



Charles Watts
Whistler

IN DARK AGES IV

WULFRIC THE
WEAPON THANE

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BRUNNAKR

HISTORICAL NOVEL

CHARLES WATTS
WHISTLER



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PREFACE

A word may be needed with regard to the sources from which this story of King Eadmund's armour bearer and weapon thane have been drawn. For the actual presence of such a close attendant on the king at his martyrdom on Nov. 20, 870 A.D. we have the authority of St. Dunstan, who had the story from the lips of the witness himself.

But as to the actual progress of events before the death of the king, the records are vague and imperfect. We are told that, after the defeat at Thetford, the king had intended to seek safety in the church, probably at Framlingham, where the royal household was, but was forced to hide, and from his hiding place was dragged before Ingvar the Danish leader, and so slain.

The two local legends of the "king's oak" in Hoxne woods, and of the "gold bridge", may fill in what is required to complete the story.

The former, identifying a certain aged oak as that to which the king was bound, has been in a measure corroborated by the discovery in 1848 of what may well have been a rough arrow point in its fallen trunk; while the fact that, until the erection of the new bridge at Hoxne in 1823, no newly-married couple would cross the "gold bridge" on the way to church, for the reasons given in the story, seems to show that the king's hiding place may indeed have been beneath it as the legend states. If so, the flight from Thetford must have been most precipitate, and closely followed.

There are two versions of the story of Lodbrok the Dane and Beorn the falconer. That which is given here is from Roger of Wendover. But in both versions the treachery of

one Beorn is alleged to have been the cause of the descent of Ingvar and Hubba on East Anglia.

These chiefs and their brother Halfden, and Guthrum, are of course historic. Their campaign in England is hard to trace through the many conflicting chronicles, but the broad outlines given by the almost contemporary *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, supplemented with a few incidents recorded in the *Heimskringla* of Sturleson as to the first raid on Northumbria by Ingvar, are sufficient for the purposes of a story that deals almost entirely with East Anglia.

The legend of the finding of the head of the martyred king is given in the homily for November 20 of the Anglo-Saxon *Sarum Breviary*, and is therefore of early date. It may have arisen from some such incident as is given here.

Details of the death of Bishop Humbert are wanting. We only know that he was martyred at about the same time as the king, or perhaps with him, and that his name is remembered in the ancient calendars on the same day. For describing his end as at his own chapel, still standing at South Elmham, the fate of many a devoted priest of those times might be sufficient warrant.

As to the geography of the East Anglian coast, all has changed since King Eadmund's days, with the steady gaining of alluvial land on sea at the mouth of the once great rivers of Yare and Waveney. Reedham and Borough were in his time the two promontories that guarded the estuary, and where Yarmouth now stands were sands, growing indeed slowly, but hardly yet an island even at "low-water springs". Above Beccles perhaps the course of the Waveney towards Thetford has altered little in any respect beyond the draining of the rich marshland along its banks, and the shrinking of such tributaries as the Hoxne or Elmham streams to half-dry rivulets.

With a few incidental exceptions, the modern spelling of place names has been adopted in these pages. No useful purpose would be served by a reproduction of what are now more or less uncouth if recognizable forms of the well-known titles of town and village and river.

C. W. W.



*CHAPTER I.
HOW LODBROK THE DANE CAME TO
REEDHAM.*

Elfric, my father, and I stood on our little watch tower at Reedham, and looked out over the wide sea mouth of Yare and Waveney, to the old gray walls of the Roman Burgh on the further shore, and the white gulls cried round us, and the water sparkled in the fresh sea breeze from the north and east, and the bright May-time sun shone warmly on us, and our hearts went out to the sea and its freedom, so that my father said:

“Once again is the spirit of Hengist stirring in me, and needs must that you and I take ship, and go on the swan’s path even as our forefathers went; let us take the good ship somewhere—anywhere to be on the sea again. What say you, son Wulfric?”

And at that I was very glad, for I had longed for that word of his. For never, since I could remember, was a time when I knew not all that a boy might learn, for his years, of sea and the seaman’s craft; and the sea drew me, calling me as it were with its many voices, even as it drew my father.

Yet, all unlike Hengist and his men, we sailed but for peaceful gain, and very rich grew Elfric, the thane of Reedham; for ours was the only ship owned by English folk on all our East Anglian shores, and she brought us wealth year by year, as we sailed to Humber and Wash northwards, and Orwell and Thames to the south, as seemed best for what merchandise we had for sale or would buy. But, more than all, my father and I alike sailed for the love of ship and sea, caring little for the gain that came, so long as the salt spray was over us, and we might hear the hum of the wind in the canvas, or the steady roll and click of the long oars in

the ship's rowlocks, and take our chance of long fights with wind and wave on our stormy North Sea coasts.

