

STUART HILL

Shield
Maiden

DRAFT

THE SAXON BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL IS ABOUT TO BEGIN...

Shield Maiden

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Contents

| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| Chapter I | 9 |
| Chapter II | 30 |
| Chapter III | 45 |
| Chapter IV | 70 |
| Chapter V | 89 |
| Chapter VI | 107 |
| Chapter VII | 116 |
| Chapter VIII | 145 |
| Chapter IX | 171 |
| Chapter X | 183 |
| Chapter XI | 194 |
| Chapter XII | 212 |
| Chapter XIII | 224 |
| Historical Note | 231 |
| Bonus Bits! | 233 |

The Danish Great Army marched over the land, rank on rank in perfect step, shield overlapping shield like the scales of a dragon. The warriors' helmeted heads were as closely grouped as studs in an armoured gate and over them all flew the feared Raven banner said to make any force that carried it invincible. Not since the time of the Romans had such a disciplined and well-trained army marched through the land, and not since the time of the Romans had so many died trying to stop such an invincible force.

Waiting for them on the wide, flat plain stood the Saxons. At their centre was the king with his small war band of trained professional soldiers, known as housecarles. Around stood the fyrd, part-time

fighters who practised with weapons for a day or so each month.

The cry went up from the Danes as they spotted their enemy, and they sang a fierce rolling song that marched with the rhythm of their step. The Saxon king gave the order and his soldiers raised a shield wall and waited, filling the air with their war cries.

Arrows and throwing axes began to fly back and forth, landing to rattle amongst the ranks or thud into flesh and bone. Screams were added to the war cries and the line of fighters began to ebb and flow as warriors fell on both sides and others stepped forward to fill the gaps in the wall of shields. The iron-tinged scent of blood began to rise up over the battlefield.

But still the Saxons held their position and still the Great Army marched on. Now both sides were in closer range and spears began to fly between the two.

The armies were soon near enough to see the faces of those they must kill, and arrows and axes and spears brought down more and more. The fyrd expanded and contracted like a huge cloudbank before a wind, but the king and his band of housecarles stood solid, waiting for the onset of shield on shield.

The space between the enemies closed and now with a roar the Great Army rose up on to its toes and charged. It smashed into the wall like a storm wave hitting a headland. The Saxons fell in their hundreds. The earth beneath them soaked up their blood.

The housecarles held the line with their king, toe to toe with the Danes; axe and sword hacked and clattered down on the enemy. Neither gave way; neither could move forward. Those behind pressed close, while those in the front rank fought for their lives, thrusting and chopping and blocking. The day was filled with the stench of sweat and blood. The roar and screech of metal on metal and wood on wood rose up into the air. The battle song echoed across the sky.

Then with a great heaving shout the Danes rolled forward over the Saxon line, breaking the shield wall. All was in chaos, the ground wet with blood, but the Saxons still fiercely resisted and tried to regroup. The fyrd fought on, charging again and again, dying in their hundreds on the hedge of spears. The Great Army rolled on – unstoppable, unbreachable, unbreakable – bringing death on all who came near.

The fyrd despaired and began to fall back in ones and twos, then in groups and finally in great crowds that turned and ran in a desperate rout that left their king to fight alone with his housecarles. But now the royal war band fell like leaves from wind-blown trees before the storm of Danish steel, until at last the king stood alone.

The Danes caged him in a hedge of spears and, when he dropped his sword, they took him before their leader, who nodded and smiled as his men slit open the king's tunic, laid him on the ground and then chopped a hole in his back and spread his lungs wide to form the 'blood eagle'.

So it was that Aella, Saxon King of Northumbria, died his brutal death.

I

My childhood ended in the town of Chippenham on Christmas Day in the year of our Lord 876. We'd gone to church before the sun had come up and given ourselves to God as was proper and right when we remembered the birth of Christ. The praying and singing had finished, the incense had drifted away, and now the time would be ours.

As a family we walked from the church in procession, as humbly as it was possible for the Royal House of Cerdinga to do. I suppose we all look much alike; I'm the eldest, Aethelflaed, daughter of King Alfred of Wessex, and Edward, my brother, was born a year after me. We're told we look like twins and I've heard us described as having golden

hair and eyes like sapphires, with flawless skin and perfect features. At least that's what the chamberlains and other servants say but I suppose they would say that, wouldn't they? Ara, our nurse, doesn't really care about flattering anyone and she says we have mousey hair, eyes as pale as ponds under a winter sky and skin like waxy candles. She's always honest, even when you don't want her to be.

Aethelgifu, the next eldest, looks just the same as us, but she keeps her hair covered most of the time, and then there's little Aethelfryth. She's still very young and I think she really could have hair like spun gold and eyes like sapphires by the time she grows up.

We children had been herded together by our nurse and forced to walk in two pairs. As the eldest, Edward and I went first, smiling and doing our best to behave as royal children were supposed to do after an early-morning service in church. But this didn't last long; we couldn't resist teasing Aethelgifu ... She was so *holy* and good, she even enjoyed the boring parts of a church service, which meant nearly all of it.

"Do you think angel burps sound like bells?" Edward suddenly asked, casting a glance at our younger sister.

This took me by surprise and I snorted loudly. “No, angel burps probably sound like choirs singing!”

We began to giggle at this but an angry voice behind us interrupted and we turned to see Aethelgifu glaring at us, just as we’d hoped. “That’s sinful talk! Angels don’t ... do that sort of thing!”

“I bet they would if they ate peas and onions,” said Edward, warming to our usual game of upsetting our sister. “I can’t stop burping when we have those!”

I watched as Aethelgifu went an interesting shade of angry pink. “No, they wouldn’t! Angels can eat anything without ... without making any sort of noise.”

“How?” I asked, genuinely interested. “Does God stop them burping?”

Aethelgifu’s pink face deepened to a blazing red. “Don’t you know *anything*? Angels don’t have bodies like we do; they’re spirits of God! They only make themselves look like people when they bring messages from heaven.”

“Well if I was an angel I’d want to burp,” said Edward. “In fact when I brought my messages from heaven I’d announce my arrival with a huge echoing burp, like the heralds announce the arrival of a king.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” said Aethelgifu. “Haven’t you seen the carvings in church? Angels carry trumpets to announce themselves – it’s far more seemly!”

“What’re you talking about?” asked Aethelfryth, who’d been walking along quietly and trying to listen to our conversation over the cheering of the crowds.

“Never you mind!” said Aethelgifu and glared at us in warning to say nothing else that might corrupt the mind of the little girl.

Edward and I carried on in silence, nudging each other and enjoying a job well done. This was one of the few occasions when my brother and I worked at anything together; usually we were rivals, competing to be the best at almost anything you’d care to mention. The fact that he was a boy might have had something to do with this: although I was older, he was the one who would probably be chosen as the next ruler of Wessex after my father. Girls don’t rule countries; they just marry the rulers ... if they’re lucky.

Ahead of us marched the housecarles, the soldiers and the palace guards. Their shields were slung on their backs and their swords stayed in their scabbards

in honour of the fact it was Christmas Day. They even carried their spears with the heads pointing earthwards in deference to Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Anyway, we continued our procession through the streets, past the wooden houses with their thatched roofs and stout wooden doors that were interrupted here and there with the stone-built structures that had survived from the time of the Romans. The people of the town lined the route and waved and cheered as we passed and soon the sun rose into a polished blue sky. It was a cold winter that year, more snow than rain, more ice and penetrating frosts than mud. We children walked with my father and mother, the king and queen, along the path that had been dug through the deep snow. With us were the thegns, or lords, who helped to rule the country and command the army. Their ladies also joined us and, as we were all dressed in our very best clothes and wearing our most expensive jewels, we glowed and glittered like a bright garden in the winter snow.

Ahead I could see the huge gates that led into the palace precinct. They stood open and the guards thumped their spears on the ground as we walked through. It took quite a while for everyone to file

into the courtyard, and then, when the last thegn and his lady had squeezed into the wide space, my father stood looking at the complex of buildings before him, smiling and relaxed, for all the world as though it was a warm spring day instead of icy mid-winter.

The delicious smells of baking and roasting that rose up from the kitchens mingled with the spicy aroma of wood smoke to make a perfume of the day. I looked at the mead hall's brightly painted wooden beams and its roof, neatly covered in red tiles that had been carefully salvaged from Roman buildings. The palace at Chippenham was one of my father's favourites. Here in this mead hall he would hold feasts for his thegns and their soldiers, and it was here that he'd commend bravery in battle and loyalty in service and, as the name suggests, huge amounts of mead and many other sorts of drink were taken.

