of the Wessex Dragon, and the new Fighting Man, made by the King's mother, floated behind them. They made a splendid sight, though they were tired to death, and could hardly keep their seats in the saddle.

Behind them the vast cavalcade of Housecarles rode proudly, their axes resting across their knees. And beyond the Carles rode the thegns, the militia, every man who could use a sword or thrust with a spear.

It was a great host and the brothers gasped.

'This is the whole of England!' said Morcar.

'If William struck now,' said Edwin craftily, 'Harold could lose his throne as easily in York as in London.'

A Carle saw the brothers and pointed up. Harold followed his gesture and saw the earls. He held up his hand in greeting, smiling at them, his fair hair blowing in the night breeze.

'Greetings,' he called, 'we come at last. It has been a hard journey. But better late than never!'

The men about him laughed. The brothers did not laugh.

That night, by the fire in their great hall, Edwin and Morcar told the King that tomorrow they were pledged to send hostages to Hardrada, who lay with his host seven miles away, on the Derwent.

The King laughed and said, 'We shall take them such gifts as they have not had before, never fear, my friends!'

Then he sent out a message that all men of the host were to sleep their fill that night, for they must ride again in the morning.

Beornoth, who sat with Finn beside a warm fire, said, 'He does not need to tell us to sleep. I could sleep for ever!'

His friend answered, 'You must not speak such words. The gods might hear you, and take you at your word!'

For seven days they had been with their friends, the Carles, having been found on the road to York, wandering almost senseless. Now they already looked much better, for they had been fed and wore their old trappings once more, though the mail shirts irked their thin shoulders, and the belts they had been given were too big for them. But what had aided their recovery was the fact that they were once more among their fellows and serving their King.

Harold had sent for them and had promised them great rewards one day for their faithfulness, though they could see that he was disappointed that they had not found his brother for him and kept Tostig out of further mischief. Indeed, his emotion was so great that Beornoth had not dared tell him what they had found out about Tostig.

‘Sleep well, brother,’ said Finn, ‘or you will not have the strength to carry an axe tomorrow!’

Shortly after dawn the trumpets blew in York, and the great host rose and prepared to ride once more. It was a bright day and the sun was already growing warm in the blue sky. Harold went with Edwin and Morcar to pray for victory. The Carles sat waiting on their horses, fidgeting with their axes. They were glad when the signal to ride came at last.

Harold and his two brothers rode like bridegrooms, dressed in splendour for a festival, their hair combed and curled, their brooches gleaming. Harold had rubbed scent on his hands and arms. His brother Gyrth smiled and said to Leofwine, ‘Our brother wishes to smell sweetly at the ceremony!’

The Carles laughed, but Edwin and Morcar frowned. Harold had married their sister and they did not wish jests to be made on that topic. Yet the King joined in the laughter as merrily as the others though his face was drawn with anxiety at odd moments.

In a great plain of meadowland, beside the River Derwent, the forces of Hardrada and Tostig waited. They expected hostages from a defeated enemy, and so many of the invaders lolled about carelessly in the sunshine, their mail shirts off, their swords and axes lying on the grass. Many had not even brought helmets that day, for it gave promise of being very hot.

Even from a distance, Beornoth saw the two great standards of the invaders set up beside the river—the raven banner of Hardrada ‘Landwaster’, and Tostig’s own flag, which bore the Dragon of Wessex set against a Northumbrian cross.

And when the two great hosts were within a quarter of a mile from each other, the King suddenly snatched the great shield of a Carle who rode near him, and pulling his cloak about him, rode forward towards the standards of the enemy. He called back over his shoulder, ‘Two Carles to follow me, no more! Strike if they take me, friends!’

Beornoth and Finn, who had edged up towards the King during the ride, clapped spurs to their horses before they could be prevented, and rode at a

short distance behind the King, their heads bare, their cloaks about their faces.

Then Harold took a white scarf and waved it as he rode, to signify that he came as a herald. Beornoth saw that the Norse host were surprised at this. They stood up now and watched with interest, wondering what this strange herald would say.

Harold halted when he was fifty yards from the group of great ones under the two standards. He held up his hand for silence. Beornoth saw the massive form of Hardrada, his beard flying in the morning breeze, his sky-blue cloak flapping about his great body. Tostig, himself a big man, looked like a boy beside him.

Now, in the great silence between the two armies, Harold the King spoke, his voice rising loud and clear for all men to hear.

‘Tostig Godwinson,’ he called, ‘I come from your brother, Harold Godwinson. He bids me speak to you.’

Then Tostig smiled and called back sneeringly, ‘And what does my brother say to me, herald?’

The King answered, ‘Your brother offers you a third of England, if you will leave this foolishness, and return to him.’

There was a great gasp from the Norsemen who stood in the meadowland, and even Hardrada looked stern at this. He whispered down to Tostig, who spoke again.

‘And what will my brother give Harald Hardcounsel then?’ he asked.

Harold the King spoke again, sneeringly himself this time.

‘The King has considered your friend,’ he said, ‘and he offers him seven feet of English ground, since he is rather taller than most men!’

Now the gasp of surprise turned to a roar of anger from the Norsemen. Beornoth and Finn shifted restlessly in their saddles. They expected to be attacked for this answer.

But Tostig held up his hand, and the host was still again. His voice was thin and clear in the sunny air.

‘Go back, herald,’ he said, ‘and tell my brother that his gracious offer comes too late.’

There was a roar behind him, and men began to put on their mail shirts and to swing their axes, like hounds anxious for battle.

Harold said sadly, 'As you will.' Then in an undertone, which only the two men beside him heard, 'Oh Tostig, my brother, my brother! You fool!'

They turned and rode back to their own army, the two Carles wondering whether they might be taken by a flight of arrows in the back. But Harold did not once turn. He rode as one who would have welcomed an arrow in his back at that moment.

And so the battle began. As the English army rode forward, they saw that their enemy was withdrawing slowly across a little bridge that spanned the Derwent, so as to fight at better advantage in the meadowlands beyond the river. It was a narrow bridge and would not allow more than two men to pass at a time. The Carles dismounted and ran forward, shouting and swinging their axes. The two standards had already passed over the bridge and were set up now on the farther side, on a little hillock that stood above the surrounding fields.

Yet, try as they might, the English could not break through to gain the bridge and to pass over to the standards, where the two great captains were. The press moved hither and thither, men striking out with their axes held short. Flights of arrows fell among them, buzzing like angry wasps. Men fell to left and to right, clutching at the feathered flights that stuck out from their bodies.

At last, the English warhorns sounded and the Carles drew off for a little way. Men looked towards the bridge and saw that it was being held by a great Norseman with an axe, who was letting his own folk through but keeping back all others who tried to cross.

Harold said, 'That is a man who must be shifted if we are to come to my brother today.' He ran forward, swinging an axe in his hand. Finn and Beornoth ran behind him, closely followed by others.

When they neared the bridge, they heard the Norseman talking as he fought.

'Come on, little Carles, and taste the edge of Brainbiter!'

He gained great victory, for each man fell before him as he struck. And as each man fell, the Norseman laughed and shouted taunts to those who followed, pushing at each other like savage hounds, to come at him. Beyond the river, a gang of Norsemen sat in the field, laughing and counting, as each Carle fell. They were keeping the score, like boys who play a game.

Harold's face worked with fury. He ran at the Norseman and engaged him. The man smiled down at him, turning the King's blows easily.

'Ah, well struck, little King,' he said, 'but you need to do better than that if you are to talk with your brother Tostig today!'

Then he aimed a great blow at Harold, who slipped away from it only just in time, and struck the man a glancing blow on the side. The axe had turned in Harold's hands as he struck, otherwise the bridge would have been clear then. The Norseman grunted and said, 'Harold Godwinson hits harder than I thought. Well, friend, if you wish to fight like a man, then be prepared for a man's blows!'

He struck out then and shivered Harold's axe. The King stared round him like a madman and then snatched Beornoth's axe from him, saying, 'Thank you, comrade. That was well done!'

Finn whispered to his friend, 'Keep the Norseman busy. I know a way to clear him from the bridge.'

Then he took up a long spear that a man had dropped and slithered down the river bank, among the reeds. Beornoth saw him creep below the bridge.

The Norseman was occupied with Harold, exchanging blow for blow and taunting the King with each stroke.

'I knew Godwin, your father,' he said. 'He was a good fighter, but careless. His son is no better!'

Harold struck low at the man, making him jump in the air. 'Take care how you speak of my father, Viking,' he said with a grim smile. The Norseman laughed back at him and said, 'That was not a bad blow for a lad!'

Then he made a feint, which Harold tried to intercept, being deceived by it. The Norseman smiled and twisted his axe cunningly in mid-air, raising it to split the King's skull.

But as he did so, his face changed to one of horror. He gave a high scream and fell forward on the planks of the bridge, transfixed by Finn's spear which had been thrust up at him.

A groan of anger came from the meadow where the Norsemen were. Harold stared at the writhing body for a space, his face black with anger.

'The man who did this is no man of mine,' he said. 'He shall hang at the end of this day if he can be found.'

Beornoth's heart sank within him at these words, but he could not tell the King why Finn had acted so, because now the whole English army was impatient to cross the bridge and attack the invaders. Men were carried over the river in another, even stronger river of their fellows, and the battle began on the other side, this time without quarter or mercy of any kind.

As the day wore on, Beornoth looked about for his friend, hoping to tell him that Harold was angry with him, even hoping that Finn might take his chance to escape until such time as Harold's anger was spent. But he could not see his friend, and then his mind was occupied by other more urgent matters.

The sun was beginning to fall into the west when Beornoth saw Finn. He was standing directly behind the King, as though he did not know of Harold's threat.

Beornoth ran forward, shouting to his friend. But Finn did not hear him in the noise of battle. He was guarding the King's back.

And as Beornoth came closer, striking down those who were in his way, an arrow whirled through the amber air, and Finn gave a great start and fell backwards. He smiled when Beornoth came up to him and bent over him. Beornoth said, 'Oh, my friend, I did not think this would happen.'

But Finn took his hand and whispered, 'I had rather this happened than die like a dog on the end of a rope. Have no fear, Beornoth, I knew this would happen. An old witch once told me so.'

His grasp on Beornoth's hand grew weaker. Then Finn rolled on to his side and said, 'I have served my purpose. That shaft was meant for Godwinson. I am honoured to have received a message sent for a King!'

His eyes closed and he was still. Beornoth saw that he was smiling. As he stood over his dead friend, he noticed that the iron ankle-ring was still on his leg.

There was no time to brood. Dead men lay about everywhere, and again and again the Norsemen tried to force the Carles back into the river to drown them. But it was too late; the combined forces of Harold and of Edwin and Morcar were too many for Hardrada.

Now Harold the King had pressed forward, doing great deeds with the axe, and stood facing his brother Tostig beneath the banner. Beornoth was close behind the King, carrying a sword now for he was too weak to hold an axe any longer. Beornoth was sobbing with exhaustion, yet still he tried to

push past the King so as to face Tostig. But Harold saw him and said, 'Stand out of my way, Housecarle. This meeting is a private one, between brothers.'

The King's face was grim from a long sword-cut which had laid open his features from temple to jawbone. The golden hair on that side had been shorn close with the same blow. He struck out at Beornoth, not knowing what he did.

Tostig heard his brother's voice and said, 'Come closer, Harold, and I will pay you for your treachery!'

But Harold said, almost gently, 'Tostig, my brother, before it is too late, come back to me and we will rule this land between us. I promise you, we will divide it.'

Tostig said, 'You are no longer my brother. Hardrada is my brother now. He and I will rule this kingdom, if anyone rules it.'

Then Tostig struck out with the long axe he carried, and Harold was forced to defend himself. Men drew away from them, the great sons of Godwin, as they fought in the dying sunlight.

Once more Harold spoke and said, 'Before it is too late, Tostig, listen to me.'

But Tostig, whose face was working horribly, groaned, 'Save your breath. It is too late.'

Then Harold, almost in game, swept his axe broadly at the head of his brother. Beornoth saw the stroke and knew that it was Finn's old blow, the one with which he had first knocked down his friend, it seemed centuries ago, at the Hall of the Carles. Finn had said that Harold liked this stroke. He must have tried it many times on Tostig in play with the staves.

But Tostig did not move. With strange horror, men saw that Tostig stood firm and let the blow fall on his neck. Then he stumbled sideways, beneath the tilting standard, and lay dead. Harold flung down his axe and bent over him with a great wordless cry, the tears streaming down his face.

Even Beornoth, who hated Tostig, turned away speechless. He could not bear to see the anguish of his King.

Ten yards away, Hardrada, beneath the raven standard 'Landwaster', stopped suddenly in his war cries and taunting. The circle of Carles who had tried to get at him stared in bewilderment. Almost in the same instant that Tostig fell, so did Harald Hardrada, Harald Hardcounsel of Norway, with an arrow in his throat.

Now men clustered about the dying Norseman, men who had been his foes but a moment before. They lifted his head gently and he smiled. 'I have come far to get this,' he said laconically. Men who recalled that Hardrada had once been the Captain of the Guard at Byzantium knew what he meant.

Someone cut the shaft of the arrow and drew it from the dying King's throat. He held out his hand for the arrow-head and looked down on it with glazing eyes.

'I came for a kingdom,' he whispered. 'But all I shall take with me is this little piece of iron, which some man has sent me.'

Now many Carles began to wish that Hardrada might live and be their leader, for he was a great warrior. But he signed that he wished to lie back on the ground. His eyes turned up towards the great standard, 'Landwaster', whose raven now flapped gently in the dying breeze, lit by the red sun from the west.

Hardrada gave a deep sigh and fingered the arrow-head.

'This was not forged for nothing,' he said, smiling. When men drew near to him, they saw that he was dead.

They turned to tell Harold, but he was kneeling by Tostig, weeping and praying by turns. Men drew away and waited for him to finish.

When at last he would speak to them again, Harold the King commanded that there should be no further fighting, and that the Norsemen who remained should be treated with honour and allowed to sail away in their ships where they willed.

Olaf, the son of Hardrada, and Earl Paul of the Orkneys, received this peace and so led the remnants of their great army down to the waiting longships at Riccall. Three hundred ships and more had sailed up the Humber; twenty-four ships were enough to take away the survivors of that great battle.

The body of Tostig was borne before the English army to York. The Carles who followed it rode like dead men themselves, for they had been in the saddle or on the battlefield the greater part of a fortnight.

When they reached York, many of them fell down in the straw even as they unsaddled their horses, and lay in a sleep of exhaustion.

It was while the English army was slowly recovering from these exertions that a man rode into York, grey with dust, his clothes hanging about him in shreds, his eyes staring like those of a madman.

A Carle brought him into the hall. 'Which one of you is the King?' he said, staggering on his feet.

