

## ***This Son of York* - First chapter**

### **1**

Far over to his right the shouts and the sound of metal on metal combine into a clearly audible din punctuated by the booming of his artillery and the popping of the enemy's lighter cannon. The sun glints off the billhooks and the harness of the infantry. Puffs of smoke rise into the air and dissipate above the fighting and banners dip and wave as the opposing lines push and thrust at each other. He finds himself, just for a moment and inappropriately, thinking how well a skilled painter would represent this on wood or canvas. And, in spite of the noise and the disturbance to the air, even though he wears a helmet he can clearly hear birdsong immediately above him as though all the larks in Leicestershire are enjoying the spectacle like watchers at a tournament.

Richard Plantagenet, King of England (France and Ireland too), has been watching intently for some time now. Though he'd placed his vanguard in a strong position, the enemy had moved along its front and wheeled to attack its exposed right flank, and now it's being driven inwards. He can even see some of Norfolk's troops breaking and running. The Stanley contingent sits motionless, on the left side of the plain below him. His attempts to keep good relations with that family have borne no fruit; what he sees now tells him clearly that rather than place their troops under his command as they should have done, they are waiting to see how things go. Turning quickly round, he realises the centre he commands is blocking any manoeuvre by Northumberland's rearguard. In this, the first big battle in which he has had full command, he has not placed his forces as well as others would have expected from him. He grinds his teeth in frustration.

He has risen early, before dawn, on this day he has waited months for, the needle point on which his and the kingdom's future is balanced. His raised heartbeat sounding like thunder in his ears, begins to block out all external sounds. Like a bow before the arrow is loosed, he vibrates with tension. Every slight movement of the horse is transmitted and magnified through his body; the toss of its head, the shifts of its hooves. Such a horse scents battle just as its rider does. Almost as though it, as well as he, knows that today history will be made – and written by the winner.

From the slight elevation where his division is drawn up, he looks down to the flat lea, and the clearly marked line of the old road pointing directly to the party, a little more than half a mile off, gathered round the standard of the contemptible pretender, Henry – who calls himself Earl of Richmond, and who would never have got so far unless puffed up by French troops and money and the covert support of

traitors. They seem to be concentrating on the fighting to their left front, excited by the likelihood of an early victory.

There is one way he can recover everything and make amends for the faulty placing of his army. Strike the invader himself while his attention and that of his escort is diverted elsewhere – keenly following the success of their own main thrust.

He turns and looks at the group around him. His people, his Household, his elite corps. Ratcliffe, Harrington, Constable, Assheton, the Staffords, Catesby, and their own personal retainers; even his secretary, Kendall. Everything they are they owe to him. Defeat today will mean they lose all; their lives forfeit as supporters of an ousted king, their lands seized, their children disinherited. These are good men, brave and loyal. They should not suffer such a fate. He must act. Do something his enemies will not have predicted, and with the sun in their eyes may not see until too late. Put himself at the head of his division in a charge and drive this presumptuous crew of foreigners out of his kingdom or share an honourable death in the attempt.

‘The mace’, he calls to the esquire standing alert beside him. The man hands it up to him. A long handled hammer with an axehead. With this he can topple a fully-armoured man from his horse, and used on lightly-protected foot soldiers, the wounds it inflicts incapacitate completely even if it does not kill outright.

He practises a few swings of the hammer and at the same time wriggles his body – the plate he wears is a work of the highest level of the armourer’s skill. The lightest and most flexible they have ever made for him, and he rejoices in the support it gives to his back and shoulders.

Through the open helmet he calls, ‘Let us put an end to this. Destroy that impudent imposter. Chase his French minions back where they came from. Follow me, keep close, knee to knee.’ All but one of those around him nod their acknowledgement. He looks hard at the one, who says, ‘Don’t take this risk, Sire. It is not for the rightful king to close with a rebel and traitor. Stay here, reform, and let them try to close with us. I beg you.’

He lifts his head. ‘Courage, William. The die is already thrown’. And he closes his visor, hearing the synchronous clatter of those of the others.

