

The Pale Horseman

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One

These days I look at twenty-year-olds and think they are pathetically young, scarcely weaned from their mothers' tits, but when I was twenty I considered myself a full-grown man. I had fathered a child, fought in the shield wall, and was loath to take advice from anyone. In short I was arrogant, stupid and headstrong. Which is why, after our victory at Cynuit, I did the wrong thing.

We had fought the Danes beside the ocean, where the river runs from the great swamp and the Sæfern Sea slaps on a muddy shore, and there we had beaten them. We had made a great slaughter and I, Uhtred of Bebbanburg, had done my part. More than my part, for at the battle's end, when the great Ubba Lothbrokson, most feared of all the Danish leaders, had carved into our shield wall with his great war axe, I had faced him, beaten him and sent him to join the *einherjar*, that army of the dead who feast and swive in Odin's corpse-hall.

What I should have done then, what Leofric told me to do, was ride hard to Exanceaster where Alfred, King of the West Saxons, was besieging Guthrum. I should have arrived deep in the night, woken the king from his sleep and laid Ubba's battle banner of the black raven and Ubba's great war axe, its blade still crusted with blood, at Alfred's feet. I should have given the king the good news that the Danish army was beaten, that the few survivors had taken to their dragon-headed ships, that Wessex was safe and that I, Uhtred of Bebbanburg, had achieved all of those things.

Instead I rode to find my wife and child.

At twenty years old I would rather have been ploughing Mildrith

than reaping the reward of my good fortune, and that is what I did wrong, but, looking back, I have few regrets. Fate is inexorable, and Mildrith, though I had not wanted to marry her and though I came to detest her, was a lovely field to plough.

So, in that late spring of the year 877, I spent the Saturday riding to Cridianton instead of going to Alfred. I took twenty men with me and I promised Leofric that we would be at Exanceaster by midday on Sunday and I would make certain Alfred knew we had won his battle and saved his kingdom.

‘Odda the Younger will be there by now,’ Leofric warned me. Leofric was almost twice my age, a warrior hardened by years of fighting the Danes. ‘Did you hear me?’ he asked when I said nothing. ‘Odda the Younger will be there by now,’ he said again, ‘and he’s a piece of goose shit who’ll take all the credit.’

‘The truth cannot be hidden,’ I said loftily.

Leofric mocked that. He was a bearded squat brute of a man who should have been the commander of Alfred’s fleet, but he was not well-born and Alfred had reluctantly given me charge of the twelve ships because I was an ealdorman, a noble, and it was only fitting that a high-born man should command the West Saxon fleet even though it had been much too puny to confront the massive array of Danish ships that had come to Wessex’s south coast. ‘There are times,’ Leofric grumbled, ‘when you are an earsling.’ An earsling was something that had dropped out of a creature’s backside and was one of Leofric’s favourite insults. We were friends.

‘We’ll see Alfred tomorrow,’ I said.

‘And Odda the Younger,’ Leofric said patiently, ‘has seen him today.’

Odda the Younger was the son of Odda the Elder who had given my wife shelter, and the son did not like me. He did not like me because he wanted to plough Mildrith, which was reason enough for him to dislike me. He was also, as Leofric said, a piece of goose shit, slippery and slick, which was reason enough for me to dislike him.

‘We shall see Alfred tomorrow,’ I said again, and next morning we all rode to Exanceaster, my men escorting Mildrith, our son

and his nurse, and we found Alfred on the northern side of Exanceaster where his green and white dragon banner flew above his tents. Other banners snapped in the damp wind, a colourful array of beasts, crosses, saints and weapons announcing that the great men of Wessex were with their king. One of those banners showed a black stag, which confirmed that Leofric had been right and that Odda the Younger was here in south Defnascir. Outside the camp, between its southern margin and the city walls, was a great pavilion made of sail-cloth stretched across guyed poles, and that told me that Alfred, instead of fighting Guthrum, was talking to him. They were negotiating a truce, though not on that day, for it was a Sunday and Alfred would do no work on a Sunday if he could help it. I found him on his knees in a makeshift church made from another poled sail-cloth, and all his nobles and thegns were arrayed behind him, and some of those men turned as they heard our horses' hooves. Odda the Younger was one of those who turned and I saw the apprehension show on his narrow face.

