

Raiders!

By Lynne Benton

When Jack Watson sleeps in an old tent in the garden, he goes through a time-slip and finds himself back in the time of the Viking raids. His name is Edric and he and his sister Elfreda are the children of a brave Saxon chief.

As soon as I was inside the tent, I lay down and closed my eyes. It is cool, dark and silent. No birds are singing. It is early dawn and I am on my way to the riverbank looking for firewood. I should have collected it yesterday, but I forgot. When I reach the high ground, overlooking the river, I look down.

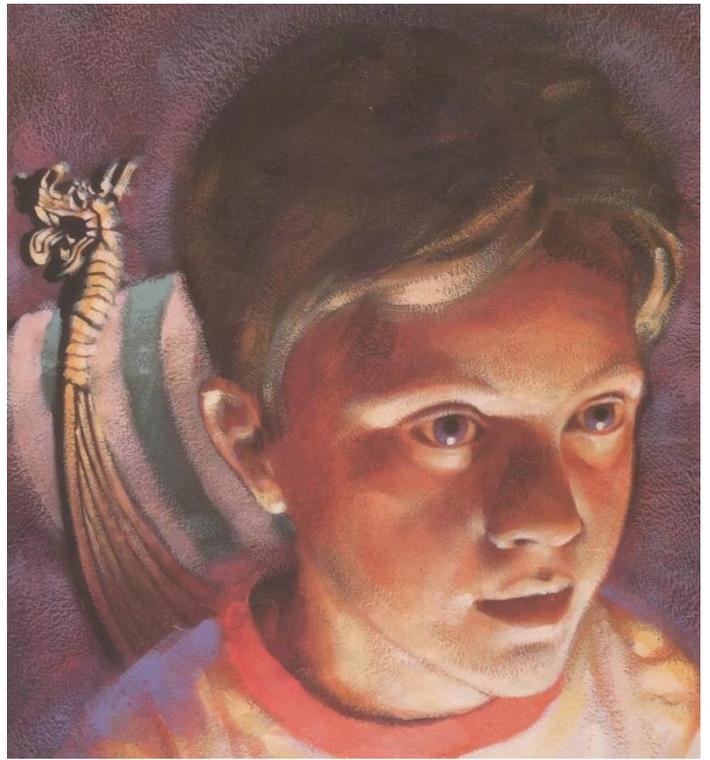
Then I freeze.

A long, narrow boat, with a dragon's head at the front, is gliding silently along. There are round metal things hanging over the sides, and I realise they are shields. The oars dip in and out of the water without a sound. My mouth goes dry. I am almost too terrified to move, but some instinct warns me to drop to my stomach, out of sight. I crawl to the edge and watch. The boat pulls up by the bank. It is full of huge men, with long fair hair underneath iron helmets.

Raiders!

They are quiet, intent and menacing. I have never seen so many men make so little noise. With hardly a sound, they spill out of the boat, lifting off their round shields to take with them. They are all carrying axes and swords. They look like giants.

Then they begin to creep purposefully towards the village. My village, where Father and Mother and Elfreda are asleep. And I remember what the stranger told us about the terrible things the raiders had done in his village. I am horribly afraid. I reach for my wooden swallow. I need it now, to bring me luck.



It is not there. I must have forgotten to pick it up. It must be in the hut. I try not to think of this as an ill omen. Trying desperately to keep out of sight, I wriggle backwards until I cannot see the raiders any more. Then I leap to my feet and start to run, faster than I have ever run in my life. My feet skim over the rough grass.

My heart is pounding, and I am terrified, but I dare not stop. I have to warn them. Only when I reach the fence do I dare to look over my shoulder. The raiders are not in sight yet, but I know they cannot be far behind. I run inside and bar the gate. Then I race to the nearest hut and bang on the door.

"Raiders!" I shout. "Help! Raiders! Help!"

I don't wait for an answer, but run to the next hut.

"Raiders!"

I can hear people stirring behind me as I race through the village. I cannot stop until I have warned Father.

Suddenly, I hear a loud splintering noise behind me as the raiders attack the gate with their axes. Then they surge into the village, with terrible, bloodcurdling cries. As I reach our hut, the door opens and Father comes out brandishing his sword.

"Well done, Edric," he cries. "We're ready for them!"

Then I realise everyone is awake. There is a lot of shouting and the clash of swords and spears. We Anglo-Saxons may not be as big as them, but we are fierce when we're threatened. We won't give in without a fight.

"Look after your mother and sister, Edric," calls Father as he charges into the battle. The noise is deafening now. I turn and see the other women and children huddled at the fence, away from the fighting.

Mother and Elfreda are in the hut. Mother is looking desperately worried, but Elfreda's eyes are sparkling with excitement.

"I want to join in!" she says.

"Oh, Elfreda!" I say, exasperated, as I hurry them out of the hut.

Then Elfreda sees what is happening, and hears all the shouting and the fearful clashing of weapons. She picks up a stout stick and as we reach the others she says bravely, "Don't worry about us, Edric. I'll look after Mother and the other children." And I know she won't give in without a fight, either.

"I must go and help Father!" I cry, and hurry off to find him.

There are men fighting everywhere, but I can't see Father. Then a huge hand is clamped over my mouth. I

struggle and find myself in the grip of an enormous raider. He is incredibly strong and I am paralysed with terror. I cannot even scream.

And suddenly Father is here. His sword is battered and has smears of blood on it. I have never seen him look so fierce.

"Leave my son alone!" he bellows, charging at the man. With a roar, the raider pushes me aside and turns to Father. He has a heavy axe in his hand. He whirls it round his head. The axe cuts the sword in two, as if it was no more than a twig. Father is left holding the stump as the Viking lifts his axe again.

"Father!" I scream. "Look out!"

Father dodges as the axe falls where his head would have been. But the axe has caught his shoulder, and I see blood spurt out from the deep wound. His sword arm dangles, useless. I must help him. What can I do?

Then I remember my lucky swallow, still in the hut. It is my last hope. But as I turn, I see our roof is now alight. I must hurry. I dive in, snatch up my swallow from the bench, when I see the raider raise his axe again. I am so angry I don't stop to think. I stand in the doorway and fling the wooden swallow at him with all my might. To my great satisfaction, it hits him on the forehead. Startled, he staggers back and drops the axe.

Father grabs it.

"Well done, Edric!" he says, glancing over his shoulder at me. Then his eyes widen with horror.

"The roof!" he cries. "Look out!"

But before I can move, everything goes black.