

We huddled into one another despite the heat of the day. And we sat without word until I heard Cwenburh almost voicelessly praying. Recognizing the psalm, I joined. At that moment we thanked God and Our Savior for that piece of cloth, knowing full well how much good fortune Prior's loaf of bread had done us.



Subdued weeping prevailed through the night, despite harsh calls for silence. The housecarls and their squires camped close around the fire. The Reeve departed for Hereford with two guards. The Master of Horse, as I thought, retained a minimum of care about the Bishop of Ludlow's wishes.

For in fact, he was a wealthy Saxon Lord and Tenant who owed service to His Eminence through having vast holdings south of us, and only a few in demesne from the Bishop of Ludlow. This Saxon Lord, in fact, provided all the housecarls, drengs, and squires for this action.

He was called Sidroc-the-Old. Sidroc was attended by two squires, talked to no one, staying aloof, quickly becoming sullen in his cups. With that number of men, they ate the remaining half of the roebuck, giving none of Alfred's former train anything but water.

Cwenburh and I were close to them at the fire. During and after Compline, his men talked within earshot, especially the squires. Though the Lombards were closer than us, those poor souls spoke not a word of any language in camp.

Cwenburh was as keen of hearing as I, and we learned via his men's gossip that Sidroc-the-Old did not wish to proceed to Ludlow, and ". . . didn't care a bit if His Grace, the 'Bishop of Thievery' wished him to go north or south. Sidroc-the-Old will go as he wishes."

All other talk pertained to the sharing of money and property, and there was bitter mention that His Grace of Ludlow had departed with the ready coin.

"We won't see a chip of that, the bloody-haired bastard."

There were furtive looks around the fire towards Sidroc, but he was slumped against a pile of hides—occasionally taking swings at the bugs that rose in hordes as the sun sank.

“More smoke! Drive these demons off me.”

And squires fed more green wood into the fire—and volumes of white smoke poured through the camp, the wind being unsteady in any direction, making the entirety seem dreamlike, not part of us.

And we finally slept—not knowing what direction our train would go, no better or worse than the others in party. The answer lay in the begrudging mind of Sidroc-the-Old, and like all great men, he would reveal plans when he wished.

At first light, we were jolted awake with a bellow that if its volume were an indicator, might have been the death cry of a dragon: “Up! Up you worthless pissants! What is this shit? Up!”

Sidroc stood before the fire pissing into it and bellowing orders.

Lying at his feet, his face badly bloodied, was a squire. The wretched soul’s clothing was torn, one shoe on, the other off. Sidroc hurled a gesture at him: “See this fuck! Sleeping on watch. Where in God’s name do you think we are?! This pig could’ve gotten us all killed, but instead got his teeth kicked in.” He allowed himself a great, menacing laugh, packed himself up in his breeches and pointed to his dreng: “He is your squire, Edfel. Slit his throat and be done with it. I could have been a Welsh vanguard. Goddamn if I will pay for this rank stupidity.”

He was in the most fearsome mood I ever saw a man, and he with great power and wealth to do as he wished. We drew back, fearing another awful murder, yet the squire’s dreng, instead of slaying him, motioned for his man to get up and be gone, and kicked him several times while he did so.

Sidroc’s order, thank God and Our Savior, was made in anger and not in earnest. His squire dressed and armed him preparing Sidroc for the day while a second readied his horse. All during it he cursed everyone: First those before him—then his man who suggested cutting the dead Alfred down. This brought to his mind they would leave the rope, and he admonished anyone using costly length of braided rope to hang

such as Alfred.

Then, in overall resentment, he launched into diatribe about holy men, which I found a rare scandal for anyone to air, let alone a rich, powerful owner.

His men warmed ale for him, a preparation I had not heard of—and this seemed to settle Sidroc. Drinking, he looked up at the sky, as if summoning a direction from the heavens. Returning his attentions back to earth, Sidroc scowled at the carpenter who was shoved forward into his presence, and I was grabbed and pushed along, not far behind.

“You help me get this catch-all to Hereford and your arse can go free along with your family, if His Eminence’s court so agrees with my wish. Him behind you, too, for your livery and tackle couldn’t last a damned league with most breaking.”

