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Opening Extract from...

The Heroes

Written by Joe Abercrombie

Published by Gollancz

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THE HEROES



JOE ABERCROMBIE



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First published in Great Britain in 2011 by
Gollancz
An imprint of the Orion Publishing Group
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA
An Hachette UK Company

This edition published in Great Britain in 2012
by Gollancz

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 575 08385 1

Typeset at The Spartan Press Ltd,
Lymington, Hants

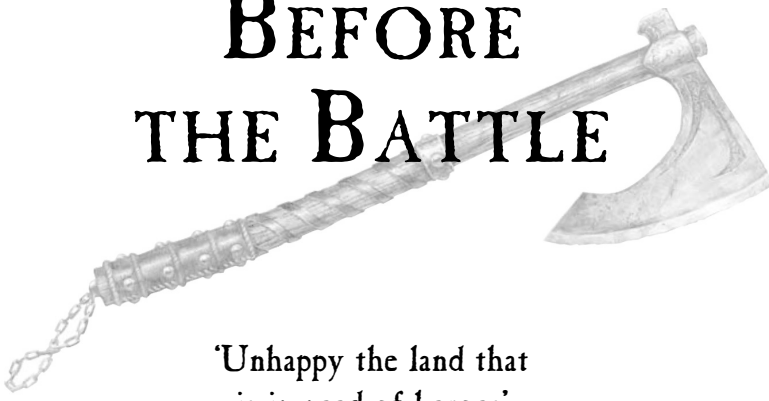
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY

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For Eve
One day you will read this
And say, 'Dad, why all the swords?'

Before the Battle



'Unhappy the land that
is in need of heroes'

Bertolt Brecht

The Times

'Too old for this shit,' muttered Craw, wincing at the pain in his dodgy knee with every other step. High time he retired. Long past high time. Sat on the porch behind his house with a pipe, smiling at the water as the sun sank down, a day's honest work behind him. Not that he had a house. But when he got one, it'd be a good one.

He found his way through a gap in the tumble-down wall, heart banging like a joiner's mallet. From the long climb up the steep slope, and the wild grass clutching at his boots, and the bullying wind trying to bundle him over. But mostly, if he was honest, from the fear he'd end up getting killed at the top. He'd never laid claim to being a brave man and he'd only got more cowardly with age. Strange thing, that – the fewer years you have to lose the more you fear the losing of 'em. Maybe a man just gets a stock of courage when he's born, and wears it down with each scrape he gets into.

Craw had been through a lot of scrapes. And it looked like he was about to snag himself on another.

He snatched a breather as he finally got to level ground, bent over, rubbing the wind-stung tears from his eyes. Trying to muffle his coughing which only made it louder. The Heroes loomed from the dark ahead, great holes in the night sky where no stars shone, four times man-height or more. Forgotten giants, marooned on their hilltop in the scouring wind. Standing stubborn guard over nothing.

Craw found himself wondering how much each of those great slabs of rock weighed. Only the dead knew how they'd dragged the bastard things up here. Or who had. Or why. The dead weren't telling, though, and Craw had no plans on joining 'em just to find out.

He saw the faintest glow of firelight now, at the stones' rough edges. Heard the chatter of men's voices over the wind's low growl. That brought back the risk he was taking, and a fresh wave of fear washed up with it. But fear's a healthy thing, long as it makes you think. Rudd Threetrees told him that, long time ago. He'd thought it through, and this was the right thing to do. Or the least wrong thing, anyway. Sometimes that's the best you can hope for.

So he took a deep breath, trying to remember how he'd felt when he was young and had no dodgy joints and didn't care a shit for nothing, picked out a likely gap between two of those big old rocks and strolled through.

Maybe this had been a sacred place, once upon an ancient day, high magic in these stones, the worst of crimes to wander into the circle uninvited. But if any old Gods took offence they'd no way of showing it. The wind dropped away to a mournful sighing and that was all. Magic was in scarce supply and there wasn't much sacred either. Those were the times.

The light shifted on the inside faces of the Heroes, faint orange on pitted stone, splattered with moss, tangled with old bramble and nettle and seeding grass. One was broken off half way up, a couple more had toppled over the centuries, left gaps like missing teeth in a skull's grin.

