

## HOW ERIC WON THE SWORD WHITEFIRE

Now Asmund the priest bent down, and Eric saw him and spoke:

"Thou badest me to thy Yule-feast, lord, by yonder slippery road and I have come. Dost thou welcome me well?"

"No man better," quoth Asmund. "Thou art a gallant man, though foolhardy; and thou hast done a deed that shall be told of while skalds sing and men live in Iceland."

"Make place, my father," said Gudruda, "for Eric bleeds." And she loosed the kerchief from her neck and bound it about his wounded brow, and, taking the rich cloak from her body, threw it on his shoulders, and no man said her nay.

Then they led him to the hall, where Eric clothed himself and rested, and he sent back the thrall Jon to Coldback, bidding him tell Saevuna, Eric's mother, that he was safe. But he was somewhat weak all that day, and the sound of waters roared in his ears.

Now Ospakar and Groa were ill pleased at the turn things had taken; but all the others rejoiced much, for Eric was well loved of men and they had grieved if the waters had prevailed against his might. But Swanhild

brooded bitterly, for Eric never turned to look on her.

The hour of the feast drew on and, according to custom, it was held in the Temple, and thither went all men. When they were seated in the nave of the Hof, the fat ox that had been made ready for sacrifice was led in and dragged before the altar on which the holy fire burned. Now Asmund the Priest slew it, amid silence, before the figures of the Gods, and, catching its blood in the blood-bowl, sprinkled the altar and all the worshippers with the blood-twigs. Then the ox was cut up, and the figures of the almighty Gods were anointed with its molten fat and wiped with fair linen. Next the flesh was boiled in the cauldrons that were hung over fires lighted all down the nave, and the feast began.

Now men ate, and drank much ale and mead, and all were merry. But Ospakar Blacktooth grew not glad, though he drank much, for he saw that the eyes of Gudruda ever watched Eric's face and that they smiled on each other. He was wroth at this, for he knew that the bait must be good and the line strong that should win this fair fish to his angle, and as he sat, unknowingly his fingers loosed the peace-strings of his sword Whitefire, and he half drew it, so that its brightness flamed in the firelight.

"Thou hast a wondrous blade there, Ospakar!" said Asmund, "though this is no place to draw it. Whence came it? Methinks no such swords are fashioned now."

"Ay, Asmund, a wondrous blade indeed. There is no other such in the world, for the dwarfs forged it of old, and he shall be unconquered who holds it aloft. This was King Odin's sword, and it is named Whitefire. Ralph the Red took it from King Eric's cairn in Norway, and he strove long with the Barrow-Dweller[\*] before he wrenched it from his grasp. But my father won it and slew Ralph, though he had never done this had Whitefire been aloft against him. But Ralph the Red, being in drink when the ships met in battle, fought with an axe, and was slain by my father, and since then Whitefire has been the last light that many a chief's eyes have seen. Look at it, Asmund."

[\*] The ghost in the cairn.

Now he drew the great sword, and men were astonished as it flashed aloft. Its hilt was of gold, and blue stones were set therein. It measured two ells and a half from crossbar to point, and so bright was the broad blade that no one could look on it for long, and all down its length ran runes.

"A wondrous weapon, truly!" said Asmund. "How read the runes?"

"I know not, nor any man--they are ancient."

"Let me look at them," said Groa, "I am skilled in runes." Now she took the sword, and heaved it up, and looked at the runes and said, "A strange writing truly."

"How runs it, housekeeper?" said Asmund.

"Thus, lord, if my skill is not at fault:--

Whitefire is my name--  
Dwarf-folk forged me--  
Odin's sword was I--  
Eric's sword was I--  
Eric's sword shall I be--  
And where I fall there he must follow me."

Now Gudruda looked at Eric Brighteyes wonderingly, and Ospakar saw it and became very angry.

"Look not so, maiden," he said, "for it shall be another Eric than yon flapper-duck who holds Whitefire aloft, though it may very well chance that he shall feel its edge."

Now Gudruda bit her lip, and Eric burned red to the brow and spoke:

"It is ill, lord, to throw taunts like an angry woman. Thou art great and strong, yet I may dare a deed with thee."

"Peace, boy! Thou canst climb a waterfall well, I gainsay it not; but beware ere thou settest up thyself against my strength. Say now, what

game wilt thou play with Ospakar?"

"I will go on holmgang with thee, byrnie-clad or baresark,[\*] and fight thee with axe or sword, or I will wrestle with thee, and Whitefire yonder shall be the winner's prize."

[\*] To a duel, usually fought, in mail or without it, on an island--"holm"--within a circle of hazel-twigs.