So we went down to the shipyard, under the lee of Reedham Hill, and found old Kenulf our pilot, and with him went round our stout Frisian ship that my father had bought long ago, and at once bade him get ready for sailing as soon as might be. And that was a welcome order to Kenulf and our crew also; for well do the North Folk of East Anglia love the sea, if our Saxon kin of the other kingdoms have forgotten for a while the ways of their forbears.

Not so welcome was our sailing to my mother, who must sit at home listening to the song of the breezes and the roll of breakers, with her heart stirred to fear for us at every shift of wind and change of tide. And fair Eadgyth, my sister, beautiful with the clear beauty of a fair-haired Saxon lady, shared in her fears also, though I think that she believed that no storm could rage more fiercely than her father and brother and their crew could ride through in safety. Once she had sailed with us in high summer time to London, and so she held that she knew well all the ways of the ship and sea; fearing them a little, maybe.

Yet there was another dread in the heart of my mother, for this is what she said:

“What of the Danes, Elfric, my husband? Surely there is risk—aye, and great risk—of falling into their hands.”

Thereat my father laughed easily, and answered:

“Not to an East Anglian ship now; for they have kept the pact we have made with them. And they watch not our shores for ships, but the long Frisian and Frankish coasts. There need be no fear of them.”

So my mother was reassured, and in a fortnight's time we had gathered a mixed cargo, though no great one; and sailed, with a shift of wind to the southwest, into the Wash,

and so put into the king's haven on its southern shore, where we would leave our goods with a merchant whom we knew.

On the second day after we came the wind shifted to the eastward, and then suddenly to the northeast, and blew a gale, so that we bided in the haven till it was over. For though it was not so heavy that we could not have won through it in open water with little harm, it was of no use risking ship and men on a lee shore for naught.

Our friend, the merchant, kept us with him gladly, and there we heard the last news of the Danish host, with whom we had made peace two years since; for nowadays that news had become of the first interest to every man in all England; though not yet in the right way. For we had not yet learnt that England must be truly one; and so long as he himself was unharmed, little cared an East Anglian what befell Mercian or Northumbrian, even as Wessex or Sussex cared for naught but themselves. Wherefore, all we longed to know was that the Danish host was not about to fall on us, being employed elsewhere.

We had found gain rather than hurt by their coming, for we had, as I say, made peace with them, and, moreover, sold them horses. Then they had honestly left our coasts, and had gone to York, and thereafter to Nottingham. Now Northumbria was theirs, and Mercia was at their feet. And now again we learnt that they bided in peace at York, and we were content.

Three days it blew, and then the gale was spent; though the sea still ran high and swift. So we bade farewell to our friend the merchant and set sail, and if the passage homewards was rough, it was swifter than we had hoped.

So it came to pass that we reached the wide inlet of our haven at the Yare's mouth too soon for the tide to take us in

over the sands which grow and shift every year, and must needs drop anchor in the roads and wait, with home in sight, hill and church and houses clear and sharp against the afternoon sky after rain; while past us the long surges the storm had raised raced in over half-hidden sands, and broke in snow-white foam along the foot of the sand dunes of the shore, sending the spindrift flying up and inland over their low crests.

Mostly the boats would have been out to meet us, and maybe to tow us in, sparing our crew a little; but today no boat might come, for the seas were too heavy over the bar, so that it would have been death to any man foolish enough to try to reach us; and we looked for none. So as the stout ship wallowed and plunged at her anchors—head to wind and sea, and everything, from groaning timbers to song of wind-curved rigging and creak of swinging yard, seeming to find a voice in answer to the plunge and wash of the waves, and swirl and patter of flying spray over the high bows—we found what shelter we might under bulwarks and break of fore deck, and waited.

My father and I sat on the steersman's bench aft, not heeding the showers of spray that reached us now and then even there, and we watched the tide rising over the sand banks, and longed for home and warm fireside, instead of this cold, gray sky and the restless waves; though I, at least, was half sorry that the short voyage was over, dreaming of the next and whither we might turn our ship's bows again before the summer ended.

My father looked now and then shoreward, and now seaward, judging wind and tide, and sitting patiently with the wondrous patience of the seaman, learnt in years of tide and calm; for he would tell me that sea learning never ends, so that though the sailor seemed to be idle, he must needs be studying some new turn of his craft if only his eyes were

noting how things went around him. Yet I thought he was silent beyond his wont.

