

"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.

HOW HALL THE MATE CUT THE GRAPNEL CHAIN

Gudruda bent her head like a drooping flower, and presently sank to earth, for her knees would bear her weight no more; but Eric marched to the lip of the sea, his head held high and laughing merrily to hide his pain of heart. Here stood Asmund, who gripped him by both hands, and kissed him on the brow, bidding him good luck.

"I know not whether we shall meet again," he said; "but, if my hours be sped before thou returnest, this I charge thee: that thou mindest Gudruda well, for she is the sweetest of all women that I have known, and I hold her the most dear."

"Fear not for that, lord," said Eric; "and I pray thee this, that, if I come back no more, as well may happen, do not force Gudruda into marriage, if she wills it not, and I think she will have little leaning that way. And I say this also: do not count overmuch on Björn thy son, for he has no loyal heart; and beware of Groa, who was thy housekeeper, for she loves not that Unna should take her place and more. And now I thank thee for many good things, and farewell."

"Farewell, my son," said Asmund, "for in this hour thou seemest as a son to me."

Eric turned to enter the sea and wade to the vessel, but Skallagrim

caught him in his arms as though he were but a child, and, wading into the surf till the water covered his waistbelt, bore him to the vessel and lifted him up so that Eric reached the bulwarks with his hands.

Then they loosed the cable and got out the oars and soon were dancing over the sea. Presently the breeze caught them, and they set the great sail and sped away like a gull towards the Westman Isles. But Gudruda sat on the shore watching till, at length, the light faded from Eric's golden helm as he stood upon the poop, and the world grew dark to her.

Now Ospakar Blacktooth had news of this sailing and took counsel of Gizur his son, and the end of it was that they made ready two great ships, dragons of war, and, placing sixty fighting men in each of them, sailed round the Iceland coast to the Westmans and waited there to waylay Eric. They had spies on the land, and from them they learned of Brighteyes' coming, and sailed out to meet him in the channel between the greater and the lesser islands, where they knew that he must pass.

Now it drew towards evening when Eric rowed down this channel, for the wind had fallen and he desired to be clear at sea. Presently, as the Gudruda came near to the mouth of the channel, that had high cliffs on either hand, Eric saw two long dragons of war--for their bulwarks were shield-hung--glide from the cover of the island and take their station side by side between him and the open sea.

"Now here are vikings," said Eric to Skallagrim.

"Now here is Ospakar Blacktooth," answered Skallagrim, "for well I know that raven banner of his. This is a good voyage, for we must seek but a little while before we come to fighting."

Eric bade the men lay on their oars, and spoke:

"Before us is Ospakar Blacktooth in two great dragons, and he is here to cut us off. Now two choices are left to us: one is to bout ship and run before him, and the other to row on and give him battle. What say ye, comrades?"

Hall of Lithdale, the mate, answered, saying:

"Let us go back, lest we die. The odds are too great, Eric."

But a man among the crew cried out, "When thou didst go on holmgang at Thingvalla, Eric, Ospakar's two chosen champions stood before thee, yet at Whitefire's flash they skurried through the water like startled ducks. It was an omen, for so shall his great ships fly when we swoop on them." Then the others shouted:

"Ay, ay! Never let it be said that we fled from Ospakar--fie on thy woman's talk, Hall!"

"Then we are all of one mind, save Hall only," said Eric. "Let us put Ospakar to the proof." And while men shouted "Yea!" he turned to speak with Skallagrim. The Baresark was gone, for, wasting no breath in words, already he was fixing the long shields on the bulwark rail.

The men busked on their harness and made them fit for fight, and, when all was ready, Eric mounted the poop, and with him Skallagrim, and bade the rowers give way. The Gudruda leapt forward and rushed on towards Ospakar's ships. Now they saw that these were bound together with a cable and yet they must go betwixt them.

Eric ran forward to the prow, and with him Skallagrim, and called aloud to a great man who stood upon the ship to starboard, wearing a black helm with raven's wings:

"Who art thou that bars the sea against me?"

"I am named Ospakar Blacktooth," answered the great man.

"And what must we lose at thy hands, Ospakar?"

"But one thing--your lives!" answered Blacktooth.

"Thrice have we stood face to face, Ospakar," said Eric, "and it seems that hitherto thou hast won no great glory. Now it shall be proved if

thy luck has bettered."

"Art yet healed, lord, of that prick in the shoulder which thou camest by on Horse-Head Heights?" roared Skallagrim.

For answer, Ospakar seized a spear and hurled it straight at Eric, and it had been his death had he not caught it in his hand as it flew. Then he cast it back, and that so mightily that it sped right through the shield of Ospakar and was the bane of a man who stood beside him.

"A gift for a gift!" laughed Eric. On rushed the Gudruda, but now the cable was strained six fathoms from her bow that held together the ships of Ospakar and it was too strong for breaking. Eric looked and saw. Then he drew Whitefire, and while all men wondered, leaped over the prow of the ship and, clasping the golden dragon's head with his arm, set his feet upon its claws and waited. On sped the ship and spears flew thick and fast about him, but there Brighteyes hung. Now the Gudruda's bow caught the great rope and strained it taut and, as it rose beneath her weight, Eric smote swift and strong with Whitefire and clove it in two, so that the severed ends fell with a splash into the quiet water.

Eric sprang back to deck while stones and spears hissed about him.

"That was well done, lord," said Skallagrim; "now we shall be snugly berthed."

"In oars and out grappling-irons," shouted Eric.

Up rose the rowers, and their war-gear rattled as they rose. They drew in the long oars, and not before it was time, for now the Gudruda forced her way between the two dragons of Ospakar and lay with her bow to their sterns. