lovereading.co.uk

The Last Kingdom

Bernard Cornwell

Published by HarperCollins

Extract is copyright of the Author

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2004
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Bernard Cornwell 2004

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

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names,
characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work
of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual
persons, living or dead, events or localities
is entirely coincidental.

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

ISBN 0 00 714990 5

Set in Postscript Linotype Meridien
with Monotype Photina display by
Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire
Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or
otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding other than that in which it
is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

One

The Danes were clever that day. They had made new walls inside the city, invited our men into the streets, trapped them between the new walls, surrounded them and killed them. They did not kill all the Northumbrian army, for even the fiercest warriors tire of slaughter and, besides, the Danes made much money from slavery. Most of the slaves taken in England were sold to farmers in the wild northern isles, or to Ireland, or sent back across the sea to the Danish lands, but some, I learned, were taken to the big slave markets in Frankia and a few were shipped south to a place where there was no winter and where men with faces the colour of scorched wood would pay good money for men and even better money for young women.

But they killed enough of us. They killed Ælla and they killed Osbert and they killed my father. Ælla and my father were fortunate, for they died in battle, swords in their hands, but Osbert was captured and he was tortured that night as the Danes feasted in a city stinking of blood. Some of the victors guarded the walls, others celebrated in the captured houses, but most gathered in the hall of Northumbria's defeated king where Ragnar took me. I did not know why he took me there, I half expected to be killed or, at best, sold into slavery, but Ragnar made me sit with his men and put a roasted goose leg, half a loaf of bread and a pot of ale in front of me, then cuffed me cheerfully round the head.

The other Danes ignored me at first. They were too busy getting drunk and cheering the fights which broke out once they were drunk, but the loudest cheers came when the captured Osbert was

forced to fight against a young warrior who had extraordinary skill with a sword. He danced round the king, then chopped off his left hand before slitting his belly with a sweeping cut and, because Osbert was a heavy man, his guts spilled out like eels slithering from a ruptured sack. Some of the Danes were weak with laughter after that. The king took a long time to die, and while he cried for relief, the Danes crucified a captured priest who had fought against them in the battle. They were intrigued and repelled by our religion, and they were angry when the priest's hands pulled free of the nails and some claimed it was impossible to kill a man that way, and they argued that point drunkenly, then tried to nail the priest to the hall's timber walls a second time until, bored with it, one of their warriors slammed a spear into the priest's chest, crushing his ribs and mangling his heart.

A handful of them turned on me once the priest was dead and, because I had worn a helmet with a gilt-bronze circlet, they thought I must be a king's son and they put me in a robe and a man climbed onto the table to piss on me, and just then a huge voice bellowed at them to stop and Ragnar bullied his way through the crowd. He snatched the robe from me and harangued the men, telling them I knew not what, but whatever he said made them stop and Ragnar then put an arm round my shoulders and took me to a dais at the side of the hall and gestured I should climb up to it. An old man was eating alone there. He was blind, both eyes milky white and had a deep-lined face framed by grey hair as long as Ragnar's. He heard me clamber up and asked a question, and Ragnar answered and then walked away.

'You must be hungry, boy,' the old man said in English.

I did not answer. I was terrified of his blind eyes.

'Have you vanished?' he asked, 'did the dwarves pluck you down to the under-earth?'

'I'm hungry,' I admitted.

'So you are there after all,' he said, 'and there's pork here, and bread, and cheese, and ale. Tell me your name.'

I almost said Osbert, then remembered I was Uhtred. 'Uhtred,' I said.

'An ugly name,' the old man said, 'but my son said I was to

look after you, so I will, but you must look after me too. Could you cut me some pork?'

'Your son?' I asked.

'Earl Ragnar,' he said, 'sometimes called Ragnar the Fearless. Who were they killing in here?'

'The king,' I said, 'and a priest.'

'Which king?'

'Osbert.'

'Did he die well?'

'No.'

'Then he shouldn't have been king.'

'Are you a king?' I asked.