The bishop who was conducting the service paused to let the congregation make a response, and that gave Odda an excuse to look away from me. He was kneeling close to Alfred, very close, suggesting that he was high in the king's favour, and I did not doubt that he had brought the dead Ubba's raven banner and war axe to Exanceaster and claimed the credit for the fight beside the sea. 'One day,' I said to Leofric, 'I shall slit that bastard from the crotch to the gullet and dance on his offal.'

'You should have done it yesterday.'

A priest had been kneeling close to the altar, one of the many priests who always accompanied Alfred, and he saw me and slid backwards as unobtrusively as he could until he was able to stand and hurry towards me. He had red hair, a squint, a palsied left hand and an expression of astonished joy on his ugly face. 'Uhtred!' he called as he ran towards our horses, 'Uhtred! We thought you were dead!'

'Me?' I grinned at the priest. 'Dead?'

'You were a hostage!'

I had been one of the dozen English hostages in Werham, but while the others had been murdered by Guthrum, I had been

spared because of Earl Ragnar who was a Danish war-chief and as close to me as a brother. 'I didn't die, father,' I said to the priest, whose name was Beocca, 'and I'm surprised you did not know that.'

'How could I know it?'

'Because I was at Cynuit, father, and Odda the Younger could have told you that I was there and that I lived.'

I was staring at Odda as I spoke and Beocca caught the grimness in my voice. 'You were at Cynuit?' he asked nervously.

'Odda the Younger didn't tell you?'

'He said nothing.'

'Nothing!' I kicked my horse forward, forcing it between the kneeling men and thus closer to Odda. Beocca tried to stop me, but I pushed his hand away from my bridle. Leofric, wiser than me, held back, but I pushed the horse into the back rows of the congregation until the press of worshippers made it impossible to advance further, and then I stared at Odda as I spoke to Beocca. 'He didn't describe Ubba's death?' I asked.

'He says Ubba died in the shield wall,' Beocca said, his voice a hiss so that he did not disturb the liturgy, 'and that many men contributed to his death.'

'Is that all he told you?'

'He says he faced Ubba himself,' Beocca said.

'So who do men think killed Ubba Lothbrokson?' I asked.

Beocca could sense trouble coming and he tried to calm me. 'We can talk of these things later,' he said, 'but for now, Uhtred, join us in prayer.' He used my name rather than calling me lord because he had known me since I was a child. Beocca, like me, was a Northumbrian, and he had been my father's priest, but when the Danes took our country he had come to Wessex to join those Saxons who still resisted the invaders. 'This is a time for prayer,' he insisted, 'not for quarrels.'

But I was in a mood for quarrels. 'Who do men say killed Ubba Lothbrokson?' I asked again.

'They give thanks to God that the pagan is dead,' Beocca evaded my question, and tried to hush my voice with frantic gestures from his palsied left hand.

‘Who do you think killed Ubba?’ I asked, and when Beocca did not answer, I provided the answer for him. ‘You think Odda the Younger killed him?’ I could see that Beocca did believe that, and the anger surged in me. ‘Ubba fought me man on man,’ I said, too loudly now, ‘one on one, just me and him. My sword against his axe. And he was unwounded when the fight began, father, and at the end of it he was dead. He had gone to his brothers in the corpse-hall.’ I was furious now and my voice had risen until I was shouting, and the distracted congregation all turned to stare at me. The bishop, whom I recognised as the bishop of Exanceaster, the same man who had married me to Mildrith, frowned nervously. Only Alfred seemed unmoved by the interruption, but then, reluctantly, he stood and turned towards me as his wife, the pinch-faced Ælswith, hissed into his ear.

‘Is there any man here,’ I was still shouting, ‘who will deny that I, Uhtred of Bebbanburg, killed Ubba Lothbrokson in single combat?’

There was silence. I had not intended to disrupt the service, but monstrous pride and ungovernable rage had driven me to defiance. The faces gazed at me, the banners flapped in the desultory wind and the small rain dripped from the edges of the sail-cloth awning. Still no one answered me, but men saw that I was staring at Odda the Younger and some looked to him for a response, but he was struck dumb. ‘Who killed Ubba?’ I shouted at him.

‘This is not seemly,’ Alfred said angrily.

‘This killed Ubba!’ I declared, and I drew Serpent-Breath. And that was my next mistake.

In the winter, while I was mewed up in Werham as one of the hostages given to Guthrum, a new law had been passed in Wessex, a law which decreed that no man other than the royal bodyguards was to draw a weapon in the presence of the king. The law was not just to protect Alfred, but also to prevent the quarrels between his great men becoming lethal and, by drawing Serpent-Breath, I had unwittingly broken the law so that his household troops were

suddenly converging on me with spears and drawn swords until Alfred, red-cloaked and bare-headed, shouted for every man to be still.

Then he walked towards me and I could see the anger on his face. He had a narrow face with a long nose and chin, a high forehead, and a thin-lipped mouth. He normally went clean-shaven, but he had grown a short beard that made him look older. He had not lived thirty years yet, but looked closer to forty. He was painfully thin, and his frequent illnesses had given his face a crabbed look. He looked more like a priest than the king of the West Saxons, for he had the irritated, pale face of a man who spends too much time out of the sun and poring over books, but there was an undoubted authority in his eyes. They were very light eyes, as grey as mail, unforgiving. 'You have broken my peace,' he said, 'and offended the peace of Christ.'

I sheathed Serpent-Breath, mainly because Beocca had muttered at me to stop being a damned fool and to put my sword away, and now the priest was tugging my right leg, trying to make me dismount and kneel to Alfred, whom he adored. Ælswith, Alfred's wife, was staring at me with pure scorn. 'He should be punished,' she called out.

'You will go there,' the king said, pointing towards one of his tents, 'and wait for my judgment.'

I had no choice but to obey, for his household troops, all of them in mail and helmets, pressed about me and so I was taken to the tent where I dismounted and ducked inside. The air smelled of yellowed, crushed grass. The rain pattered on the linen roof and some leaked through onto an altar that held a crucifix and two empty candle-holders. The tent was evidently the king's private chapel and Alfred made me wait there a long time. The congregation dispersed, the rain ended and a watery sunlight emerged between the clouds. A harp played somewhere, perhaps serenading Alfred and his wife as they ate. A dog came into the tent, looked at me, lifted its leg against the altar and went out again. The sun vanished behind cloud and more rain pattered on the canvas, then there was a flurry at the tent's opening and two men entered. One was Æthelwold, the king's nephew, and the man

who should have inherited Wessex's throne from his father except he had been reckoned too young and so the crown had gone to his uncle instead. He gave me a sheepish grin, deferring to the second man who was heavy-set, full-bearded and ten years older than Æthelwold. He introduced himself by sneezing, then blew his nose into his hand and wiped the snot onto his leather coat. 'Call it springtime,' he grumbled, then stared at me with a truculent expression. 'Damned rain never stops. You know who I am?'

'Wulphere,' I said, 'Ealdorman of Wiltunscir.' He was a cousin to the king and a leading power in Wessex.

He nodded. 'And you know who this damn fool is?' he asked, gesturing at Æthelwold who was holding a bundle of white cloth.

'We know each other,' I said. Æthelwold was only a month or so younger than I, and he was fortunate, I suppose, that his Uncle Alfred was such a good Christian or else he could have expected a knife in the night. He was much better looking than Alfred, but foolish, flippant and usually drunk, though he appeared sober enough on that Sunday morning.

'I'm in charge of Æthelwold now,' Wulphere said, 'and of you. And the king sent me to punish you.' He brooded on that for a heartbeat. 'What his wife wants me to do,' he went on, 'is pull the guts out of your smelly arse and feed them to the pigs.' He glared at me. 'You know what the penalty is for drawing a sword in the king's presence?'

'A fine?' I guessed.

'Death, you fool, death. They made a new law last winter.'

'How was I supposed to know?'

'But Alfred's feeling merciful,' Wulphere ignored my question. 'So you're not to dangle off a gallows. Not today, anyhow. But he wants your assurance you'll keep the peace.'

'What peace?'

'His damned peace, you fool. He wants us to fight the Danes, not slice each other up. So for the moment you have to swear to keep the peace.'

'For the moment?'

'For the moment,' he said tonelessly, and I just shrugged. He took that for acceptance. 'So you killed Ubba?' he asked.

‘I did.’

‘That’s what I hear.’ He sneezed again. ‘You know Edor?’

‘I know him,’ I said. Edor was one of Ealdorman Odda’s battle chiefs, a warrior of the men of Defnascir, and he had fought beside us at Cynuit.

‘Edor told me what happened,’ Wulfhere said, ‘but only because he trusts me. For God’s sake stop fidgeting!’ This last shout was directed at Æthelwold who was poking beneath the altar’s linen cover, presumably in search of something valuable. Alfred, rather than murder his nephew, seemed intent on boring him to death. Æthelwold had never been allowed to fight, lest he make a reputation for himself, instead he had been forced to learn his letters, which he hated, and so he idled his time away, hunting, drinking, whoring and filled with resentment that he was not the king. ‘Just stand still, boy,’ Wulfhere snarled.

‘Edor told you,’ I said, unable to keep the outrage from my voice, ‘because he trusts you? You mean what happened at Cynuit is a secret? A thousand men saw me kill Ubba!’

‘But Odda the Younger took the credit,’ Wulfhere said, ‘and his father is badly wounded and if he dies then Odda the Younger will become one of the richest men in Wessex, and he’ll lead more troops and pay more priests than you can ever hope to do, so men won’t want to offend him, will they? They’ll pretend to believe him, to keep him generous. And the king already believes him, and why shouldn’t he? Odda arrived here with Ubba Lothbrokson’s banner and war axe. He dropped them at Alfred’s feet, then knelt and gave the praise to God, and promised to build a church and monastery at Cynuit, and what did you do? Ride a damned horse into the middle of mass and wave your sword about. Not a clever thing to do with Alfred.’

I half smiled at that, for Wulfhere was right. Alfred was uncommonly pious, and a sure way to succeed in Wessex was to flatter that piety, imitate it and ascribe all good fortune to God.

‘Odda’s a prick,’ Wulfhere growled, surprising me, ‘but he’s Alfred’s prick now, and you’re not going to change that.’

‘But I killed . . .’

‘I know what you did!’ Wulfhere interrupted me. ‘And Alfred

probably suspects you're telling the truth, but he believes Odda made it possible. He thinks Odda and you both fought Ubba. He may not even care if neither of you did, except that Ubba's dead and that's good news, and Odda brought that news and so the sun shines out of Odda's arse, and if you want the king's troops to hang you off a high branch then you'll make a feud with Odda. Do you understand me?'

'Yes.'

Wulfhere sighed. 'Leofric said you'd see sense if I beat you over the head long enough.'

'I want to see Leofric,' I said.

'You can't,' Wulfhere said sharply. 'He's being sent back to Hamtun where he belongs. But you're not going back. The fleet will be put in someone else's charge. You're to do penance.'

For a moment I thought I had misheard. 'I'm to do what?' I asked.

'You're to grovel,' Æthelwold spoke for the first time. He grinned at me. We were not exactly friends, but we had drunk together often enough and he seemed to like me. 'You're to dress like a girl,' Æthelwold continued, 'go on your knees and be humiliated.'

'And you're to do it right now,' Wulfhere added.

'I'll be damned . . .'

'You'll be damned anyway,' Wulfhere snarled at me, then snatched the white bundle from Æthelwold's grasp and tossed it at my feet. It was a penitent's robe, and I left it on the ground. 'For God's sake, lad,' Wulfhere said, 'have some sense. You've got a wife and land here, don't you? So what happens if you don't do the king's bidding? You want to be outlawed? You want your wife in a nunnery? You want the church to take your land?'

I stared at him. 'All I did was kill Ubba and tell the truth.'

Wulfhere sighed. 'You're a Northumbrian,' he said, 'and I don't know how they did things up there, but this is Alfred's Wessex. You can do anything in Wessex except piss all over his church, and that's what you just did. You pissed, son, and now the church is going to piss all over you.' He grimaced as the rain beat harder on the tent, then he frowned, staring at the puddle spreading just outside the entrance. He was silent a long time, before turning and giving me a strange look. 'You think any of this is important?'

I did, but I was so astonished by his question, which had been asked in a soft, bitter voice, that I had nothing to say.

‘You think Ubba’s death makes any difference?’ he asked, and again I thought I had misheard. ‘And even if Guthrum makes peace,’ he went on, ‘you think we’ve won?’ His heavy face was suddenly savage. ‘How long will Alfred be king? How long before the Danes rule here?’

I still had nothing to say. Æthelwold, I saw, was listening intently. He longed to be king, but he had no following, and Wulfhere had plainly been appointed as his guardian to keep him from making trouble. But Wulfhere’s words suggested the trouble would come anyway. ‘Just do what Alfred wants,’ the ealdorman advised me, ‘and afterwards find a way to keep living. That’s all any of us can do. If Wessex falls we’ll all be looking for a way to stay alive, but in the meantime put on that damned robe and get it over with.’