There was no agree or disagree. Though the carpenter tried to bend down in thanks, we were half pushed, half led off by squires without further hearing.

The carpenter looked at me when we were back at the animals, and gesturing to the tackle—and it was a mess—warned, “I see you have the beginnings of a family, and I already have one. In our Savior’s name, I pray to live on as a born freedman to enjoy them.”

We began work most earnestly.

I knew that Cwenburh would be all in readiness for escape, but we were not with fools. She was tethered to the wagon, though I was free to move around. Worse, armed men were everywhere, and all was in great preparation and a hurry. In truth Alfred’s train was no insignificant undertaking, and the day was not yet hot—but would become so.

Himself sat on his horse, now partaking in bread and meat. He resumed his usual silence—his ranting finally over. Instead he watched all with the scrutiny of a peregrine.

Several of his men were key sergeants and they oversaw details of the train—no conversation seemed needed until it came to matters of the captives. At this time, Sidroc was close to me, watching the great oxen be readied for burden.

“If the captives ride in the wagons, Sidroc, we will make better time. We could make Ludlow in less than two days that way.”

“Fine, but we are not going to Ludlow. We are going to where His Eminence would want us—Hereford.”

“That is at least a week.”

“Jesus Christ our Savior! You don’t think I know that. But I also know that if Alfred’s two shitheads betrayed him for money, they would His Grace of Buggery too—and me—to the Welsh, the greedy pricks. We have a fortune here, sparsely guarded.”

Our troubles were such it wasn’t until that moment that the Marches of Wales became significant to me. I knew we were close, and all talk was rife with accounts of the Welshmen’s cruel raids upon the Marches. The King fought with difficulty against Welsh hosts—even moreso than years before against the Danes.

This news moved about us causing much talk amongst his men. Sidroc took a breath and groaned a lament: “I have with me fools and gut buckets! Use your brain pans. If Welshmen lurk between here and Ludlow, and we go opposite to Hereford, that is keen advantage if there has been betrayal. If no, then it doesn’t make any fucking difference does it? Save we get full share—cutting out that greedy brother of His Eminence’s who has already taken Alfred’s coin!”

This was Sidroc’s longest speech of the morning—he shouted it, wheeling his horse in all directions. While speaking he gestured all around, towards the west, the east—then south.

“Does it? You stupid oafs. Now get to it, goddamn you. The heat of the day is coming and it grows late.”

Loading enough water was hard—and the women made to do it, and so Cwenburh was cut free. The thirsty souls made advantage of this, drinking their fill—and asking for food. Realizing the need for haste—and their help—the housecarls and all others said nothing in reprisal, though no food was given.

The carpenter and I faced many problems. We could have employed a half-dozen carpenter sons in addition to his two. These extraordinarily ponderous carts being loaded with baggage and people created impossible problems.

I felt Sidroc must know. I urged the carpenter to so inform: “This tackle won’t stand the heft of loads.”

“The carts will not either—over these so-called roads?!”

“Then he must be told.”

“Will you, then?”

And me being the junior member, I could not, and we worked on. If the tackle snapped—and it would—I would repair it on the spot; same with the carts.

I had learned at a young age how great men swept aside a powerless man or woman’s life and freedom. The horrible day of Alfred’s reckoning via Sidroc-the-Old and His Grace, Bishop of Ludlow, provided fresh and grim reaffirmation. Life was opening an all-consuming maw before Cwenburh and me.



The women and children riding in the carts lasted briefly—themselves begging to walk, the path so cursedly rough. They were allowed such but the adults were tied neck-to-neck like animals. The children were left to wander between them, their mothers crying out to keep free of the unmerciful turn of those great cart wheels.

Housecarls followed behind and in front, and for the first time I noted one had a longbow and arrows. Even a child knew it was impossible to out run an arrow. Escape was not an option.

My opinion of the carpenter rose when two of the housecarls began to whip the oxen, who struggled up hills over difficult ground. He at once stood between them and the poor animals—fine-fleshed oxen.

“Stop that. These are beasts not used to such treatment, and if you keep that up, we will get never get to Hereford?! Leave us to the coaxing.”

And when they whipped him instead of the oxen, the Norwich man grabbed the whip, despite the pain, and would have pulled the dreng off horse, if not a cooler head—one of Sidroc’s sergeants—had not interceded.

“Leave off! Do as the carpenter asks.”

And he went on—the carpenter bleeding from his wound, one eye

half closed. We said nothing to one another—but drove the oxen sternly though thoughtfully.

The yokes strained and worked around the great animals' necks, and his boys trotted along beside, greasing the joints of the carts and yokes. I followed the lead yoke with switch, urging them on with taps on their vast butts. And as it approached Sext, we made temporary camp to rest through the sun's highest passage.

Seeing we all were due a long trip, the women were allowed to bring out bread for everyone—who had not eaten in a long time. The children nearly choked when wolfing down food.

Spare moments for us tradesmen were spent repairing—for even without people, the carts were hard pressed and needed attention, the tackle and livery as well. To be stopped was to allow at least some serious work on them.

For us, there was no rest.

On the second day of travel—in the settling coolness between Vespers and Compline—a mounted messenger from His Eminence of Hereford overtook us, or actually, encountered us unexpected.

He carried a letter from His Eminence to Sidroc. The messenger jumped from his horse—the poor beast foaming from hard riding—and both man and beast buried their heads in buckets of water. The heat of such a day might kill a horse by its being ridden so—only drastic business would cause it to be thus driven.

Finally, the messenger's thirst slaked—it was I who attended his poor animal—he stood before Sidroc, who held the letter.

“Is this it? What is in it? His Eminence knows I don't read—none of us here do. He thinks my son is with me, but God help me, he is not. Now tell me the drift of what's in this.”

“I don't know, Sire, save His Eminence's Secretary thought you would be on route to Ludlow, I did not expect you here, though I thank the Almighty you were.”

Sidroc appealed silently to the heavens—then raised his hand with the letter in that direction, bellowing, “Does any man present read—even if by hit and miss?”

None did. Cwenburh moved around into my line-of-sight and, putting a bucket down before a group of children, shook her head discreetly. I became confused. We encountered so many reversals since escaping that I feared encountering my own ghost under each rock.

I thought she would be for a gamble here. The poor girl had seen such mayhem at the hands of Sidroc and his housecarls that the fear had also struck her.

Sidroc, being ill-tempered and under such threat as he was, switched his wrath to the messenger.

“You useless shit! If His Eminence did not trust you, then why don’t I just slit your throat right here and now and keep your horse. We have need of a good horse. By our Savior’s grace, you *can* trust a good horse.”

This resulted in laughter the group ‘round—even a few of Alfred’s party followed. This time, all knew it was frustration that did the venting, one of Sidroc’s harmless privileges.

I made my decision. Yes, I regretted coming into Alfred’s camp for comfort of food and shelter, and barely survived it. However, the advantage of reading might well negate a disregard of keeping one’s place and flaunting prideful behavior.

People of power and position fear poor folk who transgress the order of God. It portents unseemly ambitions and possibly the workings of demons. But, it was a combination of despair and craft that overcame fear.

In as low a voice as possible, though I knew all would learn, I said, “I do, Sire. I read.”

Cwenburh put down the bucket, causing a bit of a splash, and dug her hand in her back, her eyes opening.

Sidroc made to shout, then stopped—looked around, and nodded. There was a thoughtful way about him that rendered his carrying-on deceptive. He sensed that the confidentiality of the letter’s contents was more important for that moment than why a liveryman might read.

He led his horse off well out of earshot, handed me down the letter, and ordered me to read.

The message’s essence was that he was betrayed: Dozens of well-equipped men under sway of an infamous Welsh Lord were on their

way. Knowing we transported a fortune of goods and serfs, they intended to intercept us on our way to Ludlow. Further, they held his brother, His Grace, hostage, for he was betrayed as well. And lastly, His Eminence ordered Sidroc to immediately re-direct to Hereford.

He ordered confidential response by the same messenger.

Having been a day and a half already headed for Hereford, Sidroc might have viewed his decision with pride, but he was somber. He frowned while his mind turned steadily on the situation. He shouted for water, took the letter from me—turned it over—saw it blank on the back.

“You can write as well as read?”

“Yes, Sire. I will need goose feather some stain and ash. They will serve.”

