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Introduction

England in the seventh century was a place of violence and conflict. The seven kingdoms of the Germanic tribes were warring against each other and against the native Celts. Occasionally an uneasy peace was bought by the skilful use of the diplomatic marriage. Pagan Mercia was ruthlessly dedicated to expansion and to stamping out Christianity. Within the Christian kingdoms themselves there was the clash between the organized Roman Church and the much more individualistic Celtic form of worship from Iona and Lindisfarne.

Through all this, the four remarkable daughters of Anna, King of the East Angles, fired by the ideals of a new and revolutionary religion, managed not only to hold their own, but also to emerge head and shoulders above most of the people of their time.

One of them, Etheldreda, became Queen of Northumbria during the golden age of its power and was later declared a saint, her shrine at Ely near Cambridge the centre for miracles even into the present century.

As a young girl she felt herself called to be a nun and vowed chastity, but politics intervened and she was twice married to save her father's kingdom. Once to Prince Tondbert, ruler of the wild fen country around Cambridge, a man much older than herself, and later, at his death, to Prince Egfrid of Northumbria, a boy of

fifteen. Faced with the violent deaths of those dearest to her and with upheaval and treachery on all sides, she not only endured, but ruled Northumbria with strength and wisdom for many years.

When she was in her early forties and Egfrid twenty-five, he refused to accept the arrangement he had agreed to honour when he married, and tried to force her to bed with him. She fled. He and his men gave chase. After an extraordinary journey south in which storms seemed to intervene on her behalf, she escaped at last to the Island of Ely, which had been her first husband's marriage gift to her, and there founded a religious community.

Bitterly King Egfrid gave up his claim to her, throwing her friend Bishop Wilfrid, who had supported her bid for freedom, into a dungeon and embarking on a series of punitive wars against his neighbours to the north and across the sea in Ireland. But this is not just the story of war and treachery in early England. It is about the general human struggle to comprehend the enigma of existence and to come to terms with Christ's God, faced as we are by a violent and cruel world. It is about the periods when we give up the struggle, reverting either to the darkest negativity or to superstition – and the rare but wonderful periods when we are lifted high by the inrush of spiritual certainty.

Edwin holds a council with his chief men about accepting the Faith of Christ, AD 627:

'Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a lone sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you sit in the winter months to dine with your thanes and counsellors. Inside there is a comforting fire to warm the room; outside, the wintry storms of snow and rain are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the darkness whence he came. Similarly, man appears on earth for a little while, but we know nothing of what went before this life, and what follows. Therefore if this new teaching can reveal any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it.'

From *A History of the English Church and People* by Bede (Penguin Classics, translation by Leo Sherley-Price, 1955),
Book II, Chapter 13.

Chapter 1

War AD 640

To the defenders of Egric's dykes, Penda's warriors seemed numberless.

All day they came.

Time after time the air was filled with the high deadly whine of arrow flight, the scream of the wounded, the barbarous battle shout of the enemy. Where the dykes were most easily breached, at the point where the trade road to the south-west crossed the great ditch on ramp and wooden bridge, the fighting was hand to hand, Penda wielding his battleaxe as though he were cutting the tall wheat at harvest time. The Seer he had consulted had promised him that much blood would be spilt, but that not much of it would be theirs.

The invading Mercians had few casualties. The hapless East Anglians, defending their homeland, had more than they could count.

* * * *

Before the last great dyke the Mercians paused. Evening was coming on fast, and the sun was staining the sky with a reflection of the blood that they had shed upon the earth. Penda called back his men to rest and gather

strength, intending to take the dyke at dawn. They made camp, roasting the cattle they had taken from their enemies, drinking the ale they had brought with them from their homeland.

Two young princesses of the East Anglian court, Etheldreda and Saxberga, daughters of Prince Anna, were far from home, staying with relatives. The first they knew of the Mercian invasion was the sudden arrival of terrified refugees making for the fenlands, preferring to take their chances with the ghouls and demons that inhabited those mysterious regions than be put to the sword or split by the axe. Behind the refugees the princesses could see the black smoke as village after village across the land was set on fire.

Panic-stricken, the princesses' relatives hastily packed up all they could carry of their possessions, and the girls joined them in a dash for the east. They hoped that they would reach the final dyke and be allowed over the ramps before they were closed for battle.

At the last ford before the dyke, where the crowds of hysterical people were struggling against each other in the effort to get to the other side, Saxberga was knocked off the horse she was sharing with Etheldreda and trampled under its hooves. Screaming for her sister as she saw her go under, Etheldreda flung herself after her and tried to drag her clear. The horse was instantly seized by someone else and ridden off; the two girls, separated from their friends, were left in the muddy water among the pushing, violent people.

Etheldreda was weeping and trembling, but she would not let her sister go for fear of losing her. She managed to drag her unconscious body somehow across the river and out of the path of the stampeding cattle,

people, horses and carts. She called for help, but no one came to aid her. She stared in astonishment. It was only the day before that these same people had been bowing with respect to her and her sister as they rode high and fine upon their royal horses. The sun had shone on peaceful fields of yellow buttercups. Cows had grazed and chewed on the cud.

Now it was as though she and her sister were invisible. Torn and muddy and bedraggled, they were indistinguishable from the peasants and slaves who drove the farmers' cattle across the ford and, for the first time in her life, she knew that she was on her own, that her survival depended entirely on her own ingenuity. She could not even turn for help to her older sister.

She stopped crying and looked around her. A little further on to the left was a wood; this would give them hiding place and shelter. She knew that they had to get away from the terrified mob, who were almost as destructive as the invading hordes from which they were fleeing.

Little by little she half dragged, half carried her sister to the wood, and did not rest until they were deep inside and well out of sight of the crowds and the distant columns of smoke. There she carefully made Saxberga as comfortable as she could on a bed of bracken, and carried water from a tiny trickling stream in her hands to splash into her face.

Saxberga regained consciousness with a jerk, and screamed with the pain she felt in her leg. Etheldreda flung her arms around her and held her tight.

'We're safe,' she whispered, the tears she had held back for so long beginning to flow.

Saxberga's face twisted with the pain, but she tried to pull herself together for her little sister's sake.

'What is happening?' she asked. 'Where are we?' She could hardly bring the words out as she struggled to make sense of the situation.

'We're safe,' Etheldreda babbled on. 'No one will find us here, we'll wait until the fighting is over.' The tears ran through the dirt on her cheeks unnoticed.

Suddenly they heard a movement behind them and swung round, horrified to find themselves observed by a strange, rough youth clad in skins, his hair and eyes dark, a dead deer over his shoulder. Etheldreda seized a stone that was lying next to her hand and clutched it, ready to use it as a weapon if necessary.

He took a step nearer, staring at them curiously. She shrank back. Was this one of the dread heathen Mercians? He certainly was not of their own race, though he did not look as fierce and cruel as they expected. Perhaps he was one of the native people, a Celt. She moved away from Saxberga and stood up straight, like the princess she was, looking him in the eye.

'We need help,' she said, trying to keep her voice steady and cool. 'Will you help us?'

He looked her up and down. She was covered in mud from the ford and blood from her sister; her hair was matted and hanging in strings; her pale, dirty face was pinched with weariness and anxiety, but she spoke as though she expected to be obeyed like one of the hated Angles who had invaded his land and made a slave of him. He almost turned away and then his eyes fell on the girl in agony on the ground.