As he descends the ridge to the old road, his horse and his body feel as one; it has always been like this and he has a flash of memory of being in the tiltyard at Middleham. Showing off in front of Warwick’s daughters. He shakes his head. Let the past be. Concentrate on the here and now.

Once on the firm surface he urges a canter, then a gallop. Looking quickly to his right and left, two of his companions are up on either side and he senses the rest

keeping pace immediately behind him. This is what he was brought up to do: there is no fear and no doubt; he is in his true element.

As the charge closes he deploys the war hammer to use it to its maximum extent and sees the enemy group has turned to face this unorthodox and unexpected attack. They have seen him too late; they are not fully prepared. His charge smashes into Tudor's personal guard, its standard-bearer takes Asheton's battle axe full on the head. Momentum carries him into the middle of a melee, men-at-arms still on foot and the common soldiers in utter confusion—and there is the object of his charge; a pretend-warrior, on foot, his body twisting this way and that, utterly uncertain what to do. Even in this desperate moment he notes the other's fear, the body attempting to fly; the brain as yet not fully accepting the peril it is in. The fellow turns towards him, the face through the open helmet distorted in terror; the war hammer swings in an arc and the creature is toppled to the ground, unable to get up. Then, using all the skills he has learned, man and boy, he pulls his horse back on its haunches, swivels it and brings the massive front hooves down to crush the invader lying like an armoured beetle on the ground.

Aware of their leader's fall and the subsequent display of equestrian domination over the body, the invading troops retreat, then, abandoning their pikes, turn and run pursued with whoops and yells as though this were a stag hunt. Looking to his right, he sees William Stanley's force, supposedly part of his army and which had been advancing boldly towards the action, has come to a stand. He knows from the confession poured out by its commander's nephew, whom he had wisely kept as a hostage for the Stanley family's good behaviour, the advance had not been to support him but to fulfil a pact with Tudor; now William Stanley and his treacherous brother have no choice but to share their rightful king's victory. Looking back the way he has come, he sees his own rearguard moving to attack the enemy's right flank and complete the rout. He looks upward, towards the heavens, whose mighty Lord, greater than any earthly King who ever lived or will live, has kept faith with him. The constant feeling of the need to be vigilant, the frustration at having to be in arms rather than be able to concentrate on governing his kingdom, that has weighed upon him these last several weeks, all stream out of him, leaving him, for a moment, lightheaded. He has seen all his enemies off. How proud would his father have been of him at this moment.

So ends the battle of Bosworth, on the sunlit morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 1485.

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By the time his companions return to their king, the pursuit of the fleeing enemy left to the Earl of Northumberland's force, he is on his knees, head bowed, helmet visor

open, hands clasped together, his horse chomping the grass beside him. They dismount and stand round him until he opens his eyes and parts his gauntleted hands. He waves imperiously away the two or three who have moved to help him to his feet and rises as is his custom, clumsily but without assistance. The horse ceases its nibbling, lifts its head, and obediently moves closer to him. He puts a foot in a stirrup and hoists himself into the saddle. From there he considers the group standing around him, holding their own horses. He extends his arms to encompass them all, his voice strong and clear. 'The day is ours. But without your courage and devotion to your king in what we have just done together, it would not have been. I am a fortunate King to have such men around me and proud to call you my own, and as long as I may live, I shall never forget what I owe to you'.

He gestures towards the crushed torso lying nearby. 'Have this wretch taken up, remove the armour, and let the corpse be decently dressed and conveyed on an open wagon when we return to Leicester so all can see he is truly dead. I want no false Henrys threatening this kingdom. Tomorrow we shall convey the body with the dignity due to the dead, no matter who he may be, to my Lord Stanley so his wife can bury and mourn her son, the so-called Earl of Richmond. Before we leave this place, together let us give thanks to God for what He has done here this day'. The group remount and sit silently, heads bared, round their king. His prayers completed, he calls, pointing, 'Let us go back now to where our standard flies.' He spots an esquire on a fresh horse, a latecomer to the scene. 'Go, sir, to my Lord of Norfolk's battle and report back his gains and losses to us up there beneath our standard'.

Back on the ridge, his royal standard, the white boar, flapping in the light air, his first question is, 'Lord Stanley's son. Do you still hold him?' 'Yes, my Lord, he is kept close'. 'Let him go back to his father. We no longer have need of him as security for Lord Stanley's loyalty. But first send him with an escort and Tudor's body to Leicester. The Tudors came from nothing – they have returned to nothing. Lord Stanley's wife has my blessing to weep over the pitiful result of her ambitions for them. And ask Lord Stanley to come to me as soon as maybe. He needs to explain himself and account for his brother's actions'.

His does not dismount, deliberately so as to be able to see beyond the small dismounted group of his close comrades but also to emphasise his exalted status in relation to those around him. He searches the part of the field to his right where Norfolk's vanguard had taken the full force of de Vere's invading division and where now, far into the distance, obscured by dust, that division appears to be fleeing the field. As his experienced eye quarters the land between where he sits and the furthest extent of his army's line, he sees a rider moving rapidly along the ridge towards him. When the man is a few hundred yards away, it is clear it is the esquire

he'd sent in search of news from Norfolk's force. The messenger approaches, sees the mounted figure whose battle crown flashes as the sun catches his helmet, pulls the horse abruptly to a stop, and with practised ease swings from the saddle and drops to one knee before his king.

'Stand up, sir. Tell me what you know'.

'The enemy is in full flight, Sire. The Earl of Surrey and my lord of Northumberland's forces are driving them from the field. You have the victory, my Lord'.

Richard calls down to him. 'I can see that from here. But what of my lord of Norfolk? How is it with him?'

The man looks away. 'My lord of Norfolk, Sire . . . '

'Aye, sir,' the king leans forward over his horse's neck, 'Tell me plain and clear. How is it with my Lord?'

'Dead, Sire. Struck by an arrow in the face'.

He knows there is always a price for giving battle—few in England know it better. His father and elder brother killed at Wakefield when he'd been a child of eight. There, men die or are hideously injured, your own as well as your enemy's. But death in a battle he has taken part in has never yet robbed him of anyone he was so close to. One he admired, respected, saw as the father he had never really known; if all were admitted, a man he loved.

In front of his Household, Richard straightens, his face impassive but tears stinging behind his eyes. 'Our beloved Cousin . . . ', he begins – and cannot find words. Then, 'we shall miss his courage, his wisdom, his firmness in our cause'. He looks round for his herald and gestures to him. 'Go find the Earl of Surrey. Tell him we mourn with him his father's death and how stricken his King is to have lost such a pillar of the kingdom as his father. Tell him too we expect the new Duke of Norfolk to be as firm and upright a support to us'.

Motivated directly by the wish to avenge Norfolk's death, Richard demands from those around him the pursuit and capture of the rebel and traitor de Vere, so-called Earl of Oxford, one whose military abilities and stubborn commitment to the old cause of Lancaster put him beyond hope of redemption. And, he wants to know, is there news of Francis Lovell's approach. Charged with guarding the South coasts from invasion by Tudor and the French, he had not been able to join the royal army before the battle. From Lovell his thoughts go directly to one of the other two members of his most private council. He looks round for Catesby. 'You did not ride with us, William. O ye of little faith'.

Catesby looks hangdog, his anxiety clear on his face and in his voice. 'Sire, I confess I thought your action madness. My concern was to keep some kind of control up here if the worst happened, as I feared it would. I was wrong, Sire, but as your Grace knows, I am a lawyer, and no warrior'.

Richard raises his right arm. 'You are forgiven, William. Fortunately, I employ you for your counsel, not your qualities as a fighter. And you had good reason to think as you did. Had they been prepared for us, it might well have been a disaster. Because the troops round the imposter were distracted, they did not see us coming until too late. Those long pikes which could have done such damage to our charge were laid on the ground, thank God'.