He laughed. 'I am Ravn,' he said, 'and once I was an earl and a warrior, but now I am blind so I am no use to anyone. They should beat me over the head with a cudgel and send me on my way to the netherworld.' I said nothing to that because I did not know what to say. 'But I try to be useful,' Ravn went on, his hands groping for bread. 'I speak your language and the language of the Britons and the tongue of the Wends and the speech of the Frisians and that of the Franks. Language is now my trade, boy, because I have become a skald.'

'A skald?'

'A scop, you would call me. A poet, a weaver of dreams, a man who makes glory from nothing and dazzles you with its making. And my job now is to tell this day's tale in such a way that men will never forget our great deeds.'

'But if you cannot see,' I asked, 'how can you tell what happened?'

Ravn laughed at that. 'Have you heard of Odin? Then you should know that Odin sacrificed one of his own eyes so that he could obtain the gift of poetry. So perhaps I am twice as good a skald as Odin, eh?'

'I am descended from Woden,' I said.

'Are you?' He seemed impressed, or perhaps he just wanted to be kind. 'So who are you, Uhtred, descendant of the great Odin?'

'I am the Ealdorman of Bebbanburg,' I said, and that reminded me I was fatherless and my defiance crumpled and, to my shame,

I began to cry. Ravn ignored me as he listened to the drunken shouts and the songs and the shrieks of the girls who had been captured in our camp and who now provided the warriors with the reward for their victory, and watching their antics took my mind off my sorrow because, in truth, I had never seen such things before though, God be thanked, I took plenty of such rewards myself in times to come.

'Bebbanburg?' Ravn said. 'I was there before you were born. It was twenty years ago.'

'At Bebbanburg?'

'Not in the fortress,' he admitted, 'it was far too strong. But I was to the north of it, on the island where the monks pray. I killed six men there. Not monks, men. Warriors.' He smiled to himself, remembering. 'Now tell me, Ealdorman Uhtred of Bebbanburg,' he went on, 'what is happening.'

So I became his eyes and I told him of the men dancing, and the men stripping the women of their clothes, and what they then did to the women, but Ravn had no interest in that. 'What,' he wanted to know, 'are Ivar and Ubba doing?'

'Ivar and Ubba?'

'They will be on the high platform. Ubba is the shorter and looks like a barrel with a beard, and Ivar is so skinny that he is called Ivar the Boneless. He is so thin that you could press his feet together and shoot him from a bowstring.'

I learned later that Ivar and Ubba were the two oldest of three brothers and the joint leaders of this Danish army. Ubba was asleep, his black-haired head cushioned by his arms that, in turn, were resting on the remnants of his meal, but Ivar the Boneless was awake. He had sunken eyes, a face like a skull, yellow hair drawn back to the nape of his neck, and an expression of sullen malevolence. His arms were thick with the golden rings Danes like to wear to prove their prowess in battle, while a gold chain was coiled around his neck. Two men were talking to him. One, standing just behind Ivar, seemed to whisper into his ear, while the other, a worried-looking man, sat between the two brothers. I described all this to Ravn, who wanted to know what the worried man sitting between Ivar and Ubba looked like.

'No arm rings,' I said, 'a gold circlet around his neck. Brown hair, long beard, quite old.'

'Everyone looks old to the young,' Ravn said. 'That must be King Egbert.'

'King Egbert?' I had never heard of such a person.

'He was Ealdorman Egbert,' Ravn explained, 'but he made his peace with us in the winter and we have rewarded him by making him king here in Northumbria. He is king, but we are the lords of the land.' He chuckled, and young as I was I understood the treachery involved. Ealdorman Egbert held estates to the south of our kingdom and was what my father had been in the north, a great power, and the Danes had suborned him, kept him from the fight, and now he would be called king, yet it was plain that he would be a king on a short leash. 'If you are to live,' Ravn said to me, 'then it would be wise to pay your respects to Egbert.'

'Live?' I blurted out the word. I had somehow thought that having survived the battle then of course I would live. I was a child, someone else's responsibility, but Ravn's words hammered home my reality. I should never have confessed my rank, I thought. Better to be a living slave than a dead Ealdorman.

