

SUNBURST by Rolf Norfolk

'FLAG!' said the alderman, pointing. The Mayor broke off his conversation with the people at the washing-barge and looked up at the castle: the red pennant was flying. The men hurried off Vire Island, through Totnes Gate and up Fore Street, to be met at the arch by a runner from the observation post, the antique binoculars swinging at his neck.

'What's to do, Martin?'

'Big boat coming up by Longmarsh. I see four men, might be more; some animals. The guards at the wharf flashed me. The sail has the Ditsem mark.'

'Well done. Go back, I know what this is.'

A ferryman rowed the pair to meet the visitors, who were indeed familiar. The river chain was lowered, disturbing a cormorant, and both boats then proceeded upstream. A seal popped its head among suds, blinked and disappeared again. The newcomers moored their vessel and disembarking, were taken for refreshment and the usual courtesies.

It was obvious why they had come. The large white pigs placidly chewing grass in the hold were Lops, prized for their gentle temper and easy maintenance. These grazers only needed a field and a foul-weather shelter to keep them happy.

'Are you looking for sale, or swap?'

'Bit of both, your Worship. We'd like to join the drive, well one of us to go with the herd.'

'How far?'

'To Gordano Market. We want some Welsh sheep, start a new flock.'

The Mayor understood. Wool was increasingly valuable and the export trade via Dartmouth was picking up; but the winters were getting tougher, even in the southwest, and hardier breeds of sheep were sought after.

The Lops, already in good condition, would be fitter and fatter by the time they had travelled the hundred miles, following the northward advance of Spring up Migration Five to near where Four crossed the Severn. The Welsh would love the soft, fatty meat; good to help them through the cold months.

Two more boatloads were planned and agreed; large cloth-wrapped cheeses were exchanged for barrels of the town's strong ale. The Ditsem men returned home with the tide, leaving a young swineherd, Jem, who headed for the fields by Weston Lane via Bridgetown Gate.

As he was let through the fortification he passed two Galwegian women, who were patching the brickwork with a fresh coat of river mud and straw. They stopped chattering in their native germano-gaelic, looked over Jem and then at each other, and laughed. Embarrassed, the lad looked down at the solemnly staring children at their feet, and with a single fluid line drew a lifelike pig in the wet mud on the wall, finishing at the curly tail with a flourish. He made snorting noises until they chuckled; he asked them their names and found things to praise about them, before guiding his lead sow towards the fields at Weston Lane, his dog rounding up the followers.

'A deft hand, that boy,' remarked an old man to his daughter as they walked to the Temple; she looked back at the clean-limbed youth, thinking how well he had got on with the children that most adults ignored; and watched him turn the corner and out of sight.

Jem climbed the hill. To his left he saw the grassy foundations of dwellings; their materials long since reused to shore up the town's defences. Sure-footed goats stepped and leaped among the debris.

A few structures still survived here and there, converted to byres and sties; their glassless, part-boarded windows gave glimpses of their animal occupants; the minders bedded above, under the bowed and collapsing roofs. Jem found the one allotted to him, released his herd into the hedge-bounded meadow and settled in as curfew sounded below. The dog took up its post outside the door. Jem laid his bag in a corner, wrapped his cloak about him and fell to sleep, listening to the rooks and green parrots in the trees.

DUST glinted in the light shafting from the iron-barred windows of the Guildhall. The drive master could smell old books and new hides. He stood patiently while the archivist completed the copy map, his sallow hand inking in the last known attacks by brigands and wild dogs on the route. The chart also showed where the party might seek rest, refuge or reinforcements.

In the days of the great forests, overland travel had been far more arduous, but the Migration ways were wide and gently-contoured, with grazing on their slopes and in places on the roads themselves. Spinneys and shrubs grew in the turf along the embankments, affording foraging and attracting wildlife for the hunter. Also, it was better for a well-armed party to weave through the scattering of rotting vehicles than to voyage up-channel, which was infested year-round with river pirates and occasionally in summer by slave-takers from southern lands. As farmers slowly recolonised the countryside the bandits had less to hide in and more to resist them.

The drive master placed the map in his leather wallet, together with the authorisation to draw water supplies from the great Harperswill cistern at the top of the town. The official weighed his payment of broken silver with scales brought out of the treasure chest, and wished him good luck. The guide smiled, nodded a polite farewell to the girl at work on the other table and hurried out; there was still much to arrange.

The archivist rolled up the calfskin original, replaced it in its pigeonhole and returned to his table to do a little more on the special project. King Henning's ship had brought tanned hides, women seeking husbands and a fine pair of white horses; but with all, and carefully preserved and guarded, came his ancestor's ancient chronicle. The centuries-old document was frangible and tanned by the acid in its paper until scarcely readable. The King desired a transcription to be made for him, on the finest vellum.

The Chronicle had been started some years before Sunburst. It began with a mundane account of how a group of Germans, thinking they would one day need to be self-sufficient, had formed and re-formed as members joined and left, and how their seeds and tools and skills had been acquired. Without warning, and in a way that no-one had expected, the emergency happened. Something – the copyist could not understand it – had come from the Sun, and in a very short time most devices, machines and networks using 'electronics' ceased to work. The group, cut off from all but their neighbours, had no way to know how widespread was the disaster; but they could guess. Because it had hit everywhere at once, no-one could help anyone else. Only the most primitive societies would be able to manage – in some places perhaps, would not even have noticed the cataclysm; but for the civilisations of wealth and ease, the world had abruptly turned upside down. Only some shreds of humanity had remained, to find each other and rebuild, long ago; and in this case, record their struggles.

WEEKS later, the drive got back safely, and with it came King Mark's Law-Speaker, for his annual recital in the town's market-place of one-third of the law. He also brought a sealed scroll.

'What does it say, Master?' asked the Mayor.

'The King commands us to teach the people how to read and write,' replied Tirath. 'However, I cannot spare the time from my transcriptions; already we are losing much important information. There is more than I can do in my lifetime, and my daughter Amal with and after me.'

'But it must be done.'

‘Certainly. It will also interest you to know that the King lays stress on teaching girl-children, because when they grow up they can pass on their skills to their infants. But I do not have skill and patience with the little ones.’

‘Then if not you, who?’

‘I have noticed a youth among those recently returned from the Midlands. He is from Ditsem, but perhaps he might be persuaded to stay and let me show him the essentials, and he could become a teacher.’

‘You think he can learn?’

‘Anyone can learn, but not all have the gift of teaching. I suspect he has.’

‘We shall ask him at the feast, then, and if he agrees, we’ll see if Ditsem will release him.’

‘Let us start with your name, Jem. The first letter is called Jay and makes a juh-sound. You draw a line down, then it curls at the end, like the tail of a pig. Try. Excellent! You have natural ability, Jem.’

‘Shall I show him the other letters, father?’

‘Yes, Amal. You know I must attend to the Chronicle; King Henning’s ship is due in two months. Do you like this work, Jem?’

‘Yes, Master. It’s much easier than pigs. And I’m working inside!’

‘Quite so; that is an aspect that appealed to me too, when I was your age. Work hard, for I think you are clever.’

Jem and Amal smiled.