

The Blade's Fell Blow



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The Sorrow-Song Trilogy

Part Three

By

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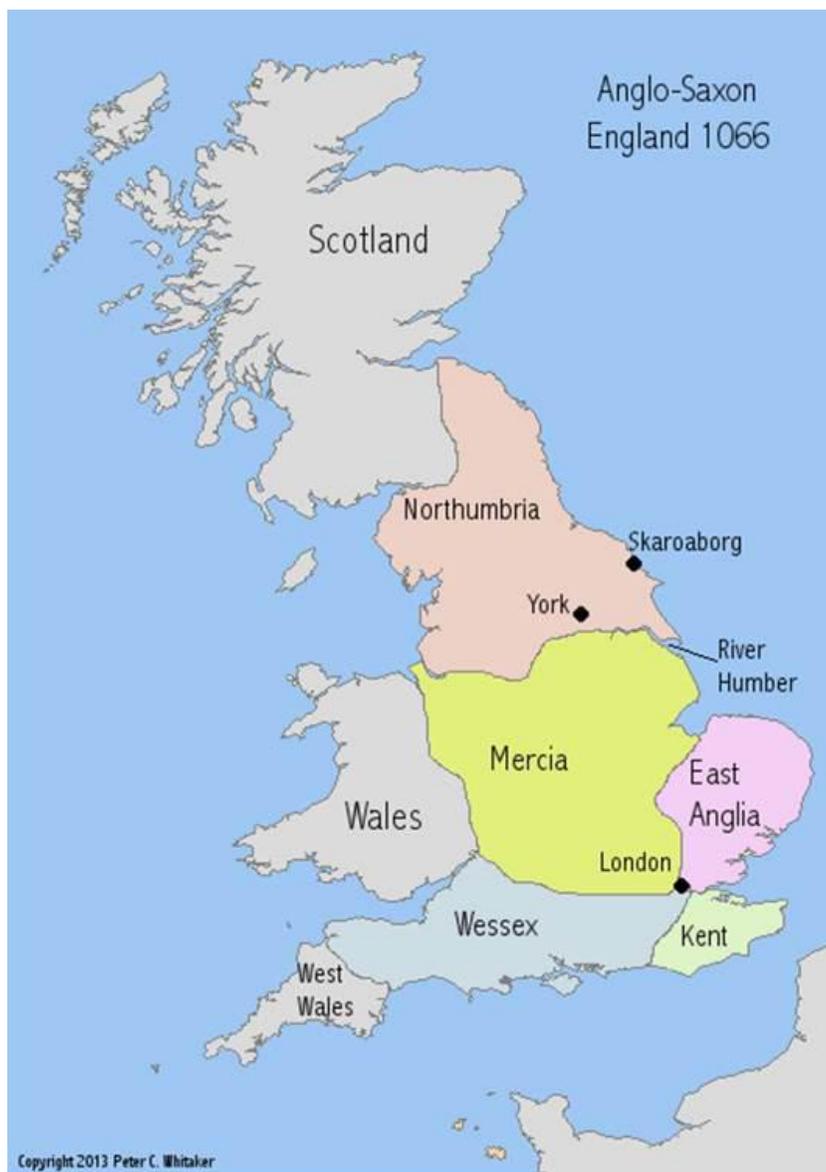
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And for Roy.

Anglo-Saxon
England 1066



The Blade's Fell Blow

Thursday, 28th September 1066

Romney Marsh, Kent.

“Hence Heardred’s end. For shelter he gave them, sword-death came, the blade’s fell blow, to bairn of Hygelac.” – Beowulf.

The dawn had broken upon a desolate spectacle. The surf was a distant sigh, no louder than the last breath to leave a man’s body. It was a scene of isolation. Nature was raw here. The animals lived their lives on a knife’s edge, or so it seemed to the men who looked upon this foreign landscape.

Robert of Saon stood on the English shore, breathing in the salty morning air, and wishing that he was back at sea again. Once more he turned on his heel and looked out to the far horizon. It was a desperate and pointless act, he understood that, but he could not resist the urge. He wanted to see the sails of the lost fleet. He wanted to feel, once again, that he was part of something great and terrible. He did not want to feel alone. All he saw, however, was the one ship that had accompanied his own and, like him, become separated from all the other Norman vessels of war.

“We should put back to sea!” Wadward insisted again. “We cannot beach the vessels here. We know not where the duke will be.”

“But we already have,” Hubert responded from a few paces away, “beached the ships that is.”

He was right, of course. The tide had washed them in and they had, in their ignorance of their real situation, rowed the vessels up onto the beach in the dark of the early morning. The two vessels listed on the wet sand, stranded like whales after a storm. The Norman soldiers had quickly disembarked, many of them professing that they would rather stand on damp English sand than reside another hour cramped in the confines of the transport ships.

Robert sympathised with them. He was not a natural sailor and, like many of them, he could not even swim. He was not a natural soldier for that matter. Robert of Saon was a just a minor noble. He was a man who owned a small estate and owed fealty to Duke Guillaume, the master of the Duchy of Normandy. Outfitting these two vessels and most of the soldiers that they carried had almost bankrupted him. The several weeks

spent paying for their inactivity as the storms raged through the channel between Normandy and England effectively had. Robert of Saon was made prisoner to the promises of Duke Guillaume by that nobleman's demands for servitude and loyalty. It was the assurances of land and titles that offered him the only hope of escaping the ruin that now faced his family. The barren sea coast of England did not offer much support to him in realising that escape, however.

"Robert, we must decide!" Wadward pressed him.

"I say we march south-west along the coast," Hubert advised.

"And leave the ships here for the Saxons to claim?" Wadward countered.

"The tide is out man, it will be hours before it returns."

"The duke was making for a point south-west of here, once the tide has turned and raised the ships from the sandbank we can follow the coastline and find the body of the host again."

"We sailed the channel last night in view of the fleet and your sailors still lost them, even by the light of a full moon!" Hubert replied derisively.

Robert of Saon wished that they would stop their arguing. He wished also that he could come upon a decision. He was unable to resolve for himself what course of action to follow. He could see merit in Wadward's suggestion to wait the turn of the tide and put out to sea once again. Indeed, despite the confines of the ship's timbers, that option appealed greatly to him. It suggested safety and less chance of being surprised by the enemy. His mind was frozen, however, by the knowledge that most of the soldiers were now camped on the sand. Many had built fires and were set about enjoying breaking their fast. He knew that they would resent being told to board the ships once more. Their voices would be raised against him in anger. Robert of Saon was only a minor nobleman; he had never wanted to be a leader of armed men. He did not deal well with confrontation, even from people beneath his station in this life.

"Robert!" Wadward snapped at him again.

"I think..." his voice trailed off as he continued to battle with his indecision. He mused for a moment more. "I see benefits to both sides of the argument." He chose to ignore Hubert's loud sigh and rolling eyes. "However, I am decided."

"Hurrah!" Hubert failed to keep his derision out of his tone.

"We are too few in number to march the land of our enemies; we will fortify our position and await the return of the tide. Wadward will then steer us to where he believes the fleet to be anchored. Once there we will

rejoin the main army.” Robert’s voice had moved from a high uncertain pitch to end on a more decisive note. He nodded to emphasise that he was convinced of his own decision. “Yes, this is the right course of action.”

“I agree!”

“It matters not,” Hubert said. He was looking inland again, but only because he did not want to gaze at either of his companions at that particular moment.

“Your arguments, directed against Wadward here, would suggest otherwise,” Robert answered him. He felt a little more confident now and he knew that he would have the mariner’s support in this.

“Aye, you were set against my plan from the start.” Wadward insisted.

“It matters not, I say,” Hubert returned again. He looked down at the sand beneath his feet and spat. “I mark thee as my dying place, cursed land of the Angles!”

“What means this?” Robert asked with a touch of apprehension. He had thought that the confrontation was over now, a wave of relief had swept through him at the prospect of a decision reached and made, but now it seemed that Hubert was intent on starting another argument.

“What means this? I am abroad with children!” Hubert snapped back. His hands were now on his hips and he stood with his feet apart. It was a challenging stance. “If you had had any experience in the army of the duke you would know that we have wasted too much time. Whether Wadward was right or wrong matters not, a decision should have been made. It should have been made quickly. Instead, we have wasted close upon an hour trying to decide what we should do. Your vacillation, Robert, has doomed us all to die on a foreign shore.”

“What mean you?”

“By my Lord Jesu, he means them!” Wadward pointed inland. Robert followed the mariner’s extended arm.

“No!” He shook his head in disbelief.

“Call the men to arms,” Hubert urged him.

“No!”

“CALL THE MEN TO ARMS!” Hubert shouted as he spun on his heel.

“No!”

“EVERYONE TO ARMS!” Wadward yelled as if he were competing against the roar of a storm.

“No,” Robert repeated himself yet again, but he was not speaking to his companions. He had not spoken to them since finally realising what it was that Hubert had seen.

He was almost whimpering.

The armed soldiers quickly roused themselves. They were trained men. They had spent a long time training as there had been precious little else to do when the army had been camped on the shores of Normandy waiting for the unseasonal storms to abate. They formed into three ranks with those at the front presenting their kite-shaped shields as a defence. All of the men wore the typical conical steel helmets with the extended nose guard so favoured by the Norman fighting man. None of them, however, wore the expensive chain mail vests as their lord could ill afford to equip them with such expensive armour. Instead, they wore humble padded jackets. In some instances these had patches of hardened leather or metal plates fixed to key areas to improve personal protection.

The sailors were urged to join their fellows on the beach. Many brought spears with them, a typical weapon amongst the common soldiery. Some elected to use bows, however. They formed a loose line behind the practised soldiers.

“No,” Robert said again in a plaintive voice.

“Robert, come!” Hubert took hold of the nobleman’s arm and steered him back to the safety of the lines drawn up by their men.

“We must parley for peace,” Robert now insisted. Hubert hated the sound of fear in the other’s voice.

“There can be no peace between us and them. Duke Guillaume has invaded the land of the Angles, their King Harold warned him that such would be met by the cold steel of Saxon spears, this will be their only answer.”

“But we can try?”

“Grip thy courage if you have any man!” Hubert snapped angrily. “You cannot appear thus before the men, not before they meet the enemy. You are a lord, act the part!”

They retired behind the small formation of Norman soldiers. Their horses had not been brought ashore as yet so the knights present, a mere handful, would have to fight on foot. They all wore heavy chain mail armour and helmets of steel, but then they were richer than Robert of Saon. It would give them better protection than their fellows would enjoy, mayhap, but it would also mark them out as the lords of these men and Hubert knew that the Saxons would press to kill them first. The knights had boarded their ships simply because there had been space in the holds of these vessels to carry them and their horses. It may prove to be a decision that they would come to rue. He glanced at Robert and saw the naked fear in the man’s eyes.

“Ready thee men,” Hubert called out in a loud voice. As Robert could not take the lead he would, if only to give these men that they commanded some semblance of hope. “They are Saxons only, peasants, farmers of the land with shit on their heels and wood-axes in their hands. They are not warriors! They are not a match for thee. Today, we will give the poets cause to sing songs about our deeds. Today, we will be the first Normans to spill Saxon blood!”

Hubert wished that he felt as confident as his words suggested. He had served in the army of Duke Guillaume previously. Indeed he was the only minor noble present, with the exception of the knights, who had any experience of actual combat. It was because of that fact that he was able to muster the scant power that they had, some sixty men, into a semblance of a defence. It was also because of that experience that he knew that their cause was lost even before the first blow was struck. He would die this day, along with every other Norman soul that stood upon this desolate beach.

Advancing towards them was a formation of men that outnumbered the Normans some four to one. It was not a loose band of peasants armed with farming implements, however. These Saxons were warriors ranged in three long rows, marching in good order and under the command of a leader who knew what he was about. The men at the front had their large round shields presented forward, loosely interlocked. Those warriors wore the best armour. Their role was to hold the shield wall intact and suffer what blows the Normans could land upon their defence. Behind them, other Saxons would reach over the shoulders of their comrades with long fighting spears to stab at the enemy. Theigns would also lash out with vicious Dane-axes or gold embellished swords to cut down the opposition. This was not a rabble, as he had suggested, but a practised fyrd, an army of trained ceorls and theigns. They existed to defend the people and their villages from marauders, more commonly the Vikings, but today it would be the Normans to test their mettle. They were coming to put their skills to the test against a new enemy.

“Stand thee firm!” Hubert shouted out as several of the sailors glanced longingly back at the safety that the stout boards of their ships seemed to offer. He knew that it was an illusion. The ships were too heavily laden to be moved off this beach easily. Their holds were stuffed with the victuals and other necessary supplies for a campaign abroad. Re-floating them without the help of the tide was an impossible task. Even more so with blood thirsty Saxons at your back.

“We should have put to sea,” Wadward said again. Hubert glanced at him and saw that the man wore a grim smile that was also somewhat mocking.

“One of us should have made a decision.”

“Robert! Draw your sword!” Wadward shouted at their titular commander.

The Saxon fyrd halted, just short of a spear’s throw from the Normans. For a moment the two forces faced each other in silence. There was a movement in the ranks of the Saxons and a man appeared before the shield wall. He was well built and wore a long coat of mail. His face was obscured by a steel helmet but his voice rang out loud and true.

“Normans, we know thee for what thou art, enemies of our land. King Harold bade thee not to set foot here upon pain of death. You have chosen death.” The Saxon spoke with a heavy accent but his words were clear enough to be understood by all those who heard them.

“Our duke has brought a great host to thy land,” Hubert answered him, but he chose to remain behind the protection of his men’s shields. “Know that to oppose us is to bring death upon thy heads.”

“We will deal with your duke after we have dealt with thee, if, that is, our king has not dealt with him first and cast his head into the sea.” The theign was clearly unmoved.

“Draw thee back and leave us unmolested here, you will do well for such a course of action!” Hubert tried once more.

“Normans!” The word was spat out with disdain. “You come to our land unbidden and tell us how to act and what to do here. No one born beyond our shores tells a Saxon what to do. Prepare, now, to die!” With that, the theign turned and disappeared back into the Saxon ranks. The time for talking was done.

“They will press us hard,” Wadward observed.

“They will press us to the earth and then they will press our bones beneath their heels,” Hubert predicted grimly.

He opened and closed his grip on his sword once more and thought of his wife, Mary. She seemed to have made a life out of his long and frequent absences from their home. Theirs had never been a passionate romance, more a marriage of convenience really, between two people of similar station, but they had honoured each other in their own way. He felt a moment of sadness at the realisation that he would never see her or their children again.

If he felt any anger at his fate it was perhaps inspired by the thought that a man like Robert stood higher in society than he did and yet clearly

lacked the same kind of ability that Hubert possessed. This was not mere envy on his part, he did not dislike Robert personally; he just felt that if the nobleman's advantages had been his own then he would have done far better in life, both for himself and for his family.

The air was suddenly rent by the noise of battle-horns. Men visibly flinched at the awful sound that assaulted their ears. After several loud blasts, the Saxons took up a rhythmic chant. It was accompanied by the tapping of spear and axe shafts against the metal rims of their circular shields. Continuing this liturgy they started forward with impressive precision. Their shields were drawn closer together, presenting an apparently impenetrable defence.

The only warning that the march had given way to the attack came with a sudden movement behind the front rank. The chant died on the air as a volley of throwing spears was hurled at the Normans. The heavy missiles were aimed at the tall shields presented to them. Spearheads impacted on wood and where they pierced, as many did, they made those shields heavy and cumbersome. More than one Norman found his defence dragged down by the weight of the stout shaft of the angon, combined with the heavy iron shank and head.

With a sudden rush, the Saxons closed on the Normans. Their shields clashed together and long spears licking forward with vicious intent. Anyone who had lowered their shield was vulnerable to this assault and their blood was quickly spilt. The Normans offered their defence with spirit, however. They fought back with spears of their own and also with flashing swords. Weapons forged with foreign steel that also drew blood.

The impetus lay with the Saxon's greater numbers, however, and they would not surrender it. To meet the longer line of the Saxon shield wall the Norman sailors, neither well-armed nor armoured, had placed themselves on the flanks of the soldiers. They could not hold against the heavy infantry that they faced, however. Saxon archers, moving independently of the shield wall, ranged around the sides of the Normans and sent well-aimed darts into their ranks. When the press of men came too close to clearly mark an enemy from a friend the archers slung their bows and drew their langseaxes, single edged knives as long as swords, and charged into the unprotected flanks.

The weight of the Saxons bore down upon the Norman lines and shattered them. The sand beneath their feet turned red and quickly became a mire to trap feet and limit movement. The Normans could neither retreat nor advance. Assailed on every side their men were cut down by axes, by glittering swords, by long reaching spears, and also by the langseaxes of the peasant soldiers.

After what seemed like only moments the violent struggle was suddenly over. The Saxons stood in the warm morning sun, breathing heavily after their exertions. Not a single Norman took a breath with them.

Pevensey Bay, Kent

The Norman fleet had sailed through the night heading roughly north-west out of St Valéry-sur-Somme. The wind had held true and the much feared Saxon ships had not attempted to intercept them. As Guillaume, Duke of Normandy, stood at the stern of his ship, Mora, he thanked God that the Saxons had not yet been encountered. His army would never be more vulnerable than it was now, crammed into the ships making the vessels difficult to manoeuvre. Skilled crews in swift Saxon warships could have dispersed his fleet at will and then picked them off one at a time. This invasion of England was a most dangerous enterprise and the crossing of the channel was probably the most perilous part of it. Now, it was complete, but yet new dangers were to present themselves. Those were, however, the kinds of danger that he, a seasoned warrior, could deal with. With his feet upon solid ground, Guillaume possessed the confidence to deal with any foe that challenged him.

Harold Godwinson must still be in London, he reasoned. Today it really did feel as if God was smiling down upon him and the Duke of Normandy acted the part. He was effusive with the crew, entering into their banter, complementing their seamanship. He encouraged the soldiers as they nervously awaited the command to disembark the cramped vessel.

The fleet crowded into the bay on the southern coast of England but there was an ordered discipline about their formation. The ships had first assembled back in July at the port of Dives, a time that now seemed like a distant memory. The sailors had had the opportunity, at least before the persistent storms had arrived, to be trained in marshalling their ships in such close quarters. They did so with little trouble. As also had been practised the archers were the first to disembark. They went with one arrow nocked at the ready and quivers full. Cautiously the bowmen made their way up the beach, spreading to the west and east as they went. They fanned out in a crescent shape all the time scanning the horizon for adversaries. None were to be seen.

Once the landing site was declared safe the general disembarkation commenced. Foot soldiers quickly alighted to set up a perimeter. Once they were ashore the knights followed with their horses. The sailors began to prepare their various cargoes to be moved from the ships' holds onto the beach.

Duke Guillaume watched with growing anticipation. No one could understand where the English might be or why they had not yet attacked.

Convinced that all was safe Guillaume made his mind up to step onto the shore. As he came off the gangplank, acknowledging shouts from his soldiers with a wave of his hand, he lost his footing and fell. The men near to the duke watched in horror as he stumbled and came down hard upon his hands and knees. They were superstitious and the fall of their leader in such an ignoble manner would not sit well with them.

For a moment no one spoke nor moved.

"Look!" Guillaume cried suddenly. He clenched the damp sand in his fists and then raised his arms into the air. "I seize the soil of my rightful kingdom with my own hands!"

"That was close," Robert, Count of Mortain, commented dryly as he walked over to his half-brother. "And quick thinking on your part." He helped Guillaume to his feet. The Duke was weighed down by his armour and not as young as he used to be.

"I tell thee brother, God is with us this day!" Guillaume asserted. "Was not your crossing as smooth as you could wish for? No alarms! No sight of the enemy! Does this not go against all that those who opposed our plans counselled?"

"Providence is with us, brother, I agree with you there," Robert admitted. "There is yet much to do before I'll feel safe in this foreign land, however."

"Then let's to it. We are here now and I mean for us to stay!"