'I think you'll live,' Ravn said. 'Ragnar likes you and Ragnar gets what he wants. He says you attacked him?'

'I did, yes.'

'He would have enjoyed that. A boy who attacks Earl Ragnar? That must be some boy, eh? Too good a boy to waste on death he says, but then my son always had a regrettably sentimental side. I would have chopped your head off, but here you are, alive, and I think it would be wise if you were to bow to Egbert.'

Now, I think, looking back so far into my past, I have probably changed that night's events. There was a feast, Ivar and Ubba were there, Egbert was trying to look like a king, Ravn was kind to me, but I am sure I was more confused and far more frightened than I have made it sound. Yet in other ways my memories of the feast are very precise. Watch and learn, my father had told me, and Ravn made me watch, and I did learn. I learned about treachery, especially when Ragnar, summoned by Ravn, took me by the collar and led me to the high dais where, after a surly gesture of

permission from Ivar, I was allowed to approach the table. 'Lord King,' I squeaked, then knelt so that a surprised Egbert had to lean forward to see me. 'I am Uhtred of Bebbanburg,' I had been coached by Ravn in what I should say, 'and I seek your lordly protection.'

That produced silence, except for the mutter of the interpreter talking to Ivar. Then Ubba awoke, looked startled for a few heartbeats as if he were not sure where he was, then he stared at me and I felt my flesh shrivel for I had never seen a face so malevolent. He had dark eyes and they were full of hate and I wanted the earth to swallow me. He said nothing, just gazed at me and touched a hammer-shaped amulet hanging at his neck. Ubba had his brother's thin face, but instead of fair hair drawn back against the skull, he had bushy black hair and a thick beard that was dotted with scraps of food. Then he yawned and it was like staring into a beast's maw. The interpreter spoke to Ivar who said something and the interpreter, in turn, talked to Egbert who tried to look stern. 'Your father,' he said, 'chose to fight us.'

'And is dead,' I answered, tears in my eyes, and I wanted to say something more, but nothing would come, and instead I just snivelled like an infant and I could feel Ubba's scorn like the heat of a fire. I cuffed angrily at my nose.

'We shall decide your fate,' Egbert said loftily, and I was dismissed.

I went back to Ravn who insisted I tell him what had happened, and he smiled when I described Ubba's malevolent silence. 'He's a frightening man,' Ravn agreed, 'to my certain knowledge he's killed sixteen men in single combat, and dozens more in battle, but only when the auguries are good, otherwise he won't fight.'

'The auguries?'

'Ubba is a very superstitious young man,' Ravn said, 'but also a dangerous one. If I give you one piece of advice, young Uhtred, it is never, never, to fight Ubba. Even Ragnar would fear to do that and my son fears little.'

'And Ivar?' I asked, 'would your son fight Ivar?'

'The boneless one?' Ravn considered the question. 'He too is frightening, for he has no pity, but he does possess sense. Besides, Ragnar serves Ivar if he serves anyone, and they're friends, so they

would not fight. But Ubba? Only the gods tell him what to do, and you should beware of men who take their orders from the gods. Cut me some of the crackling, boy. I particularly like pork crackling.'

I cannot remember now how long I was in Eoferwic. I was put to work, that I do remember. My fine clothes were stripped from me and given to some Danish boy, and in their place I was given a flea-ridden shift of tattered wool that I belted with a piece of rope. I cooked Ravn's meals for a few days, then the other Danish ships arrived and proved to hold mostly women and children, the families of the victorious army, and it was then I understood that these Danes had come to stay in Northumbria. Ravn's wife arrived, a big woman called Gudrun with a laugh that could have felled an ox, and she chivvied me away from the cooking fire that she now tended with Ragnar's wife, who was called Sigrid and whose hair reached to her waist and was the colour of sunlight reflecting off gold. She and Ragnar had two sons and a daughter. Sigrid had given birth to eight children, but only those three had lived. Rorik, his second son, was a year younger than me and on the very first day I met him he picked a fight, coming at me in a whirl of fists and feet, but I put him on his back and was throttling the breath out of him when Ragnar picked us both up, crashed our heads together and told us to be friends. Ragnar's eldest son, also called Ragnar, was eighteen, already a man, and I did not meet him then for he was in Ireland where he was learning to fight and to kill so he could become an Earl like his father. In time I did meet Ragnar the Younger who was very similar to his father; always cheerful, boisterously happy, enthusiastic about whatever needed to be done, and friendly to anyone who paid him respect.

Like all the other children I had work to keep me busy. There was always firewood and water to be fetched, and I spent two days helping to burn the green muck from the hull of a beached ship, and I enjoyed that even though I got into a dozen fights with Danish boys, all of them bigger than me, and I lived with black eyes, bruised knuckles, sprained wrists, and loosened teeth. My worst enemy was a boy called Sven who was two years older than me and very big for his age with a round, vacant face, a slack jaw,

and a vicious temper. He was the son of one of Ragnar's ship-masters, a man called Kjartan. Ragnar owned three ships, he commanded one, Kjartan the second and a tall, weather-hardened man named Egil steered the third. Kjartan and Egil were also warriors, of course, and as shipmasters they led their crews into battle and so were reckoned important men, their arms heavy with rings, and Kjartan's son Sven took an instant dislike to me. He called me English scum, a goat-turd and dog-breath, and because he was older and bigger he could beat me fairly easily, but I was also making friends and, luckily for me, Sven disliked Rorik almost as much as he hated me, and the two of us could just thrash him together and after a while Sven avoided me unless he was sure I was alone. So apart from Sven it was a good summer. I never had quite enough to eat, I was never clean, Ragnar made us laugh and I was rarely unhappy.

Ragnar was often absent, for much of the Danish army spent that summer riding the length and breadth of Northumbria to quell the last shreds of resistance, but I heard little news, and no news of Bebbanburg. It seemed the Danes were winning, for every few days another English thegn would come to Eoferwic and kneel to Egbert, who now lived in the palace of Northumbria's king, though it was a palace that had been stripped of anything useful by the victors. The gap in the city wall had been repaired in a day, the same day that a score of us dug a great hole in the field where our army had fled in panic. We filled the hole with the rotting corpses of the Northumbrian dead. I knew some of them. I suppose my father was among them, but I did not see him. Nor, looking back, did I miss him. He had always been a morose man, expecting the worst, and not fond of children.

The worst job I was given was painting shields. We first had to boil down some cattle hides to make size, a thick glue, that we stirred into a powder we had made from crushing copper ore with big stone pestles, and the result was a viscous blue paste that had to be smeared on the newly-made shields. For days afterwards I had blue hands and arms, but our shields were hung on a ship and looked splendid. Every Danish ship had a strake running down each side from which the shields could hang, overlapping

as though they were being held in the shield wall, and these shields were for Ubba's craft, the same ship I had burned and scraped clean. Ubba, it seemed, planned to leave, and wanted his ship to be beautiful. She had a beast on her prow, a prow that curved like a swan's breast from the waterline, then jutted forward. The beast, half dragon and half worm, was the topmost part, and the whole beast-head could be lifted off its stem and stowed in the bilge. 'We lift the beast-heads off,' Ragnar explained to me, 'so they don't frighten the spirits.' I had learned some of the Danish language by then.

'The spirits?'

Ragnar sighed at my ignorance. 'Every land has its spirits,' he said, 'its own little gods, and when we approach our own lands we take off the beast-heads so that the spirits aren't scared away. How many fights have you had today?'

'None.'

'They're getting frightened of you. What's that thing around your neck?'

