

## XII

### HOW ERIC WAS OUTLAWED AND SAILED A-VIKING

Now the marriage-feast went on, and Swanhild, draped in white and girt about with gold, sat by Atli's side upon the high seat. He was fain of her and drew her to him, but she looked at him with cold calm eyes in which hate lurked. The feast was done, and all the company rode to the sea strand, where the Earl's ship lay at anchor. They came there, and Swanhild kissed Asmund, and talked a while with Groa, her mother, and bade farewell to all men. But she bade no farewell to Eric and to Gudruda.

"Why sayest thou no word to these two?" asked Atli, her husband.

"For this reason, Earl," she answered, "because ere long we three shall meet again; but I shall see Asmund, my father, and Groa, my mother, no more."

"That is an ill saying, wife," said Atli. "Methinks thou dost foretell their doom."

"Mayhap! And now I will add to my redes, for I foretell thy doom also: it is not yet, but it draws on."

Then Atli bethought him of many wise saws, but spoke no more, for it

seemed to him this was a strange bride that he had wed.

They hauled the anchor home, shook out the great sail, and passed away into the evening night. But while land could still be seen, Swanhild stood near the helm, gazing with her blue eyes upon the lessening coast. Then she passed to the hold, and shut herself in alone, and there she stayed, saying that she was sick, till at length, after a fair voyage of twenty days, they made the Orkney Islands.

But all this pleased Atli wondrous ill, yet he dared not cross her mood.

Now, in Iceland the time drew on when men must ride to the Althing, and notice was given to Eric Brighteyes of many suits that were laid against him, in that he had brought Mord, Ospakar's son, to his death, dealing him a brain or a body or a marrow wound, and others of that company. But no suits were laid against Skallagrim, for he was already outlaw. Therefore he must go in hiding, for men were out to slay him, and this he did unwillingly, at Eric's bidding. Asmund took up Eric's case, for he was the most famous of all lawmen in that day, and when thirteen full weeks of summer were done, they two rode to the Thing, and with them a great company of men of their quarter.

Now, men go up to the Lögberg, and there came Ospakar, though he was not yet healed of his wound, and all his company, and laid their suits

against Eric by the mouth of Gizur the Lawman, Ospakar's son. The pleadings were long and cunning on either side; but the end of it was that Ospakar brought it about, by the help of his friends--and of these had many--that Eric must go into outlawry for three years. But no weregild was to be paid to Ospakar and his men for those who had been killed, and no atonement for the great wound that Skallagrim Lambstail gave him, or for the death of Mord, his son, inasmuch as Eric fought for his own hand to save his life.

The party of Ospakar were ill pleased at this finding, and Eric was not over glad, for it was little to his mind that he should sail a-warring across the seas, while Gudruda sat at home in Iceland. Still, there was no help for the matter.

Now Ospakar spoke with his company, and the end of it was that he called on them to take their weapons and avenge themselves by their own might. Asmund and Eric, seeing this, mustered their army of freemen and thralls. There were one hundred and five of them, all stout men; but Ospakar Blacktooth's band numbered a hundred and thirty-three, and they stood with their backs to the Raven's Rift.

"Now I would that Skallagrim was here to guard my back," said Eric, "for before this fight is done few will left standing to tell its tale."

"It is a sad thing," said Asmund, "that so many men must die because some men are now dead."

"A very sad thing," said Eric, and took this counsel. He stalked alone towards the ranks of Ospakar and called in a loud voice, saying:

"It would be grievous that so many warriors should fall in such a matter. Now hearken, you company of Ospakar Blacktooth! If there be any two among you who will dare to match their might against my single sword in holmgang, here I, Eric Brighteyes, stand and wait them. It is better that one man, or perchance three men, should fall, than that anon so many should roll in the dust. What say ye?"

Now all those who watched called out that this was a good offer and a manly one, though it might turn out ill for Eric; but Ospakar answered:

"Were I but well of my wound I alone would cut that golden comb of thine, thou braggart; as it is, be sure that two shall be found."

"Who is the braggart?" answered Eric. "He who twice has learned the weight of this arm and yet boasts his strength, or I who stand craving that two should come against me? Get thee hence, Ospakar; get thee home and bid Thorunna, thy leman, whom thou didst beguile from that Ounound who now is named Skallagrim Lambstail the Baresark, nurse thee whole of the wound her husband gave thee. Be sure we shall yet stand face to face, and that combs shall be cut then, combs black or golden. Nurse thee! nurse thee! cease thy prating--get thee home, and bid Thorunna nurse thee; but first name thou the two who shall stand against me in

holmgang in Oxarà's stream."

Folk laughed aloud while Eric mocked, but Ospakar gnashed his teeth with rage. Still, he named the two mightiest men in his company, bidding them take up their swords against Brighteyes. This, indeed, they were loth to do; still, because of the shame that they must get if they hung back, and for fear of the wrath of Ospakar, they made ready to obey his bidding.