Presently he rose up and paced the deck for a little, and then came and sat down by me again.

“I am restless, son Wulfric,” he said, laughing softly; “and I know not why.”

“For the sake of supper,” I answered, “for I am that also, and tide seems mighty slow therefore.”

“Nay, supper comes to the patient; but it seems to me that I have to watch for somewhat.”

“Surely for naught but the tide,” I answered, not thinking much of the matter, but yet wondering a little.

“Not for tide or wind, but for somewhat new, rather—somewhat of which I have a fear.

“But this is foolishness,” he said, laughing again at himself, for few men thought less of signs and forewarnings than he.

Then he looked out again to windward, under his hand, and all of a sudden turned sharply to me, pointing and saying:

“But, as I live, hither comes something from the open sea!”

I rose up and looked to where he showed me, and as the ship rose to a great wave, far off I saw a dark speck among white-crested rollers, that rose and fell, and came ever nearer, more swiftly than wreckage should.

Now some of the men who clustered under the shelter of the fore deck, with their eyes ever on us, rose up from their places and began to look out seaward over the bows through the spray to find out what we watched, and ere long one man called to his mates:

“Ho, comrades, here comes flotsam from the open sea!”

Slowly the men rose up one by one and looked, clustering round the stem head, and a little talk went round as to what this might be.

“It is a bit of wreck,” said one.

“Hardly, for the gale has not been wild enough to wreck a ship in the open; ‘tis maybe lumber washed from a deck,” answered another.

“It is a whale—no more or less.”

“Nay,” said old Kenulf; “it behaves not as a whale, and it comes too swiftly for wreckage.”

“Would it were a dead whale. Then would be profit,” said another man again, and after that the men were silent for a long while, having said all that could be guessed, and watched the speck that drew nearer and nearer, bearing down on us.

At last my father, ever keen of sight, said to me:

“This thing is not at the mercy of wind and wave. Rather has it the rise and fall of a boat well handled. Yet whence should one come in this heavy sea, after three days’ gale?”

Even as he spoke, old Kenulf growled, half to himself, that to his thinking this was a boat coming, and handled, moreover, by men who knew their trade. Thereat some of the men laughed; for it seemed a thing impossible, both by reason of the stretch of wild sea that so small a craft as this—if it were indeed a boat—must have crossed, and because the sea was surely too heavy to let one live.

Yet in the end we saw that it was a boat, and that in her, moreover, was but one man, whose skill in handling her was more than ours, and greater than we could deem possible.

Whereupon some of us were afraid, seeing how wondrously the tiny craft came through the swift seas, and a man called out, giving voice to our fears:

“Surely yon man is a Finn and the wizard who has raised this storm to drown us; now are we lost!”

And I—who had listened eagerly to all the wild stories of the seamen, since first I was old enough to wander curiously over the ships from overseas that put into our haven on their way up the great rivers to Norwich, or Beccles, or other towns—knew that the Finns have powers more than mortal (though how or whence I know not) over wind and sea, often using their power to the hurt of others, and so looked to see the lines of a great squall, drawn as it were astern of the wizard’s boat, whitening as it rushed upon us to sink us in sight of home.

But old Kenulf cried out on the man, saying:

“Rather is it one of the holy saints, and maybe the blessed Peter the fisherman himself,” and he bared his gray head, crossing himself, as he looked eagerly to catch sight of the glory of light round the seafarer; and that rebuked my fears a little.

But squall or crown of light was there none. Only the brown waves, foam crested, which we feared not, and the gray light of the clouded sun that was nigh to setting.

My father heeded naught of this, but watched the boat, only wondering at the marvellous skill of her steersman. And when the boat was so near that it was likely that the eyes of the man were on us, my father raised his arm in the seaman’s silent greeting, and I thought that the boatman returned the salute.

Now the course that the boat was holding when that signal passed would have taken her wide of us by half a cable’s length, but she was yet so far distant that but a little

change would bring her to us. Some sort of sail she seemed to have, but it was very small and like nothing I had ever seen, though it was enough to drive her swiftly and to give her steering way before the wind. Until my father signed to him the man seemed to have no wish to near our ship, going on straight to what would be certain destruction amid the great breakers on our largest sand bar, and that made the men more sure that he was a wizard, and there were white faces enough among them.

“Now,” said my father to me, “doubtless this is what was put in my mind when I felt I must watch. Had I not seen him, yon man would have been surely lost; for I think he cannot see the breakers from his boat,” and again he signed to the boatman.