"Nay, I will have no bloodshed here at Middalhof," said Asmund sternly.

"Make play with fists, or wrestle if ye will, for that were great sport to see; but weapons shall not be drawn."

Now Ospakar grew mad with anger and drink--and he grinned like a dog, till men saw the red gums beneath his lips.

"Thou wilt wrestle with me, youngling--with me whom no man has ever so much as lifted from my feet? Good! I will lay thee on thy face and whip thee, and Whitefire shall be the stake--I swear it on the holy altar-ring; but what hast thou to set against the precious sword? Thy poor hovel and its lot of land shall be all too little."

"I set my life on it; if I lose Whitefire let Whitefire slay me," said Eric.

"Nay, that I will not have, and I am master here in this Temple," said

Asmund. "Bethink thee of some other stake, Ospakar, or let the game be off."

Now Ospakar gnawed his lip with his black fang and thought. Then he laughed aloud and spoke:

"Bright is Whitefire and thou art named Brighteyes. See now: I set the great sword against thy right eye, and, if I win the match, it shall be mine to tear it out. Wilt thou play this game with me? If thy heart fails thee, let it go; but I will set no other stake against my good sword."

"Eyes and limbs are a poor man's wealth," said Eric: "so be it. I stake my right eye against the sword Whitefire, and we will try the match to-morrow."

"And to-morrow night thou shalt be called Eric One-eye," said Ospakar--at which some few of his thralls laughed.

But most of the men did not laugh, for they thought this an ill game and a worst jest.

Now the feast went on, and Asmund rose from his high seat in the centre of the nave, on the left hand looking down from the altar, and gave out the holy toasts. First men drank a full horn to Odin, praying for triumph on their foes. Then they drank to Frey, asking for plenty; to

Thor, for strength in battle; to Freya, Goddess of Love (and to her Eric drank heartily); to the memory of the dead; and, last of all, to Bragi, God of all delight. When this cup was drunk, Asmund rose again, according to custom, and asked if none had an oath to swear as to some deed that should be done.

For a while there was no answer, but presently Eric Brighteyes stood up.

"Lord," he said, "I would swear an oath."

"Set forth the matter, then," said Asmund.

"It is this," quoth Eric. "On Mosfell mountain, over by Hecla, dwells a Baresark of whom all men have ill knowledge, for there are few whom he has not harmed. His name is Skallagrim; he is a mighty man and he has wrought much mischief in the south country, and brought many to their deaths and robbed more of their goods: for none can prevail against him. Still, I swear this, that, when the days lengthen, I will go up alone against him and challenge him to battle, and conquer him or fall."

"Then, thou yellow-headed puppy-dog, thou shalt go with one eye against a Baresark with two," growled Ospakar.

Men took no heed of his words, but shouted aloud, for Skallagrim had plagued them long, and there were none who dared to fight with him any more. Only Gudruda looked askance, for it seemed to her that Eric swore

too fast. Nevertheless he went up to the altar, and, taking hold of the holy ring, he set his foot on the holy stone and swore his oath, while the feasters applauded, striking their cups upon the board.

And after that the feast went merrily, till all men were drunk, except Asmund and Eric.

Now Eric went to rest, but first he rubbed his limbs with the fat of seals, for he was still sore with the beating of the waters, and they must needs be supple on the morrow if he would keep his eye. Then he slept sound, and rose strong and well, and going to the stream behind the stead, bathed, and anointed his limbs afresh. But Ospakar did not sleep well, because of the ale that he had drunk. Now as Eric came back from bathing, in the dark of the morning, he met Gudruda, who watched for his coming, and, there being none to see, he kissed her often; but she chided him because of the match that he had made with Ospakar and the oath that he had sworn.

"Surely," she said, "thou wilt lose thine eye, for this Ospakar is a giant, and strong as a troll; also he is merciless. Still, thou art a mighty man, and I shall love thee as well with one eye as with two. Oh! Eric, methought I should have died yesterday when thou didst leap from Wolf's Fang! My heart seemed to stop within me."

"Yet I came safely to shore, sweetheart, and well does this kiss pay for all I did. And as for Ospakar, if but once I get these arms about him, I



fear him little, or any man, and I covet that sword of his greatly. But we can talk more certainly of these things to-morrow."

Now Gudruda clung to him and told him all that had befallen, and of the doings and words of Swanhild.

"She honours me beyond my worth," he said, "who am in no way set on her, but on thee only, Gudruda."

"Art thou so sure of that, Eric? Swanhild is fair and wise."

"Ay and evil. When I love Swanhild, then thou mayest love Ospakar."

"It is a bargain," she said, laughing. "Good luck go with thee in the wrestling," and with a kiss she left him, fearing lest she should be seen.

Eric went back to the hall, and sat down by the centre hearth, for all men slept, being still heavy with drink, and presently Swanhild glided up to him, and greeted him.

"Thou art greedy of deeds, Eric," she said. "Yesterday thou camest here by a path that no man has travelled, to-day thou dost wrestle with a giant for thine eye, and presently thou goest up against Skallagrim!"

"It seems that this is true," said Eric.

"Now all this thou doest for a woman who is the betrothed of another man."

"All this I do for fame's sake, Swanhild. Moreover, Gudruda is betrothed to none."

"Before another Yule-feast is spread, Gudruda shall be the wife of Ospakar."

"That is yet to be seen, Swanhild."

Now Swanhild stood silent for a while and then spoke: "Thou art a fool, Eric--yes, drunk with folly. Nothing but evil shall come to thee from this madness of thine. Forget it and pluck that which lies to thine hand," and she looked sweetly at him.

"They call thee Swanhild the Fatherless," he answered, "but I think that Loki, the God of Guile, was thy father, for there is none to match thee in craft and evil-doing, and in beauty one only. I know thy plots well and all the sorrow that thou hast brought upon us. Still, each seeks honour after his own manner, so seek thou as thou wilt; but thou shalt find bitterness and empty days, and thy plots shall come back on thine own head--yes, even though they bring Gudruda and me to sorrow and death."

Swanhild laughed. "A day shall dawn, Eric, when thou who dost hate me shalt hold me dear, and this I promise thee. Another thing I promise thee also: that Gudruda shall never call thee husband."

But Eric did not answer, fearing lest in his anger he should say words that were better unspoken.

Now men rose and sat down to meat, and all talked of the wrestling that should be. But in the morning Ospakar repented of the match, for it is truly said that *\_ale is another man\_*, and men do not like that in the morning which seemed well enough on yester eve. He remembered that he held Whitefire dear above all things, and that Eric's eye had no worth to him, except that the loss of it would spoil his beauty, so that perhaps Gudruda would turn from him. It would be very ill if he should chance to lose the play--though of this he had no fear, for he was held the strongest man in Iceland and the most skilled in all feats of strength--and, at the best, no fame is to be won from the overthrow of a deedless man, and the plucking out of his eye. Thus it came to pass that when he saw Eric he called to him in a big voice:

"Hearken, thou Eric."

"I hear thee, thou Ospakar," said Eric, mocking him, and people laughed; while Ospakar grinned angrily and said, "Thou must learn manners, puppy. Still, I shall find no honour in teaching thee in this wise. Last night we made a match in our cups, and I staked my sword Whitefire and thou

thine eye. It would be bad that either of us should lose sword or eye; therefore, what sayest thou, shall we let it pass?"

"Ay, Blacktooth, if thou fearest; but first pay thou forfeit of the sword."

Now Ospakar grew very mad and shouted, "Thou wilt indeed stand against me in the ring! I will break thy back anon, youngster, and afterwards tear out thine eye before thou diest."

"It may so befall," answered Eric, "but big words do not make big deeds."

Presently the light came and thralls went out with spades and cleared away the snow in a circle two rods across, and brought dry sand and sprinkled it on the frozen turf, so that the wrestlers should not slip. And they piled the snow in a wall around the ring.

But Groa came up to Ospakar and spoke to him apart.

"Knowest thou, lord," she said, "that my heart bodes ill of this match? Eric is a mighty man, and, great though thou art, I think that thou shalt lout low before him."

"It will be a bad business if I am overthrown by an untried man," said Ospakar, and was troubled in his mind, "and it would be evil moreover to

lose the sword. For no price would I have it so."

"What wilt thou give me, lord, if I bring thee victory?"

"I will give thee two hundred in silver."

"Ask no questions and it shall be so," said Groa.

Now Eric was without, taking note of the ground in the ring, and presently Groa called to her the thrall Koll the Half-witted, whom she had sent to Swinefell.

"See," she said, "yonder by the wall stand the wrestling shoes of Eric Brighteyes. Haste thee now and take grease, and rub the soles with it, then hold them in the heat of the fire, so that the fat sinks in. Do this swiftly and secretly, and I will give thee three pennies."

Koll grinned, and did as he was bid, setting back the shoes just as they were before. Scarcely was the deed done when Eric came in, and made himself ready for the game, binding the greased shoes upon his feet, for he feared no trick.