‘Where are you hurt?’ he asked gruffly, his accent strange to them, but his voice not ungentle. Etheldreda silently pointed to the bone protruding from her sister’s leg and he put the carcass of the deer down in the bracken and crouched down beside them, looking thoughtfully at Saxberga’s leg.

From somewhere in the distance they heard a terrible scream.

‘Haven’t you heard of the war?’ Etheldreda asked him. ‘You don’t seem to be running away like everyone else.’

‘Yes, I have heard of the war,’ he said as though it was of no importance. Then – ‘You take the deer,’ he said to her, and put his arms around Saxberga to lift her from the ground. ‘Come.’

Etheldreda looked with horror at the animal that she was expected to carry.

‘Come,’ he said again, urgently, commandingly.

Etheldreda tried to swing the carcass to her shoulder, but she almost fell over with the weight.

‘Can’t I leave it?’ she pleaded.

‘No. Bring it,’ he said roughly, already moving away through the wood.

Terrified of being left alone, she took a grip on the deer’s antlers and dragged the body behind her, tugging and struggling as it caught on fallen branches and tough little bushes. Not once did he look back to see if she was managing to keep up with him.

When he finally stopped walking and lowered Saxberga to the ground, Etheldreda was sweating and exhausted, but determined not to cry. They were deep in the thickest part of the wood, the undergrowth of brambles making the way almost impassable. He started

to bend back branches, and she discovered that an overhang of rock made a sizeable cavern behind a wall of bushes. He indicated that she should go ahead, and when she had crept and scrambled and slithered her way in, he carefully lifted her sister in after her.

Etheldreda looked around her. There was a small lamp cut out of the chalk, with a rush wick and, by the smell of it, animal oil; earthenware pots and jugs, and the blackened stones of a small hearth fire. There was also a pile of straw with furs flung over it, onto which he now lowered the older girl. He then left them for a moment to attend to the deer carcass the child had left exposed outside.

Etheldreda crouched down beside Saxberga and held her hand tightly. It was very dim in the cave, but as her eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light she noticed the grotesque figure of a heathen god staring at her from a niche in the rough wall. Seven-branched antlers grew from his head and a garland of leaves hung around his neck.

* * * *

That night as Penda tried to sleep in his tent of skins he heard a terrible sound. Only half awake he went to the entrance of his tent. The battlefield of the day before, still covered with the bodies of the slain, lay behind him. Above him the sky was swirling with dark clouds, and from the wind came a wild keening. Could he see the women of death riding the clouds, crying high and loud, calling the names of the warriors who had died and would die... and behind them the hounds, howling across the sky?

He shuddered, remembering the eyes of the Seer he had killed when she had told him he would have victory and yet no victory. She had spoken in riddles of a man who would come bearing no spear, no sword and no axe, who would rise again when he was killed.

He raised his fist and shook it at the sky.

'I vowed by Thunor's silver ring I would defeat the upstart god who challenges him,' he shouted into the wind. 'I, wielder of Thunor's avenging hammer, wearer of his belt of power and his iron gloves, swear again by the true gods, I will destroy the heathen Christ!'

The sky was ripped open by a deadly blade of lightning and his god spoke to him in the thunder.

* * * *

In the cave, Etheldreda, sleepless through the night, clutched her sister's skirt, watching the lightning flicker through the branches over the entrance, weirdly illuminating the figure of the idol. She heard the thunder and then the heavy hushing of the rain.

The youth slept soundly and seemed unaware of the storm. Saxberga slipped fitfully into a heavy state that was at times more unconsciousness than sleep. Etheldreda alone kept vigil, trembling and afraid. All the order she had known and taken for granted was gone, and it was as though she were in the swirling dark and chaos of the first Creation. Within her she fought the fear of the void, the fear of becoming nothing.

As the lightning flashed she caught the eye of the stone god, and almost screamed aloud with the shock of feeling that it was watching her. It seemed so real she cried out to it for help. But in the next flash of lightning she saw the god's eyes were hollow and sightless, his

ears of stone. He could not see her plight, nor hear her prayer. There was no one in the cave besides herself, her sister and the youth.

Near dawn she crept out of the cave. Saxberga was lying fast asleep on the young man's straw and fur, her leg firmly and skilfully bound. The youth himself was hunched against the far wall, snoring.

The rain had stopped, but drops of water were still dripping from the canopy of leaves. At first it was quite dark but every moment it was lightening. And so were her thoughts. She could hardly believe that the dark horrors of the day before had really happened and she began to feel that it would not be difficult to find a way out of the wood and back to her family and friends. Surely there would be a village nearby where she would be able to find a horse for Saxberga to ride. She set off at once to look for one.

She had not gone far when she smelled burning and saw smoke through the trees. She began to run, joyfully sure that she would now soon be among friendly people cooking their breakfast. But something made her cautious, perhaps something she had only just learned. She slowed down and kept under cover, approaching carefully. The wood suddenly gave way to a large clearing.

She stood transfixed, staring at the scene, as though she were above the world looking down. The fire was no hearth fire as she had hoped, but the smouldering remains of a village and, lying among the charred wood of the fallen house beams, were the mutilated bodies of the villagers. The child clapped her hand to her mouth to stifle a scream. She wanted to run, but she found she could not.

Suddenly Etheldreda felt a hand seize her shoulder and her heart jerked painfully. She felt herself pulled backwards and terror seemed to break over her like a dark and icy wave. She twisted her head and then, sick with relief, she recognised the youth who had taken her sister and her to the cave.

Her legs gave way as he lifted her in his arms. He ran with her as swift and sure as a wild animal through the woods, scarcely cracking a stick underfoot.

She put her arms around his neck and clung. She felt she had known him all her life. He had become father and mother and home and security, light and warmth and sleep. Tears poured from her eyes and ran down his neck.

He did not stop until he was outside the cave and then he lowered her to the ground. He pulled aside the branches and pushed her roughly under them. The lamp was not lit, but the light of dawn had penetrated a little and she could see Saxberga sitting bolt upright reaching out her arms to her. She fell into them sobbing.

She was aware of being scolded, of being closely held, of alternate sisterly endearments and angry accusations – but she could not stop sobbing.

Saxberga demanded to know what had happened, but Etheldreda could not tell her.

The older girl looked over her head at the youth sitting on his haunches trimming pieces of meat from the deer with his belt knife, the small hearth fire comfortably blazing. But his face was totally absorbed in what he was doing.

* * * *

The early light that crept into the cave where the two princesses were hiding brought no comfort to the thousands of men behind King Egric's last defensive dyke. Tensely they waited, crouched in the cold dawn air praying to their god, the ramps taken, the wooden bridges dismantled. All night they had watched the storm and wondered what it presaged. It had doused the enemies' fires: if only it would douse their battle spirit. Some had thought they heard the fierce ride of the women of death and had said goodbye to the fair world in their hearts, but others had seen the anger of Christ's father against the heathen in the lashing of the storm and had stubbornly clung to hope.

By the time the grey dawn came, the storm had passed though the sky still hung close to the earth, heavy and swollen with dark drops of rain.

Lying along the ridge of the dyke the East Anglian look-outs saw the earth move, its black mantle creeping forward towards them. Some made the sign of the cross, others reached for amulets of the old gods. None thought that they would live to see the sun set that day.