Harold said, 'I am the King, rider. But I am weary. They may have told you, there has been a battle. What have you to say to me? Make haste.'

The man fell on his knees and said, 'Harold, I bring you greetings from the Great Council. They bid me tell you that William of Normandy has come. He has landed at Pevensey with no man to hinder him. He kills and pillages as he wishes. I come to you for aid. The Witan begs that you ride without delay, for your sword is needed in the south. Your land is in danger.'

Harold turned to the men who sat by him. 'Will you ride with me, Edwin? Morcar?'

The brothers turned away their faces. Then Morcar said, 'Our men are wounded and exhausted, Harold. We would come if we could, but we are tired near to death.'

And Edwin smiled and said, 'Go, Harold, and we will follow you, that we swear.'

Harold looked through them and then shrugged his shoulders.

'Tired?' he said, 'We are all tired, by the Rood!' Then he turned to the Carles, who tottered with weariness. 'Shall we ride to face William as we faced my brother and the Norsemen?'

The warriors beat their hands together and shouted, 'Yes, Harold. Lead us; lead us to victory! Harold Godwinson! Harold Godwinson!'

17. The Road to Sandlake

It was October once again when the Carles rode behind Harold. Only a year before they had ridden to Oxford with him to meet the rebels; but then they had been fresh and ready to fight any man. Now, as they set forth towards the south, they were tired to the point of exhaustion.

Yet, as they made their way along the dusty roads, they found heart to sing.

‘Harold is of Godwin’s line,
A warrior strides his shield;
With such a banner as he brings,
We can never yield.

‘William comes from Normandy,
A cow’s hide is his banner;
Shall men like us, with swords like these,
Kneel before the Tanner!’

Harold smiled grimly as he listened to them. Their courage seemed indestructible.

But though the spirit may be willing, there are times when the body can be driven no further. And now, as the dust-caked cavalcade clattered on towards London, many Carles tottered in their saddles and would have fallen had not their comrades supported them.

Beornoth, who missed Finn more and more each day, was such a one. His imprisonment in Lindsey had weakened him sadly, and so had the long march across country to find Harold. Now, after the trials of the great battle, he was light-headed and had scarcely the strength to speak coherently. As he rode, he began to think of his mother and father, and even to imagine he was a little boy again. Those near to him looked at him strangely, and drew close so as to catch him when he fell.

And this he did three days out of London. Two Carles carried him to the rear of the long line, took off his mail shirt and heavy belt, and placed him

with the other wounded in the wagon that trundled on behind the active force. They tethered his horse to the tailboard of the wagon, against the time when he recovered, so that he might ride after them and face Duke William.

Then they rode on to their places in the long column.

The next three days passed like a slow and frightening nightmare for Beornoth. He hardly knew where he was, but started with wide-open eyes when he awoke from time to time and stared about him, in the grip of a fever. Those Carles who were in the wagon with him tried to comfort him, but he could hardly understand the words they spoke to him.

One elderly Carle, whose arm had been broken by an axe-blow, fed him with broth and pieces of white bread, which he crumbled up for the lad.

‘If you were my son,’ he said, ‘they would not drag you to the battlefield again. You have seen enough.’

Beornoth’s fever left him, when they were twenty miles from London. There the wagon had stopped, outside a little village where the people were kind and brought the Carles food and warm blankets, for the weather had turned colder.

But, in the night, Beornoth suddenly remembered Finn and wondered where he was. He had forgotten all details of the battle at Stamfordbridge, such was his exhaustion.

To pacify him, the old Carle said, ‘Go to sleep, lad. Finn is safe with Harold in the south. Go to sleep.’

Before dawn, when men began to move about, Beornoth woke again and said to himself, ‘I must find Finn. I must be with my axe-friend.’

He crept from the wagon, clad only in his woollen shirt and thick linen breeches, and finding his horse still tethered to the wagon, he mounted him quietly and rode away from the village.

He did not know where he was going, but he felt that he must ride and ride until he found his friend.

Late that afternoon, he stopped at a little hovel below a hill, a place embowered with trees. An old woman gave him a bowl of chicken broth and a piece of black bread. She said she was alone in the place, as her sons and husband had gone to meet the Norman.

Beornoth said, ‘Where is that? Where are they meeting him?’

The old woman saw that he was ill and tried to comfort him.

‘Stay here,’ she said, ‘for though you might ride fast, you would come too late.’

But Beornoth gave a shuddering cry and ran out of the cottage. He rode on through the evening, his senses coming back to him gradually, and by nightfall, had reached the wild country that led at last towards the sea. That night he slept in a barn, the larger part of which had been burned to keep it from William’s hands.

Rats and mice scuttered about in the straw, but Beornoth did not notice them. An owl perched on a charred rafter and stared down at him, but still he slept on.

And in the morning he rose once more and mounted his tired horse. Here and there he saw knots of peasants hurrying south, as though they, too, wished to meet William. They carried scythes, billhooks and even stones tied to the end of sticks. When he asked them where the fighting was, they gestured vaguely onwards, towards the south. Beornoth banged his horse’s sides savagely with his heels and rode in the direction of their pointing.

