

SIGRID'S STORY

There's an underlying theme to the traditional vampire narrative that relies heavily on seduction and forbidden occult practices. The monster in Stoker's *Dracula* is a mysterious Eastern European who feeds on the blood of a sweet, vulnerable English virgin. The message being that if English women, particularly virgin women, got involved with those Continental types then bad things could happen. It was English xenophobia at its most overt, tinged with chauvinistic paternalism. I would like to say it was all fiction but sadly those women did exist in large numbers and they did fall victim to all kinds of unsavoury types. The theme has been repeated time and again with monotonous regularity and only minor variations. Such monstrous vampires feed off our darkest fears and although they did exist they were a rarity, an aberration rather than the norm. When they met their grisly end it was usually at the hands of another vampire who either wanted to claim their territory or just end their reign of terror.

Nevertheless there was some seduction at work when I first came to the people of the Grey Raven although it was certainly not sexual seduction. I would have known such a play instantly. At thirteen years of age I was well on the way to becoming a tavern whore in Oswine's den of iniquity. It wasn't a life I chose, rather it chose me when my father's hall was burned by Saxon raiders dressed as Danes in 885. My father was killed along with his sons and all his crew. The women were loaded onto a ship and sold at the slave market in London, which back then was known as Lundene. From there I was bought by Oswine and taken to Hamtun on the southern Wessex coast, the town is now known as Southampton and it looks nothing like the place I knew in my youth. Hamtun was just across the river from the old Roman ruins of Clausentum. The Saxons were always suspicious of Roman ruins, believing them to be haunted or the work of giants. It was a seaport and being so far south was popular because it was in the heart of Wessex. London on the other hand was in Mercia and subject to Viking raiders.

I remember the first time I saw her, the Golden Maiden. She was a beautiful ship from the distance, as long as a dragon boat belonging to one of the more prosperous Jarls and as we got nearer it was obvious she was also a trading ship. That didn't mean she wasn't also a dragon boat. The Danes would often pose as traders by taking the heads off their boats to show they came in peace, only to put the heads back on when they wanted to go viking. To go viking meant to go raiding and thus because of the size of the ship a small guard had gathered on the beach. The priest had come down as well, he was a small man with a knobby head and spittle running down his face. He planted a cross on the beach to ward the demons off but I don't think the demons saw the cross because there were so many people on the pier. You see she had come in with valuable supplies. Amber from the Baltic, gold from Francia and Italy, axe heads and sword blades from Aragon and many other things. There was silk from a land far to the east I found out later. To have so much on board and yet survive the prowling dragon ships was suspicious but wise traders always picked fighters for their crews, the rest prayed to their gods.

I was brought down to the pier along with a dozen other women, at least half of them were twice my age and considered old but experienced. Oswine was a Saxon version of a pimp was also an opportunist who saw himself becoming a fat merchant. He had no goods to sell or barter but he had twelve slave girls and seeing as the priest had preached against whoredom for the last few months he decided to sell us to the pagans.

Most of the crew had gone by the time we got to the pier but those who remained were a mixed bunch. Some had the red hair of the Britons and others were Danes. The second thing I noticed with surprise was the fact that there seemed to be quite a few women on board and these weren't the usual slaves or 'companions.' They wore weapons. More importantly they seemed to be on equal terms with the men. Saxon society had very definite distinctions between men's and women's roles. It wasn't as strictly enforced as in later Norman times and women could and did carry arms but in general women were subservient, unlike these women. One woman in particular intrigued me. She sat on a pile of old ropes with a large Dane beside her. She was talking quietly to him as the cargo was unloaded. Like the other women she had a sword at her back and she wore breeches and a

woollen tunic. There was something about this woman that drew me in even as Oswine pushed us all forward. She seemed as if she didn't have a care in the world. Her hair was long and dark, her features were flawless and unmarked by age or scars. Indeed I thought she must have been thirty but that was impossible because by then your age was showing. She must have noticed my attention because she looked briefly at me and then at Oswine as he pushed a girl forward for the attention of the man at her side.

"Slaves, good slaves."

"So I see," the woman spoke Saxon with a strange accent, "why did you bring slaves?"

Oswine's mouth dropped and I saw him take a half step back at being addressed so openly by a mere woman and I noticed her companion had a sly grin on his face.

"I believe the lady asked you a question, earsling. Why did you bring slaves?"

Oswine flushed at that, earsling was Saxon for turd.

"To, to trade."

"For what?" She ran her eyes along the line, "wine, ale, eels?" This last got a guffaw from her companion and a scowl from Oswine.

"For gold, or silver."

He grabbed me by the hair and hauled me forward and I yelped as he forced me to look at her.

"This one is young, nice and tight, perhaps she would fetch a good price."

Her face flinched and she said something to the man in another language and he laughed out loud as he replied.

"You don't normally show the best first, fool," he waved him away, "we don't trade in misery but if you would consent to letting some of the lady's crew rut with them we might sell some axe heads to you at a cheaper price. Your fyrds will need them when the Danes invade again."

The lady's crew, my eyes widened. They were her crew? I thought I had heard wrong until she got up and picked up a waterbag.

"I think that is the best deal you will get," she took a step forward and her eyes narrowed as she stopped in front of him, "slaves cost money to feed, axeheads just lie and do nothing and as my steersman has just told you, I don't trade in human misery."

She looked past him.

"As you can see much of the cargo is gone but if you will let my men have some of the pleasures of home I might be willing to let a few things go at a cheaper price."

I thought Oswine was going to rip my hair out of my head he was holding me so tightly. She was so close she could have touched him. Eventually he came to his senses and realised that he was getting to keep his slaves and perhaps turn a profit.

"A deal then."

"A deal," she raised my hands that had been chained, "but you might need to lose the chains, my men won't rut with a chained girl."

"They will escape."

"Then set a guard," she walked past him, "they're your slaves, not mine, Saison."

She reached into one of the wagons that had been drawn up and took out an axehead and tossed it at his feet.

"Good Frankish workmanship, one hundred for three shillings."

A shilling was about a day's pay for a skilled worker and he picked it up and felt its weight.

"Good quality," he conceded.

"So we are agreed?"

"Agreed," he looked to the Dane who had lost interest in the proceedings, not knowing if he should wait for his approval but the Dane rose and stretched.

"I'll go find the crew, make yourself useful, earsling and break their chains."

"Will I be getting paid for the broken chains?" Oswine took a chance. The man glowered at him and then leered.

"As long as I get to break your skull with my axe."

It had been so long since I had been without chains that I felt like floating. The others were moving

about and Oswine tried to keep us all in order as we waited. However it was taking some time to find the crew again, apparently they had gone straight for the warehouses when the ship docked and so Oswine paid some guards to keep an eye on us while he started counting out one hundred axeheads.

While all this had been going on I had been examining the ship up close. I couldn't go too far because the guards at each end of the ship were there to push me back into line at the point of a spear but from what I could see the ship was beautifully made. From the planed boards that made up her sides to the great prow and the golden maiden. I could just imagine the spirits who protected this magnificent ship peering out through her eyes at new and exotic lands. A shadow passed over me and I looked up to find a woman standing looking down at me. She had thick red hair and a great battle sword at her back and she was standing with one foot up on the side and the other on a rowing bench. We held each other's gaze for a few seconds before someone called her and she turned away and jumped down.

I could see the big Dane approaching with some men and I knew soon I would have to perform my duties, I just hoped that whoever I got wouldn't hurt me too badly. I looked at a rope stretching to the side of the ship and remembered a trick I'd only just managed to perfect a few months before my father was sent to Valhalla. Rope walking. Instead of walking along the gangplank you walked along the rope. It was difficult and many a time I'd fallen into the water but my father had taught me how to place my feet at an angle and take longer steps to spread my weight.

I don't know to this day why I did it. Perhaps Morganna had seduced me or maybe it was just seeing free women who weren't the cow eyed pitiful objects on the pier. But whatever the reason I found myself walking the rope. For a few seconds I thought I'd lost the skill but then I heard my father's voice and took a step forward and then another until I reached the side of the ship. At that point I heard a whoop of encouragement from someone on board that was followed a few moments later by Oswine's cry of anger.

"Get off that ship you little Danish whore before I strip the skin from your belly and let the pigs eat your stomach."

I looked at Oswine. From up here I was taller than him and out of reach. He was a Saxon, I was a Dane and we were always better than them. We bathed for a start, a Saxon bath was little more than splashing cold water on his face. They were enslaved to the Christian god, the one who was stupid enough to get himself nailed to a cross. At least Odin came down from his tree, the Christian god was still nailed there. I had been beaten several times since arriving here, forced to work as a sex slave for a Saxon pig who would have run in terror from my father's sword Bone Breaker and I was going to walk to the gangplank and go down to the pier when I was ready.

And so I started walking along the edge, which only caused Oswine to become angrier. He called me a dirty Dane, a daughter of a Danish pig, weasel shit and told me he was going to thrash me within an inch of my miserable life. But I kept walking along the edge and when I got to the gangplank I stopped as he marched up the board. His leather whip lashed out and caught me on the neck and I yelped. But the next cry came from Oswine as the woman he'd spoken to earlier stepped up behind him and shoved him up onto the boat. He fell forward in a pile of arms and legs and then she was on top of him and picking him up, tossed him over the other side of the boat.

"Have a bath, Saxon."

There was a stunned silence and then a ragged cheer went up from the slaves. The guards didn't know what to do or where to look and then the crew were back. Big blue eyed Danes, dark Frisians and Franks and a couple of Arabs. They were all armed to the teeth and the guards turned towards this new threat and then seeing they were outnumbered, stepped aside as the big Dane moved to the gangplank and looked at her.

"Do we have a problem?"

"No," she glanced over her shoulder, "fish that filthy Saxon toad out of the water before he frightens the fish away. I was just teaching him the value of bathing."

He laughed at that as he mounted the gangplank. Oswine was hauled from the water and deposited on the deck. He was spitting and coughing up water as she flipped him over onto his back.

"You came onto my ship without my permission," she drew her sword.

"That makes you an enemy and I always kill my enemies," she put the blade to his throat, "this is Raven Feeder, would you like to feed the ravens?"

"Please," he put up his hands, "I am a fool, a silly old fool."

"Fleas would not live on the likes of you," her eyes narrowed, "but now I have a bargain for you, I will take all your slaves off your hands right now and in return I will spare your miserable life," she pressed the point into his throat and a dribble of blood inched out.

"What say you, Saison? Do we have a deal?"

"We, we have a deal," he spluttered, "you, you can keep the axeheads."

"I was going to keep them anyway," she raised the sword, "but give this toad one axehead and send him on his way."

She looked at me for a moment and something akin to a smile nudged her lips.

"Welcome aboard, Dane."

"Sigrid," I replied, "my name is Sigrid."

"A pretty name," she stepped away from Oswine, "I am Morganna. You can earn your keep by loading the cargo into the wagons when they arrive," she surveyed the women looking open mouthed at her. "And all of you are as free as the day you were born. Those who want to leave be here at sunrise tomorrow, those who want to stay may your gods go with you."

There were a few moments of stunned amazement and then one of the women crossed herself and fell to her knees.

"God bless you, my lady."

She nodded at her and then looked at me.

"Well, are you going to stand there or get to work? Anyone on my ship works, the rest are thrown over to feed the fish."

It was not the last I was to see of Oswine however. He came the next morning while we were waiting for a cargo of wool to come down and he had brought reinforcements. The Ealdorman and six of his household guards and the priest. The crew sounded the alert and leapt down with swords and shields to form a shield wall, which caused the Ealdorman to come to an abrupt halt as he faced overwhelming odds. The men looked to be hardened fighters but it was presence of women fighters that perhaps troubled him. The priest was raining curses from his nailed god upon the women. The stand-off lasted for a few minutes before Morganna allowed the Ealdorman, Oswine and the priest to come through the wall. She even allowed the Ealdorman to keep his weapons. He stepped aboard and asked if it was true that twelve women had been kidnapped.

"Twelve women were kidnapped," Morganna looked at Oswine, "and they were sold to him."

"I have a deed of sale," Oswine protested, "the holy father wrote it himself," he looked at him, "show it to her."

Ataulf looked pained as the priest unrolled a piece of paper and cleared his throat.