Now everybody went out to the ring, and Ospakar and Eric stripped for wrestling. They were clad in tight woollen jerkins and hose, and sheep-skin shoes were on their feet.

They named Asmund master of the game, and his word must be law to both of them. Eric claimed that Asmund should hold the sword Whitefire that was at stake, but Ospakar gainsaid him, saying that if he gave Whitefire into Asmund's keeping, Eric must also give his eye--and about this they debated hotly. Now the matter was brought before Asmund as umpire, and he gave judgment for Eric, "for," he said, "if Eric yield up his eye into my hand, I can return it to his head no more if he should win; but if Ospakar gives me the good sword and conquers, it is easy for me to pass it back to him unharmed."

Men said that this was a good judgment.

Thus then was the arm-game set. Ospakar and Eric must wrestle thrice, and between each bout there would be a space while men could count a thousand. They might strike no blow at one another with hand, or head, or elbow, foot or knee; and it should be counted no fall if the haunch and the head of the fallen were not on the ground at the self-same time. He who suffered two falls should be adjudged conquered and lose his stake.

Asmund called these rules aloud in the presence of witnesses, and Ospakar and Eric said that should bind them. Ospakar drew a small knife and gave it to his son Gizur to hold.

"Thou shalt soon know, youngling, how steel tastes in the eyeball," he said.

"We shall soon know many things," Eric answered.

Now they drew off their cloaks and stood in the ring. Ospakar was great beyond the bigness of men and his arms were clothed with black hair like the limbs of a goat. Beneath the shoulder joint they were almost as thick as a girl's thigh. His legs also were mighty, and the muscles stood out upon him in knotty lumps. He seemed a very giant, and fierce as a Baresark, but still somewhat round about the body and heavy in movement.

From him men looked at Eric.

"Lo! Baldur and the Troll!" said Swanhild, and everybody laughed, since so it was indeed; for, if Ospakar was black and hideous as a troll, Eric was beautiful as Baldur, the loveliest of the Gods. He was taller than Ospakar by the half of a hand and as broad in the chest. Still, he was not yet come to his greatest strength, and, though his limbs were well knit, they seemed but as a child's against the limbs of Ospakar. But he was quick as a cat and lithe, his neck and arms were white as whey, and beneath his golden hair his bright eyes shone like spears.

Now they stood face to face, with arms outstretched, waiting the word of Asmund. He gave it and they circled round each other with arms held low. Presently Ospakar made a rush and, seizing Eric about the middle, tried to lift him, but with no avail. Thrice he strove and failed, then Eric

moved his foot and lo! it slipped upon the sanded turf. Again Eric moved and again he slipped, a third time and he slipped a third time, and before he could recover himself he was full on his back and fairly thrown.

Gudruda saw and was sad at heart, and those around her said that it was easy to know how the game would end.

"What said I?" quoth Swanhild, "that it would go badly with Eric were Ospakar's arms about him."

"All is not done yet," answered Gudruda. "Methinks Eric's feet slipped most strangely, as though he stood on ice."

But Eric was very sore at heart and could make nothing of this matter--for he was not overthrown by strength.

He sat on the snow and Ospakar and his sons mocked him. But Gudruda drew

near and whispered to him to be of good cheer, for fortune might yet change.

"I think that I am bewitched," said Eric sadly: "my feet have no hold of the ground."

Gudruda covered her eyes with her hand and thought. Presently she looked



up quickly. "I seem to see guile here," she said. "Now look narrowly on thy shoes."

He heard, and, loosening his shoe-string, drew a shoe from his foot and looked at the sole. The cold of the snow had hardened the fat, and there it was, all white upon the leather.

Now Eric rose in wrath. "Methought," he cried, "that I dealt with men of honourable mind, not with cheating tricksters. See now! it is little wonder that I slipped, for grease has been set upon my shoes--and, by Thor! I will cleave the man who did it to the chin," and as he said it his eyes blazed so dreadfully that folk fell back from him. Asmund took the shoes and looked at them. Then he spoke:

"Brighteyes tells the truth, and we have a sorry knave among us. Ospakar, canst thou clear thyself of this ill deed?"

"I will swear on the holy ring that I know nothing of it, and if any man in my company has had a hand therein he shall die," said Ospakar.

"That we will swear also," cried his sons Gizur and Mord.

"This is more like a woman's work," said Gudruda, and she looked at Swanhild.

"It is no work of mine," quoth Swanhild.

"Then go and ask thy mother of it," answered Gudruda.

Now all men cried aloud that this was the greatest shame, and that the match must be set afresh; only Ospakar bethought him of that two hundred in silver which he had promised to Groa, and looked around, but she was not there. Still, he gainsaid Eric in the matter of the match being set afresh.