Well after midday, he heard the sound of men shouting ahead of him, and saw many peasants, in large bands, roughly armed, waiting at the edge of the road and pointing towards a valley.

He rode towards them, but one man, dressed in a greasy horse-hide and carrying a rusty sword, stopped him and roughly demanded his horse. This angered Beornoth, who struck down at the man. But he forgot how weak he was now and the man only laughed and caught his fist in his own bearlike grip. Then he dragged Beornoth from the horse and flung him on to the side of the road. When Beornoth tried to rise, other peasants knocked him down again, saying that a horse was meant for a warrior, not a weakling. Then they went on, leaving Beornoth lying in the dust, his heart full of shame.

Later he struggled to his feet and stumbled over the edge of the slope. There was a great murmur of noise below him, but his head was so muddled that he could not distinguish it from the sound of the wind, and of the flurries of rain that had begun to sweep across the open countryside.

At last he slithered down the slope for a way, and came to rest between two gorse bushes that grew close together. It gave him shelter from the rain and he lay there for a while, grateful for a little rest. Then, being so tired, he fell asleep.

It was late afternoon when he woke, his head and eyes cleared by the sleep. Around him and below him, there were many sounds. They reminded

him of something else he had heard recently, but he could not put a name to them. At last, curiously, he peered out from behind the bushes and a terrifying sight met his eyes.

Then he shuddered and was able to recall Stamfordbridge. He saw Finn again with the arrow in him, and Tostig, bowing before his brother's axe. He saw 'Landwaster' sinking in the dying sun, and he remembered all. Now he knew what these sounds meant—Duke William had come for the crown he thought Harold owed him. . . .

On the slope beneath him were set up many pavilions, men moving hither and thither about them, pennants and gonfanons fluttering above them. His training as a Carle had involved the learning of the signs by which the more eminent of the lords, both English and Norman, were known; and now, as he looked at these flags, he saw the emblems of Hugh de Montfort, Walter Giffard, Ralf de Tosny, William de Warenne, William fitz Osbern, William Malet—and, yes, even the great spangled gonfanon of Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, half-brother to the Duke of Normandy. These were known and goodly warriors, thought Beornoth. Men might sneer at William and call him 'the Tanner', but he was a man whom men would follow, just as Harold was, and even poor Tostig had been.

Farther down the slope, the various companies stood, resting after the bloody affray of the early noontime; the knights, in three great divisions, with the Bretons on the left, the Normans in the centre, the French mercenaries on the right. . . . And before the knights, the heavily armed infantry; and before them, the archers and cross-bowmen. Beornoth whistled. Duke William fought a battle as another man might play a game of chess. A man with half an eye could see that now that he had come, William would not be shrugged off like some tipsy robber, whose courage evaporates when a few hard blows are struck. Beornoth thought that even Harald Hardrada was less formidable than this cold-blooded William.

Then his eyes strayed down, past the forward ranks of Norman archers, over the rough tussocky ground at the valley bottom, and so on up the far hill. As he looked, a great lump came into his throat and he brushed the moisture from his eyes.

At the hill's summit waved the splendid banners of the English, many of them, but none more beautiful to his sight than the great Dragon of Wessex and the King's own Fighting Man. Harold was up there then. Beornoth strained his eyes, trying to see him, but all he could discern was a tightly packed shield wall, and the silver helmets of the Carles just visible above the

round bucklers. Here and there an axe flourished and a high-pitched taunting cry came floating down the hill. Beornoth listened; they were singing the song he had heard on the march south:

‘William comes from Normandy,
A cow’s hide is his banner;
Shall men like us, with swords like these,
Kneel before the Tanner!’

Now these insulting words came clearly to him, borne on the breezes that flowed down into the valley from the hilltop. Others besides Beornoth heard them, for suddenly, below him, among the pavilions, there was a great outcry, and a man stormed away from his tent, some yards up the hill, closely followed by another, older man, in a long surcoat of ecclesiastical sort, which covered a coat of mail.

Beornoth looked closely at the man who raved below him, waving his arms about, red in the face with fury at the song.

He had no doubt that this must be Norman William. He was a bull-necked man, with a thin nose but heavy jowls and lips. His was a cruel face, but yet a powerful one. He wore his dark hair cropped close, so that it would not trouble him in battle. He was a bulky man, dressed in a thick coat of rusting mail. Unlike Harold Godwinson, William did not seem to adorn himself before battle.

The man behind William, who seemed to be coaxing him, was Odo of Bayeux, Odo the Fox; there could be no doubt of that either. Even from that distance, Beornoth sensed the crafty nature of this man, a bishop by name but a wolf by nature. Now Beornoth punched himself hard in the side for his lost chance. Had he a bow and but the worst of arrows, he could so easily have put a shaft through William of Normandy. Why, a good man with a shepherd-boy’s sling could do as much. The distance could not have been much more than eighty yards. He could even hear William swearing his usual oath: ‘Splendeur de Dieu!’ though he could not hear what followed it, but there was little doubt about whom it was being said. The song of the Carles had caught William on his sore spot, that of his ancestry.