Craw counted eight men, huddled around their wind-whipped campfire with patched cloaks and worn coats and tattered blankets wrapped tight. Firelight flickered on gaunt, scarred, stubbled and bearded faces. Glinted on the rims of their shields, the blades of their weapons. Lots of weapons. Fair bit younger, in the main, but they didn't look much different to Craw's own crew of a night. Probably they weren't much different. He even thought for a moment one man with his face side-on was Jutlan. Felt that jolt of recognition, the eager greeting ready on his lips. Then he remembered Jutlan was twelve years in the ground, and he'd said the words over his grave.

Maybe there are only so many faces in the world. You get old enough, you start seeing 'em used again.

Craw lifted his open hands high, palms forward, doing his best to stop 'em shaking any. 'Nice evening!'

The faces snapped around. Hands jerked to weapons. One

man snatched up a bow and Craw felt his guts drop, but before he got close to drawing the string the man beside him stuck out an arm and pushed it down.

'Whoa there, Redcrow.' The one who spoke was a big old lad, with a heavy tangle of grey beard and a drawn sword sitting bright and ready across his knees. Craw found a rare grin, 'cause he knew the face, and his chances were looking better.

Hardbread he was called, a Named Man from way back. Craw had been on the same side as him in a few battles down the years, and the other side from him in a few more. But he'd a solid reputation. A long-seasoned hand, likely to think things over, not kill then ask the questions, which was getting to be the more popular way of doing business. Looked like he was Chief of this lot too, 'cause the lad called Redcrow sulkily let his bow drop, much to Craw's relief. He didn't want anyone getting killed tonight, and wasn't ashamed to say that counted double for his self.

There were still a fair few hours of darkness to get through, though, and a lot of sharpened steel about.

'By the dead.' Hardbread sat still as the Heroes themselves, but his mind was no doubt doing a sprint. ''Less I'm much mistaken, Curnden Craw just wandered out o' the night.'

'You ain't.' Craw took a few slow paces forwards, hands still high, doing his best to look light-hearted with eight sets of unfriendly eyes weighing him down.

'You're looking a little greyer, Craw.'

'So are you, Hardbread.'

'Well, you know. There's a war on.' The old warrior patted his stomach. 'Plays havoc with my nerves.'

'All honesty, mine too.'

'Who'd be a soldier?'

'Hell of a job. But they say old horses can't jump new fences.'

'I try not to jump at all these days,' said Hardbread. 'Heard you was fighting for Black Dow. You and your dozen.'

'Trying to keep the fighting to a minimum, but as far as who I'm doing it for, you're right. Dow buys my porridge.'

'I love porridge.' Hardbread's eyes rolled down to the fire and he poked thoughtfully at it with a twig. 'The Union pays for mine now.' His lads were twitchy – tongues licking at lips, fingers

tickling at weapons, eyes shining in the firelight. Like the audience at a duel, watching the opening moves, trying to suss who had the upper hand. Hardbread's eyes came up again. 'That seems to put us on opposite sides.'

'We going to let a little thing like sides spoil a polite conversation?' asked Craw.

As though the very word 'polite' was an insult, Redcrow had another rush of blood. 'Let's just kill this fucker!'

Hardbread turned slowly to him, face squeezed up with scorn. 'If the impossible happens and I feel the need for your contribution, I'll tell you what it is. 'Til then keep it shut, halfhead. Man o' Curnden Craw's experience don't just wander up here to get killed by the likes o' you.' His eyes flicked around the stones, then back to Craw. 'Why'd you come, all by your lone self? Don't want to fight for that bastard Black Dow no more, and you've come over to join the Dogman?'

'Can't say I have. Fighting for the Union ain't really my style, no disrespect to those that do. We all got our reasons.'

'I try not to damn a man on his choice o' friends alone.'

'There's always good men on both sides of a good question,' said Craw. 'Thing is, Black Dow asked me to stroll on down to the Heroes, stand a watch for a while, see if the Union are coming up this way. But maybe you can spare me the bother. Are the Union coming up this way?'

'Dunno.'

'You're here, though.'

'I wouldn't pay much mind to that.' Hardbread glanced at the lads around the fire without great joy. 'As you can see, they more or less sent me on my own. The Dogman asked me to stroll up to the Heroes, stand a watch, see if Black Dow or any of his lot showed up.' He raised his brows. 'You think they will?'

Craw grinned. 'Dunno.'

'You're here, though.'

'Wouldn't pay much mind to that. It's just me and my dozen. 'Cept for Brydian Flood, he broke his leg a few months ago, had to leave him behind to mend.'

