

# Bernard Cornwell

In a clash of heroes, the kingdom is born

## *The Lords of the North*



# *The Lords of the North*

A NOVEL OF  
KING ALFRED THE GREAT

BOOK 3

of the

The Saxon Chronicles

\* \* \* \*

ISBN: 9780007219704

by **Bernard Cornwell**

Published by HarperCollins Publishers 2007

77 – 85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith

London W68JB

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved

Copyright © 2007 by Bernard Cornwell

Bernard Cornwell asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Libraries

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, with out the written permission of the publisher, except where permitted by law

*.....Com on wanre niht scridan scead ugenga*

*From out of the wan night slides the shadow walker*

*Beowulf*

## Part One

### The Slave King

I wanted darkness. There was a half-moon that summer night and it kept sliding from behind the clouds to make me nervous. I wanted darkness. I had carried two leather bags to the small ridge which marked the northern boundary of my estate. My estate. Fifhaden, it was called, and it was King Alfred's reward for the service I had done him at Ethandun where, on the long green hill, we had destroyed a Danish army. It had been shield wall against shield wall, and at its end Alfred was king again and the Danes were beaten, and Wessex lived, and I dare say that I had done more than most men. My woman had died, my friend had died, I had taken a spear thrust in my right thigh, and my reward was Fifhaden.

Five hides. That was what the name meant. Five hides! Scarce enough land to support the four families of slaves who tilled the soil and sheared the sheep and trapped fish in the River Kenet. Other men had been given great estates and the church had been rewarded with rich woodlands and deep pastures, while I had been given five hides. I hated Alfred. He was a miserable, pious, tight-fisted king who distrusted me because I was no Christian, because I was a northerner, and because I had given him his kingdom back at Ethandun. And as reward he had given me Fifhaden. Bastard.

So I had carried the two bags to the low ridge that had been cropped by sheep and was littered with enormous grey boulders that glowed white when the moon escaped the wispy clouds. I crouched by one of the vast stones and Hild knelt beside me.

She was my woman then. She had been a nun in Cippanhamm, but the Danes had captured the town and they had whored her. Now she was with me. Sometimes, in the night, I would hear her praying and her prayers were all tears and despair, and I reckoned she would go back to her god in the end, but for the moment I was her refuge. 'Why are we waiting?' she asked. I touched a finger to my lips to silence her. She watched me. She had a long face, large eyes and golden hair under a scrap of scarf. I reckoned she was

wasted as a nun. Alfred, of course, wanted her back in the nunnery. That was why I let her stay. To annoy him. Bastard.

I was waiting to make certain that no one watched us. It was unlikely, for folk do not like to venture into the night when things of horror stalk the earth. Hild clutched at her crucifix, but I was comfortable in the dark. From the time I was a small child I had taught myself to love the night. I was a sceadugengan, a shadow-walker, one of the creatures other men feared. I waited a long time until I was certain no one else was on the low ridge, then I drew Wasp-Sting, my short-sword, and I cut out a square of turf that I laid to one side. Then I dug into the ground, piling the soil onto my cloak. The blade kept striking chalk and flints and I knew Wasp-Sting's blade would be chipped, but I went on digging until I had made a hole large enough for a child's burial. We put the two bags into the earth. They were my hoard. My silver and gold, my wealth, and I did not wish to be burdened with it. I possessed five hides, two swords, a mail coat, a shield, a helmet, a horse and a thin nun, but I had no men to protect a hoard and so I had to hide it instead. I kept only a few silver coins and the rest I put into the ground's keeping, and we covered the hoard over and stamped the soil down and then replaced the turf. I waited for the moon to sail out from behind a cloud and then I looked at the turf and reckoned no one would know it had been disturbed, and I memorised the place, marking it in my mind by the nearby boulders. One day, when I had the means to protect that treasure, I would return for it. Hild stared at the hoard's grave. 'Alfred says you must stay here,' she said.

'Alfred can piss down his own throat,' I said, 'and I hope the bastard chokes on it and dies.' He would probably die soon enough for he was a sick man. He was only twenty-nine, eight years older than I was, yet he looked closer to fifty and I doubt any of us would have given him more than two or three years to live. He was forever griping about his belly pains or running to the shithole or shivering in a fever.

Hild touched the turf where the hoard was buried. 'Does this mean we're coming back to Wessex?' she asked.

'It means,' I said, 'that no man travels among enemies with his hoard. It's safer here, and if we survive, we'll fetch it. And if I die, you fetch it.'

She said nothing, and we carried the earth that was left on the cloak back to the river and threw it into the water.

In the morning we took our horses and rode eastwards. We were going to Lundene, for in Lundene all roads start. It was fate that drove me. It was the year 878, I was twenty-one years old and believed my swords could win me the whole world. I was Uhtred of Bebbanburg, the man who had killed Ubbabroth beside the sea and who had spilled Svein of the White Horse from his saddle at Ethandun. I was the man who had given Alfred his kingdom back and I hated him. So I would leave him. My path was the sword-path, and it would take me home. I would go north.

Lundene is the greatest city in all the island of Britain and I have always loved its ruined houses and feverish alleys, but Hild and I stayed there only two days, lodging in a Saxon tavern in the new town west of the decaying Roman walls. The place was a part of Mercia then and was garrisoned by the Danes. The alehouses were full of traders and foreigners and shipmasters, and it was a merchant called Thorkild who offered us passage to Northumbria. I told him my name was Ragnarson and he neither believed me nor questioned me and he gave us passage in return for two silver coins and my muscle on one of his oars. I was a Saxon, but I had been raised by the Danes so I spoke their tongue and Thorkild assumed I was Danish. My fine helmet, mail coat and two swords told him I was a warrior and he must have suspected I was a fugitive from the defeated army, but what did he care? He needed oarsmen. Some traders used only slaves at their oars, but Thorkild reckoned they were trouble and employed free men.

We left on the ebb-tide, our hull filled with bolts of linen, oil from Frankia, beaver-pelts, scores of fine saddles and leather sacks filled with precious cumin and mustard. Once away from the city and in the estuary of the Temes we were in East Anglia, but we saw little of that kingdom for on our first night a pernicious fog rolled in from the sea and it stayed for days. Some mornings we could not travel at all, and even when the weather was half good we never went far from shore. I had thought to sail home because it would be quicker than travelling by road, but instead we crept mile by foggy mile through a tangle of mudbanks, creeks and treacherous currents. We stopped every night, finding some place to anchor or tie up, and spent a

whole week in some godforsaken East Anglian marsh because a bowstrake sprang loose and the water could not be bailed fast enough, and so we were forced to haul the ship onto a muddy beach and make repairs. By the time the hull was caulked the weather had changed and the sun sparkled on a fogless sea and we rowed northwards, still stopping every night. We saw a dozen other ships, all longer and narrower than Thorkild's craft. They were Danish warships and all were travelling northwards. I assumed they were fugitives from Guthrum's defeated army and they were going home to Denmark or perhaps to Frisia or wherever there was easier plunder to be had than in Alfred's Wessex. Thorkild was a tall, lugubrious man who thought he was thirty-five years old. He plaited his greying hair so that it hung in long ropes to his waist, and his arms were bare of the rings that showed a warrior's prowess. 'I was never a fighter,' he confessed to me. 'I was raised as a trader and I've always been a trader and my son will trade when I'm dead.'

'You live in Eoferwic?' I asked.

'Lundene. But I keep a storehouse in Eoferwic. It's a good place to buy fleeces.'

'Does Ricsig still rule there?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'Ricsig's been dead two years now. There's a man called Egbert on the throne now.'

'There was a King Egbert in Eoferwic when I was a child.'

'This is his son, or his grandson? Maybe his cousin? He's a Saxon, anyway.'

'So who really rules in Northumbria?'

'We do, of course,' he said, meaning the Danes. The Danes often put a tamed Saxon on the thrones of the countries they captured, and Egbert, whoever he was, was doubtless just such a leashed monarch. He gave a pretence of legality to the Danish occupiers, but the real ruler was Earl Ivarr, the Dane who owned most of the land about the city. 'He's Ivarr Ivarson,'

Thorkild told me with a touch of pride in his voice, 'and his father was Ivar Lothbrokson.'

'I knew Ivar Lothbrokson,' I said.

I doubt Thorkild believed me, but it was true. Ivar Lothbrokson had been a fearsome warlord, thin and skeletal, savage and ghastly, but he had been a friend to Earl Ragnar who raised me. His brother had been Ubba, the man I had killed by the sea. 'Ivarr is the real power in Northumbria,' Thorkild told me,

'but not in the valley of the River Wiire. Kjartan rules there.' Thorkild touched his hammer amulet when he spoke Kjartan's name. 'He's called Kjartan the Cruel now,' he said, 'and his son is worse.'

'Sven.' I said the name sourly. I knew Kjartan and Sven. They were my enemies.

'Sven the One-Eyed,' Thorkild said with a grimace and again touched his amulet as if to fend off the evil of the names he had just spoken. 'And north of them,' he went on, 'the ruler is Ælfric of Bebbanburg.'

I knew him too. Ælfric of Bebbanburg was my uncle and thief of my land, but I pretended not to know the name. 'Ælfric?' I asked, 'another Saxon?'

'A Saxon,' Thorkild confirmed, 'but his fortress is too powerful for us,' he added by way of explanation why a Saxon lord was

permitted to stay in Northumbria, 'and he does nothing to offend us.'

'A friend of the Danes?'

'He's no enemy,' he said. 'Those are the three great lords. Ivarr, Kjartan and Ælfric, while beyond the hills in Cumbraland? No one knows what happens there.' He meant the west coast of Northumbria which faced the Irish Sea.

'There was a great Danish lord in Cumbraland,' he went on. 'Hardicnut, he was called, but I hear he was killed in a squabble. And now?' He shrugged. So that was Northumbria, a kingdom of rival lords, none of whom had

cause to love me and two of whom wanted me dead. Yet it was home, and I had a duty there and that is why I was following the sword-path. It was the duty of the bloodfeud. The feud had started five years before when Kjartan and his men had come to Earl Ragnar's hall in the night. They had burned the hall and they had murdered the folk who tried to flee the flames. Ragnar had raised me, I had loved him like a father, and his murder was unavenged. He had a son, also called Ragnar, and he was my friend, but Ragnar the Younger could not take vengeance for he was now a hostage in Wessex. So I would go north and I would find Kjartan and I would kill him. And I would kill his son, Sven the One-Eyed, who had taken Ragnar's daughter prisoner. Did Thyra still live? I did not know. I only knew I had sworn to revenge Ragnar the Elder's death. It sometimes seemed to me, as I hauled on Thorkild's oar, that I was foolish to be going home because Northumbria was full of my enemies, but fate drove me, and there was a lump in my throat when at last we turned into the wide mouth of the Humber.

There was nothing to see other than a low muddy shore half glimpsed through rain, and withies in the shallows marking hidden creeks, and great mats of oarweed and bladderwrack heaving on the grey water, but this was the river that led into Northumbria and I knew, at that moment, that I had made the right decision. This was home. Not Wessex with its richer fields and gentler hills. Wessex was tamed, harnessed by king and church, but up here there were wilder skeins in the colder air.

'Is this where you live?' Hild asked as the banks closed on either side.

'My land is far to the north.' I told her. 'That's Mercia,' I pointed to the river's southern shore, 'and that's Northumbria,' I pointed the other way,

'and Northumbria stretches up into the barbarous lands.'

'Barbarous?'

'Scots.' I said, and spat over the side. 'Before the Danes came the Scots had been our chief enemies, ever raiding south into our land, but they, like us, had been assaulted by the Northmen and that had lessened their threat, though it had not ended it.'