But at length the other seemed to quieten him, and when Beornoth could look out once more, the two had gone back to the pavilion, where a conference seemed to be held, judging by the tethered horses and the gonfanons that stood upright in the ground outside the tent.

At length the battle started again. A great troop of heavy cavalry from the Breton division on the left sounded their trumpets and rode forward, over the valley and up the farther slope. Beornoth watched them go, watched them approach the massive shield wall, a long line of horsemen dedicated to death, their hooves thundering like surf along a rocky coast.

And like the surf upon a rocky coast, these horsemen were beaten back. Now at the feet of the first rank of Housecarles lay a great heap of dead men and horses, and the English warriors wiped their axes and jested with each other. And when this wave had broken itself again and again on the shield wall, the cry went up among the pavilions that the Duke was down.

A bare-headed man ran yelling through the tents, 'William is slain! Fly for your lives! Every man for himself!'

And then the Breton horse, who were thick on the far hillside, turned tail and galloped away as fast as they could, not bothering to rejoin their division. Suddenly there was great confusion in the ranks, and both archers and slingmen began to drift away to each side, as though anxious to go while they still might.

Beornoth could not see the Duke anywhere, yet at last he heard his voice from among a cluster of horsemen.

'The Breton horse are riding down my footmen, the thrice-cursed fools! Stop them, Malet, or they will lose us the day!'

Then a trumpet blew and a high voice called, 'The Duke still lives, you fools! Look, he stands before you!'

William had mounted his charger and had ridden out a score of yards so as to show himself. He looked a fine figure, though a terrible one.

Then to his horror Beornoth saw that many of the English forces, mainly levies or ill-armed peasants, were streaming down the hill, screaming and laughing, for they thought that the Breton retreat meant a complete victory.

Beornoth stood up and shouted, 'Go back, you fools! Oh, go back!' But his voice was too weak even to be heard among the pavilions below him. And no one saw him rise; their eyes were turned to the hill.

Then another wave of Normans charged, this time for a more easy task. Led by the Duke, they rode among the peasants and the lightly armed militia, cutting and hacking until their horses could scarcely move for fear of slipping on the wet ground.

A roar came across the valley from the hilltop. Beornoth saw one great Carle suddenly break from the shield-ring and stripping off his shirt as he ran, launch himself on the almost stationary riders, who were busy plunging downwards with their lances. It was Grim; Beornoth's eyes recognised that grey head. With an almost laughable ease, he cut down the first horse and rider he came to, then, hoisting another rider from the stirrups, brought down that fearful axe upon his neck even before he reached the ground. Some of the horsemen turned and saw him then, and fled before him. Grim ran on, battle-mad and laughing horribly. But a young Norman knight set his jaw, and levelling his lance, rode full-tilt at the berserker. His lance took Grim in the breast and carried him ten yards before the horse slowed down. But before the rider could free his lance, another Carle ran from the shield wall and struck the young man across the right arm. Then, hoisting Grim upon his back, he staggered up the hill again towards the wall. The shields opened to let him in and the Carles shouted like Viking madmen. But even as the man reached the lines, he pitched backwards and rolled down again, Grim's body rolling with him, an arrow in his back. The shield wall closed again, and Beornoth buried his face in his hands, weeping.

The day drew to its close. Once more the knights played their new trick of pretending to retreat, so drawing down the hill those of the undisciplined followers who were outside Harold's commands. Beornoth groaned at the stupidity of these ceorls who ran with their pathetic stone axes, to be skewered like rats in a barn before they could collect their wits and scramble back up the hill.

And at length, when the eastern sky was tinged with purple, the knights rested, and the archers strode forward, each man setting his shafts before him upright in the soft ground, so that he could reach them more easily. Then these men of death sat down and waited. And at length the thin trumpet screamed over the valley and the archers shrugged their shoulders and went to their trade.

So, when the sun was setting behind the western hills, a thick cloud of arrows rained down upon the men who stood about the Wessex Dragon and the Fighting Man. So tightly packed were the Carles that many were struck but could not fall to the ground. Again and again the shafts flew, until the archers had used all they dared. Then the trumpet howled once more, and these sturdy men walked back, to one side, allowing the horses free passage.

Twilight fell quickly, and Beornoth stood shuddering in the open now, well away from his protecting bushes. And as he stood, a strange and ghastly chant came to his ears from the hilltop. He shook his head, unbelieving, for

a moment, but he could not drive those terrible words away. And as he listened he found himself chanting, too, while he ran down the slope.

‘Thought shall be the harder, heart the keener,
Courage the greater, as our strength faileth.
Here lies our leader, in the dust of his greatness.
Who leaves him now, be damned for ever.
We who are old now shall not leave this battle,
But lie at his feet, in the dust with our leader!’

Now Beornoth knew where he must be, and he ran between the pavilions heedless of the enemy. Scullions and blacksmiths called to him, asking him if he had lost his way, for they thought he was a kitchen-lad of their own forces. As he passed the waiting knights, one of them spoke sternly to him, telling him to keep out of their way as they would start the charge in a moment. Beornoth heard the man and spat at him as he ran. The knight laughed and said it would be better if others of the serving-men showed such courage.