Then all men passed down to the bank of Oxarà, and, on the other side, people came from their booths and sat upon the slope of All Man's Raft, for it was a new thing that one man should fight two in holmgang.

Now Eric crossed to the island where holmgangs are fought to this day, and after him came the two chosen, flourishing their swords bravely, and taking counsel how one should rush at his face, while the other passed behind his back and spitted him, as woodfolk spit a lamb. Eric drew Whitefire and leaned on it, waiting for the word, and all the women held him to be wondrous fair as, clad in his byrnie and his golden helm, he leaned thus on Whitefire. Presently the word was given, and Eric, standing not to defend himself as they deemed he surely would, whirled Whitefire round his helm and rushed headlong on his foes, shield aloft.

The great carles saw the light that played on Whitefire's edge and the other light that burned in Eric's eyes, and terror got hold of them. Now he was almost come, and Whitefire sprang aloft like a tongue of flame.

Then they stayed no more, but, running one this way and one that, cast themselves into the flood and swam for the river-edge. Now from either bank rose up a roar of laughter, that grew and grew, till it echoed against the lava rifts and scared the ravens from their nests.

Eric, too, stopped his charge and laughed aloud; then walked back to where Asmund stood, unarmed, to second him in the holmgang.

"I can get little honour from such champions as these," he said.

"Nay," answered Asmund, "thou hast got the greatest honour, and they, and Ospakar, such shame as may not be wiped out."

Now when Blacktooth saw what had come to pass, he well-nigh choked, and fell from his horse in fury. Still, he could find no stomach for fighting, but, mustering his company, rode straightway from the Thing home again to Swinefell. But he caused those two whom he had put up to do battle with Eric to be set upon with staves and driven from his following, and the end of it was that they might stay no more in Iceland, but took ship and sailed south, and now they are out of the story.

On the next day, Asmund, and with him Eric and all their men, rode back to Middalhof. Gudruda greeted Eric well, and for the first time since Swanhild went away she kissed him. Moreover, she wept bitterly when she learned that he must go into outlawry, while she must bide at home.

"How shall the days pass by, Eric?" she said, "when thou art far, and I know not where thou art, nor how it goes with thee, nor if thou livest or art already dead?"

"In sooth I cannot say, sweet," he answered; "but of this I am sure that, wheresoever I am, yet more weary shall be my hours."

"Three years," she went on--"three long, cold years, and no sight of thee, and perchance no tidings from thee, till mayhap I learn that thou art in that land whence tidings cannot come. Oh, it would be better to die than to part thus."

"Well I wot that it is better to die than to live, and better never to have been born than to live and die," answered Eric sadly. "Here, it would seem, is nothing but hate and strife, weariness and bitter envy to fret away our strength, and at last, if we come so far, sorrowful age and death, and thereafter we know not what. Little of good do we find to our hands, and much of evil; nor know I for what ill-doing these burdens are laid upon us. Yet must we needs breathe such an air as is blown about us, Gudruda, clasping at this happiness which is given, though we may not hold it. At the worst, the game will soon be played, and others will stand where we have stood, and strive as we have striven, and fail as we have failed, and so on, till man has worked out his doom, and the Gods cease from their wrath, or Ragnarrök come upon them, and they too are lost in the jaws of grey wolf Fenrir."

"Men may win one good thing, and that is fame, Eric."

"Nay, Gudruda, what is it to win fame? Is it not to raise up foes, as it were, from the very soil, who, made with secret hate, seek to stab us in the back? Is it not to lose peace, and toil on from height to height only to be hurled down at last? Happy, then, is the man whom fame flies from, for hers is a deadly gift."

"Yet there is one thing left that thou hast not numbered, Eric, and it is love--for love is to our life what the sun is to the world, and, though it seems to set in death, yet it may rise again. We are happy, then, in our love, for there are many who live their lives and do not find it."

So these two, Eric Brighteyes and Gudruda the Fair, talked sadly, for their hearts were heavy, and on them lay the shadow of sorrows that were to come.

"Say, sweet," said Eric at length, "wilt thou that I go not into banishment? Then I must fall into outlawry, and my life will be in the hands of him who may take it; yet I think that my foes will find it hard to come by while my strength remains, and at the worst I do but turn to meet the fate that dogs me."

"Nay, that I will not suffer, Brighteyes. Now we will go to my father,



and he shall give thee his dragon of war--she is a good vessel--and thou shalt man her with the briskest men of our quarter: for there are many who will be glad to fare abroad with thee, Eric. Soon she shall be bound and thou shalt sail at once, Eric: for the sooner thou art gone the sooner the three years will be sped, and thou shalt come back to me. But, oh! that I might go with thee."

Now Gudruda and Eric went to Asmund and spoke of this matter.

"I desired," he answered, "that thou, Eric, shouldst bide here in Iceland till after harvest, for it is then that I would take Unna, Thorod's daughter, to wife, and it was meet that thou shouldst sit at the wedding-feast and give her to me."

"Nay, father, let Eric go," said Gudruda, "for well begun is, surely, half done. He must remain three years in outlawry: add thou no day to them, for, if he stays here for long, I know this: that I shall find no heart to let him go, and, if go he must, then I shall go with him."

"That may never be," said Asmund; "thou art too young and fair to sail a-viking down the sea-path. Hearken, Eric: I give thee the good ship, and now we will go about to find stout men to man her."

"That is a good gift," said Eric; and afterwards they rode to the seashore and overhauled the vessel as she lay in her shed. She was a great dragon of war, long and slender, and standing high at stem and

prow. She was fashioned of oak, all bolted together with iron, and at her prow was a gilded dragon most wonderfully carved.

Eric looked on her and his eyes brightened.

"Here rests a wave-horse that shall bear a viking well," he said.

"Ay," answered Asmund, "of all the things I own this ship is the very best. She is so swift that none may catch her, and she can almost go about in her own length. That gale must be heavy that shall fill her, with thee to steer; yet I give her to thee freely, Eric, and thou shalt do great deeds with this my gift, and, if things go well, she shall come back to this shore at last, and thou in her."

"Now I will name this war-gift with a new name," said Eric. "'Gudruda,' I name her: for, as Gudruda here is the fairest of all women, so is this the fairest of all war-dragons."

"So be it," said Asmund.

Then they rode back to Middalhof, and now Eric Brighteyes let it be known that he needed men to sail the seas with him. Nor did he ask in vain, for, when it was told that Eric went a-viking, so great was his fame grown, that many a stout yeoman and many a great-limbed carle reached down sword and shield and came up to Middalhof to put their hands in his. For mate, he took a certain man named Hall of Lithdale,

and this because Björn asked it, for Hall was a friend to Björn, and he had, moreover, great skill in all manner of seamanship, and had often sailed the Northern Seas--ay, and round England to the coast of France.

But when Gudruda saw this man, she did not like him, because of his sharp face, uncanny eyes, and smooth tongue, and she prayed Eric to have nothing to do with him.

"It is too late now to talk of that," said Eric. "Hall is a well-skilled man, and, for the rest, fear not: I will watch him."

"Then evil will come of it," said Gudruda.

Skallagrim also liked Hall little, nor did Hall love Skallagrim and his great axe.

At length all were gathered; they were fifty in number and it is said that no such band of men ever took ship from Iceland.

Now the great dragon was bound and her faring goods were aboard of her, for Eric must sail on the morrow, if the wind should be fair. All day long he stalked to and fro among his men; he would trust nothing to others, and there was no sword or shield in his company but he himself had proved it. All day long he stalked, and at his back went Skallagrim Lambstail, axe on shoulder, for he would never leave Eric if he had his will, and they were a mighty pair.

At length all was ready and men sat down to the faring-feast in the hall at Middalhof, and that was a great feast. Eric's folk were gathered on the side-benches, and by the high seat at Asmund's side sat Brighteyes, and near to him where Björn, Asmund's son, Gudruda, Unna, Asmund's betrothed, and Saevuna, Eric's mother. For this had been settled between Asmund and Eric, that his mother Saevuna, who was some somewhat sunk in age, should flit from Coldback and come with Unna to dwell at Middalhof. But Eric set a trusty grieve to dwell at Coldback and mind the farm.

When the faring-toasts had been drunk, Eric spoke to Asmund and said: "I fear one thing, lord, and it is that when I am gone Ospakar will trouble thee. Now, I pray you all to beware of Blacktooth, for, though the hound is whipped, he can still bite, and it seems that he has not yet put Gudruda from his mind."

Now Björn had sat silently, thinking much and drinking more, for he loved Eric less than ever on this day when he saw how all men did him honour and mourned his going, and his father not the least of them.

"Methinks it is thou, Eric," he said, "whom Ospakar hates, and thee on whom he would work his vengeance, and that for no light cause."

"When bad fortune sits in thy neighbour's house, she knocks upon thy door, Björn. Gudruda, thy sister, is my betrothed, and thou art a party

to this feud," said Eric. "Therefore it becomes thee better to hold her honour and thy own against this Northlander, than to gird at me for that in which I have no blame."

Björn grew wroth at these words. "Prate not to me," he said. "Thou art an upstart who wouldst teach their duty to thy betters--ay, puffed up with light-won fame, like a feather on the breeze. But I say this: the breeze shall fail, and thou shalt fall upon the goose's back once more. And I say this also, that, had I my will, Gudruda should wed Ospakar: for he is a mighty chief, and not a long-legged carle, outlawed for man-slaying."

Now Eric sprang from his seat and laid hand upon the hilt of Whitefire, while men murmured in the hall, for they held this an ill speech of Björn's.

"In thee, it seems, I have no friend," said Eric, "and hadst thou been any other man than Gudruda's brother, forsooth thou shouldst answer for thy mocking words. This I tell thee, Björn, that, wert thou twice her brother, if thou plottest with Ospakar when I am gone, thou shalt pay dearly for it when I come back again. I know thy heart well: it is cunning and greedy of gain, and filled with envy as a cask with ale; yet, if thou lovest to feel it beating in thy breast, strive not to work me mischief and to put Gudruda from me."

Now Björn sprang up also and drew his sword, for he was white with rage;

but Asmund his father cried, "Peace!" in a great voice.

"Peace!" he said. "Be seated, Eric, and take no heed of this foolish talk. And for thee, Björn, art thou the Priest of Middalhof, and Gudruda's father, or am I? It has pleased me to betroth Brighteyes to Gudruda, and it pleased me not to betroth her to Ospakar, and that is enough for thee. For the rest, Ospakar would have slain Eric, not he Ospakar, therefore Eric's hands are clean. Though thou art my son, I say this, that, if thou workest ill to Eric when he is over sea, thou shalt rightly learn the weight of Whitefire: it is a niddering deed to plot against an absent man."

Eric sat down, but Björn strode scowling from the hall, and, taking horse, rode south; nor did he and Eric meet again till three years had come and gone, and then they met but once.

"Maggots shall be bred of that fly, nor shall they lack flesh to feed on," said Skallagrim in Eric's ears as he watched Björn pass. But Eric bade him be silent, and turned to Gudruda.

"Look not so sad, sweet," he said, "for hasty words rise like the foam on mead and pass as soon. It vexes Björn that thy father has given me the good ship: but his anger will soon pass, or, at the very worst, I fear him not while thou art true to me."

"Then thou hast little to fear, Eric," she answered. "Look now on thy

hair: it grows long as a woman's, and that is ill, for at sea the salt will hang to it. Say, shall I cut it for thee?"

"Yes, Gudruda."

So she cut his yellow locks, and one of them lay upon her heart for many a day.

"Now thou shalt swear to me," she whispered in his ear, "that no other man or woman shall cut thy hair till thou comest back to me and I clip it again."

"That I swear, and readily," he answered. "I will go long-haired like a girl for thy sake, Gudruda."

He spoke low, but Koll the Half-witted, Groa's thrall, heard this oath and kept it in his mind.

Very early on the morrow all men rose, and, taking horse, rode once more to the seaside, till they came to that shed where the Gudruda lay.

Then, when the tide was high, Eric's company took hold of the black ship's thwarts, and at his word dragged her with might and main. She ran down the greased blocks and sped on quivering to the sea, and as her

dragon-prow dipped in the water people cheered aloud.

Now Eric must bid farewell to all, and this he did with a brave heart till at the last he came to Saevuna, his mother, and Gudruda, his dear love.

"Farewell, son," said the old dame; "I have little hope that these eyes shall look again upon that bonny face of thine, yet I am well paid for my birth-pains, for few have borne such a man as thou. Think of me at times, for without me thou hadst never been. Be not led astray of women, nor lead them astray, or ill shall overtake thee. Be not quarrelsome because of thy great might, for there is a stronger than the strongest. Spare a fallen foe, and take not a poor man's goods or a brave man's sword; but, when thou smitest, smite home. So shalt thou win honour, and, at the last, peace, that is more than honour."

Eric thanked her for her counsel, and kissed her, then turned to Gudruda, who stood, white and still, plucking at her golden girdle.

"What can I say to thee?" he asked.

"Say nothing, but go," she answered: "go before I weep."

"Weep not, Gudruda, or thou wilt unman me. Say, thou wilt think on me?"

"Ay, Eric, by day and by night."



"And thou wilt be true to me?"

"Ay, till death and after, for so long as thou cleavest to me I will cleave to thee. I will first die rather than betray thee. But of thee I am not so sure. Perchance thou mayest find Swanhild in thy journeyings and crave more kisses of her?"

"Anger me not, Gudruda! thou knowest well that I hate Swanhild more than any other woman. When I kiss her again, then thou mayst wed Ospakar."

"Speak not so rashly, Eric," she said, and as she spoke Skallagrim drew near.

"If thou lingerest here, lord, the tide will serve us little round Westmans," he said, eyeing Gudruda as it were with jealousy.

"I come," said Eric. "Gudruda, fare thee well!"

She kissed him and clung to him, but did not answer, for she could not speak.