

## VIII

### HOW OSPAKAR BLACKTOOTH FOUND ERIC BRIGHTEYES AND SKALLAGRIM LAMBSTAIL ON HORSE-HEAD HEIGHTS

Now Skallagrim led Eric to his cave and fed the fire and gave him flesh to eat and ale to drink. When he had eaten his fill Eric looked at the Baresark. He had black hair streaked with grey that hung down upon his shoulders. His nose was hooked like an eagle's beak, his beard was wild and his sunken eyes were keen as a hawk's. He was somewhat bent and not over tall, but of a mighty make, for his shoulders must pass many a door sideways.

"Thou art a great man," said Eric, "and it is something to have overcome thee. Now tell me what turned thee Baresark."

"A shameful deed that was done against me, lord. Ten years ago I was a yeoman of small wealth in the north. I had but one good thing, and that was the fairest housewife in those parts--Thorunna by name--and I loved her much, but we had no children. Now, not far from my stead is a place called Swinefell, and there dwells a mighty chief named Ospakar Blacktooth; he is an evil man and strong----"

Eric started at the name and then bade Skallagrim take up the tale.

"It chanced that Ospakar saw my wife Thorunna and would take her, but

at first she did not listen. Then he promised her wealth and all good things, and she was weary of our hard way of life and hearkened. Still, she would not go away openly, for that had brought shame on her, but plotted with Ospakar that he should come and take her as though by force. So it came about, as I lay heavily asleep one night at Thorunna's side, having drunk somewhat too deeply of the autumn ale, that armed men seized me, bound me, and haled me from my bed. There were eight of them, and with them was Ospakar. Then Blacktooth bid Thorunna rise, clothe herself and come to be his May, and she made pretence to weep at this, but fell to it readily enough. Now she bound her girdle round her and to it a knife hung.

"Kill thyself, sweet,' I cried: 'death is better than shame.'

"Not so, husband,' she answered. 'It is true that I love but thee; yet a woman may find another love, but not another life,' and I saw her laugh through her mock tears. Now Ospakar rode in hot haste away to Swinefell and with him went Thorunna, but his men stayed a while and drank my ale, and, as they drank, they mocked me who was bound before them, and little by little all the truth was told of the doings of Ospakar and Thorunna my housewife, and I learned that it was she who had planned this sport. Then my eyes grew dark and I drew near to death from very shame and bitterness. But of a sudden something leaped up in my heart, fire raged before my eyes and voices in my ears called on to war and vengeance. I was Baresark--and like hay bands I burst my cords. My

axe hung on the wainscot. I snatched it thence, and of what befell I know this alone, that, when the madness passed, eight men lay stretched out before me, and all the place was but a gore of blood.

"Then I drew the dead together and piled drinking tables over them, and benches, and turf, and anything else that would burn, and put cod's oil on the pile, and fired the stead above them, so that the tale went abroad that all these men were burned in their cups, and I with them.

"But I took the name of Skallagrim and swore an oath against all men, ay, and women too, and away I went to the wood-folk and worked much mischief, for I spared few, and so on to Mosfell. Here I have stayed these five years, awaiting the time when I shall find Ospakar and Thorunna the harlot, and I have fought many men, but, till thou camest up against me, none could stand before my might."

"A strange tale, truly," said Eric; "but now hearken thou to a stranger, for of a truth it seems that we have not come together by chance," and he told him of Gudruda and the wrestling and of the overthrow of Blacktooth, and showed him Whitefire which he won out of the hand of Ospakar.

Skallagrim listened and laughed aloud. "Surely," he said, "this is the work of the Norns. See, lord, thou and I will yet smite this Ospakar. He has taken my wife and he would take thy betrothed. Let it be! Let it be! Ah, would that I had been there to see the wrestling--Ospakar had never

risen from his snow-bed. But there is time left to us, and I shall yet see his head roll along the dust. Thou hast his goodly sword and with it thou shalt sweep Blacktooth's head from his shoulders--or perchance that shall be my lot," and with this Skallagrim sprang up, gnashing his teeth and clutching at the air.

"Peace," said Eric. "Blacktooth is not here. Save thy rage until it can run along thy sword and strike him."

"Nay, not here, nor yet so far off, lord. Hearken: I know this Ospakar. If he has set eyes of longing on Gudruda, Asmund's daughter, he will not rest one hour till he have her or is slain; and if he has set eyes of hate on thee--then take heed to thy going and spy down every path before thy feet tread it. Soon shall the matter come on for judgment and even now Odin's Valkyries[\*] choose their own."

[\*] The "corse-choosing sisters" who were bidden by Odin to single out those warriors whose hour had come to die in battle and win Valhalla.

"It is well, then," said Eric.

"Yea, lord, it is well, for we two have little to fear from any six men, if so be that they fall on us in fair fight. But I do not altogether like thy tale. Too many women are mixed up in it, and women stab in the back. A man may deal with swords aloft, but not with tricks, and lies,

and false women's witchery. It was a woman who greased thy wrestling soles; mayhap it will be a woman that binds on thy Hell-shoes when all is done--ay! and who makes them ready for thy feet."

"Of women, as of men," answered Eric, "there is this to be said, that some are good and some evil."

"Yes, lord, and this also, that the evil ones plot the ill of their evil, but the good do it of their blind foolishness. Forswear women and so shalt thou live happy and die in honour--cherish them and live in wretchedness and die an outcast."

"Thy talk is foolish," said Eric. "Birds must to the air, the sea to the shore, and man must to woman. As things are so let them be, for they will soon seem as though they had never been. I had rather kiss my dear and die, if so it pleases me to do, than kiss her not and live, for at the last the end will be one end, and kisses are sweet!"

"That is a good saying," said Skallagrim, and they fell asleep side by side and Eric had no fear.

Now they awoke and the light was already full, for they were weary and their sleep had been heavy.

Hard by the mouth of the cave is a little well of water that gathers there from the rocks above and in this Eric washed himself. Then

Skallagrim showed him the cave and the goodly store of arms that he had won from those whom he had slain and robbed.

"A wondrous place, truly," said Eric, "and well fitted to the uses of such a chapman[\*] as thou art; but, say, how didst thou find it?"

[\*] Merchant.

"I followed him who was here before me and gave him choice--to go, or to fight for the stronghold. But he needs must fight and that was his bane, for I slew him."

"Who was that, then," asked Eric, "whose head lies yonder?"

"A cave-dweller, lord, whom I took to me because of the lonesomeness of the winter tide. He was an evil man, for though it is good to be Baresark from time to time, yet to dwell with one who is always Baresark is not good, and thou didst a needful deed in smiting his head from him--and now let it go to find its trunk," and he rolled it over the edge of the great rift.

"Knowest thou, Skallagrim, that this head spoke to me after it had left the man's shoulders, saying that where its body fell there I should fall, and where it lay there I should lie also?"

"Then, lord, that is likely to be thy doom, for this man was

foresighted, and, but the night before last, as we rode out to seek sheep, he felt his head, and said that, before the sun sank again, a hundred fathoms of air should link it to his shoulders."

"It may be so," answered Eric. "I thought as I lay in thy grip yonder that the fate was near. And now arm thyself, and take such goods as thou needest, and let us hence, for that thrall of mine who waits me yonder will think thou hast been too mighty for me."

Skallagrim went to the edge of the rift and searched the plain with his hawk eyes.

"No need to hasten, lord," he said. "See yonder rides thy thrall across the black sand, and with him goes thy horse. Surely he thought thou camest no more down the path by which thou wentest up, and it is not thrall's work to seek Skallagrim in his lair and ask for tidings."

"Wolves take him for a fool!" said Eric in anger. "He will ride to Middalhof and sing my death-song, and that will sound sadly in some ears."

"It is pleasant, lord," said Skallagrim, "when good tidings dog the heels of bad, and womenfolk can spare some tears and be little poorer. I have horses in a secret dell that I will show thee, and on them we will ride hence to Middalhof--and there thou must claim peace for me."

"It is well," said Eric; "now arm thyself, for if thou goest with me thou must make an end of thy Baresark ways, or keep them for the hour of battle."

"I will do thy bidding, lord," said Skallagrim. Then he entered the cave and set a plain black steel helm upon his black locks, and a black chain byrnie about his breast. He took the great axe-head also and fitted to it the half of another axe that lay among the weapons. Then he drew out a purse of money and a store of golden rings, and set them in a bag of otter skin, and buckled it about him. But the other goods he wrapped up in skins and hid behind some stones which were at the bottom of the cave--purposing to come another time and fetch them.

Then they went forth by that same perilous path which Eric had trod, and Skallagrim showed him how he might pass the rock in safety.

"A rough road this," said Eric as he gained the deep cleft.

"Yea, lord, and, till thou camest, one that none but wood-folk have trodden."

"I would tread it no more," said Eric again, "and yet that fellow thief of thine said that I should die here," and for a while his heart was heavy.

Now Skallagrim Lambstail led him by secret paths to a dell rich in



grass, that is hid in the round of the mountain, and here three good horses were at feed. Then, going to a certain rock, he brought out bits and saddles, and they caught the horses, and, mounting them, rode away from Mosfell.

Now Eric and his henchman Skallagrim the Baresark rode four hours and saw nobody, till at length they came to the brow of a hill that is named Horse-Head Heights, and, crossing it, found themselves almost in the midst of a score of armed men who were about to mount their horses.

"Now we have company," said Skallagrim.

"Yes, and bad company," answered Eric, "for yonder I spy Ospakar Blacktooth, and Gizur and Mord his sons, ay and others. Down, and back to back, for they will show us little gentleness."

Then they sprang to earth and took their stand upon a mound of rising ground--and the men rode towards them.

"I shall soon know what thy fellowship is worth," said Eric.

"Fear not, lord," answered Skallagrim. "Hold thou thy head and I will hold thy back. We are met in a good hour."

"Good or ill, it is likely to be a short one. Hearken thou: if thou must turn Baresark when swords begin to flash, at the least stand and be Baresark where thou art, for if thou rushest on the foe, my back will be naked and I must soon be sped."

"It shall be as thou sayest, lord."

Now men rode round them, but at first they did not know Eric, because of the golden helm that hid his face in shadow.

"Who are ye?" called Ospakar.

"I think that thou shouldst know me, Blacktooth," Eric answered, "for I set thee heels up in the snow but lately--or, at the least, thou wilt know this," and he drew great Whitefire.

"Thou mayest know me also, Ospakar," cried the Baresark. "Skallagrim, men called me, Lambstail, Eric Brighteyes calls me, but once thou didst call me Ounound. Say, lord, what tidings of Thorunna?"

Now Ospakar shook his sword, laughing. "I came out to seek one foe, and I have found two," he cried. "Hearken, Eric: when thou art slain I go hence to burn and kill at Middalhof. Shall I bear thy head as keepsake from thee to Gudruda? For thee, Ounound, I thought thee dead; but, being yet alive, Thorunna, my sweet love, sends thee this," and he hurled a spear at him with all his might.

But Skallagrim catches the spear as it flies and hurls it back. It strikes right on the shield of Ospakar and pierces it, ay and the byrnie, and the shoulder that is beneath the byrnie, so that Blacktooth was made unmeet for fight, and howled with pain and rage.

"Go, bid Thorunna draw that splinter forth," says Skallagrim, "and heal the hole with kisses."

Now Ospakar, writhing with his hurt, shouts to his men to slay the two of them, and then the fight begins.

One rushes at Eric and smites at him with an axe. The blow falls on his shield, and shears off the side of it, then strikes the byrnie beneath, but lightly. In answer Eric sweeps low at him with Whitefire, and cuts his leg from under him between knee and thigh, and he falls and dies.

Another rushes in. Down flashes Whitefire before he can smite, and the carle's shield is cloven through. Then he chooses to draw back and fights no more that day.

Skallagrim slays a man, and wounds another sore. A tall chief with a red scar on his face comes at Brighteyes. Twice he feints at the head while Eric watches, then lowers the sword beneath the cover of his shield, and sweeps suddenly at Eric's legs. Brighteyes leaps high into the air, smiting downward with Whitefire as he leaps, and presently that chief is

dead, shorn through shoulder to breast.

Now Skallagrim slays another man, and grows Baresark. He looks so fierce that men fall back from him.

Two rush on Eric, one from either side. The sword of him on the right falls on his shield and sinks in, but Brighteyes twists the shorn shield so strongly that the sword is wrenched from the smiter's hand. Now the other sword is aloft above him, and that had been Eric's bane, but Skallagrim glances round and sees it about to fall. He has no time to turn, but dashes the hammer of his axe backward. It falls full on the swordsman's head, and the head is shattered.

"That was well done," says Eric as the sword goes down.

"Not so ill but it might be worse," growls Skallagrim.

Presently all men drew back from those two, for they have had enough of Whitefire and the Baresark's axe.

Ospakar sits on his horse, his shield pinned to his shoulder and curses aloud.

"Close in, you cowards!" he yells, "close in and cut them down!" but no man stirs.

Then Eric mocks them. "There are but two of us," he says, "will no man try a game with me? Let it not be sung that twenty were overcome of two."

Now Ospakar's son Mord hears, and he grows mad with rage. He holds his shield aloft and rushes on. But Gizur the Lawman does not come, for Gizur was a coward.

Skallagrim turns to meet Mord, but Eric says:--

"This one for me, comrade," and steps forward.

Mord strikes a mighty blow. Eric's shield is all shattered and cannot stay it. It crashes through and falls full on the golden helm, beating Brighteyes to his knee. Now he is up again and blows fall thick and fast. Mord is a strong man, unwearied, and skilled in war, and Eric's arms grow faint and his strength sinks low. Mord smites again and wounds him somewhat on the shoulder.

Eric throws aside his cloven shield and, shouting, plies Whitefire with both arms. Mord gives before him, then rushes and smites; Eric leaps aside. Again he rushes and lo! Brighteyes has dropped his point, and it stands a full span through the back of Mord, and instantly that was his bane.

Now men rush to their horses, mount in hot haste and ride away,

crying that these are trolls whom they have to do with here, not men. Skallagrim sees, and the Baresark fit takes him sore. With axe aloft he charges after them, screaming as he comes. There is one man, the same whom he had wounded. He cannot mount easily, and when the Baresark comes

he still lies on the neck of his horse. The great axe wheels on high and falls, and it is told of this stroke that it was so mighty that man and horse sank dead beneath it, cloven through and through. Then the fit leaves Skallagrim and he walks back, and they are alone with the dead and dying.

Eric leans on Whitefire and speaks:

"Get thee gone, Skallagrim Lambstail!" he said; "get thee gone!"

"It shall be as thou wilt, lord," answered the Baresark; "but I have not befriended thee so ill that thou shouldst fear for blows to come."

"I will keep no man with me who puts my word aside, Skallagrim. What did I bid thee? Was it not that thou shouldst have done with the Baresark ways, and where thou stoodest there thou shouldst bide? and see: thou didst forget my word swiftly! Now get thee gone!"

"It is true, lord," he said. "He who serves must serve wholly," and Skallagrim turned to seek his horse.

"Stay," said Eric; "thou art a gallant man and I forgive thee: but cross my will no more. We have slain several men and Ospakar goes hence wounded. We have got honour, and they loss and the greatest shame. Nevertheless, ill shall come of this to me, for Ospakar has many friends and will set a law-suit on foot against me at the Althing,[\*] and thou didst draw the first blood."

[\*] The annual assembly of free men which, in Iceland, performed the functions of a Parliament and Supreme Court of Law.

"Would that the spear had gone more home," said Skallagrim.

"Ospakar's time is not yet," answered Eric; "still, he has something by which to bear us in mind."