

WULFGAR AND THE RIDDLE

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Christina Eastwood



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Foreword

In this adventure, Wulfgar, the hero invented by Christina Eastwood for these stories, returns to Wessex, which I love as my own native area, and quickly becomes aware of differences of thought and outlook from his sojourn in East Francia, in the area we now call France. He meets other people, including some who actually lived in history, such as King Alfred the Great, Æthelgifu the King's daughter, and Asser the Welsh monk who was Bishop of Sherborne, knew Alfred, and wrote the earliest story of Alfred's life. In the course of Wulfgar's travels, adventures and work, he muses on different ways of thought and worship he has encountered in both Francia and Wessex, and wrestles with the question of how he himself should think, especially as to what he can trust to lead him and others towards true belief. His questions are ones people still ask and debate today, and it is as important now as it has ever been for us to search for answers to them.

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DEDICATION

To

Eleanor Faith Jones

Welcome, welcome, little one,
Welcome to the sky, the trees, the birds, the sun,
Welcome to the grief, the pain, the woe, the loss,
But welcome to the road to heaven through Christ's cross.

With love
From
Nain

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Introduction

If you have read the two previous books *Wulfgar and the Vikings* and *Wulfgar and the Dragon*, you will remember that Wulfgar was “banished” to East Francia to learn his craft by the king, who could have inflicted a much worse punishment on him. You will also remember his friend Morcant the Celt who escaped from the Vikings in the first book in the series.

Wulfgar is back from his travels in Francia and he has learned a lot while he has been away. But perhaps some of the ideas he has accepted are not as good as those he left behind in Wessex.

Just as he is beginning to find the answers to the riddle that confronts him he’s caught up in an escapade that is definitely against the law – or is it?

On the front of this book you can see a picture of an Anglo-Saxon aestel or reader’s pointer. Some people think the picture on it is of King Alfred himself. Certainly it is one of several that the king gave with his Latin translations to every bishopric in his kingdom. Perhaps it is the one that peeps into the story!

Chapter 1

The Road

This is the record of Wulfgar Waelwulfson of Leofham Burgh in Wessex, master wood carver, detailing the mercy of God to his creatures in the Kingdom of Wessex and elsewhere. The said Wulfgar, having served eight years under Abbot Bovo of Corvey in East Francia to learn his craft, was summoned thence by his Lord, Alfred, King of the Anglo-Saxons.

Two of us had travelled together from Corvey in East Francia, myself, on my way to my home village of Leofham, and a young Frankish monk called Grifo who was going to the Abbey at Æt Baðum. Poor man, he had been horribly seasick when we crossed the South Sea from the coast of Francia and he was little better once we were on dry land again. I wondered what to do. He was not well enough to travel on foot but I was impatient to be setting out on the last stage of my journey. I had grown very fond of brother Grifo as we crossed Francia together but he, lying green faced and miserable on a pallet bed in the cottage of a widow who lived near the place where we had landed, urged me to go on with my journey at once. The widow would take care of him for a little money, he said, and in any case our paths would surely have diverged quite soon.

I agonised. Did the polite and cultured Brother Grifo know what he was letting himself in for by coming to Wessex? How would he fare on his own? He certainly did not know about sea voyages. He was astonished to find the boat had made him so sick. Not for the first time in our travels together I wondered if he should have

stayed where he was more at home. I had tried to explain to him that Wessex was not like Francia as we travelled on foot together from Corvey but I found it hard to put the differences into words that did not make my own dear Wessex sound – well – a little bit rough and unpolished. Now we were actually in Wessex I worried about leaving him alone. “Shall I wait with you?” I asked again. “It will be no trouble and you’ll feel better in a matter of hours.”

“No, no,” he groaned quietly, “I’ll be fine but I’ve never felt so terrible. I’m sure it will take some time for this to get better – tomorrow or next week and then I’ll set off.”

The widow woman offered to find someone to guide him when he was feeling better and, in the end, I set off alone.

It was April, the beginning of the year, a joyful time to be coming back to Leofham. The song of the throstles and blackbirds in the hedges and copses was a cheerful welcome. Eight years was a long time. I strode along the downland trackway and into the overhanging shadows of the forest, my bag of tools over my shoulder and a little gold left from my wages tucked into my tunic and I must admit that Brother Gifo slipped from my mind at first. As I marched along the long road towards home, I gave myself up to pleasant considerations: I would give the simple peasants with whom I grew up quite a surprise when I got there – I was a master craftsman now!

But I soon began to miss my walking companion, and to enjoy being alone with my own thoughts less. I thought over some of the things the two of us had chatted about to pass the time while we were still walking through Francia. At first we had been with a group of monks returning to Corbie Abbey in East Francia but our paths had diverged after a few days and Brother Grifo and I were left to make our own way to the coast. One day I had entertained him with the story of my adventures, some years ago, with a dragon that had suddenly appeared near our village – well, two dragons actually – and he was very interested. Dragons were apparently

not uncommon in remote parts of Francia, but he had never seen one himself. He was an earnest and scholarly young man and he eagerly pumped me for every detail of the dragons' appearance.

"I have only seen them in pictures myself," he had explained, "and I am keen to know just how true to life our artists have made them."

I had tried hard to give him some impression of size. "We set up the leg bones over the thane's chair in the village Mead Hall in the end," I explained, "and King Alfred himself even sat under them when he was there!"

"Ah yes, The king! You told me, I think, that you were sent to Francia by royal command to work on the building of our Abbey at Corvey. I don't think I took in what you were saying. Do you mean it was actually King Alfred himself who sent you?" Brother Grifo had asked as we strode along in the spring sunshine, past prosperous fields and newly cleared woodland. "However did that come about?"

The circumstances of my despatch to Francia were not a little embarrassing and I had not wanted Brother Grifo to question me in more detail! "Yes, he did," I replied, then quickly changing the subject, I added, "and I arrived when the building was nearing completion so I was able to work alongside masters of their craft in furnishing the inside. I had never seen such a magnificent construction or such a rich interior in my life before. The Westwerk alone is an imposing structure without mentioning the rest of the building!"

Brother Grifo had smiled, quietly proud of his countrymen and an awkward moment had been avoided.

These reflections banished my loneliness a little. If Brother Grifo had been with me now I would have pointed out the good quality of the new road to him, I thought, as I entered the forest.

The dappled shade of the trees was agreeable and soon other cheerful ideas occurred to me. I patted my big pocket contentedly as I thought of what it contained. Alongside my tools I had a gift for my friend Morcant that I knew would interest him: a small book. I was sure ...

Something fell on me from above. A hand covered my mouth. I struck out wildly as I was forced to the ground. My arms were pinned down and a savage face, burnt brown and unkempt with dark piercing eyes, was staring into mine.

“Gag him quickly and search the bag – there’s gold here in his tunic.”

I kicked out frantically. Someone grasped my legs in an iron hold and bound them swiftly with something. “A book!” came a contemptuous snort, “and not worth much! Not a pretty coloured page in the whole thing.” There was a thud as the precious volume landed in the ditch, “Tools – those can be sold. No more money though.” My arms were tied now and expert fingers were running over my person, searching for signs of more gold coins. There were none.

“Let’s be off. Don’t like this spot – road’s too busy these days.”

“Should we make an end of him first?”

“No, you fool! Why do you think we’ve tied him up? Can’t risk our lives to the law for so little money and a few tools! It will be a good while before he’s able to raise an alarm if we’ve done the job on him well. No, not in the ditch. No one will *ever* find him there, he’ll be done for! Push him under the bushes – and let’s away before anyone passes – I tell you I don’t like the place.”

Rough bare feet kicked me and horny hands dragged me deep into the bushes out of sight. Running footsteps, then silence but for a blackbird above me warning, “Pink, pink, pink, pink ...”

Trembling from head to foot so that my teeth seemed to rattle in spite of the gag, I listened. The blackbird's warning ceased and there was no human sound from the ancient high road. Morcant had once told me it had been made before my own Saxon kind ever came to Wessex. The forest seemed as empty now as it had been before the old inhabitants, the great ones who had conquered, subdued and ruled even Morcant's own wild Celtic people, built the road. The huge ruins of their stone houses and castles were still to be seen all over Wessex, sticking up like huge broken teeth out of the ground, the work of giants, the ignorant villagers said. Now their road was used by the fyrd, the trader, the traveller – and the robber. I tried to think clearly and escape from the fear that paralysed my mind. Think! There was a good chance that someone passing might not see me. Think! I would have to get the gag out of my mouth somehow to be sure of rescue. Thinking gave way to action and I began rubbing my head against the root of a tree.

The robbers had not meant me to die or they would have left me in the ditch but they had certainly given themselves a good start on anyone who might come to my aid. My squirming and struggling gradually produced results and the gag slipped down over my chin. My first instinct was to immediately call for help but I realised that was to risk having the robbers return to do a better job, if they were still within earshot. Better to wait until I could hear someone coming. But I wanted to shout! My whole terrified being was clamouring inside me for human help – how could I just lie there? Never before – or since – have I ever had to force my mind to master my feelings to such an extent. “Better to wait,” my mind said firmly and with its aid I was somehow able to force my trembling body to remain silent.

It was not giants but the soldiers of the Roman Empire who had built the road. They had made it in the far-off days before the empire had earned the added title “Holy” that it bears in these Christian times. A pagan empire it was in those days, although I had heard

tell that the first Christians ever to reach our shores were in the ranks of its army. But they had gone, those great ones, hundreds of years ago and we Saxons had taken their fertile land, pushing the Celts, whom the Roman Empire had ruled, ever westward, if they resisted us, into the wild and barren hills of Wales. Nowadays King Alfred found the great highways useful to enable his fyrdmen to move about quickly in response to the threat of attack or invasion from the Vikings. How I hoped to hear the sound of their steady march or perhaps one of their scouts running with a message now! I strained my ears, pushing down that terrible urge to shout by trying to get free from my bonds. But nothing I could do seemed to shift the knots around my feet or hands.

Then, at last, a faint noise of jingling harness met my ear. Could it be the fyrd? It certainly sounded like more than one horse. Now all my pent-up terrors were released in a great yell. "Help!" I shouted. Then again, "Help, help!"

When the astonished packhorse driver had pulled me out of the bushes and untied my wrists and ankles I do not know which of the two of us was the more terrified. I was still shaking violently and all he could say was, "We must get away from here quickly," over and over again.

"B...b...but the b...b...b...book!" I cried as well as my chattering teeth would allow. "I m...m...m...must find it!" As best as I could in my shocked state I explained what had happened and with the utmost reluctance he consented to help me grub about in the ditch until we recovered it, soiled and battered but otherwise unharmed. I must put his kindness on record for he went to the trouble, as one of his mares was only lightly laden, of quickly shifting her burden onto other horses and hoisting me and my book onto the pack-saddle. Then he started his train of animals and off we went, never slackening pace until the highway left the forest and came out into open fields surrounding a village. Here he was intending to stay the night.

I had stopped shaking by this time but was quite unable to eat any of the cold bannock bread he offered me, though I drank a little water from his bottle. The staring eyes and wild face of the robber who had sprung on me kept coming back to me, making me shiver again.

“I can take you on with me tomorrow if you like,” he offered, seeing the state I was in. “I have some business to do here today and I want to rest the horses.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I’m heading for a place called Leofham eventually, a few days west of here.”

“Leofham!” I replied in thankful surprise, “that’s my home! But why are you going there with your loaded animals? Leofham is a small place and out of the way for trade. What are you carrying?”

“Tin mostly,” he said, “and some crockery and a few bits of imported jewellery that I picked up as a bargain – should sell well at Leofham!”

I stared at him, incredulous. There was no tinsmith at Leofham, and Frithestan, the village potter, made all our rough pots. As for jewellery, much as Leofham women may have wanted it, coin would be needed to pay for it and coin was a commodity Leofham did not have in abundant supply. But I did not feel equal yet to long conversation, only grateful that I could go home in safety with him, so I said, “Well, my friend, I am afraid I cannot reward you. All my little store of money was taken.”

He mumbled something about being pleased to help and set about finding us lodgings in one of the village huts.