"In the year of our lord, eight hundred and eighty five, Oswine of Hamtun did purchase twelve slaves from Athelwulf a trader of Winceaster," he glanced at Morganna, "ten shillings."

"Expensive slaves," Morganna smiled crookedly, "can I see the paper."

"You cannot read it."

"I cannot?" Morganna looked around in amazement, "is your sword bigger than mine? You are on my ship and I can read," she held out her hand, "or would you like Boudica to cut off your hand?" The redhead I now knew as Boudica drew her sword and smiled warmly.

"She means what she says, weasel breath. Hand it over or lose your hand."

"Do it," Ataulf sighed.

Reluctantly the priest handed it over and Morganna read the letter and a few moments later burst out laughing.

"What were you reading, black robe?" Her eyes narrowed, "the words you read out do not appear on this paper. This is a letter from Alfred's priest, Asser to you asking you to press Ataulf to double the grain levy," she glanced at Ataulf.

"Would you like me to read it?"

Ataulf's eyes narrowed as he moved closer.

"If you could?"

"To my humble servant," she traced along the lines. "I greet you in the name of Christ our saviour who has saved us once again from the Danes. Alas our victory has cost us dearly. The pagans have burned many crops in Wessex and so I must ask you to double the grain levy. Your lord Ataulf will not be willing to do this but his title belongs to his king, Alfred whom God Almighty has blessed with good fortune and health. You must press on him to increase the levy so that we can fill Wessex barns with Wessex grain," she stopped as Ataulf lifted his eyes from the page where she had been tracing her finger under the words.

"You lied, priest."

"No man is without sin."

Ataulf controlled himself with an effort as he moved closer to Oswine. "You paid him to say those words?"

Oswine's eyes rolled back in his head as Ataulf waited for an answer and when none was forthcoming he looked at the priest.

"Go back to your church and pray to God I don't empty your barns."

Oswine's bladder let go at that moment and Ataulf grabbed him and hurled him off the ship to land in a crumpled heap.

"My apologies, my lady. It would seem I have been led by the nose like a fool," he nodded at her, "you will make yourself known at my hall the next time you are in port," he moved down the gangway and grabbing Oswine, hauled him to his feet.

"On your feet, slave."

The last I saw of Oswine was his anguished face as he was led down the pier with his hands bound in front of him and a rope around his neck. I heard they hanged him. Most of the women were taken back to their people, which surprised me at first but most were Danes and returning their women meant her kindness was remembered and more importantly, the Danes remembered the ship that brought them. My family were all dead and I had no desire to return. One woman was a wild Scot and she took her back to her people on the Angus coast, I was amazed to learn that the girl's father knew of Morganna and the Grey Raven because we spent the winter in a feasting hall while the blizzards buffeted the land. That winter she had Andraste teach me my letters. I never thought reading was much use unless you were a priest or a monk, but she said it was important to know how to read and speak other languages. At winter's end she gave me a choice, to take me back to Mercia or keep me with her for a while. I think by then however the choice had already been made for me. I wanted more of this, the adventure, travel, glory, riches but above all I wanted to be free and the way of the Grey Raven was the freedom of the sea.

It was ten years before I submitted to the bite of the Grey Raven but by then I understood the nature of the choice. I had been to Frankia, the Holy Land, Alexandria, Rome, the Barbary Coast, travelled the Silk Road and seen many exotic places. We bought and sold goods, robbed the tombs of the dead in Egypt, India and dozens of other places. One of our sidelines was false reliquaries, a wizened fingertip from an Egyptian mummy became the finger of some long dead Christian saint. The priests would fawn over these trinkets believing them to be the real thing and we would laugh heartily at their naivete as we rowed away with bulging sacks of silver and gold. We were aided in this by a priest we found hiding in the remains of a burned out monastery. He turned out to be invaluable, not just because it was his idea but because he knew all the saints and we soon had a brisk trade in sacred objects. He was richly rewarded for his part but spent most of his money in whorehouses. In the end she gave me a choice. To go back to Mercia and accept the shackles of marriage or submit to her bite and become one of the Grey Ravens. In the end I chose to end my life and be reborn in the high Altai Mountains. I have never regretted the choice I made.