I showed him. It was a crude iron hammer, a miniature hammer the size of a man's thumb, and the sight of it made him laugh and cuff me around the head. 'We'll make a Dane of you yet,' he said, plainly pleased. The hammer was the sign of Thor, who was a Danish god almost as important as Odin, as they called Woden, and sometimes I wondered if Thor was the more important god, but no one seemed to know or even care very much. There were no priests among the Danes, which I liked, because priests were forever telling us not to do things or trying to teach us to read or demanding that we pray, and life without them was much more pleasant. The Danes, indeed, seemed very casual about their gods, yet almost every one wore Thor's hammer. I had torn mine from the neck of a boy who had fought me, and I have it to this day.

The stern of Ubba's ship, which curved and reared as high as the prow, was decorated with a carved eagle's head, while at her masthead was a wind-vane in the shape of a dragon. The shields were hung on her flanks, though I later learned they were only displayed there for decoration and that once the ship was under way the shields were stored inboard. Just underneath the shields

were the oar-holes, each rimmed with leather, fifteen holes on each side. The holes could be stopped with wooden plugs when the ship was under sail so that the craft could lean with the wind and not be swamped. I helped scrub the whole boat clean, but before we scrubbed her she was sunk in the river, just to drown the rats and discourage the fleas, and then we boys scraped every inch of wood and hammered wax-soaked wool into every seam, and at last the ship was ready and that was the day my uncle Ælfric arrived in Eoferwic.

The first I knew of Ælfric's coming was when Ragnar brought me my own helmet, the one with the gilt-bronze circlet, and a tunic edged with red embroidery, and a pair of shoes. It felt strange to walk in shoes again. 'Tidy your hair, boy,' he said, then remembered he had the helmet that he pushed onto my tousled head. 'Don't tidy your hair,' he said, grinning.

'Where are we going?' I asked him.

'To hear a lot of words, boy. To waste our time. You look like a Frankish whore in that robe.'

'That bad?'

'That's good, lad! They have great whores in Frankia; plump, pretty and cheap. Come on.' He led me from the river. The city was busy, the shops full, the streets crowded with packmules. A herd of small, dark-fleeced sheep was being driven to slaughter, and they were the only obstruction that did not part to make way for Ragnar whose reputation ensured respect, but that reputation was not grim for I saw how the Danes grinned when he greeted them. He might be called Jarl Ragnar, Earl Ragnar, but he was hugely popular, a jester and fighter who blew through fear as though it were a cobweb. He took me to the palace, which was only a large house, part-built by the Romans in stone and part-made more recently in wood and thatch. It was in the Roman part, in a vast room with stone pillars and limewashed walls, that my uncle waited and with him was Father Beocca and a dozen warriors, all of whom I knew, and all of whom had stayed to defend Bebbanburg while my father rode to war.

Beocca's crossed eyes widened when he saw me. I must have looked very different for I was long-haired, sun-darkened, skinny,

taller and wilder. Then there was the hammer amulet about my neck, which he saw for he pointed to his own crucifix, then at my hammer and looked very disapproving. Ælfric and his men scowled at me as though I had let them down, but no one spoke, partly because Ivar's own guards, all of them tall men, and all of them in mail and helmets and armed with long-shafted war axes, stood across the head of the room where a simple chair, which now counted as Northumbria's throne, stood on a wooden platform.

King Egbert arrived, and with him was Ivar the Boneless and a dozen men, including Ravn who, I had learned, was a counsellor to Ivar and his brother. With Ravn was a tall man, white-haired and with a long white beard. He was wearing long robes embroidered with crosses and winged angels and I later discovered this was Wulfhere, the Archbishop of Eoferwic who, like Egbert, had given his allegiance to the Danes. The king sat, looking uncomfortable, and then the discussion began.

They were not there just to discuss me. They talked about which Northumbrian lords were to be trusted, which were to be attacked, what lands were to be granted to Ivar and Ubba, what tribute the Northumbrians must pay, how many horses were to be brought to Eoferwic, how much food was to be given to the army, which ealdormen were to yield hostages, and I sat, bored, until my name was mentioned. I perked up then and heard my uncle propose that I should be ransomed. That was the gist of it, but nothing is ever simple when a score of men decide to argue. For a long time they wrangled over my price, the Danes demanding an impossible payment of three hundred pieces of silver, and Ælfric not wanting to budge from a grudging offer of fifty. I said nothing, but just sat on the broken Roman tiles at the edge of the hall and listened. Three hundred became two seventy-five, fifty became sixty, and so it went on, the numbers edging closer, but still wide apart, and then Ravn, who had been silent, spoke for the first time. 'The Earl Uhtred,' he said in Danish, and that was the first time I heard myself described as an Earl, which was a Danish rank, 'has given his allegiance to King Egbert. In that he has an advantage over you, Ælfric.'

The words were translated and I saw Ælfric's anger when he

was given no title. But nor did he have a title, except the one he had granted to himself, and I learned about that when he spoke softly to Beocca who then spoke up for him. 'The Ealdorman Ælfric,' the young priest said, 'does not believe that a child's oath is of any significance.'

Had I made an oath? I could not remember doing so, though I had asked for Egbert's protection, and I was young enough to confuse the two things. Still, it did not much matter, what mattered was that my uncle had usurped Bebbanburg. He was calling himself Ealdorman. I stared at him, shocked, and he looked back at me with pure loathing in his face.

'It is our belief,' Ravn said, his blind eyes looking at the roof of the hall that was missing some tiles so that a light rain was spitting through the rafters, 'that we would be better served by having our own sworn Earl in Bebbanburg, loyal to us, than endure a man whose loyalty we do not know.'

Ælfric could feel the wind changing and he did the obvious thing. He walked to the dais, knelt to Egbert and kissed the king's outstretched hand and, as a reward, received a blessing from the Archbishop. 'I will offer a hundred pieces of silver,' Ælfric said, his allegiance given.

'Two hundred,' Ravn said, 'and a force of thirty Danes to garrison Bebbanburg.'

'With my allegiance given,' Ælfric said angrily, 'you will have no need of Danes in Bebbanburg.'

So Bebbanburg had not fallen and I doubted it could fall. There was no stronger fortress in all Northumbria, and perhaps in all England.

Egbert had not spoken at all, nor did he, but nor had Ivar and it was plain that the tall, thin, ghost-faced Dane was bored with the whole proceedings for he jerked his head at Ragnar who left my side and went to talk privately with his lord. The rest of us waited awkwardly. Ivar and Ragnar were friends, an unlikely friendship for they were very different men, Ivar all savage silence and grim threat, and Ragnar open and loud, yet Ragnar's eldest son served Ivar and was even now, at eighteen years old, entrusted with the leadership of some of the Danes left in Ireland who were

holding onto Ivar's lands in that island. It was not unusual for eldest sons to serve another lord, Ragnar had two Earls' sons in his ships' crews and both might one day expect to inherit wealth and position if they learned how to fight. So Ragnar and Ivar now talked and Ælfric shuffled his feet and kept looking at me, Beocca prayed and King Egbert, having nothing else to do, just tried to look regal.

Ivar finally spoke. 'The boy is not for sale,' he announced.

'Ransom,' Ravn corrected him gently.

Ælfric looked furious. 'I came here . . .' he began, but Ivar interrupted him.

'The boy is not for ransom,' he snarled, then turned and walked from the big chamber. Egbert looked awkward, half rose from his throne, sat again, and Ragnar came and stood beside me.

'You're mine,' he said softly, 'I just bought you.'

'Bought me?'

'My sword's weight in silver,' he said.

'Why?'

'Perhaps I want to sacrifice you to Odin?' he suggested, then tousled my hair. 'We like you, boy,' he said, 'we like you enough to keep you. And besides, your uncle didn't offer enough silver. For five hundred pieces? I'd have sold you for that.' He laughed.

Beocca hurried across the room. 'Are you well?' he asked me.

'I'm well,' I said.

'That thing you're wearing,' he said, meaning Thor's hammer, and he reached as though to pull it from its thong.

'Touch the boy, priest,' Ragnar said harshly, 'and I'll straighten your crooked eyes before opening you from your gutless belly to your skinny throat.'