* * * *

Penda, the plunder-lord on his great war-horse, rode ahead with his picked men, the most feared fighting warriors of his whole force, men whose blood-curdling screams in battle were said to melt men's minds and burst their hearts before even a blow were struck. He gripped his spear. It had lain on Thunor's iron altar and would be guided with supernatural accuracy to its mark.

His eyes glinted under his beetling brows. This is what he lived for: the moment before a battle when everything depended on his signal to strike. At such a

moment he felt himself possessed by his god. Penda stopped just outside arrow range and raised his spear arm. The whole vast body of men froze where they were, the silence stretched so taut a lark's call would have shattered it.

And then, suddenly, an incredible thing happened. A man emerged from the great ditch in front of the ridge and started walking calmly forward towards Penda.

Penda frowned. This was not as it should be. Straining, he tried to see more clearly in the dim light. The figure approached steadily, head up, shoulders squared, purposive and authoritative. But as he came nearer Penda saw that he was unarmed and he remembered the Seer's words: 'No spear. No sword. No axe.' A chill came to the Mercian's heart. This had been foretold. This was his adversary.

Sigbert, the King who had given up his kingdom to become a monk, came near enough to look into Penda's eyes and, as men's lives and the fate of kingdoms hung in the balance of that tense and silent dawn, the two men faced each other, each a formidable warrior, each fighting a different war.

Penda forgot the waiting men, the blood shadow that hung above the landscape, the women of death that rode at his heels, the hounds that hunted. It was as though everything in the world had ceased to exist except this one man, and this man, though he uttered not a word, was asking him a question.

'What am I doing here?' he found himself thinking. 'Why do I want to kill these people?'

But even as he struggled for the answer an arrow came whining through the air and fell at the end of its

reach just ahead of him. The spell was broken. So it had been only a trick to distract him!

He threw his spear with all his strength into the breast of the sorcerer who had made him look into his own heart. With a high and fearsome scream his men rushed forward, their arrows and their spears falling like deadly rain upon the defenders of the dyke.

* * * *

It was at Prince Ethelhere's command that the arrow had been loosed, and it was Prince Ethelhere, brother to King Egric, who shouted commands and led the defence.

With tears in his eyes King Egric knew that they had lost, but might not, had his cousin, Sigbert, been allowed to live. He remembered how they had taken him away from the peaceful fields he was ploughing and demanded that he lead them into battle. His reputation as a warrior before he gave up the world to become a monk was so formidable that they knew the people would have no fear of Penda if he were at their head. Egric could hear Ethelhere's haughty voice even now.

'Have you heard no rumours of the war, sir, in this remote place?'

And Egric could hear Sigbert's reply.

'There is always war in the souls of men.'

Ethelhere scowled. 'Real war, sir!' he snapped. 'Penda of Mercia attacks our country and kills our women and children! We come to demand that you help us to defend our land – your land!'

'Your land? My land?' Sigbert said quietly. 'Is it not God's land?'

It was he, Egric, who then spoke up.

‘It is God’s land, my cousin, but He has given it to us to work in His name and to defend against His enemies.’

‘How can His children be His enemies?’

‘Penda’s wolves are not God’s children,’ one of Egric’s thegns shouted angrily. ‘They are heathen and mock Him with their idols and their blasphemous ways.’

‘A man standing in a field at night looks up and sees the moon caught in the branches of a tree. If he is wise he will know this cannot be, because the moon is immeasurably higher than the tree. It only seems as though it is caught, because he is standing where he is.’

‘What has this to do with us?’ Ethelhere said impatiently.

‘The heathen are children of our God, no less than we, but we have learned that the moon cannot be caught in the tree.’

The men looked puzzled, but Egric had understood, and wished that there was more time to discuss these deep matters with his cousin.

‘Enough!’ Ethelhere growled. ‘While we stand and play with words, Penda marches and kills our people. We must ride against him, and when we ride, you must be at our head!’

‘I will not ride to war,’ Sigbert said firmly. ‘I have no right to say who will live and who will die.’

‘You will let your people be killed?’

‘Each man is answerable for himself at the throne of God.’

‘I see we have wasted our journey,’ Ethelhere said bitterly. ‘The Lord Sigbert will not help us. He is content to hide in safety and watch his people die.’

Sigbert looked around the table at the disappointed and hostile faces. Only Egric chose not to meet his eye.

‘I will come with you,’ Sigbert said. ‘I will come to meet Penda. But I will not fight him with weapons, but with the power of the Lord’s spirit within me.’

‘You are insane!’ Ethelhere muttered in disbelief.

Egric raised his head, a glimmering of hope in his eyes. Then Ethelhere took a deep breath and thought hard. He knew that with Sigbert there the men would fight, no matter if he wielded sword himself or not.

‘Come and use what weapons you will,’ the prince said at last, ‘but come before it is too late.’

* * * *

After Sigbert’s death, Egric had tried to fight, but he knew he was not a fighting man, and his heart was soon stopped with iron. On seeing both Sigbert and Egric fall, the men turned to run and no amount of shouting and commanding on Ethelhere’s part would make them stay and face the Mercians. Penda’s hordes poured unchecked into the ditch and up the other side, and Ethelhere was forced to flee with the rest.

* * * *

Penda was almost sorry the victory had been so easy.

He rode back to where the mysterious sorcerer had stood, still haunted by the words of the Seer: ‘No spear. No sword. No axe’, and the memory of how he had felt with the man’s eyes boring into his, how he had momentarily wondered whether he had a right to take men’s lives.

Sigbert’s body had been beaten into the ground under the charge of men and horses. There was very

little left of it to rise again. Penda was satisfied that this part at least of the Seer's vision was false.

* * * *

That night, installed as conqueror in the great hall at Exning, Penda called for a prisoner to be brought before him.

‘One who was at the dyke,’ he commanded.

This order was not easy to obey. The Mercians on the whole did not take prisoners and it was some time before a boy was found who had escaped killing.

He was flung at Penda's feet.

‘You saw the sorcerer who came to trick me?’ Penda growled. The boy looked bewildered and was kicked.

‘The man who came out unarmed before the battle.’

In dumb terror the boy nodded.

‘Who was he?’

The boy was silent, struggling to think how best to stay alive. He was kicked again.

‘Who was he?’ shouted Penda, his eyes of fire boring into the young lad's dimming ones.

The boy muttered something.

‘What was that?’

Penda gestured impatiently for the guards to bring the prisoner nearer to him.

‘Well, who was he?’

‘Our king,’ the lad said, and even as he said it he seemed to gain courage.

‘That is a lie,’ Penda snarled and nodded brusquely at one of his men. He left the tent and returned with Egric's head and flung it before the lad.

The boy tried not to gag.

‘That... that is the new king,’ he sobbed. ‘King Sigbert gave up being king to... to become a monk.’

Penda, who had clawed his way up to kingship, its power being more important to him than anything else on earth, confronted the image of a man who had had that power, and given it away.

‘You mean he gave up being king to become a priest?’ he said disbelievingly.

The boy nodded. He wished he could remember a prayer he had once learned, to keep him from the harm of demons. Penda was surely demon-driven with those dark and restless eyes, those beetling brows, those knotted muscular hands closing and unclosing on the hilt of the dagger in his belt.

‘Your priests, are they richer and more powerful than the King?’ Penda demanded, still trying to understand a man who would give up being king to be a priest. If he must be priest, could he not have been both?

The boy looked helpless. He had no idea how to answer this. The soldier jabbed him fiercely in the side.

‘No, my lord,’ he said. ‘They’re poor. They have nothing of their own. They even beg for food.’

Penda strode about. He could not get the eyes of the man Sigbert out of his mind. He had killed many men, but none who had disturbed him so much.

‘These priests, do they know magic?’

The boy shook his head, darkness seemed to be closing in on him. He knew that he had heard a wandering monk once condemn magic as being of the devil though this had not prevented many in his village turning to it when they needed it. For his own part he could never understand why an amulet that had the power to heal was evil, when a relic of a holy man doing

the same work was not. His brother, who seemed to understand these things more than the rest of them, said it was because the amulet was 'blind' power and no one knew what dark forces might work through it without your noticing, but the relic was 'seeing' power and was linked to a spirit that was known and proven to be good.

'If he was not there to fight, and he was not there to make magic, why was he there?' Penda demanded.

'King Egric and Prince Ethelhere had brought him to us to lead us into battle. He used to be a warrior. But he spoke to us of friendship with the Mercians, and said it was wrong to kill, even our enemies. He said he had taken a vow to God not to kill and he would not do it even to save his own life.'

'He vowed to his god that he would not kill?' Penda asked in amazement.

The boy nodded.

Penda grunted and rubbed his bearded chin.

'What did he hope to gain by coming up to me like that?'

The boy shrugged helplessly.

'I respect a man who keeps a vow and who honours his god. Even a god who is as foolish as this one seems to be.' The Mercian king spoke as though to himself. And then, louder, to his men, he said: 'Find this priest-king's body and let it be buried with dignity.'

But before they could leave his presence to do his bidding there was a disturbance at the entrance and a man rushed in with urgent news. The boy could not catch what was said, as there was a great deal of shouting, but he heard enough to know that the Mercians were alarmed at a sudden change in the

situation. When they rushed out leaving him alone, he began to crawl towards the entrance, but fainted before he reached it.

* * * *

The news Penda had heard to change his mood so swiftly had been that the East Anglians, whom he had thought he had defeated, were rallying under the standard of a new leader.

Prince Anna, brother to both Egric and Ethelhere, had missed the battle, being at the time on a visit to the Kentish court. But he had had a dream of such horror about his country that he had set off for home even before messengers arrived with the news of Penda's invasion. And so it was that he was now already on East Anglian territory, having sailed up the Deben river while Penda's army was mostly scattered, looting in isolated villages, celebrating with the local strong ale, over confident in the extent of their victory. He and his companion rode in from the south-east, fresh from their sojourn in Kent, angry and determined to retake their land.

Penda had overreached himself and knew it. His spies had told him East Anglia would be easy taking once he had breached the dykes, and at first it had seemed that they were right. But the Seer had warned him he would have a victory that was not a victory.

He had been foolish to relax so soon and he was angry with himself. That damn sorcerer had taken his mind off things he ought to have been thinking about.

Within a few days Anna had turned the Mercians around. No matter how cruelly Penda's troops tried to

stamp on the people, enough of them always seemed to get away to join their new leader.

By the coming of the Lord's day, Prince Anna could give thanks to his god for deliverance from the enemy, while Penda, angry and disappointed, had had to retreat.

* * * *

All through these terrible events Etheldreda and Saxberga lay hidden in the cave under the care of the taciturn youth. During the day he went out to forage for food and drink. At night they sat in the dark and talked long hours together, learning that the young man's name was Ovin and that he was a runaway slave of the Celtic race.

The punishment if he was caught would be certain death, and probably not by the most merciful method.

All their lives the princesses had taken slaves for granted, assuming that they would always be there at their father's house at Exning or at Rendilsham, taking care of everything. They were not treated badly, for Anna and his wife were kind people and their slaves respected them and worked willingly. But Ovin told them that all masters were not so fair and gentle.

He started to describe the suffering and humiliations that he had endured, but had to stop because Etheldreda wept so piteously. She had been growing steadily paler as the days went by and now would scarcely eat or sleep, her eyes almost like dark holes in her head. She felt as though she had been living all her life believing that she was in a sturdy boat on a calm lake, and had suddenly found that she was on the open sea in a frail craft buffeted by winds and lashed by

tremendous waves. One night as she dozed uneasily she thought she saw dry land and a beautiful country... but she could not see a way to reach it. She stretched out her arms, sobbing.

‘Ssh,’ hushed Saxberga, rocking her gently in her arms. ‘Ssh!’

Ovin woke and crept over to them.

‘She is having a bad dream,’ whispered Saxberga. ‘Do you think I should wake her?’

Runaway slave or not, Ovin had become for them both a strong and a comforting force, the only thing that kept them from absolute despair. He had treated Saxberga’s leg with herbal concoctions to keep it from going gangrenous and he had set the bone well, probably better than the king’s own physician would have done, binding it with strips of hide to a stick of wood. They had grown accustomed to his making every decision and waited patiently for the time when he thought it would be safe for them to leave the cave.

He put his hand on Etheldreda’s shoulder.

‘Wake up,’ he said softly. ‘You are safe.’

She jerked awake at once and sat bolt upright.

And for one amazing instant it seemed to her that she was not in the dark, but was seeing everything around her as clearly as though it were full daylight. But everything she saw, and everything she had ever seen, was as nothing to the fair and distant land she had glimpsed in her dream.

* * * *

The next day Ovin returned from foraging with good news.

‘The Mercians have gone,’ he told them. ‘King Anna has driven them away.’

‘King Anna?’ gasped the girls.

He looked at them and smiled. ‘Yes, King Anna,’ he said.

Chapter 2

The marriage of Saxberga

King Anna looked gravely down upon the mutilated bodies of three Mercian soldiers that had been laid proudly at his feet as he entered Garbaldisham.

‘I would rather these men were alive,’ he said quietly.

‘My lord,’ protested the young man who brought them to him, ‘they killed my mother and my wife.’

The king nodded sadly.

‘They kill your family, so you kill them. Their family must kill you in revenge for their death, and your kin must kill their kin in revenge for your death. And so it goes on. When will the killing stop if we do not stop it now? Why do we speak of being born again into a new life, if we do not change our ways?’

‘But my lord, my wife and mother must be avenged!’

“Vengeance is mine,” said the Lord. “I will repay”,’ the king murmured, almost under his breath.

There was an uneasy silence among the people gathered before him, until at last one spoke, a challenging spark in his eyes.

‘Is it true, my lord, that your own daughters have been killed by the Mercians?’

A shadow passed over Anna’s face and a muscle twitched in his cheek. He took a long time to answer this, and when he did his voice was full of pain.

‘It is true.’

‘And do you still say we must not take vengeance?’

There was another long pause. He shut his eyes and took a deep, slow, breath. Those who were near could see his knuckles white as he clenched his fists. But when he opened his eyes again, his gaze was steady and clear.

‘I do,’ he said simply.

The crowd murmured and shifted restlessly in front of him.

‘Take these men away,’ he said, straightening his shoulders and suddenly speaking in quite a different tone of voice. ‘I do not believe in vengeance, but I do believe in self-defence. We have driven the Mercians from our land, but they will be back. Next time they must not penetrate the dykes. I want every man, woman and child in the country to pledge two days out of every week for digging at the dykes until I am satisfied that they are too high and strong for Penda’s men to take. Those who live far from the place may work their days off in groups of ten, returning to their homes for the intervening weeks. Make this known,’ he commanded, and leapt upon his horse.

After he had gone there was murmuring, some complaining about having to work on the dyke, others relieved that King Anna, though Christian like King Sigbert and willing to forgive his enemies, was shrewd enough at least to see the necessity of strong defence.

They remembered also that he had delivered them from Penda.

The council of elders and priests, thegns and earls, had no hesitation in confirming Anna's claim to the crown, and people flocked to him from far and wide willing to take the oath of allegiance.

It is said that when the news of his daughters' safe return was brought to him he fell down on his knees in the mud and wept.

Later, at Rendilsham, he heard the details of their escape and was introduced to Ovin, who, only with the greatest difficulty, had been persuaded to come out of hiding and throw himself on the king's mercy. When Anna had listened to his story he sent for the man who had been Ovin's master.

That night the youth tried to run away, feeling sure that he had been betrayed, but he had gone no further than the stockade that surrounded the royal buildings when he found himself seized by the belt of his jerkin. He spun round, his fists at the ready, to find that he was looking into a child's face.

'My lady 'Dreda!' he gasped.

'You are not going to run away again?' she hissed.

'I have to,' he whispered miserably. 'Please, my lady, let me go.'

'No, I will not let you go to live in a hole in the ground again like a hunted animal, or become a wolf's-head outlaw, harrying the countryside for food. My father will not give you back to your master.'

'He has called for him.'

'He has called for him to punish him for how he has treated you. Come back with me and you will see.'

'He will give me back. He has to. It is the law.'

‘He has promised me that he will pay the price for you. He will buy you. You will see how different masters can be.’

‘My lady,’ Ovin’s voice broke slightly. ‘I am grateful, but...’

‘But what?’ she asked sharply. The night was dark and they were in shadow. She could see people moving, silhouetted against the house fires, the guards talking near the gate. She hoped that she could persuade Ovin to return to the slaves’ quarters before he was missed.

‘I can’t go back to being a slave, no matter how kind the master.’

‘Why not?’

Ovin shook his head in the dark.

‘I can’t!’ he repeated vehemently – forgetting caution. Etheldreda put her hand upon his arm.

‘Ssh,’ she said. ‘I will persuade my father to free you. But it must be done correctly or you will always live in fear.’

Ovin looked at her. Was this possible? Was the nightmare he had lived for so long finally going to end?

‘Come,’ she said, tugging at his arm. ‘Trust me. Please! I owe you my life. Let my father give you back the one my people took from you.’

He allowed himself to be led to the slaves’ quarters, but he hesitated to go in.

‘It will only be for a little while,’ she pleaded. ‘I promise you.’

He sighed and disappeared through the low door into the darkness.

* * * *

It turned out that Ovin's master and most of his family had been killed in the fighting. Only his wife and one small child were left, and they were brought before King Anna. They were offered a good price for the slave, and accepted readily. Had the husband been alive he might have demanded Ovin's life, but his wife was destitute and preferred the money.

'You see!' cried Etheldreda joyously.

Ovin bowed his head glad that half of the promise had been kept, but he would not rejoice until he had the whole of it.

He was taken to the crossroads and there the ceremony of manumission was performed. The record of it was entered into King Anna's gospel book and witnessed by two priests and two thegns.

After the signatures, the curse was written in against anyone who would deny Ovin's freedom in the future.

'May he have the disfavour of God who at any time perverts this grant of freedom.'

It was signed by King Anna and the witnesses.

Ovin took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. He had never seen it so high and wide before, so full of splendour. He leapt into the air and ran like a young colt over the fallow field to the west.

The group at the crossroads watched him quietly, Etheldreda slipping her hand into her father's.

'It must be a terrible thing to be a slave,' she said thoughtfully. 'I hadn't thought of it before.'

'Most people are slaves, my child, in one way or another.'

'I am not!' she said fiercely.

'The strange thing is,' her father continued, ignoring her, speaking as though to himself, 'More often than not

the only way we can prove we have our freedom is to give it up voluntarily.'

Ovin came running back, his eyes alight, his breath short.

'Well, my friend,' the King said. 'We are at the cross-roads. You are free to go. Which way will you choose?'

Ovin looked around at the vast landscape, the fields of grain, the forests in the distance, the paths spreading out from where they stood. In every direction freedom lay.

He looked down at Etheldreda standing beside her father, still thin from her recent ordeal, but her cheeks now warm and glowing with happiness. The sunlight caught her hair and it shone like gold. Her eyes were full of caring and concern.

He suddenly flung himself on the ground and kissed the hem of her skirt.

'I ask to stay and serve the Princess Etheldreda as a free man,' he said, with a catch in his voice.

She cried out with delight and would have flung her arms around him, had her father not pulled her sharply back.

'My daughter is very young and has not yet learned fully the constrictions of her place in life. You too will find your new role confusing. If I give you permission to serve her, have I your oath that you will not abuse my trust?' He looked hard at the lad.

Ovin stood up and met his gaze, eye to eye as a free man would, then he bowed his head as a free man bows.

'You have, my lord,' he said quietly.

* * * *

Not long after this, Saxberga was called into her father's presence. The message was so formal Saxberga was alarmed, and insisted that Etheldreda accompany her.

But when they arrived they found him sitting in his favourite chair with his wife upon his knee, his head resting on her hair. They looked so happy together the two girls hesitated to draw attention to their arrival and thought to turn around and creep out. But Anna noticed them and held out a hand to draw them close to him, encompassing all three with his arms. Tears came to Etheldreda's eyes to think that they were all together again, and the nightmare of war was over.

After a while he pushed them gently away from him and they could see that it was time to speak of the reason he had sent for Saxberga. They stood patiently in front of him, Saxberga beginning to feel a little uneasy as he gazed long and thoughtfully at her. She looked questioningly at her mother and was met with eyes half full of tears.

'What is it?' she cried, suddenly frightened.

Anna raised his hand soothingly. 'Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'I have good news for you. I hesitate only because I know at first it might seem a little...' His voice trailed away.

'What is it?' she demanded.

Anna looked appealingly at his wife and she stepped forward and took Saxberga's hands.

'My dove, your father has arranged for you to go to Kent to meet King Eorconbert,' she said.

Saxberga looked at her father suspiciously.

'Why?'

‘Because he is a good man, a great man, king of the most powerful country in southern Britain, and his help in times of trouble would be invaluable.’

‘What are you saying?’ Saxberga almost screamed the words, knowing very well what he was saying.

‘Hush, my dear. It is a great honour,’ her mother said.

‘What? What is a great honour? What is going on?’ cried Etheldreda, bewildered.

‘What is going on,’ said Saxberga to her little sister, ‘is that I am to be married off to a total stranger for the good of the country!’

Anna stood up. His face was no longer soft and loving, but stern.

‘You are a woman and you know you must marry soon. You are a princess and you know you cannot marry whom you choose. Our country is in danger. You have seen with your own eyes what that means. Why do you pretend to protest? You know what must be, must be. The king of Kent is a fine man. You will marry him from necessity, but you will grow to love him. I promise you. There is no more to be said.’ He looked at his wife and she hurried them out, Etheldreda bubbling with excited questions, Saxberga bitterly silent, her face red and angry.

They went to their special place in the woods, where they knew they could be alone. They talked for hours. In the end Saxberga was reconciled to the idea. Their own parents had not met before the betrothal vows. At least King Eorconbert was a young man, not much older than Saxberga herself. His country, Kent, had been the first of the kingdoms in the new land to be converted to Christianity. Under his grandfather’s long rule it had

become a strong and peaceful country, where people could travel and not be in continual fear of their lives, where the crafts that made for gracious living flourished, and the songs that were sung around the hearths were of love more often than of war. It was a fertile land, farmed intelligently according to the Frankish system, each field yielding more than an equivalent field in their own country.

The work of the Kentish weavers and of the goldsmiths was famous. When they returned home their mother showed the girls the presents Anna had brought from Kent. They held the fine cloth and pretended that it was already fashioned into clothes. Etheldreda fastened several necklaces at a time to her shoulders.

‘Look! Look!’ she cried, standing upon a wooden stool so that the cloth flowed down around her to the ground and she looked as tall as any grown woman. On her head she had placed a circlet of gold. ‘I am to be a queen too! I am to marry a king!’

Their mother looked at them as they played at being queens, and tears came to her eyes. If only it were just a matter of wearing fine clothes! She knew that, as Anna’s queen, her own days of peace and happiness with her family were over. From now on she would be continually with other people, on her guard, watching to protect her husband’s interests, diplomatically helping him to keep the power he had against jealous contenders, helping him to carry out unpopular but necessary laws, smiling, talking, charming powerful foreigners to enlist their help, entertaining strangers who would be useful to her husband as friends and deadly as enemies, cultivating people because she needed them, and not because she enjoyed their company.

She sighed. The Mercian attack, and the years of Egric's indecisive reign before that, would make Anna's job more difficult.

In Kent her daughter would not have an easy time either. The peace and plenty of the reign of the great Bretwalda Ethelbert had been almost destroyed by his easy-going son Eadbald. From the moment of his father's death when he had taken his mistress, his father's second wife, to be his own wife, things had gone wrong. Heathenism, which in spite of thirty years of Christian rule was still not far from the surface, had welled up and almost overwhelmed the church Augustine had founded. Eventually Eadbald had paid lip-service to the new religion, but had never really understood it. He put away his step-mother, and married Emma, a Frankish princess, after the Archbishop of Canterbury had shown him the miraculous scourge marks received on his own back, he said, at the hands of Saint Peter for allowing the king to love so grossly and so sinfully. The child of that new union, Prince Eorconbert, grew up at a court that was unruly and licentious, watching his father and his father's friends drunk and boasting, taking women as they pleased, sometimes upon the very tables of the mead hall.

He watched, because he could not stop himself, but he secretly vowed that things would be very different when he was king.

* * * *

Saxberga had agreed to the marriage as her parents knew she must, with one stipulation, and that was that her sister Etheldreda should come with her and stay

with her for the first few months. Her mother agreed gladly and Etheldreda was delighted with the prospect of her first sea voyage and her first visit to another kingdom. Their home had not been the same since Anna had become king. He and their mother seemed always to be too busy for them, and even their aunt Hereswith, King Egric's widow, who used to be so fond of Etheldreda, had left to go to France, taking with her their eldest sister Ethelberga, both to become nuns at the monastery of Faremoutier at Brie. Hereswith left her infant son, Aldwulf, born after Egric's death, for Anna's family to raise.

* * * *

In Kent the days before the wedding passed very quickly for the two princesses.

King Eorconbert's Gallic mother, Emma, was dead, but his aunt Ethelberga, once Queen of Northumbria, widow of the great Bretwalder Edwin, was there to take her place. She was a woman in her late forties, beautiful and elegant, her hair already silver-white from the sorrows she had endured.

It was her request that Paulinus, now Bishop of Rochester, should speak at the wedding ceremony after Archbishop Honorius of Canterbury. She had been through much with him since he first accompanied her, a nervous young girl, to Northumbria to marry King Edwin. It was he who had finally persuaded her pagan husband to baptism, and it was he who had protected her and her children in their flight after Edwin's defeat and death.

Paulinus was now very old and he reminded Etheldreda in some ways of a bird of prey. He was tall and

very thin, his shoulders stooping, his eyes like dark and burning coals. He was originally from the Mediterranean and had a sallow complexion that contrasted very strikingly with the fairness of the young couple. Etheldreda scarcely heard a word he said though he spoke a long time. She was watching her sister who had so recently fought against the necessity of the marriage, already smiling up into the handsome young king's eyes and twining her fingers lovingly in his. She suddenly felt very much alone.

At the end of the sermon Etheldreda felt a touch on her arm and beside her she found the exiled Northumbrian princess, Eanfleda, the only surviving child of Queen Ethelberga and King Edwin. She was a girl of fourteen, so slight of build that she did not seem much older than Etheldreda, though her face had the weariness and the bitterness of a much older person.

'My mother says that we should go together to the wedding feast,' she said without enthusiasm. 'Shall we go now?'

Etheldreda was glad to leave the crowd that thronged around her sister. She looked at Eanfleda. She too looked lonely. Her face was set and worn, as though she had been weeping.

'What's the matter?' Etheldreda asked, touching her arm.

Eanfleda shook her head, and turned to move away.

Etheldreda took her hand and walked beside her.

'Tell me why you're so sad,' she insisted.

Again Eanfleda shook her head. 'You wouldn't understand,' she said. She longed to speak to someone, but Etheldreda was too young.

‘I understand more than people think,’ Etheldreda said.

Tears began to form in Eanfleda’s blue eyes and well over to fall down her pale cheeks.

‘I am ashamed to tell,’ she whispered.

They were away from the crowds now, hidden from the other wedding guests by the trunk of a huge old tree.

Etheldreda squeezed her arm and looked at her with such compassion that Eanfleda broke down.

‘I had hoped,’ she said with a sob, ‘that my cousin Eorconbert... and I...’ Her voice faded away.

‘You wanted to be his bride?’

‘Hush, not so loud. I should not have said it.’

‘Your cousin is most handsome, most brave. I am not surprised that you love him.’

Eanfleda sobbed freely now, the relief she felt for having told half her guilt encouraging her to blurt out the rest.

‘Do you know what I have done?’ she whispered, clutching Etheldreda’s arm and staring wildly at her. Etheldreda shook her head, beginning to feel very uneasy at the intensity of the older girl’s expression.

‘I went to the witch woman of the pagans,’ Eanfleda whispered. ‘I asked for a love potion to make him come to me.’

Etheldreda gasped.

‘You must tell no one. I shall be cursed as long as I live.’ The Northumbrian princess gripped Etheldreda’s arms tighter with her thin fingers.

Etheldreda shook her head dumbly.

‘Vow,’ hissed Eanfleda.

Etheldreda could not bring the words out. She continued to stare at Eanfleda, not so much shocked at what she said, but at the expression on the girl's face.

'Vow,' sobbed Eanfleda, starting to shake her, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Chapter 3

The attack on Oswald AD 641

‘Are you not satisfied, my lord, with the blood that you’ve already shed?’ Cynewise, the Mercian queen, was looking angrily at the fighting men gathering, the horses riding in from the hills, the wagons being loaded.

Penda was standing with arms crossed on his broad chest, his eyes gleaming. This was more like it! No country would stand against this force. He had killed Edwin and purged his country of the false faith of the Nazarene god, but in his place had come another cursed Christian, Oswald of the Bernician royal line, brought up on Iona, an island of monks. There was surely not a good swordsman or axeman among them to have taught the prince how to fight. Northumbria was practically his.

Penda took a deep breath, almost smelling the wild places of the hills and the heather wind sweeping across the high moors. His men were happier with this type of terrain, no sticky marshland and narrow bottle-necks guarded by dykes. Wide open spaces and rocks to hide behind, heights to reach and hold.

‘Did you hear me, lord?’ Cynewise persisted, long years of marriage and the bearing of five children having given her confidence to speak her mind.

‘I heard you woman. I heard you,’ he muttered, then raised his voice and pointed with one stubby fierce finger at some boys who were struggling to load a wagon with some huge barrels.

‘Take it from the other side, fools! Do you want your fathers to sleep thirsty after a day of fighting?’

He moved away and Cynewise was left alone, to be joined by her second eldest son, Wulfhere, a moment later.

‘Can I go with him this time, mother? Can I?’

She looked down at his thin, fine face, eager for adventure.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Not this time.’ Not this time, her heart echoed, but soon there would be a time when she would have to let him go.

‘Peada goes.’

‘Peada is blooded. He has years on you, my son.’

‘I am strong and my horse is faster than Peada’s. His is made of lead.’

‘You are needed here. If all the men go, who will guard the women?’

Wulfhere’s face wrinkled with disgust and he moved away, but he was glad she had called him a man. When all the men were mustering it was frustrating to be a child. A king’s son could not afford to waste his time on childhood.

Cynewise returned to the stockade and the royal house. Penda was busy and would not return until late in the night. He would be drunk and full of fierce lusts as always before he started on one of his raids. She

would need strength. She made sure no one would disturb her and told her women that she was going to sleep. Then she drew the heavy cloth over the windows of her chamber and lit a tiny iron lamp. She listened for a moment to make sure that there was no one moving in the other chamber and then pulled out from under the wooden bed that she and Penda shared, a small plain box. With trembling hands she fumbled to open it, knowing that if Penda caught her now she would be dead, though she bore him a hundred sons. The lid came away at last and inside, wrapped in silk, was a tiny golden crucifix set with pearls given to her by her father Cynegils on her last visit home to Wessex.

They had talked long into the night about his conversion to Christianity and, although she had refused baptism for fear of her husband, she had taken the cross, well hidden in her robes, to be kept secret in this box ever since. From time to time she came to it and pondered over the strange religion that it symbolised. That a god could be invisible and only show himself when he chose was not strange to her, but that he commanded that they did not slay their enemies (the Northumbrians, the East Anglians, the Celts) but only the desires in their own hearts, the secret roots of hatred deep in their own minds, was new to her. 'Fight only against yourself,' he said, 'prepare *yourself* as a temple for your god instead of building one of stone and wood. Have no blood feuds... pay no wergild... forgive all men for what they do...' She shivered. There was so much she did not understand.

Again she listened and when she heard no sound she knelt before the little cross now propped up on her clothes-chest.

‘God of my father Cynegils,’ she whispered, her heart pounding nervously, ‘protect my sister Cyneberga and her husband King Oswald of Bernicia. Soften my lord’s heart and let him be content with his own country, with his own people.’ She stopped, opening her eyes a crack to see if there was anyone or anything changed in the room, but nothing had that she could see.

She rose from her knees, wrapped the cross in the silk, and returned it to its box and thence to its hiding place. She then bowed low before the small wooden statue of Thunor that stood in an alcove.

She took off her ring and laid it at his feet.

‘Lord of Storm, wild warrior and defender of the gods,’ she said softly, ‘watch over my lord and bring him safely home.’

* * * *

King Anna and his family only heard of Oswald’s defeat and death at the battle of Maserfield more than a week after it had occurred.

News of Penda’s army on the move had reached them earlier, and Anna had breathed a sigh of relief that it was northward bound this time and not towards his own country. His spies in Northumbria were many, but the savagery of the fighting that followed Penda’s invasion was such that none could leave until, defeated, many of the Bernicians and Deirans fled, and refugees came straggling south.

The queen and Etheldreda were so moved by the stories of the suffering of the refugees that they insisted on travelling north to see what they could do to help.

Tondbert, prince of the marshlands, gave them a lodge on the island of Ely in which to rest and ordered his men to help the women in any way they required. He himself took Etheldreda in his light reed boat ahead of the main party, impressing her with his skill at manoeuvring the craft through the reeds, finding the waterways, and avoiding the mud-banks, the water snakes and the fen demons. He was a grizzled old man in his fifties, tough and brown-skinned from continual exposure to the weather, rough in manner, having learned no courtly graces in ruling such a wild and independent bunch of fowlers and fishermen, but Etheldreda liked him. He treated her with gruff respect as though she were an equal instead of still a child.

Ovin was in the boat that closely followed them and it was he who lifted her out onto the bank when at last they reached firm land. The excitement of the journey through the marshes had brought high colour to her cheeks and her eyes were sparkling. For the moment she had forgotten the reason for their mission, but it soon came back to her as they came upon the refugee encampment. The sights that she had tried so hard to forget from Penda's attack on her own country came welling back and she turned to Ovin with a sob.

Tentatively, remembering her father's words, he put his arms about her. 'Don't cry, lady,' he said softly against her hair. 'These people need our help, not our tears.'

She tried to pull herself together at this and look at the children with thin bones and dark-ringed eyes, the women with dirty, blood-soaked bandages, the pathetic collection of bits and pieces they had brought from their homes. She wiped her tears on his tunic, drew away

from him and walked firmly towards the ragged crowd. Within minutes she was completely in control of herself and, child as she still was in body if not in spirit, she took command and with grace and dignity organised the distribution of the food that they had brought with them and the administering of herbal potions. She dressed wounds and listened with a pale but calm face to women telling of what they had seen.

But, all the time, at the back of her mind, a voice kept saying over and over again with the insistence of a drum beat: 'This is not all there is. Remember – this is not all there is.'

And then, almost as confirmation of what she was thinking, one of the refugees told her about the death of King Oswald.

'With his very last breath he prayed for the souls of his enemies. All who were near saw a light hover over the place where he fell and, as they looked at it, they felt no pain over his death nor our defeat.'

Etheldreda watched and listened intently, beginning to grasp the importance of what was being said. In realising that his enemies were, like his friends, all the sons of God, all eternal souls, she understood he had gained something more valuable than the life and lands Penda took away from him. He had won the only victory worth winning.

There were tears in her eyes as she turned suddenly to Ovin, her friend, her comforter, her rock.

'You see, there is something more,' she whispered.

He nodded, smiling broadly.

And then there was no more time to be thinking of these wonders. One of the pack-horses started to slip on

the slimy mud of the riverbank and everyone had to rush to his assistance.

At the end, laughing and covered in mud, they collapsed exhausted – the immediate distracting them from the eternal. But, behind the horse’s desperate floundering and their clumsy but energetic attempts to rescue it, the eternal was still there.

* * * *

On the way back they rested again at Ely and Etheldreda, tired as she was, insisted on walking round the island.

‘I love this place,’ she said to Prince Tondbert. ‘I feel at home here.’ He could see that the cares of her recent experience were almost gone from her face.

He smiled at her. ‘It’s yours, my lady.’

She looked at him sharply. ‘Don’t tease me, my lord.’

He opened his mouth to confirm his gift, but was interrupted by the arrival of Etheldreda’s mother and one of Oswald’s men. They were talking of what would become of Northumbria now that Oswald was dead.