The head of his personal attendants now moves towards him, going down on one knee. 'Sire, we have prepared your tent for your un-arming and for you to wash the dust of battle from your face and body'. Richard dismounts and goes into the tent where the rest of his body servants begin to remove his armour. These are men he trusts implicitly with his own private cleanliness and with their knowledge of his physical condition – the crooked back, a deformity caused by a twist in his spine, a fact of nature which has troubled him for several years past although its effect is not visible to others when he is fully dressed. One which, if known to his enemies, would be quickly tossed into the rumour mill as evidence of divine displeasure for his person and his cause. Unfair, he thinks, on a man whose faith in the goodness and power of God, His Son, and His Saints, has always been paramount in his life and demonstrated in his performance of service to God, observance of His commandments, and the gifts and endowments he has made to His institutions. Still, he reflects, better that none other than those who daily see his undressed body should know his secret and that those are people he would trust with his life.

Once his plate has been removed, piece by piece, he is enclosed by a leather body belt, kept in place by straps, giving him some, though not all, of the support his armour provided.

Washed and dressed for a journey of some hours on horseback, he sits in a chair in the centre of the tent drinking some watered wine and eating a leg of fowl. It seems far longer than it actually is since his breakfast of bread sopped in wine, and he feels the excitement draining out of his body in the realisation that he has just snuffed-out a rebellion far more dangerous and many-headed than the one he crushed not quite two years ago.

It is now almost noon and the leaders of the parts of the royal army start calling at his tent for further instructions, the Earl of Northumberland among the earliest. He senses from the fact that the Earl is still in full armour and has obviously hurried to the royal tent, the extent of Percy's anxiety that any inaction on his part

during the battle is down to the position his division – the rearguard – was placed in, confined and restricted, so unable to manoeuvre, and not to any disinclination to engage until the outcome could be predicted. ‘Your charge, Sire, left me with my heart in my mouth. The bravery of it I applauded; the risk I could only wonder at’. All this said while fidgeting as much as is possible when covered from neck to feet in steel.

He chooses to take the Earl’s congratulations on his victory at face value, saying only, ‘Well, Percy, you were not the only one who thought it madness. I myself considered, as I called my Household together, I might be the first English king since Harold to die in battle. But I knew it was the only way to end this recent trouble once and for all’. He watches Northumberland’s face, knowing that he has not allowed the principal family in the north to take over the leadership of the northern council from himself and that Percy resents that. He’s also aware that Percy was slow to reach the battle site and that part of the reason for his being hemmed-in was his, possibly deliberate, late arrival. He says, ‘I am grateful for your taking de Vere’s division in flank and destroying it. It does a little to comfort me for the loss of Norfolk. By the way, do you know what has become of de Vere?’

‘I have men searching the field, Sire, but before I came here I had had no news of him. No one had discovered his body. He may have flown’.

He presses his point. ‘Very well, my Lord, but make it your priority either to discover his body dead—or alive but wounded—or be certain he left the field and is now in flight. Your men need to have covered either eventuality before the field is taken over by those who come at nightfall, like carrion crows, to strip the dead of anything of value. Once that happens we may never know where to look for him. If he is taken, he must be held and appear before the Constable’ . . . At that he stops mid-sentence, ‘. . . who is Lord Stanley’. Turning to those around him, he asks of no one in particular, ‘Has Lord Stanley come yet, as I ordered him to?’ ‘No, clearly not.’ he answers his own question into the silence no one else feels able to break. He turns to Richard Ratcliffe, ‘Send to him, and let there be no delay, that he meet us tomorrow at Leicester to receive, at my pleasure, the corpse of his stepson. Make it clear I shall hear no excuses and that he stays away at his peril.’

He gets up from his seat and gives orders for the royal army to follow him to Leicester. ‘We, and our Household, leave immediately so as to arrive there in daylight.’ And then, as though his spirit is talking to himself, he adds an afterthought, ‘In any case, a battlefield is no place I want to spend a moment longer than I need to—even one where I have been victorious.’

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