‘Both of us,’ Æthelwold said, and he picked up the robe and I saw he had fetched two of them, folded together.

‘You?’ Wulfhere snarled at him. ‘Are you drunk?’

‘I’m penitent for being drunk. Or I was drunk, now I’m penitent.’ He grinned at me, then pulled the robe over his head. ‘I shall go to the altar with Uhtred,’ he said, his voice muffled by the linen.

Wulfhere could not stop him, but Wulfhere knew, as I knew, that Æthelwold was making a mockery of the rite. And I knew Æthelwold was doing it as a favour to me, though as far as I knew he owed me no favour. But I was grateful to him, so I put on the damned frock and, side by side with the king’s nephew, went to my humiliation.

I meant little to Alfred. He had a score of great lords in Wessex, while across the frontier in Mercia there were other lords and thegns who lived under Danish rule but who would fight for Wessex if Alfred gave them an opportunity. All of those great men could bring him soldiers, could rally swords and spears to the dragon banner of Wessex, while I could bring him nothing except my

sword, Serpent-Breath. True, I was a lord, but I was from far off Northumbria and I led no men and so my only value to him was far in the future. I did not understand that yet. In time, as the rule of Wessex spread northwards, my value grew, but back then, in 877, when I was an angry twenty-year-old, I knew nothing except my own ambitions.

And I learned humiliation. Even today, a lifetime later, I remember the bitterness of that penitential grovel. Why did Alfred make me do it? I had won him a great victory, yet he insisted on shaming me, and for what? Because I had disturbed a church service? It was partly that, but only partly. He loved his god, loved the church and passionately believed that the survival of Wessex lay in obedience to the church and so he would protect the church as fiercely as he would fight for his country. And he loved order. There was a place for everything and I did not fit and he genuinely believed that if I could be brought to God's heel then I would become part of his beloved order. In short he saw me as an unruly young hound that needed a good whipping before it could join the disciplined pack.

So he made me grovel.

And Æthelwold made a fool of himself.

Not at first. At first it was all solemnity. Every man in Alfred's army was there to watch, and they made two lines in the rain. The lines stretched to the altar under the guyed sail-cloth where Alfred and his wife waited with the bishop and a gaggle of priests. 'On your knees,' Wulfhere said to me. 'You have to go on your knees,' he insisted tonelessly, 'and crawl up to the altar. Kiss the altar cloth, then lie flat.'

'Then what?'

'Then God and the king forgive you,' he said, and waited. 'Just do it,' he snarled.

So I did it. I went down on my knees and I shuffled through the mud, and the silent lines of men watched me, and then Æthelwold, close beside me, began to wail that he was a sinner. He threw his arms in the air, fell flat on his face, howled that he was penitent, shrieked that he was a sinner, and at first men were embarrassed and then they were amused. 'I've known women!'

Æthelwold shouted at the rain, 'and they were bad women! Forgive me!'

Alfred was furious, but he could not stop a man making a fool of himself before God. Perhaps he thought Æthelwold's remorse was genuine? 'I've lost count of the women!' Æthelwold shouted, then beat his fists in the mud. 'Oh God, I love tits! God, I love naked women, God, forgive me for that!' The laughter spread, and every man must have remembered that Alfred, before piety caught him in its clammy grip, had been notorious for the women he had pursued. 'You must help me, God!' Æthelwold cried as we shuffled a few feet farther. 'Send me an angel!'

'So you can hump her?' a voice called from the crowd and the laughter became a roar.

Ælswith was hurried away, lest she hear something unseemly. The priests whispered together, but Æthelwold's penitence, though extravagant, seemed real enough. He was weeping. I knew he was really laughing, but he howled as though his soul was in agony. 'No more tits, God!' he called, 'no more tits!' He made a fool of himself, but, as men already thought him a fool, he did not mind. 'Keep me from tits, God!' he shouted, and now Alfred left, knowing that the solemnity of the day was ruined, and most of the priests left with him, so that Æthelwold and I crawled to an abandoned altar where Æthelwold turned in his mud-spattered robe and leaned against the table. 'I hate him,' he said softly, and I knew he referred to his uncle. 'I hate him,' he went on, 'and now you owe me a favour, Uhtred.'

'I do,' I said.

'I'll think of one,' he said.