Then from the little craft rose a great, long-winged hawk that cried and hovered over it for a little, as if loth to leave it; and one man said, shrinking and pale, that it was the wizard’s familiar spirit. But the wind caught the bird’s long wings and drove it from the boat, and swiftly wheeling it must needs make for us, speeding down the wind with widespread, still pinions.

Then cried aloud that same terrified man:

“It is a sending, and we are done for!” thinking that, as Finns will, the wizard they deemed him had made his spells light on us in this visible form. But my father held out his hand, whistling a falconer’s call, and the great bird flew to him, and perched on his wrist, looking bravely at us with its bright eyes as though sure of friendship.

“See!” said my father loudly; “this is a trained bird, and no evil sending; here are the jesses yet on its feet.”

And Kenulf and most of the men laughed, asking the superstitious man if the ship sank deeper, or seas ran higher for its coming.

“Hold you the bird,” said my father to me; “see! the boatman makes for us.”

I took the beautiful hawk gladly, for I had never seen its like before, and loved nothing better when ashore than falconry, and as I did so I saw that its master had changed the course of his boat and was heading straight for us. Now, too, I could make out that what we had thought a sail was but the floor boarding of the boat reared up against a thwart, and that the man was managing her with a long oar out astern.

The great hawk’s sharp talons were like steel on my ungloved wrist, piercing through the woollen sleeve of my jerkin, but I heeded them not, so taken up was I with watching this man who steered so well and boldly in so poorly fitted a craft. And the boat was, for all that, most beautiful, and built on such lines as no Saxon boat had. Well we know those wondrous lines now, for they were those of the longships of the vikings.

Now the men forward began to growl as the boat came on to us, and when my father, seeing that the man would seek safety with us, bade those on the fore deck stand by with a line to heave to him as he came, no man stirred, and they looked foolishly at one another.

Then my father called sharply to Kenulf by name, giving the same order, and the old man answered back:

“Bethink you, Thane; it is ill saving a man from the sea to be foe to you hereafter. Let him take his chance.”

Thereat my father’s brow grew dark, for he hated these evil old sayings that come from heathen days, and he cried aloud:

“That is not the way of a Christian or a good seaman! Let me come forward.”

And in a moment he was on the fore deck, where the men made hasty way for him. There the long lines were coiled, ready for throwing to the shore folk on our wharf, both fore and aft. My father caught up one at his feet and stood ready, for now the boat was close on us, and I could see the white set face of her steersman as he watched for the line he knew was coming, and wherein lay his only slender hope of safety.

My father swung his arm and cast. Swift and true fled the coils from his hand—but fell short by two fathoms or less, and the boat swept past our bows, as the men held their breath, watching and ashamed.

But I also had caught up the coil from the after deck, fearing lest my father should not have been in time, while the hawk fluttered and gripped my arm in such wise that at any other time I should have cried out with the pain of the sharp piercing of its talons. Yet it would not leave me.

The boat flew on, but the man had his eyes on me—not looking vainly for the lost end of the first line among the foam as many another man would—and I saw that he was ready.

I threw; and the hawk screamed and clutched, as it lost its balance, and beat my face with its great wings, and I could not see for its fluttering; but the men shouted, and I heard my father's voice cry "Well done!" Then I made fast the end of the line round the main-sheet cleat, for that told me that the man had caught on.

Then the bird was still, and I looked up. I saw the boat pass astern as the man made fast the line round the fore thwart, with his eyes on the wave that came. Then he sprang to the steering oar, and in a moment the boat rounded to on the back of a great wave and was safe before

the crest of the next roller ran hissing past me, to break harmless round her bows.

Then the man looked up, smiling to me, lifted his hand in greeting, and then straightway laid in the steering oar. Having found a bailing bowl in the stern sheets, he set to work to clear out the water that washed about in the bottom of the boat; then he replaced the floor boards, and all things being shipshape, sat down quickly in the stern, putting his head into his hands, and there bided without moving, as if worn out and fain to rest for a while.

Now it was like to be a hard matter to get the boat alongside in that sea, and we must needs wait till the man took in hand to help, so we watched him as he sat thus, wondering mostly at the boat, for it was a marvel to all of us. Sharp were her bows and stern, running up very high, and her high stem post was carved into the likeness of a swan's neck and head, and the wings seemed to fall away along the curve of the bows to the carved gunwale, that was as if feathered, and at last the stern post rose and bent like a fan of feathers to finish all. Carved, too, were rowlocks and the ends of the thwarts, and all the feathered work was white and gold above the black of the boat's hull. Carved, too, was the baling bowl, and the loom of the oar was carved in curving lines from rowlock leather to hand. And as I thought of the chances of our losing her as we crossed the bar among the following breakers, I was grieved, and would have asked my father to let us try to get her on deck if we could.

But now the man roused, and put his hands to his mouth, hailing us to ask if we would suffer him to come on board, and my father hailed him back to bid him do so. Then it would seem that our men were ashamed, having once disobeyed my father whom they loved, not to finish the work that we had begun, and so, without waiting for the

order, saw to getting the boat up to our quarter, so that it was but a minute or two before the man leapt on our deck, and the boat was once more astern at the length of her line.

“Thanks, comrades,” said the man; “out of Ran’s [1] net have you brought me, and ill fall me if I prove foe to you, as the old saw bodes.”

Now as one looked at this storm-beaten wanderer there was no doubt but that he was surely a prince among men, and I for one marvelled at his look and bearing after what he must have gone through. Drenched and salt crusted were his once rich clothes, tangled and uncared for were his hair and beard, and worn and tired he showed both in face and body, yet his eyes were bright and his speech was strong and free as he swung to the roll of the ship with the step of a sea king. His speech told us that he was a Dane, for though we of the East Angles had never, even before the coming of the great host of which I must tell presently, such great difference of tongue between our own and that of Dane and Frisian but that we could well understand them and speak therein, yet time and distance have given us a new way of handling our words, as one might say, and a new turn to the tones of our voices. Often had I heard the Danish way of speech on board the ships from over sea in our haven, and had caught it up, as I was wont to try to catch somewhat of every tongue that I heard.

So he and we looked at each other for a moment, we wondering at him and he seeking our leader. Nor did he doubt long, taking two steps to my father, holding out his hand, and again thanking him.

My father grasped the offered hand frankly, and, smiling a little, said:

“Rather should you thank Wulfric, my son, here; for it was his line that reached you.”

“No fault that of yours,” answered the Dane; and he turned to me with the same hearty greeting.

“Now, friend Wulfric, I owe you my life, and therefore from this time forward my life is for yours, if need be. Nor shall my men be behind in that matter—that is if I ever see them again,” he added, looking quaintly at me, if gravely.

“Surely you shall do so,” I said, “if it is in our power.”

“I thank you—and it is well. I know coasts where a stranger would be a slave from the moment his foot touched shore. Now tell me whose ship this is that has given me shelter, and what your father’s name is, that I may thank you rightly.”

“Elfric, the Thane of Reedham, is my father,” I said, “Sheriff of the East Anglian shore of the North Folk, under Eadmund, our king. And this is his ship, and this himself to whom you have spoken.”

“Then, Thane and Thane’s son, I, whose life you have saved, am Lodbrok, Jarl [\[2\]](#) of a strip of Jutland coast. And now I have a fear on me that I shall do dishonour to the name of Dane, for I faint for want of food and can stand no more.”

With that he sat down on the bench where I had been, and though he smiled at us, we could see that his words were true enough, and that he was bearing bravely what would have overborne most men. And now the falcon fluttered from my wrist to his.

Then my father bade me hasten, and I brought ale and meat for the jarl, and set them before him, and soon he was taking that which he needed; but every now and then he gave to the bird, stroking her ruffled feathers, and speaking softly to her.

“Aye, my beauty,” he said once, “I did but cast you down wind lest you should be lost with me. And I would have had you take back the news that I was lost to my own home.”

My father stood and watched the tide, and presently I joined him, for I would not hinder the Dane from his meal by watching him. I looked at the beautiful boat astern, tossing lightly on the wave crests, and saw that she would surely be lost over the bar; so I asked my father now, as I had meant before, if we might not try to get her on board.

For answer he turned to Lodbrok.

“Set you much store by your boat, Jarl?” he asked him.

“The boat is yours, Thane, or Wulfric’s, by all right of salvage. But I would not have her lost, for my sons made her for me this last winter, carving her, as you see, with their own hands. Gladly would I see her safe if it might be.”

“Then we will try to get her,” answered my father; “for there are one or two things that my children have made for me, and I would not lose them for the sake of a little trouble. And, moreover, I think your sons have made you the best boat that ever floated!”

“Else had I not been here!” answered the Dane. “They are good shipwrights.”

Then Kenulf and the men set to work, and it was no easy matter to come by the boat; but it was done at last, and glad was I to see her safely lashed on deck. Then the time had come, and we up anchor and plunged homewards through the troubled seas of the wide harbour mouth. It was I who steered, as I ever would of late, while the Dane stood beside me, stroking his hawk and speaking to it now and then. And once or twice he looked long and earnestly at the breakers, knowing now from what he had escaped; and at last he said to me: