

VII

HOW ERIC WENT UP MOSFELL AGAINST SKALLAGRIM THE BARESARK

Now Atli the Good, earl of the Orkneys, comes into the story.

It chanced that Atli had sailed to Iceland in the autumn on a business about certain lands that had fallen to him in right of his mother Helga, who was an Icelander, and he had wintered west of Reyjanes. Spring being come, he wished to sail home, and, when his ship was bound, he put to sea full early in the year. But it chanced that bad weather came up from the south-east, with mist and rain, so he must needs beach his ship in a creek under shelter of the Westman Islands.

Now Atli asked what people dwelt in these parts, and, when he heard the name of Asmund Asmundson the Priest, he was glad, for in old days he and Asmund had gone many a viking cruise together.

"We will leave the ship here," he said, "till the weather clears, and go up to Middalhof to stay with Asmund."

So they made the ship snug, and left men to watch her; but two of the company, with Earl Atli, rode up to Middalhof.

It must be told of Atli that he was the best of the earls who lived in those days, and he ruled the Orkneys so well that men gave him a by-name

and called him Atli the Good. It was said of him that he had never turned a poor man away unsuccoured, nor bowed his head before a strong man, nor drawn his sword without cause, nor refused peace to him who prayed it. He was sixty years old, but age had left few marks on him, except that of his long white beard. He was keen-eyed, and well-fashioned of form and face, a great warrior and the strongest of men. His wife was dead, leaving him no children, and this was a sorrow to him; but as yet he had taken no other wife, for he would say: "Love makes an old man blind," and "When age runs with youth, both shall fall," and again, "Mix grey locks and golden and spoil two heads." For this earl was a man of many wise sayings.

Now Atli came to Middalhof just as men sat down to meat and, hearing the clatter of arms, all sprang to their feet, thinking that perhaps Ospakar had come again as he had promised. But when Asmund saw Atli he knew him at once, though they had not met for nearly thirty years, and he greeted him lovingly, and put him in the high seat, and gave place to his men upon the cross-benches. Atli told all his story, and Asmund bade him rest a while at Middalhof till the weather grew clearer.

Now the Earl saw Swanhild and thought the maid wondrous fair, and so indeed she was, as she moved scornfully to and fro in her kirtle of white. Soft was her curling hair and deep were her dark blue eyes, and bent were her red lips as is a bow above her dimpled chin, and her teeth shone like pearls.

"Is that fair maid thy daughter, Asmund," asked Atli.

"She is named Swanhild the Fatherless," he answered, turning his face away.

"Well," said Atli, looking sharply on him, "were the maid sprung from me, she would not long be called the 'Fatherless,' for few have such a daughter."

"She is fair enough," said Asmund, "in all save temper, and that is bad to cross."

"In every sword a flaw," answers Atli; "but what has an old man to do with young maids and their beauty?" and he sighed.

"I have known younger men who would seem less brisk at bridals," said Asmund, and for that time they talked no more of the matter.

Now, Swanhild heard something of this speech, and she guessed more; and it came into her mind that it would be the best of sport to make this old man love her, and then to mock him and say him nay. So she set herself to the task, as it ever was her wont, and she found it easy. For all day long, with downcast eyes and gentle looks, she waited upon the Earl, and now, at his bidding, she sang to him in a voice soft and low, and now she talked so wisely well that Atli thought no such maid had

trod the earth before. But he checked himself with many learned saws, and on a day when the weather had grown fair, and they sat alone, he told her that his ship was bound for Orkney Isles.

Then, as though by chance, Swanhild laid her white hand in his, and on a sudden looked deep into his eyes, and said with trembling lips, "Ah, go not yet, lord!--I pray thee, go not yet!"--and, turning, she fled away.

But Atli was much moved, and he said to himself: "Now a strange thing is come to pass: a fair maid loves an old man; and yet, methinks, he who looks into those eyes sees deep waters," and he beat his brow and thought.

But Swanhild in her chamber laughed till the tears ran from those same eyes, for she saw that the great fish was hooked and now the time had come to play him.

For she did not know that it was otherwise fated.

Gudruda, too, saw all these things and knew not how to read them, for she was of an honest mind, and could not understand how a woman may love

a man as Swanhild loved Eric and yet make such play with other men, and that of her free will. For she guessed little of Swanhild's guilefulness, nor of the coldness of her heart to all save Eric; nor of how this was the only joy left to her: to make a sport of men and put

them to grief and shame. Atli said to himself that he would watch this maid well before he uttered a word to Asmund, and he deemed himself very cunning, for he was wondrous cautious after the fashion of those about to fall. So he set himself to watching, and Swanhild set herself to smiling, and he told her tales of warfare and of daring, and she clasped her hands and said:

"Was there ever such a man since Odin trod the earth?" And so it went on, till the serving-women laughed at the old man in love and the wit of her that mocked him.

Now upon a day, Eric having made an end of sowing his corn, bethought himself of his vow to go up alone against Skallagrim the Baresark in his den on Mosfell over by Hecla. Now, this was a heavy task: for Skallagrim was held so mighty among men that none went up against him any more; and

at times Eric thought of Gudruda, and sighed, for it was likely that she would be a widow before she was made a wife. Still, his oath must be fulfilled, and, moreover, of late Skallagrim having heard that a youngling named Eric Brighteyes had vowed to slay him single-handed, had made of a mock of him in this fashion. For Skallagrim rode down to Coldback on Ran River and at night-time took a lamb from the fold. Holding the lamb beneath his arm, he drew near to the house and smote thrice on the door with his battle-axe, and they were thundering knocks. Then he leapt on to his horse and rode off a space and waited. Presently

Eric came out, but half clad, a shield in one hand and Whitefire in the other, and, looking, by the bright moonlight he saw a huge black-bearded man seated on a horse, having a great axe in one hand and the lamb beneath his arm.

"Who art thou?" roared Eric.

"I am called Skallagrim, youngling," answered the man on the horse.

"Many men have seen me once, none have wished to see me twice, and some few have never seen aught again. Now, it has been echoed in my ears that thou hast vowed a vow to go up Mosfell against Skallagrim the Baresark, and I am come hither to say that I will make thee right welcome. See," and with his axe he cut off the lamb's tail on the pommel of his saddle:

"of the flesh of this lamb of thine I will brew broth and of his skin I will make me a vest. Take thou this tail, and when thou fittest it on to the skin again, Skallagrim will own a lord," and he hurled the tail towards him.

"Bide thou there till I can come to thee," shouted Eric; "it will spare me a ride to Mosfell."

"Nay, nay. It is good for lads to take the mountain air," and Skallagrim turned his horse away, laughing.

Eric watched Skallagrim vanish over the knoll, and then, though he was very angry, laughed also and went in. But first he picked up the tail,

and on the morrow he skinned it.

Now the time was come when the matter must be tried, and Eric bade farewell to Saevuna his mother, and Unna his cousin, and girt Whitefire round him and set upon his head a golden helm with wings on it. Then he found the byrnie which his father Thorgrimur had stripped, together with the helm, from that Baresark who cut off his leg--and this was a good piece, forged of the Welshmen--and he put it on his breast, and taking a stout shield of bull's hide studded with nails, rode away with one thrall, the strong carle named Jon.

But the women misdoubted them much of this venture; nevertheless Eric might not be gainsayed.

Now, the road to Mosfell runs past Middalhof and thither he came. Atli, standing at the men's door, saw him and cried aloud: "Ho! a mighty man comes here."

Swanhild looked out and saw Eric, and he was a goodly sight in his war-gear. For now, week by week, he seemed to grow more fair and great, as the full strength of his manhood rose in him, like sap in the spring grass, and Gudruda was very proud of her lover. That night Eric stayed at Middalhof, and sat hand in hand with Gudruda and talked with Earl Atli. Now the heart of the old viking went out to Eric, and he took great delight in him and in his strength and deeds, and he longed much that the Gods had given him such a son.

"I prophesy this of thee, Brighteyes," he cried: "that it shall go ill with this Baresark thou seekest--yes, and with all men who come within sweep of that great sword of thine. But remember this, lad: guard thy head with thy buckler, cut low beneath his shield, if he carries one, and mow the legs from him: for ever a Baresark rushes on, shield up."

Eric thanked him for his good words and went to rest. But, before it was light, he rose, and Gudruda rose also and came into the hall, and buckled his harness on him with her own hands.

"This is a sad task for me, Eric!" she sighed, "for how do I know that Baresark's hands shall not loose this helm of thine?"

"That is as it may be, sweet," he said; "but I fear not the Baresark or any man. How goes it with Swanhild now?"

"I know not. She makes herself sweet to that old Earl and he is fain of her, and that is beyond my sight."

"I have seen as much," said Eric. "It will be well for us if he should wed her."

"Ay, and ill for him; but it is to be doubted if that is in her mind."

Now Eric kissed her soft and sweet, and went away, bidding her look for

his return on the day after the morrow.

Gudruda bore up bravely against her fears till he was gone, but then she wept a little.

Now it is to be told that Eric and his thrall Jon rode hard up Stonefell and across the mountains and over the black sand, till, two hours before sunset, they came to the foot of Mosfell, having Hecla on their right. It is a grim mountain, grey with moss, standing alone in the desert plain; but between it and Hecla there is good grassland.

"Here is the fox's earth. Now to start him," said Eric.

He knows something of the path by which this fortress can be climbed from the south, and horses may be ridden up it for a space. So on they go, till at length they come to a flat place where water runs down the black rocks, and here Eric drank of the water, ate food, and washed his face and hands. This done, he bid Jon tend the horses--for hereabouts there is a little grass--and be watchful till he returned, since he must go up against Skallagrim alone. And there with a doubtful heart Jon stayed all that night. For of all that came to pass he saw but one thing, and that was the light of Whitefire as it flashed out high above him on the brow of the mountain when first Brighteyes smote at foe.

Eric went warily up the Baresark path, for he would keep his breath in him, and the light shone redly on his golden helm. High he went, till at length he came to a pass narrow and dark and hedged on either side with sheer cliffs, such as two armed men might hold against a score. He peered down this path, but he saw no Baresark, though it was worn by Baresark feet. He crept along its length, moving like a sunbeam through the darkness of the pass, for the light gathered on his helm and sword, till suddenly the path turned and he was on the brink of a gulf that seemed to have no bottom, and, looking across and down, he could see Jon and the horses more than a hundred fathoms beneath. Now Eric must stop, for this path leads but into the black gulf. Also he was perplexed to know where Skallagrim had his lair. He crept to the brink and gazed. Then he saw that a point of rock jutted from the sheer face of the cliff and that the point was worn with the mark of feet.

"Where Baresark passes, there may yeoman follow," said Eric and, sheathing Whitefire, without more ado, though he liked the task little, he grasped the overhanging rock and stepped down on to the point below. Now he was perched like an eagle over the dizzy gulf and his brain swam. Backward he feared to go, and forward he might not, for there was nothing but air. Beside him, growing from the face of the cliff, was a birch-bush. He grasped it to steady himself. It bent beneath his clutch, and then he saw, behind it, a hole in the rock through which a man could creep, and down this hole ran footmarks.

"First through air like a bird; now through earth like a fox," said Eric

and entered the hole. Doubling his body till his helm almost touched his knee he took three paces and lo! he stood on a great platform of rock, so large that a hall might be built on it, which, curving inwards, cannot be seen from the narrow pass. This platform, that is backed by the sheer cliff, looks straight to the south, and from it he could search the plain and the path that he had travelled, and there once more he saw Jon and the horses far below him.

"A strong place, truly, and well chosen," said Eric and looked around. On the floor of the rock and some paces from him a turf fire still smouldered, and by it were sheep's bones, and beyond, in the face of the overhanging precipice, was the mouth of a cave.

"The wolf is at home, or was but lately," said Eric; "now for his lair;" and with that he walked warily to the mouth of the cave and peered in. He could see nothing yet a while, but surely he heard a sound of snoring?

Then he crept in, and, presently, by the red light of the burning embers, he saw a great black-bearded man stretched at length upon a rug of sheepskins, and by his side an axe.

"Now it would be easy to make an end of this cave-dweller," thought Eric; "but that is a deed I will not do--no, not even to a Baresark--to slay him in his sleep," and therewith he stepped lightly to the side of Skallagrim, and was about to prick him with the point of Whitefire,

when! as he did so, another man sat up behind Skallagrim.

"By Thor! for two I did not bargain," said Eric, and sprang from the cave.

Then, with a grunt of rage, that Baresark who was behind Skallagrim came out like a she-bear robbed of her whelps, and ran straight at Eric, sword aloft. Eric gives before him right to the edge of the cliff.

Then the Baresark smites at him and Brighteyes catches the blow on his shield, and smites at him in turn so well and truly, that the head of the Baresark flies from his shoulders and spins along the ground, but his body, with outstretched arms yet gripping at the air, falls over the edge of the gulf sheer into the water, a hundred fathoms down. It was the flash that Whitefire made as it circled ere it smote that Jon saw while he waited in the dell upon the mountain side. But of the Baresark he saw nothing, for he passed down into the great fire-riven cleft and was never seen more, save once only, in a strange fashion that shall be told. This was the first man whom Brighteyes slew.

Now the old tale tells that Eric cried aloud: "Little chance had this one," and that then a wonderful thing came to pass. For the head on the rock opened its eyes and answered:

"Little chance indeed against thee, Eric Brighteyes. Still, I tell thee this: that where my body fell there thou shalt fall, and where it lies there thou shalt lie also."

Now Eric was afraid, for he thought it a strange thing that a severed head should speak to him.

"Here it seems I have to deal with trolls," he said; "but at the least, though he speak, this one shall strike no more," and he looked at the head, but it answered nothing.

Now Skallagrim slept through it all and the light grew so dim that Eric thought it time to make an end this way or that. Therefore, he took the head of the slain man, though he feared to touch it, and rolled it swiftly into the cave, saying, "Now, being so glib of speech, go tell thy mate that Eric Brighteyes knocks at his door."

Then came sounds as of a man rising, and presently Skallagrim rushed forth with axe aloft and his fellow's head in his left hand. He was clothed in nothing but a shirt and the skin of Eric's lamb was bound to his chest.

"Where now is my mate?" he said. Then he saw Eric leaning on Whitefire, his golden helm ablaze with the glory of the passing sun.

"It seems that thou holdest somewhat of him in thine hand, Skallagrim, and for the rest, go seek it in yonder rift."

"Who art thou?" roared Skallagrim.

"Thou mayest know me by this token," said Eric, and he threw towards him the skin of that lamb's tail which Skallagrim had lifted from Coldback.

Now Skallagrim knew him and the Baresark fit came on. His eyes rolled, foam flew to his lips, his mouth grinned, and he was awesome to see. He let fall the head, and, swinging the great axe aloft, rushed at Eric. But Brighteyes is too swift for him. It would not be well to let that stroke fall, and it must go hard with aught it struck. He springs forward, he louts low and sweeps upwards with Whitefire. Skallagrim sees the sword flare and drops almost to his knee, guarding his head with the axe; but Whitefire strikes on the iron half of the axe and shears it in two, so that the axe-head falls to earth. Now the Baresark is weaponless but unharmed, and it would be an easy task to slay him as he rushes by. But it came into Eric's mind that it is an unworthy deed to slay a swordless man, and this came into his mind also, that he desired to match his naked might against a Baresark in his rage. So, in the hardihood of his youth and strength, he cast Whitefire aside, and crying "Come, try a fall with me, Baresark," rushed on Skallagrim.

"Thou art mad," yells the Baresark, and they are at it hard. Now they grip and rend and tear. Ospakar was strong, but the Baresark strength of Skallagrim is more than the strength of Ospakar, and soon Brighteyes thinks longingly on Whitefire that he has cast aside. Eric is mighty beyond the might of men, but he can scarcely hold his own against this mad man, and very soon he knows that only one chance is left to him, and

that is to cling to Skallagrim till the Baresark fit be passed and he is once more like other men. But this is easier to tell of than to do, and presently, strive as he will, Eric is on his back, and Skallagrim on him. But still he holds the Baresark as with bands of iron, and Skallagrim may not free his arms, though he strive furiously. Now they roll over and over on the rock, and the gloom gathers fast about them till presently Eric sees that they draw near to the brink of that mighty rift down which the severed head of the cave-dweller has foretold his fall.

"Then we go together," says Eric, but the Baresark does not heed. Now they are on the very brink, and here as it chanced, or as the Norns decree, a little rock juts up and this keeps them from falling. Eric is uppermost, and, strive as he will, Skallagrim may not turn him on his back again. Still, Brighteyes' strength may not endure very long, for he grows faint, and his legs slip slowly over the side of the rift till now he clings, as it were, by his ribs and shoulder-blades alone, that rub against the little rock. The light dies away, and Eric thinks on sweet Gudruda and makes ready to die also, when suddenly a last ray from the sun falls on the fierce face of Skallagrim, and lo! Brighteyes sees it change, for the madness goes out of it, and in a moment the Baresark becomes but as a child in his mighty grip.

"Hold!" said Skallagrim, "I crave peace," and he loosed his clasp.

"Not too soon, then," gasped Eric as, drawing his legs from over the

brink of the rift, he gained his feet and, staggering to his sword, grasped it very thankfully.

"I am fordone!" said Skallagrim; "come, drag me from this place, for I fall; or, if thou wilt, hew off my head."

"I will not serve thee thus," said Eric. "Thou art a gallant foe," and he put out his hand and drew him into safety.

For a while Skallagrim lay panting, then he gained his hands and knees and crawled to where Eric leaned against the rock.

"Lord," he said, "give me thy hand."

Eric stretched forth his left hand, wondering, and Skallagrim took it. He did not stretch out his right, for, fearing guile, he gripped Whitefire in it.

"Lord," Skallagrim said again, "of all men who ever were, thou art the mightiest. Five other men had not stood before me in my rage, but, scorning thy weapon, thou didst overcome me in the noblest fashion, and by thy naked strength alone. Now hearken. Thou hast given me my life, and it is thine from this hour to the end. Here I swear fealty to thee. Slay me if thou wilt, or use me if thou wilt, but I think it will be better for thee to do this rather than that, for there is but one who has mastered me, and thou art he, and it is borne in upon my mind that

thou wilt have need of my strength, and that shortly."

"That may well be, Skallagrim," said Eric, "yet I put little trust in outlaws and cave-dwellers. How do I know, if I take thee to me, that thou wilt not murder me in my sleep, as it would have been easy for me to do by thee but now?"

"What is it that runs from thy arm," asked Skallagrim.

"Blood," said Eric.

"Stretch out thine arm, lord."

Eric did so, and the Baresark put his lips to the scratch and sucked the blood, then said:

"In this blood of thine I pledge thee, Eric Brighteyes! May Valhalla refuse me and Hela take me; may I be hunted like a fox from earth to earth; may trolls torment me and wizards sport with me o' night; may my limbs shrivel and my heart turn to water; may my foes overtake me, and my bones be crushed across the doom-stone--if I fail in one jot from this my oath that I have sworn! I will guard thy back, I will smite thy enemies, thy hearthstone shall be my temple, thy honour my honour. Thrall am I of thine, and thrall I will be, and whiles thou wilt we will live one life, and, in the end, we will die one death."

"It seems that in going to seek a foe I have found a friend," said Eric,
"and it is likely enough that I shall need one. Skallagrim, Baresark and
outlaw as thou art, I take thee at thy word. Henceforth, we are master
and man and we will do many a deed side by side, and in token of it I
lengthen thy name and call thee Skallagrim Lambstail. Now, if thou hast
it, give me food and drink, for I am faint from that hug of thine, old
bear."