‘His brother Oswy should by rights be king,’ the man was saying, ‘but he’ll have to win his kingdom back from Penda, and there are many in his own country who hate him and wouldn’t like to see him king.’

‘Why is that?’ the queen asked mildly. ‘Wasn’t he brought up by the monks of Iona in the same way as his brother Oswald?’

‘Aye... but...’ The man hesitated, looking at Etheldreda.

‘I heard that he is a hard man to his enemies, that’s for sure.’ The queen frowned. Whoever became king of Northumbria affected them all. If Penda kept what he had won they would suffer most. Separate, the seven

kingdoms kept a kind of balance, but if Northumbria and Mercia were united it would not be long before they were all absorbed. But if Oswy was as they hinted... what then?

Chapter 4

The school at Dunwich: Oswy and Eanfleda

While Prince Oswy of Bernicia was fighting to regain his brother's throne from Penda and hold it against others of his country who wished to wrest it from him, Etheldreda was growing up. Heregyth, a girl a few years older than herself, the daughter of one of Egric's thegns who had died defending Rendilsham, was assigned to be her special maid and companion and in her company Etheldreda was sent to Dunwich to study at the famous school that had been founded by Bishop Felix during the reign of King Sigbert.

The princess at once took to the life of study, eagerly learning everything she could as fast as she could, finding in scholarship and the long hours of work the pleasure that others might find in the playful company of friends and the noisy evenings of entertainment at court. She found that by learning to read she now had a direct door into the Gospels through which she could go whenever she wished, finding things there that the priests, on whose interpretations she had been dependent before, had never shown her.

Each day had its excitement and at night when she returned to her small bare chamber, where Heregyth was waiting to comb her hair, she poured out her enthusiasms to the girl. Heregyth, who could neither read nor write, nor had any wish to do so, longed to return to Rendilsham. She had been enrolled in the embroidery school and although the work they did there was famous throughout Europe, even the Bishop of Rome wearing a cope that had been designed and worked at Dunwich, she found each day longer than the last.

Just before Michaelmas Etheldreda was allowed to start work in the scriptorium and every evening when she and Heregyth were together she talked enthusiastically about her work. The bemused girl heard about the difficulties of applying gold leaf when the resin underlying it dried too quickly or too slowly because of changeable weather, and the preciousness of ultramarine, which was one of the few pigments they could not grind themselves, but had to have sent from Rome.

‘Even in Rome,’ the princess told Heregyth, ‘they don’t know how it is made and have to import it from the East. They know its base is lapis lazuli but not one has been able to find out just what else they use. The others are easy. We use orpiment for yellow when we can’t get the gold, verdigris from copper for green, woad for blue, white and red lead, ox-gall for brown, and then it is just a matter of knowing how much to mix with the egg, the gum or the vinegar.’

Heregyth combed Etheldreda’s hair so that it floated out around her and became a haze of fine gold threads in the lamplight, and then she put away the comb and folded back the rugs on the bed.

'I'd be frightened that I'd make a mistake and ruin a whole page,' she said.

Etheldreda smiled.

'Even experienced scribes make mistakes. We think nothing of it,' she said airily. 'We just turn the mistake into a little animal or a flower or something. My pages are usually full of extra figures!' She laughed, and then she looked serious. 'But one day,' she said, 'one day I will write the perfect page.'

* * * *

Being a school attached to a monastery there were not many hours of the day and night that were not accounted for in duties. But sometimes Etheldreda felt the need to be by herself and she would rise before dawn and, instead of going to the chapel where the monks and nuns would already be gathered, she would slip away to the sea and walk along the beach, watching for the sunrise. The air would be fresh and clear as though newly washed, the long beach curving to the distant headland pure and deserted. She would stand right at the water's edge, her sandals abandoned further up the beach, her shift gathered up and held above her knees, the waves washing over her feet, tugging at the pebbles.

At last the sun would rise, filaments and veils of light falling from it and floating away; she at the centre.

* * * *

When Oswy had finally established himself on the throne he sent to Kent for the young princess Eanfleda. The marriage would serve a double purpose. The fact that her mother was of the Kentish royal house would

help to extend his influence far to the south, but more importantly, as the last remaining offspring of the great Bretwalder Edwin, who had so effectively welded the Deiran and Bernician kingdoms together, her place on the throne beside him would strengthen his own case for doing the same. For the moment he ruled only Bernicia. Oswin, descended from Edwin's cousin, held Deira.

* * * *

Eanfleda left for Bernicia with her chaplain Romanus, as though she were going to prison instead of to marriage.

Her mother watched the brave train of thegns and women companions that accompanied her, the chests of treasure and the gifts of fine horses and Frankish weaponry, and thought of the time she too had set off for the north to marry a man she had never met. Edwin at that time was a pagan, a warrior prince who had won his kingdom fiercely and mercilessly. She had had no way of knowing then that as the years of their marriage passed she would grow to love him and that he would eventually embrace the Christian faith. Their child Eanfleda had been baptised by her priest Paulinus, as pledge that the king and all his people would accept baptism if the God of his wife would give him victory over the West Saxons.

But Oswy was a very different man.

Tears came to her eyes to think of what Eanfleda might have to face. Oswy was officially a Christian, but from the tales told of him the teachings of the Saviour had not sunk very deep. He was a man in his thirties, twice married, known to be hard natured and a

womaniser, the son of her father's enemy, Ethelfrid, who had been king of Northumbria before Edwin.

Her daughter looked frail and young as she sat her horse, her cheeks pale as chalk, her eyes looking into her mother's with such desperation that Ethelberga could hardly bear to meet them. She might indeed have given in at this moment, had not Eorconbert joined her and said with calm satisfaction:

'Do not worry, lady, with this marriage we will all sleep easier in our beds. Besides – it is only fitting that she should take back her father's kingdom. It is rightfully hers.'

Ethelberga bit her lip. He was right. Eanfleda's sacrifice would win years of peace for them. She turned back to her daughter with a speech about duty ready on her lips when she was startled to intercept a look in the girl's eyes as she gazed at Eorconbert that could only be interpreted in one way. Sharply she looked back at Eorconbert, wondering if the same emotion would be expressed in his. But he had turned away from them and was shouting orders for the train to start moving. The mother saw Eanfleda's expression turn to bitterness as he rode off.

Ethelberga crossed herself and thanked God that her daughter after all was going far away from Kent.

'May guardian angels go with her and protect her in all that she has to face,' she whispered. 'From within and from without. Amen.'

Saxberga rode up on her chestnut horse and embraced the girl.

'I want you to have this,' she said, and held up a necklace of silver and jet with a small pendant cross. 'It was my mother's and I held it all the way to Kent. It gave

me courage and, as you see, brought me good fortune.’ Saxberga’s smile was so warm and loving, it was clear that she had no idea of Eanfleda’s secret feelings about her husband.

Ethelberga watched anxiously as the girl took the necklace. She hesitated for a long time, turning it over and over in her fingers. But at last she looked up, and met the young queen’s eyes. ‘Thank you,’ she said in a low voice, her face expressionless.

Saxberga kissed her on the cheek and rode off to find her husband. It had not been easy to part with her mother’s necklace and she had thought Eanfleda would have been more pleased to receive it.

The entourage started to move forward.

Eanfleda turned her back on her mother and her home and all that she had known and loved. She lifted her chin and set her eyes on the horizon.

So be it. It was God’s will.

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.
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