Then Eric cried out in his anger that he would let the game stand as it was, since Ospakar swore himself free of the shameful deed. Men thought this a mad saying, but Asmund said it should be so. Still, he swore in his heart that, even if he were worsted, Eric should not lose his eye--no not if swords were held aloft to take it. For of all tricks this seemed to him the very worst.

Now Ospakar and Eric faced each other again in the ring, but this time the feet of Eric were bare.

Ospakar rushed to get the upper hold, but Eric was too swift for him and sprang aside. Again he rushed, but Eric dropped and gripped him round the middle. Now they were face to face, hugging each other like bears, but moving little. For a time things went thus, while Ospakar strove to lift Eric, but in nowise could he stir him. Then of a sudden Eric put out his strength, and they staggered round the ring, tearing at each other till their jerkins were rent from them, leaving them almost bare

to the waist. Suddenly, Eric seemed to give, and Ospakar put out his foot to trip him. But Brighteyes was watching. He caught the foot in the crook of his left leg, and threw his weight forward on the chest of Blacktooth. Backward he went, falling with the thud of a tree on snow, and there he lay on the ground, and Eric over him.

Then men shouted "A fall! a fair fall!" and were very glad, for the fight seemed most uneven to them, and the wrestlers rolled asunder, breathing heavily.

Gudruda threw a cloak over Eric's naked shoulders.

"That was well done, Brighteyes," she said.

"The game is still to play, sweet," he gasped, "and Ospakar is a mighty man. I threw him by skill, not by strength. Next time it must be by strength or not at all."

Now breathing-time was done, and once more the two were face to face. Thrice Ospakar rushed, and thrice did Eric slip away, for he would waste Blacktooth's strength. Again Ospakar rushed, roaring like a bear, and fire seemed to come from his eyes, and the steam went up from him and hung upon the frosty air like the steam of a horse. This time Eric could not get away, but was swept up into that great grip, for Ospakar had the lower hold.

"Now there is an end of Eric," said Swanhild.

"The arrow is yet on the bow," answered Gudruda.

Blacktooth put out his might and reeled round and round the ring, dragging Eric with him. This way and that he twisted, and time on time Eric's leg was lifted from the ground, but so he might not be thrown. Now they stood almost still, while men shouted madly, for no such wrestling had been known in the southlands. Grimly they hugged and strove: forsooth it was a mighty sight to see. Grimly they hugged, and their muscles strained and cracked, but they could stir each other no inch.

Ospakar grew fearful, for he could make no play with this youngling. Black rage swelled in his heart. He ground his fangs, and thought on guile. By his foot gleamed the naked foot of Eric. Suddenly he stamped on it so fiercely that the skin burst.

"Ill done! ill done!" folk cried; but in his pain Eric moved his foot.

Lo! he was down, but not altogether down, for he did but sit upon his haunches, and still he clung to Blacktooth's thighs, and twined his legs about his ankles. Now with all his strength Ospakar strove to force the head of Brighteyes to the ground, but still he could not, for Eric clung to him like a creeper to a tree.

"A losing game for Eric," said Asmund, and as he spoke Brighteyes was pressed back till his yellow hair almost swept the sand.

Then the folk of Ospakar shouted in triumph, but Gudruda cried aloud:

"Be not overthrown, Eric; loose thee and spring aside."

Eric heard, and of a sudden loosed all his grip. He fell on his outspread hand, then, with a swing sideways and a bound, once more he stood upon his feet. Ospakar came at him like a bull made mad with goading, but he could no longer roar aloud. They closed and this time Eric had the better hold. For a while they struggled round and round till their feet tore the frozen turf, then once more they stood face to face. Now the two were almost spent; yet Blacktooth gathered up his strength and swung Eric from his feet, but he found them again. He grew mad with rage, and hugged him till Brighteyes was nearly pressed to death, and black bruises sprang upon the whiteness of his flesh. Ospakar grew mad, and madder yet, till at length in his fury he fixed his fangs in Eric's shoulder and bit till the blood spurted.

"Ill kissed, thou rat!" gasped Eric, and with the pain and rush of blood, his strength came back to him. He shifted his grip swiftly, now his right hand was beneath the fork of Blacktooth's thigh and his left on the hollow of Blacktooth's back. Twice he lifted--twice the bulk of Ospakar rose from the ground--a third mighty lift--so mighty that the wrapping on Eric's forehead burst, and the blood streamed down his

face--and lo! great Blacktooth flew in air. Up he flew, and backward he fell into the bank of snow, and was buried there almost to the knees.