As this was my father's favourite palace he'd obviously decided that he wanted to enjoy looking at its well-built beauty. So we all stood there in the freezing-cold sunshine, the snow trampled to ice beneath our feet while my father beamed happily at the building before him, waiting until he finally gave the word that would allow us to go into the hall and

begin the celebrations. Then a strange figure in black rags stepped from the press around us and placed a hand like a claw on my father's arm.

"Are you waiting for someone to die of cold before you let the rest of us into your mead hall, Alfred King of Wessex?"

Only Ara would have dared to talk to my father like this. As I've already said, she was our nurse, and not only did she seem to be as ancient as the land my father ruled, but she'd also been *his* nurse when he was a little boy. He looked surprised for a moment, but then, seeming to rouse himself from whatever thoughts had been occupying him, he raised his hand. The party of neatly dressed chamberlains who stood before the huge wooden doors swung them open, and a glittering, fire-lit, candle-lit, torch-lit space opened up before us.

In the centre of the wide flagstone floor the fire roared in its deep, pit-like hearth, where the traditional Yule log blazed. It threw dancing shadows and flickering light over the richly worked tapestries that hung over every scrap of wall space.

As king, my father led the way into the hall. We were all so excited we couldn't resist running ahead,

and we raced over the flagstones screaming and laughing as we went. I felt I was flying as my cloak billowed behind me and I was almost convinced that I could soar up to the huge brightly painted beams that stretched from wall to wall and held up the high roof.

The hall soon filled with thegns, and their soldiers and ladies, their voices rising to fill the cavernous space with conversation, laughter and the excitement of Christmas. All around us the walls were decorated with the traditional evergreen branches of holly and ivy, which filled the air with a sweet, spicy smell. Then, as the servants rushed forward with jugs, the scent of mulled wine mingled with the foliage to make the proper perfume of Christmas.

My father and mother took their places at the high table that stood at the very top of the hall, and as they sat, so did everyone else, filling the long benches and tables that stood in rows on either side of the huge central fire. Christmas was one of the few occasions that we got to spend time with our parents. Usually Father was too busy with whatever it is kings do when they run countries to have much time for us. And my mother ran the palaces of the royal court like a general commands an army. The chamberlains

and servants probably saw more of our mother throughout the year than we did. The only time we could be certain of seeing her was when we'd done something wrong, and then she would descend to hand out punishment.

In fact we children had already been reined in today by some of Mother's special sharp stares and by the even sharper words and hands of Ara. The old nurse was standing in the shadows at the edge of the mead hall and watched us where we were sitting, a little further down the table from our parents. I'd been placed next to Aethelgifu, because she was quiet and it was hoped she'd calm me down. Aethelfryth sat beyond her, and then Edward. He was as wild as me, so once again we'd been deliberately separated. Even so, we grinned at each other over our sisters' heads, and managed to discuss the incoming guests under the covering rumble and chatter of people greedily looking forward to all the eating and drinking.

He suddenly pointed down into the hall. "Look, Aethelflaed, there's Cerdic. I'm surprised he's not training the housecarles even if it is Christmas."

I looked down into the press of people and immediately spotted the old warrior. Cerdic

Guthweinson was the commander of Father's personal guard and even though he was off duty and carrying no weapons he still looked like the soldier he was.

"Do you think he'll allow me to start using a full-sized shield soon?" Edward went on. "I can lift one easily now."

"So can I," I immediately pointed out, not wanting my brother to think he could do something that I couldn't. "We'll both ask him when we begin training again after the Holy Day."

Cerdic's long white hair and beard made him easy to spot in the crowd. He stood as straight as a spear and was easily as strong as the younger housecarles. I only hoped that I'd still be a tough fighter when I was his age.

"Perhaps we should keep ourselves alert and ready for anything, like proper warriors," Edward said, interrupting my thoughts. Then grabbing a winter-stored apple from the large bowl that stood in front of us, he threw it at me. "Here, catch! Stay awake!"

I caught the apple and threw it back, making him dive halfway across the table to scoop it from the air. The duel went on for a happy few minutes, each

throw getting wilder and wilder, until finally the apple hit Aethelgifu on the head.

Ara swept down on us like an angry raven, took the apple away and clipped Edward and me round the ear.

“You’re the children of the House of Cerdinga, not the peasant brats of some swineherd! Behave like the nobility you are!”