At that, he ordered camp made—surprising most, but pleasing all—the heat being awful. Immediately he ordered pickets out to high ground, and brambles and rods to be cut for a surrounding barricade that night.

Housecarls and squires exchanged glances, learning the general drift of the letter from his action. Our armed group was such that they knew only an equal number of brigands—or more—could necessitate such action.

They could not know the force was threefold our number—even more.

Faux angel wings from Alfred’s show properties were a good source of fine feathers, and several men, Sidroc and I included, knew the making of crude ink. The stain was blood, in fact his own.

While the messenger waited—a fresh horse exchanged for the spent—Sidroc sat impatiently as I sharpened several quills. We then got down to it—I had not written anything in some time. But they had drilled me so often, and I was so young with hands nimble, I was sure of my strokes.

He was brief—and the only sign he made of his thoughts behind his answer was just before beginning; he disparaged the word ‘hostage’ to describe His Eminence’s brother’s situation, and there was no smile in the saying of it.

Then he told His Eminence he needed a dozen or more housecarls or whoever sent as fast as possible. By changing directions early, he had two or two-and-a-half unhindered days, but they would then be overtaken

up by the Welshmen when they realized the change.

“What does that say? I did not say that.”

He pointed to my large penned words at the beginning, and I reminded him it was customary to begin messages to fine figures by invoking our Savior, His Father, and the Holy Spirit.

I restrained a gasp—for Sidroc was anything but joking, and sent off the messenger with a warning not to get caught, and the consequences if it happened: “Your uncle is my undertenant, and if you ride off and get your throat slit, I’ll take it out on him.”

And the man was off, taking a grim hold of his leads. Sidroc meant no overstatement but a promise, and the messenger knew it.

Then when I moved to return to duties—he stopped me by reaching out with his foot. He sat on his stool and drank only a light beer, and pulled me back roughly: “Now by hanging you, I would assure confidentiality. No one here knows that we surely are pursued, or how many there are. And who! If so . . . ,” and he trailed off, and looked at the spreading camp grimly, and I knew what he meant. Most of his men would flee, for Welshman would kill everyone not fit for the serf merchant. Horse, liveryman, and arms of all those slain were valuable of themselves. Further, the Welsh would enjoy slaughtering Saxons or Saxon adherents, perhaps even prolonging its doing.

“I will say nothing but do my job, Sire.”

“Of course you will say nothing, and you will do your job. Especially say nothing to that woman of yours. Otherwise I will have you, your wife, and the whelp in her belly flayed alive. Now get to it, you upstart little turd. I will know the moment you leaked word that a host of Welsh are on our ass.”

It was best I avoided talking to anyone. For all noticed that Sidroc stayed away from ale, on alert, and remained surly. He would have slain someone asleep on watch—in fact, said it—and his eyes were everywhere.

The livery—traces and all tackle—were a frayed mess each day. The oxen were driven too hard, as were most of the animals. The carpenter and his sons did what they could, but the massive carts—buildings on wheels, in fact—were coming apart in joint and coupling.

No one asked what the letter said—nor did I give them opportunity to ask. The bugs arose from a nearby wetland by the bushel-weight, and the fires were made to smoke more—itsself not a good thing.

“I want your pickets on the highest places. I want them to look sharp for fires during the night.”

I do not remember the name of Sidroc’s two sergeants, but they had fought together for the King and Archbishop frequently and knew their business—even if the others remained inexperienced.

In fact, I was sure Sidroc had informed his two sergeants what His Eminence had warned. For those two needed no urging from Sidroc.

I made my decision, however. When I lay next to Cwenburh that night, I took her close and told her she—in the event of coming chaos—should keep enough close at hand to survive in the bush, and to escape in the confusion. We very likely would be apart if the fray were to begin.

“I can say no more. But you and the child must survive. Could you find your way back to Elstow?”

“Without you, Cuthwin? Not on my spirit’s posterior. I won’t find my way anywhere. We go where each other goes.”

We were not that far removed from others—we could not argue the matter. I told her life was better than death. It was not just hers but the child as well. Also, that she should not blaspheme, especially now.

I felt in my breast her resolve. Cwenburh was of a nature—and remained so—making me wonder if she were possessed of the same demons that dwelled inside the thorny presence of Waddles, the donkey, who Father Abbot loved so.

Cwenburh’s mind was bright—brighter than the best of us—but her bones, sinews, and God-given stubbornness were soulmates of Waddles. And God forgive me for saying this, even nearly these eighty years hence. But that is part of my purpose herein; no saint, you see, could ever state such trespass on so good a soul as Cwenburh-of-Loe.



In recalling those years along the Marches of Wales I cannot say I ever met a Welshman any greedier or crueler than a Saxon, for they are both God's creations. However, I was young, having just turned my nineteenth year. I was not yet knowledgeable how brother will betray brother; furthermore, that great Holy Men and ordinary folk when possessed by greed will stoop to any foulness of deed.

But youth is a vulnerable period of life, for a young man's knowledge is small but opinion of his own abilities large. This is the age that is the sinew—the backbone of armies and brigands who visit violence upon others by the design of Great Men.

So, Sidroc-the-Old—though corrupt of soul—benefited by four-plus decades, much of it in violent struggle. He knew by events His Grace sold out His Eminence, his brother, in hopes of gaining the sale of all our train. This was much more of a sum than I even vaguely appreciated, especially calculating horse, tackle, and weaponry of those killed.

Sidroc-the-Old oversaw us negotiating the remnant of a road to Hereford, urging us along with as much haste as possible. Those first two days after receiving the letter, he even worked us all through the heat of the day. He was more knowledgeable than all of us in tricks to accomplish this. The most valued art was the manner to keep the oxen cool enough to pull; he had them covered with cloth, and a train of the women and boys to haul buckets of water, tossing it over the cloth spread across the great backs of the beasts, and ordering extra rations to the keep them fed and happy.

So doing, they pulled as if it were much cooler.

And nobody, including him, could ride; but tackle was removed or loosened from all horses, and all were given as much water as possible. This was more than the humans, especially the wretches of Alfred's train.

Several dropped—especially the older women. One of the few elderly

men was just left, despite the howls of protest. Most knew—certainly I did—that when one of the housecarls went back after we’d proceeded a way, it was to end it for the poor soul—dead he would be unable to inform about our vulnerabilities.

And at frequent turn and rise of the road, our pair of rear observers would arrive, report, water themselves, exchange horses, then ride out.

Sidroc all the while noting everything.

Then, in God’s unknowing Grace, on the third day—towards None—it was from before us that we heard great horses. At once the alarm was sounded. Weapons were drawn, horses were mounted. We without weapons experienced our innards stretching tighter than drum-tops; children and women dived under the wagons. Hence it was with immeasurable relief and prayers of thanks when the horsemen turned out to be more than a dozen mounted housecarls led by Lenoc, Sidroc’s son.

Sidroc nodded seeing them, asked if they had come by the way of Jerusalem. I remember well his son’s response: “No, father, but we did stop to make fine sport in several of your favorite places.”

It was not only a vast relief to see them, but to learn that Lenoc was just the opposite of his father—optimistic, and joyful of nature and word.

He announced at once that they’d come to kill Welshmen, and looked forward to it. Furthermore, without bothering to keep the fact unsaid, this would include “His Betrayalship,” who he heaped scandalous words upon.

“I will have his red hair in a wad and wipe my arse with it.”

And this resulted in the first laughter heard in days—even from bound, troubled people. For he mimed this act while voicing it—rising high in his stirrups. He criticized his father for allowing Alfred’s women being used so thoughtlessly, claiming he and his housecarls pick of the best.

He ended his sporting words by advising we camp at once—then his father to lead all armed men back trail and kill every Welshman found.

“We look forward to the sale of stout Welsh horse and equipment, Father. I consider the profit for sale of looted equipment all ours for coming here in such damned Lammastide heat.”

Sidroc groused at his son's behavior, but all became of an easier mood, not only because we were now powerfully defended. We also sensed that Sidroc was helpless against his son's mirth and impulse, so high was his regard for him. We all benefited that the elder's surly moods were watered down by Lenoc's nature.

Lenoc was indeed of a randy, sacrilegious way. He showed this again, by remembering aloud several of the women from Alfred's last visit three years before. Finally, even Cwenburh had to recognize that Alfred-of-Aylesbury offered more than Saint's mummings and children's amusements by foreigners during his stops at fair and festival.

It was then I told her a bit about Frog, those years back, and his sinful debaucheries, ballyhooded by others, if only mentioned in lament by their doer.

"I thought, Cuthwin, harlots were all warty, filthy hags with pestilence about them," she replied.

For she made friends of some. Such was her spirit that she viewed them with no less kindness or sisterhood. It was God's gift with people given her, for Cwenburh always kept profuse kindness and love for anyone who did not visit pain and violence on others, no matter their place.

Our lot continued to improve.

At Compline just before, Sidroc-the-Younger arrived—the elder son—and with him were four of his housecarls and squires. His men were powerfully and richly armed; Sidroc-the-Younger was unlike his junior sibling, Lenoc—more like his father, save of even fewer words, and never allowing outburst of temper.

Now we were a formidable army in my view, and there was great comfort, though the night fires were kept going and barricades peopled. Spirited talk—actually gossip—was more common with the presence of Lenoc and his men. Sidroc-the-Younger had no more luck in dampening Lenoc than his father. During the evening, rear-guards brought in a hind and roebuck for meat.

Lenoc celebrated this. He spoke of fattening up the women, giving them back strength. So it was hoped that some of the wild beast's meat—if only bones—would be given to us. It was at Matins, for indeed we now

had a young priest with us, that Sidroc-the-Younger's squire fetched me.

Himself sat before a station fire, stirring it thoughtfully with a stick, studying the glow of it while talking.

"My father says you read and write?"

"Yes, Sire."

"I do too. They taught me in the Monastery which is where you learned. I know how I left, my father owns a half-dozen hundreds and the Holy Brothers owe him. But how did you?"

"I'm a freedman; my apprenticeship was served, Sire."

"You lie."

"I am a freedman, Sire. A liveryman."

"If I was given a pound of silver for every liveryman in this entire land who read and wrote, I would have nothing."

"But, Sire, fact is, I am a liveryman, and an able one, surely you've seen."

"I have. I see much, including some things unseen. You even use monks' wordcraft."

He stirred away and thought. It occurred to me that his mistrustful heart suspected I was part of some distant threat sent into Hereford to apprise things. I might, perhaps, be in league with the Welsh or others powerful.

My suspicions were sound, for in the next breath, he said, "We have few friends in the direction of Elstow Abbey, which is a Norman outpost, in my thinking."

So the cloth with its holy emblem that saved us a few days before—or bought us time—now functioned in the reverse by indicating dark allegiance.

I repeated how we came by the cloth and bread. He removed the stick from the fire, and put it aside.

"What I can do is get that woman of yours with the deformed mouth, stand her by, and threaten to slit your throat until she tells me the truth, you dissembling toad. So tell me the truth and perhaps save yourself. This land crawls with enemies of His Eminence, and so enemies of my father."

So I did. I would rather that, than risk what he had promised, for like

his father, Sidroc-the-Younger did not employ empty threats. At the very least, I could beg for Cwenburh's life—and the child.

His thoughts—other than giving a toss of his head—he kept to himself. “Return and do your work. I will consider this on our way to Hereford.”

It was with absolute resolve I would keep this interview from Cwenburh. But such was her eye this would be difficult. Returning to our shelter under the wagon, she had questions, and I emphasized how he had quizzed me about my ability in written Saxon.

“He seemed satisfied enough,” I told her, and I believed it.

“He seems a serious, suspicious sort.”

Whether she was sounding me or not, I feigned sleep, and held her to me, which always put her to sleep. Hopefully, by morning her thoughts would be drawn elsewhere. How, I always wondered, at these close, quiet times, could such a tiny bit of humanity contain such ferocity and energy?

For certain, any escape attempt now would be self-destructive—acting as a positive indictment of bad purpose. It was Hereford for us, and there I must use every bit of thoughtful craft God gave me to try and resolve our uncertain situation.

Book 3

The venerable Cuthwin tells the beginning of his innovative vocation in Hereford and how his wanderings began. Also, he speaks of dastardly events experienced by him and his worthy wife, Cwenburh. His account continues, by the Grace of God, including his encounters with strange and gifted souls. Lastly, he describes those of the Devil's craft, and how their ways create misery and evil for Godly men and women.