Hardbread gave a rueful smile, prodded the fire with his twig and sent up a dusting of sparks. 'Yours always was a tight crew. I daresay they're scattered around the Heroes now, bows to hand.'

'Something like that.' Hardbread's lads all twitched to the side, mouths gaping. Shocked at the voice coming from nowhere, shocked on top that it was a woman's. Wonderful stood with her arms crossed, sword sheathed and bow over her shoulder, leaning up against one of the Heroes as careless as she might lean on a tavern wall. 'Hey, hey, Hardbread.'

The old warrior winced. 'Couldn't you even nock an arrow, make it look like you take us serious?'

She jerked her head into the darkness. 'There's some boys back there, ready to put a shaft through your face if one o' you looks at us wrong. That make you feel better?'

Hardbread winced even more. 'Yes and no,' he said, his lads staring into the gaps between the stones, the night suddenly heavy with threat. 'Still acting Second to this article, are you?'

Wonderful scratched at the long scar through her shaved-stubble hair. 'No better offers. We've got to be like an old married couple who haven't fucked for years, just argue.'

'Me and my wife were like that, 'til she died.' Hardbread's finger tapped at his drawn sword. 'Miss her now, though. Thought you'd have company from the first moment I saw you, Craw. But since you're still jawing and I'm still breathing, I reckon you're set on giving us a chance to talk this out.'

'Then you've reckoned the shit out o' me,' said Craw. 'That's exactly the plan.'

'My sentries alive?'

Wonderful turned her head and gave one of her whistles, and Scorry Tiptoe slid out from behind one of the stones. Had his arm around a man with a big pink birthmark on his cheek. Looked almost like two old mates, 'til you saw Scorry's hand had a blade in it, edge tickling at Birthmark's throat.

'Sorry, Chief,' said the prisoner to Hardbread. 'Caught me off guard.'

'It happens.'

A scrawny lad came stumbling into the firelight like he'd been shoved hard, tripped over his own feet and sprawled in the long grass with a squawk. Jolly Yon stalked from the darkness behind him, axe held loose in one fist, heavy blade gleaming down by his boot, heavy frown on his bearded face.

'Thank the dead for that.' Hardbread waved his twig at the

lad, just clambering up. 'My sister's son. Promised I'd keep an eye out. If you'd killed him I'd never have heard the end of it.'

'He was asleep,' growled Yon. 'Weren't looking out too careful, were you?'

Hardbread shrugged. 'Weren't expecting anyone. If there's two things we've got too much of in the North it's hills and rocks. Didn't reckon a hill with rocks on it would be a big draw.'

'It ain't to me,' said Craw, 'but Black Dow said come down here—'

'And when Black Dow says a thing . . .' Brack-i-Dayn half-sang the words, that way the hillmen tend to. He stepped into the wide circle of grass, tattooed side of his great big face turned towards the firelight, shadows gathered in the hollows of the other.

Redcrow made to jump up but Hardbread weighed him down with a pat on the shoulder. 'My, my. You lot just keep popping up.' His eyes slid from Jolly Yon's axe, to Wonderful's grin, to Brack's belly, to Scorry's knife still at his man's throat. Judging the odds, no doubt, just the way Craw would've done. 'You got Whirrun of Bligh with you?'

Craw slowly nodded. 'I don't know why, but he insists on following me around.'

Right on cue, Whirrun's strange valley accent floated from the dark. 'Shoglig said . . . I would be shown my destiny . . . by a man choking on a bone.' It echoed off the stones, seeming to come from everywhere at once. He'd quite the sense of theatre, Whirrun. Every real hero needs one. 'And Shoglig is old as these stones. Hell won't take her, some say. Blade won't cut her. Saw the world born, some say, and will see it die. That's a woman a man has to listen to, ain't it? Or so some say.'

Whirrun strolled through the gap one of the missing Heroes had left and into the firelight, tall and lean, face in shadow from his hood, patient as winter. He had the Father of Swords across his shoulders like a milkmaid's yoke, dull grey metal of the hilt all agleam, arms slung over the sheathed blade and his long hands dangling. 'Shoglig told me the time, and the place, and the manner of my death. She whispered it, and made me swear to keep it secret, for magic shared is no magic at all. So I cannot tell you where it will be, or when, but it is not here, and it is not

now.' He stopped a few paces from the fire. 'You boys, on the other hand . . .' Whirrun's hooded head tipped to one side, only the end of his sharp nose, and the line of his sharp jaw, and his thin mouth showing. 'Shoglig didn't say when you'd be going.' He didn't move. He didn't have to. Wonderful looked at Craw, and rolled her eyes towards the starry sky.

But Hardbread's lads hadn't heard it all a hundred times before. 'That Whirrun?' one muttered to his neighbour. 'Cracknut Whirrun? That's him?'

His neighbour said nothing, just the lump on the front of his throat moving as he swallowed.

'Well, my old arse if I'm fighting my way out o' this,' said Hardbread, brightly. 'Any chance you'd let us clear out?'

'I've a mind to insist on it,' said Craw.

'We can take our gear?'

'I'm not looking to embarrass you. I just want your hill.'

'Or Black Dow does, at any rate.'

'Same difference.'

'Then you're welcome to it.' Hardbread slowly got to his feet, wincing as he straightened his legs, no doubt cursed with some sticky joints of his own. 'Windy as anything up here. Rather be down in Osrung, feet near a fire.' Craw had to admit he'd a point there. Made him wonder who'd got the better end of the deal. Hardbread sheathed his sword, thoughtful, while his lads gathered their gear. 'This is right decent o' you, Craw. You're a straight edge, just like they say. Nice that men on different sides can still talk things through, in the midst of all this. Decent behaviour . . . it's out o' fashion.'

'Those are the times.' Craw jerked his head at Scorry and he slipped his knife away from Birthmark's throat, gave this little bow and held his open hand out towards the fire. Birthmark backed off, rubbing at the new-shaved patch on his stubbly neck, and started rolling up a blanket. Craw hooked his thumbs in his sword-belt and kept his eyes on Hardbread's crew as they made ready to go, just in case anyone had a mind to play hero.

Redcrow looked most likely. He'd slung his bow over his shoulder and now he was standing there with a black look, an axe in one white-knuckled fist and a shield on his other arm, a red bird painted on it. If he'd been for killing Craw before, didn't

seem the last few minutes had changed his mind. 'A few old shits and some fucking woman,' he snarled. 'We're backing down to the likes o' these without a fight?'

'No, no.' Hardbread slung his own scarred shield onto his back. 'I'm backing down, and these fellows here. You're going to stay, and fight Whirrun of Bligh on your own.'

'I'm what?' Redcrow frowned at Whirrun, twitchy, and Whirrun looked back, what showed of his face still stony as the Heroes themselves.

'That's right,' said Hardbread, 'since you're itching for a brawl. Then I'm going to cart your hacked-up corpse back to your mummy and tell her not to worry 'cause this is the way you wanted it. You loved this fucking hill so much you just had to die here.'

Redcrow's hand worked nervously around his axe handle. 'Eh?'

'Or maybe you'd rather come down with the rest of us, blessing the name o' Curnden Craw for giving us a fair warning and letting us go without any arrows in our arses.'

'Right,' said Redcrow, and turned away, sullen.

Hardbread puffed his cheeks at Craw. 'Young ones these days, eh? Were we ever so stupid?'

Craw shrugged. 'More'n likely.'

'Can't say I felt the need for blood like they seem to, though.'

Craw shrugged again. 'Those are the times.'

'True, true, and three times true. We'll leave you the fire, eh? Come on, boys.' They made for the south side of the hill, still stowing the last of their gear, and one by one faded into the night between the stones.

Hardbread's nephew turned in the gap and gave Craw the fuck yourself finger. 'We'll be back here, you sneaking bastards!' His uncle cuffed him across the top of his scratty head. 'Ow! What?'

'Some respect.'

'Ain't we fighting a war?'

Hardbread cuffed him again and made him squeal. 'No reason to be rude, you little shit.'

Craw stood there as the lad's complaints faded into the wind beyond the stones, swallowed sour spit, and eased his thumbs out from his belt. His hands were trembling, had to rub 'em together

to hide it, pretending he was cold. But it was done, and everyone involved still drawing breath, so he guessed it had worked out as well as anyone could've hoped.

Jolly Yon didn't agree. He stepped up beside Craw frowning like thunder and spat into the fire. 'Time might come we regret not killing those folks there.'

'Not killing don't tend to weigh as heavy on my conscience as the alternative.'

Brack tut-tutted from Craw's other side. 'A warrior shouldn't carry too much conscience.'

'A warrior shouldn't carry too much belly either.' Whirrun had shrugged the Father of Swords off his shoulders and stood it on end, the pommel coming up to his neck, watching how the light moved on the crosspiece as he turned it round and round. 'We all got our weights to heft.'

'I've got just the right amount, you stringy bastard.' And the hillman gave his great gut a proud pat like a father might give his son's head.

'Chief.' Agrick strode into the firelight, bow loose in his hand and an arrow dangling between two fingers.

'They away?' asked Craw.

'Watched 'em down past the Children. They're crossing the river now, heading towards Osrung. Athroc's keeping a watch on 'em, though. We'll know if they double back.'

'You reckon they will?' asked Wonderful. 'Hardbread's cut from the old cloth. He might smile, but he won't have liked this any. You trust that old bastard?'

Craw frowned into the night. ''Bout as much as I'd trust anyone these days.'

'Little as that? Best post guards.'

'Aye,' said Brack. 'And make sure ours stay awake.'

Craw thumped his arm. 'Nice o' you to volunteer for first shift.'

'Your belly can keep you company,' said Yon.

Craw thumped his arm next. 'Glad you're in favour, you can go second.'

'Shit!'

'Drofd!'

You could tell the curly lad was the newest of the crew 'cause he actually hurried up with some snap. 'Aye, Chief?'

'Take the saddle horse and head back up the Yaws Road. Not sure whose lads you'll meet first – Ironhead's most likely, or maybe Tenways'. Let 'em know we ran into one of the Dogman's dozens at the Heroes. More'n likely just scouting, but . . .'

'Just scouting.' Wonderful nibbled some scab off one knuckle and spat it from the tip of her tongue. 'The Union are miles away, split up and spread out, trying to make straight lines out of a country with none.'

'More'n likely. But hop on the horse and pass on the message anyway.'

'Now?' Drofd's face was all dismay. 'In the dark?'

'No, next summer'll be fine,' snapped Wonderful. 'Yes, now, fool, all you've got to do is follow a road.'

Drofd heaved a sigh. 'Hero's work.'

'All war work is hero's work, boy,' said Craw. He'd rather have sent someone else, but then they'd have been arguing 'til dawn over why the new lad wasn't going. There are right ways of doing things a man can't just step around.

'Right y'are, Chief. See you in a few days, I reckon. And with a sore arse, no doubt.'

'Why?' And Wonderful gave a few thrusts of her hips. 'Tenways a special friend o' yours is he?' That got some laughs. Brack's big rumble, Scorry's little chuckle, even Yon's frown got a touch softer which meant he had to be rightly tickled.

'Ha, bloody ha.' And Drofd stalked off into the night to find the horse and make a start.

'I hear chicken fat can ease the passage!' Wonderful called after him, Whirrun's cackle echoing around the Heroes and off into the empty dark.

With the excitement over Craw was starting to feel all burned out. He dropped down beside the fire, wincing as his knees bent low, the earth still warm from Hardbread's rump. Scorry had found a place on the far side, sharpening his knife, the scraping of metal marking the rhythm to his soft, high singing. A song of Skarling Hoodless, greatest hero of the North, who brought the clans together long ago to drive the Union out. Craw sat and

listened, chewed at the painful skin around his fingernails and thought about how he really had to stop doing it.

Whirrun set the Father of Swords down, squatted on his haunches and pulled out the old bag he kept his runes in. 'Best do a reading, eh?'

'You have to?' muttered Yon.

'Why? Scared o' what the signs might tell you?'

'Scared you'll spout a stack of nonsense and I'll lie awake half the night trying to make sense of it.'

'Guess we'll see.' Whirrun emptied his runes into his cupped hand, spat on 'em then tossed 'em down by the fire.

Craw couldn't help craning over to see, though he couldn't read the damn things for any money. 'What do the runes say, Cracknut?'

'The runes say . . .' Whirrun squinted down like he was trying to pick out something a long way off. 'There's going to be blood.'

Wonderful snorted. 'They always say that.'

'Aye.' Whirrun wrapped himself in his coat, nuzzled up against the hilt of his sword like a lover, eyes already shut. 'But lately they're right more often than not.'

Craw frowned around at the Heroes, forgotten giants, standing stubborn guard over nothing. 'Those are the times,' he muttered.