“We’re keeping ourselves battle-alert,” I answered. “That’s *exactly* how Saxon nobility should behave.”

Ara turned her icy stare on me, but then she surprised me by nodding sharply as she accepted my argument. “Then do it without killing your sister and without bringing ridicule down on your noble family.”

I was the eldest child and so was expected to behave better than the others, even though I rarely did. Just because I was older didn’t mean I was more sensible. Why should it? Some of the worst-behaved people I know are grown-ups. Look at Guthrum, King of the Vikings! But in the end I nodded and Ara went back to perch in the shadows at the edge of the hall.

By this time most of the guests had found their places at the long tables and after a dramatic pause

the great doors were suddenly flung open. The traditional roasted boar was carried in on a huge metal platter held above the helmets of the escorting housecarles. Everyone cheered wildly and sang the old Yuletide song as it was paraded around the hall.

Now the feast could really begin, and the chamberlains and scullions came running in with tray after tray of food and huge jugs of wine and beer and mead.

The celebrations wore on throughout the day, and the strange thing was, after an early burst of energy and huge noise, the adults seemed to get slowly quieter and more tired with every new dish of food and every beaker of wine. The musicians, who'd been playing energetically when we'd first walked into the hall, were now producing quiet little tunes that meandered up into the roof space along with the smoke from the great central fire. Even Father, who was usually the most talkative and excitable of people, was reduced to murmuring quietly to my mother.

By the time darkness fell some of the guests had slipped under the tables and were snoring loudly, and the rest picked listlessly at yet more platters of food. Ara also seemed to have withdrawn further into the

shadows that haunted the edges of the hall and might have been asleep ... if, that is, she did sleep. This of course gave me and my brother and sisters free rein, and soon we were running amongst the tables, laughing and shouting in excitement.

Even some of the housecarle guards, who were supposed to be on duty and not drinking, visibly winced as Aethelfryth's high-pitched voice reached a particularly piercing note when we chased her down the hall.

All of this noise and excitement meant that at first we didn't notice the sounds from outside. They seemed to be coming from the town beyond the palace precinct, and when eventually I stopped running and stood to listen, I could hear dogs barking and what sounded like people screaming. The sound slowly got louder, as though it was coming this way, and suddenly I felt the cold hand of fear touching my shoulder.

Ara appeared beside me as though out of thin air, and without worrying about etiquette or the presence of royalty, she raised her hands. "Listen!" she shouted. "There's movement in the night air! Something stalks the town around us!"

An almost complete silence fell in the mead hall, so that I could hear the Yule log crackling and snapping in the great central hearth. By this time, most of the housecarles had managed to shake off some of the sleepiness caused by the beer, and they slung their shields on their arms and levelled their spears at the huge double doors.

Screams and shouts could now be heard clearly, and suddenly my father shook his head as though to clear it and then leapt over the top table and gave a great shout that called his thegns and soldiers to attention.

“TO ARMS! TO ARMS! THE DANES ...”

But his voice was drowned out by a great splintering crack as the mead hall’s doors were broken open and Vikings poured through in an unstoppable gushing rush of axes, swords and spears!

The housecarles charged, locking shields and trying to hold back the enemy. But it was impossible; they were smashed aside and then my father took the kind of instant decision that had made him such a good king. He ran to where we children were and somehow managed to pick three of us up bodily while Ara dragged Edward along by his arm. Father seemed to have the strength of ten

as the massive panic and raging fear engulfed the Christmas celebrations.

He ran for the small door that was hidden behind a tapestry at the far end of the hall. He leapt on the top table, knocked over his chair, roared at my mother to run and kicked open the door.

In the mead hall everything was in chaos. People screamed in fear and agony as the Danes rampaged on, killing and maiming as they surged through the room. All the housecarles were dead, and the guests were trying to fight back using whatever came to hand. I watched one old thegn smash his tankard into the face of a Viking, and then stab another with a meat skewer. But it was hopeless; we'd been taken completely by surprise. The palace and town were already lost.

Behind us I could see Ara and also Cerdic Guthweinson, who had a sword and shield he must have picked up from a dead housecarle and was managing to run backwards at an amazing speed as he covered our retreat.

We burst out into the icy, clear night. The stars glittered above us giving all the light we needed as Father kicked his way into the nearby stables. He leapt on to a horse without saddle or bridle, shouted at my