Odda the Younger had not left with Alfred. He seemed bemused. My humiliation, which he had surely thought to enjoy, had turned into laughter and he was aware that men were watching him, judging his truthfulness, and he moved closer to a huge man who was evidently one of his bodyguards. That man was tall and very broad about the chest, but it was his face that commanded attention for it looked as though his skin had been stretched too tight across his skull, leaving his face incapable of making any expression other than one of pure hatred and wolfish hunger. Violence

came off the man like the stench of a wet hound and when he looked at me it was like a beast's soulless stare, and I instinctively understood that this was the man who would kill me if Odda found a chance to commit murder. Odda was nothing, a rich man's spoiled son, but his money gave him the means to command men who were killers. Then Odda plucked at the tall man's sleeve and they both turned and walked away.

Father Beocca had stayed by the altar. 'Kiss it,' he ordered me, 'then lie flat.'

I stood up instead. 'You can kiss my arse, father,' I said. I was angry, and my anger frightened Beocca who backed away.

But I had done what the king wanted. I had been penitent.

The tall man beside Odda the Younger was named Steapa. Steapa Snotor, men called him, or Steapa the Clever. 'It's a joke,' Wulfhere told me as I ripped off the penitent's frock and pulled on my mail coat.

'A joke?'

'Because he's dumb as an ox,' Wulfhere said. 'He's got frog spawn instead of a brain. He's stupid, but he's not a stupid fighter. You didn't see him at Cynuit?'

'No,' I said curtly.

'So what's Steapa to you?' Wulfhere asked.

'Nothing,' I said. I had asked the ealdorman who Odda's body-guard was so that I could learn the name of the man who might try to kill me, but that possible murder was none of Wulfhere's business.

Wulfhere hesitated, wanting to ask more, then deciding he would fetch no better answer. 'When the Danes come,' he said, 'you'll be welcome to join my men.'

Æthelwold, Alfred's nephew, was holding my two swords and he drew Serpent-Breath from her scabbard and stared at the wispy patterns in her blade. 'If the Danes come,' he spoke to Wulfhere, 'you must let me fight.'

'You don't know how to fight.'

‘Then you must teach me.’ He slid Serpent-Breath back into the scabbard. ‘Wessex needs a king who can fight,’ he said, ‘instead of pray.’

‘You should watch your tongue, lad,’ Wulfhere said, ‘in case it gets cut out.’ He snatched the swords from Æthelwold and gave them to me. ‘The Danes will come,’ he said, ‘so join me when they do.’

I nodded, but said nothing. When the Danes came, I thought, I planned to be with them. I had been raised by Danes after being captured at the age of ten and they could have killed me, but instead they had treated me well. I had learned their language and worshipped their gods until I no longer knew whether I was Danish or English. Had Earl Ragnar the Elder lived I would never have left them, but he had died, murdered in a night of treachery and fire, and I had fled south to Wessex. But now I would go back. Just as soon as the Danes left Exanceaster I would join Ragnar’s son, Ragnar the Younger, if he lived. Ragnar the Younger’s ship had been in the fleet which had been hammered in the great storm. Scores of ships had sunk, and the remnants of the fleet had limped to Exanceaster where the boats were now burned to ash on the riverbank beneath the town. I did not know if Ragnar lived. I hoped he lived, and I prayed he would escape Exanceaster and then I would go to him, offer him my sword, and carry that blade against Alfred of Wessex. Then, one day, I would dress Alfred in a frock and make him crawl on his knees to an altar of Thor. Then kill him.

Those were my thoughts as we rode to Oxton. That was the estate Mildrith had brought me in marriage and it was a beautiful place, but so saddled with debt that it was more of a burden than a pleasure. The farmland was on the slopes of hills facing east towards the broad sea-reach of the Uisc and above the house were thick woods of oak and ash from which flowed small clear streams that cut across the fields where rye, wheat and barley grew. The house, it was not a hall, was a smoke-filled building made from mud, dung, oak and rye-straw, and so long and low that it looked like a green, moss-covered mound from which smoke escaped through the roof’s central hole. In the attached yard were pigs,

chickens and mounds of manure as big as the house. Mildrith's father had farmed it, helped by a steward named Oswald who was a weasel, and he caused me still more trouble on that rainy Sunday as we rode back to the farm.

I was furious, resentful and vengeful. Alfred had humiliated me which made it unfortunate for Oswald that he had chosen that Sunday afternoon to drag an oak tree down from the high woods. I was brooding on the pleasures of revenge as I let my horse pick its way up the track through the trees and saw eight oxen hauling the great trunk towards the river. Three men were goading the oxen, while a fourth, Oswald, rode the trunk with a whip. He saw me and jumped off and, for a heartbeat, it looked as if he wanted to run into the trees, but then he realised he could not evade me and so he just stood and waited as I rode up to the great oak log.

'Lord,' Oswald greeted me. He was surprised to see me. He probably thought I had been killed with the other hostages, and that belief had made him careless.

My horse was nervous because of the stink of blood from the oxen's flanks and he stepped backwards and forwards in small steps until I calmed him by patting his neck. Then I looked at the oak trunk that must have been forty feet long and as thick about as a man is tall. 'A fine tree,' I said to Oswald.

He glanced towards Mildrith who was twenty paces away. 'Good day, lady,' he said, clawing off the woollen hat he wore over his springy red hair.

'A wet day, Oswald,' she said. Her father had appointed the steward and Mildrith had an innocent faith in his reliability.

'I said,' I spoke loudly, 'a fine tree. So where was it felled?'

Oswald tucked the hat into his belt. 'On the top ridge, lord,' he said vaguely.

'The top ridge on my land?'

He hesitated. He was doubtless tempted to claim it came from a neighbour's land, but that lie could easily have been exposed and so he said nothing.

'From my land?' I asked again.

'Yes, lord,' he admitted.

'And where is it going?'

He hesitated again, but had to answer. 'Wigulf's mill.'

'Wigulf buys it?'

'He'll split it, lord.'

'I didn't ask what he will do with it,' I said, 'but whether he will buy it.'

Mildrith, hearing the harshness in my voice, intervened to say that her father had sometimes sent timber to Wigulf's mill, but I waved her to silence. 'Will he buy it?' I asked Oswald.

'We need the timber, lord, to make repairs,' the steward said, 'and Wigulf takes his fee in split wood.'

'And you drag the tree on a Sunday?' He had nothing to say to that. 'Tell me,' I went on, 'if we need planks for repairs, then why don't we split the trunk ourselves? Do we lack men? Or wedges? Or mauls?'

'Wigulf has always done it,' Oswald said in a surly tone.

'Always?' I repeated and Oswald said nothing. 'Wigulf lives in Exanmynster?' I guessed. Exanmynster lay a mile or so northwards and was the nearest settlement to Oxton.

'Yes, lord,' Oswald said.

'So if I ride to Exanmynster now,' I said, 'Wigulf will tell me how many similar trees you've delivered to him in the last year?'

There was silence, except for the rain dripping from leaves and the intermittent burst of birdsong. I edged my horse a few steps closer to Oswald, who gripped his whip's handle as if readying it to lash out at me. 'How many?' I asked.

Oswald said nothing.

'How many?' I demanded, louder.

'Husband,' Mildrith called.

'Quiet!' I shouted at her and Oswald looked from me to her and back to me. 'And how much has Wigulf paid you?' I asked. 'What does a tree like this fetch? Eight shillings? Nine?'

The anger that had made me act so impetuously at the king's church service rose again. It was plain that Oswald was stealing the timber and being paid for it, and what I should have done was charge him with theft and have him arraigned before a court where a jury of men would decide his guilt or innocence, but I was in no mood for such a process. I just drew Serpent-Breath

and kicked my horse forward. Mildrith screamed a protest, but I ignored her. Oswald ran, and that was a mistake, because I caught him easily, and Serpent-Breath swung once and opened up the back of his skull so I could see brains and blood as he fell. He twisted in the leaf mould and I wheeled the horse back and stabbed down into his throat.

‘That was murder!’ Mildrith shouted at me.

‘That was justice,’ I snarled at her, ‘something lacking in Wessex.’ I spat on Oswald’s body, which was still twitching. ‘The bastard’s been stealing from us.’

Mildrith kicked her horse, leading the nurse who carried our child uphill. I let her go. ‘Take the trunk up to the house,’ I ordered the slaves who had been goading the oxen. ‘If it’s too big to drag uphill then split it here and take the planks to the house.’

I searched Oswald’s house that evening and discovered fifty-three shillings buried in the floor. I took the silver, confiscated his cooking pots, spit, knives, buckles and a deerskin cloak, then drove his wife and three children off my land. I had come home.