One archer, suspecting this running figure, fitted an arrow to his bow and aimed, half-heartedly, at Beornoth. The shaft went through his tunic and grazed his right thigh, but he ran on, hardly feeling the wound.

Then he stumbled over the tussocky grass in the valley bottom, sometimes falling, but always getting up again, the death-chant of *Maldon* in his ears, drawing him as a stoat draws a rabbit.

He had begun his climb up the hill when the trumpets screamed behind him and the thud of horses’ hooves drummed his brain to senselessness. The ground shuddered with the great charge, and horses passed on either side of him. Still he panted on, oblivious, though many a rider struck at him for a fool, or swore at him as he passed, his lance at the ready.

Then the axes on the hill struck again and again, and this charge crumbled as the others had done. The horses staggered past him, their riders now too concerned with their own affairs to speak to the ghastly youth who scrambled over the rutted slope to his death as they thought.

And when Beornoth came within reach of the shield wall, he saw that certain Carles were laughing at him grimly and shaking their axes.

‘Come on then, little one,’ yelled Thori, ‘if you must die, then you must!’

But Beornoth yelled out at him, ‘Brothers, I have come to you at last. Make a space for me. Give me an axe!’

The white-faced Carles recognised him and screamed hoarsely to him to fall down behind the wall, for the Normans were assembling for another charge and he would be trampled to death or struck with an axe.

But Beornoth could hardly hear them, the blood drummed in his ears so wildly.

Then Beornoth saw the King, lurching beneath the standard of the Fighting Man, an axe in his hand, his head half-shrouded in a bloody bandage. Cynwulf was at his side, trying to drag him back from the shield wall. Beornoth shouted to Cynwulf, but the man turned on him eyes that were aware of only one person, the King. Cynwulf looked like a dead man already, for a great wound in his chest had almost drained him of blood. Yet he had arisen to protect his wounded lord.

But Harold Godwinson painfully saw Beornoth with his one remaining eye, saw him and recognised him and called to him, though his voice was not that of a man but of a doomed wolf.

‘Oho, little Master Ploughman,’ he croaked, ‘have you come to give me back my penny, then? Nay, I am not worth any more! But I thought you had gone over to the Duke’s side, you have been so long away!’

Beornoth stumbled forward, meaning to fall on his knees and do homage to his lord, but the horses had come again.

They swept in a great hue and cry along the hill, led by William now, naming Harold with insults and shame. The King heard them and wept as he struck at the black shapes that yelled and neighed above him, bespattering him with bloody froth.

Beornoth was swept over like a wooden doll, and for a moment his body shielded that of Harold Godwinson. But at last a shape darker than the rest bore down on the King and a sword flashed out of the sunset across the King’s shattered brow. A knight rolled Beornoth roughly aside and three Normans plunged their lances again and again into the body of Harold Godwinson. And the sounds of battle faded from his ears at last as he lay beside his brothers Leofwine and Gyrth, and by his henchmen Cynwulf and Thori, and Ofram and Beornoth. Now the Housecarles were no more. That last thrust had wiped them out to a man. They did not feel the lances that pushed down at them brutally. They lay fulfilled by their lord, their faces turned up to the stars, to the dew that was already falling.

William rode down into the valley, his face streaming with tears. When Odo came to meet him, the Duke struck his brother in the face, and stumbling into his tent, fell on his knees to ask for God's forgiveness.

And in the dawn time, two monks from Waltham Abbey came searching for the body of the King when they stumbled across a man dressed in a woollen tunic and linen breeches, still breathing, beneath a grey apple tree.

And they looked at the scars on his face and said, 'This must be a Carle. The last of the Carles. Yet he wears no armour.'

The first monk said, 'This is a berserker who fights without armour. He is a brave man for one so young. Let us take him with us. By God's grace, he may yet be saved.'

But the other monk did not reply. He had drawn back with a start, pointing.

'Look who lies beneath him,' he said. 'The one we came to find.'

Epilogue

It was spring again when a rider came to the village. The village boys who hung about the gates ran forward to meet him, for he had the shaven head and the long vestments of a priest, and they hoped to gain a few pence for showing him to the house of their own priest.

But he waved them aside, staring past them with a strange smile. 'I can take myself there, my friends,' he said.

They stared at his thin pale face and the livid scars that marked his head, some of them creeping up into the thin hair. They looked aghast at the red and blue tattoo marks which gave that thin face a hard, almost savage look.

The boys drew back and one of them said, 'This is a man to avoid, my friends. He is like no priest I ever saw.'

Beornoth turned in the saddle, these words coming back to him clearly over the years again. He smiled sadly and was about to speak to the boy, but then thought better of it and rode on towards his mother's house.

It was only when he reined in his horse before a patch of bare ground, on which the charred embers of old rafters lay, that he remembered his family's new house. But he did not know where that was! He turned in the saddle, to call to any of the boys who might still be about. They had gone.

He heard a step before him and turned to see a tall, dark young man, dressed well, as a reeve might be. This young man came towards him, smiling. 'Can I help you, father?' he said.

Then Cryda recognised the strange and ravaged face of his old enemy, Beornoth. And he shrank back, his dark eyes wide with terror. Beornoth sat still in the saddle, smiling.

Then slowly he dismounted and limped towards Cryda, his hands held out in friendly greeting.

'Have no fear, Cryda,' he said gently. 'Those days are over. We shall never fight again. There has been too much blood shed in our land already. Are you my friend, then?'

Cryda came towards him slowly, his hands held out, an uncertain smile on his dark face.

‘Aye, lord,’ he said. ‘We are friends for ever.’

Then Beornoth remembered for the first time that he was a thegn, and a man of property. He remembered these things and shrugged them away as lightly, for they meant nothing to him now. He had gone beyond such things.

‘Lead me to my mother’s house,’ he said quietly. Then, as an afterthought, ‘I hope she is well?’

Cryda breathed a sigh of relief and walked beside the great horse to lead the way.

‘Aye, Beornoth,’ he said, ‘she is well, as well as she can be, thinking that she has lost a son as well as a husband. When she sees you she will be the happiest woman in England.’

Beornoth nodded his head. ‘Please God there is still some happiness for the mother of Harold Godwinson,’ he said, ‘for she has lost many sons.’

And then they stopped before the splendid house that stood beside the church.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

<i>Aelle</i>	A South Saxon who landed about 477 with his sons, one of whom was Cissa. In 491 this roving family distinguished itself by massacring many Britons at Pevensey — where Duke William landed so many years later.
<i>Beretun</i>	Barton-on-Humber, in North Lincolnshire.
<i>Byzantium</i>	Constantinople or Istanbul. The Emperors of Constantinople were proud of their Varangian Guard — a fierce fighting body composed mainly of Northmen, which existed from the end of the 10th century until 1453. Harald Hardrada, ‘Hardcounsel,’ was once a Captain of this Guard. It seems ironic that he should have ended his days a few miles outside York.
<i>Ceorl</i>	These were peasants, of varying grades, in the old English social grouping. They had slightly different privileges and responsibilities and were all under the administration of the reeve in whatever manor they lived.
<i>Cnut</i>	King Canute, who became King of England, Denmark and Norway in A.D. 1016. He is remembered for the lesson which he gave to his flattering courtiers on the seashore. His sister married Earl Godwin and became the mother of Harold Godwinson of this book. Hence Harold considered himself a ‘Viking’.
<i>Danelaw</i>	The part of England given over to the Northmen: the Five Boroughs — Lincoln, Stamford, Leicester, Derby, Nottingham, and their Shires.
<i>Feorm</i>	A tax paid in kind, not money. Originally it went direct to the King himself, and was based on the amount of food needed to keep the King and his retinue for one day.

<i>Frankland</i>	Roughly speaking, France.
<i>Fyrd</i>	The old English army, being mainly composed of men sent from the various villages, rather like a more ambitious Home Guard. The difficulty during that fateful year 1066 was that since the Fyrd was kept out so long, waiting for Duke William, the harvests suffered. King Harold had many problems on his mind.
<i>Gonfanon</i>	The flag of an important lord or a baron, bigger than a mere knight's pennant.
<i>Hide</i>	A measurement of land; roughly, as much as could be ploughed in a day.
<i>Kingpost</i>	The main supporting post of a roof. Saxon houses were made of wood and therefore the kingpost was important.
<i>Lindsey</i>	The North Riding (or <i>Thirding</i>) of Lincolnshire. This county was, and is, too big to be administered from one centre alone.
<i>Maldon</i>	<i>The Battle of Maldon</i> : a poem commemorating a grim battle fought in A.D. 991, between Byrhtnoth, ealdorman of Essex, and the ravaging Danes. The English were wiped out, but this poem celebrates the brave thegns who, knowing that the fight was lost, deliberately gave themselves up to death so as to avenge their lord.
<i>Odin</i>	The Saxon Woden, the Father of the Gods. He lived at Valhalla, the Slaughter Hall.

<i>Reeve</i>	Roughly, a bailiff, or administrator, either of a manor, or more importantly, of a shire. In the absence of his earl, he would have control of a great area. It was Tostig's misfortune that his reeve antagonised the people of Northumbria and caused the rebellion which resulted in Tostig becoming an outlaw.
<i>Scramasaxe</i>	A short swordlike knife, with one cutting edge. The weapon of a man not considered noble enough to carry a sword.
<i>Thegn</i>	An obscure title; some of them were very rich, especially the King's Thegns, and some of them were little more than country gentlemen. They all had some claim to nobility, however impoverished they might be.
<i>Viking</i>	One who goes travelling, a Northman.
<i>Waltham</i>	North of London. The Abbey there had been consecrated by Harold.
<i>Witan</i>	The Great Council of 'Knowing Ones'; the Old English Parliament, supposedly of independent power. They elected Harold as King when Edward died.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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[The end of *Hounds of the King*, by Henry Treece.]