Beocca, of course, could not understand what the Dane had said, but he could not mistake the tone and his hand stopped an inch from the hammer. He looked nervous. He lowered his voice so only I could hear him. 'Your uncle will kill you,' he whispered.

'Kill me?'

'He wants to be Ealdorman. That's why he wished to ransom you. So he could kill you.'

'But,' I began to protest.

'Shh,' Beocca said. He was curious about my blue hands, but did not ask what had caused them. 'I know you are the Ealdorman,' he said instead, 'and we will meet again.' He smiled at me, glanced warily at Ragnar, and backed away.

Ælfric left. I learned later that he had been given safe passage to and from Eoferwic, which promise had been kept, but after that meeting he retreated to Bebbanburg and stayed there. Ostensibly he was loyal to Egbert, which meant he accepted the overlordship of the Danes, but they had not yet learned to trust him. That, Ragnar explained to me, was why he had kept me alive. 'I like Bebbanburg,' he told me, 'I want it.'

'It's mine,' I said stubbornly.

'And you're mine,' he said, 'which means Bebbanburg is mine. You're mine, Uhtred, because I just bought you, so I can do whatever I like with you. I can cook you, if I want, except there's not enough meat on you to feed a weasel. Now, take off that whore's tunic, give me the shoes and helmet, and go back to work.'

So I was a slave again, and happy. Sometimes, when I tell folk my story, they ask why I did not run away from the pagans, why I did not escape southwards into the lands where the Danes did not yet rule, but it never occurred to me to try. I was happy, I was alive, I was with Ragnar and it was enough.

More Danes arrived before winter. Thirty-six ships came, each with its contingent of warriors, and the ships were pulled onto the riverbank for the winter while the crews, laden with shields and weapons, marched to wherever they would spend the next few months. The Danes were casting a net over eastern Northumbria, a light one, but still a net of scattered garrisons. Yet they could not have stayed if we had not let them, but those Ealdormen and thegns who had not died at Eoferwic had bent the knee and so we were a Danish kingdom now, despite the leashed Egbert on his pathetic throne. It was only in the west, in the wilder parts of Northumbria, that no Danes ruled, but nor were there any strong forces in those wild parts to challenge them.

Ragnar took land west of Eoferwic, up in the hills. His wife and family joined him there, and Ravn and Gudrun came, plus all Ragnar's ships' crews who took over homesteads in the nearby valleys. Our first job was to make Ragnar's house larger. It had belonged to an English thegn who had died at Eoferwic, but it was no grand hall, merely a low wooden building thatched with rye straw and bracken on which grass grew so thickly that, from a distance, the house looked like a long hummock. We built a new part, not for us, but for the few cattle, sheep and goats who would survive the winter and give birth in the new year. The rest were slaughtered. Ragnar and the men did most of the killing, but as the last few beasts came to the pen, he handed an axe to Rorik, his younger son. 'One clean, quick stroke,' he ordered, and Rorik tried, but he was not strong enough and his aim was not true and the animal bellowed and bled and it took six men to restrain it while Ragnar did the job properly. The skinners moved onto the carcass and Ragnar held the axe to me. 'See if you can do better.'

A cow was pushed towards me, a man lifted her tail, she obediently lowered her head and I swung the axe, remembering exactly where Ragnar had hit each time, and the heavy blade swung true, straight into the spine just behind the skull and she went down with a crash. 'We'll make a Danish warrior of you yet,' Ragnar said, pleased.

The work lessened after the cattle slaughter. The English who still lived in the valley brought Ragnar their tribute of carcasses and grain, just as they would have delivered the supplies to their English lord. It was impossible to read from their faces what they thought of Ragnar and his Danes, but they gave no trouble, and Ragnar took care not to disturb their lives. The local priest was allowed to live and give services in his church that was a wooden shed decorated with a cross, and Ragnar sat in judgment on disputes, but always made certain he was advised by an Englishman who was knowledgeable in the local customs. 'You can't live somewhere,' he told me, 'if the people don't want you to be there. They can kill our cattle or poison our streams, and we would never know who did it. You either slaughter them all or learn to live with them.'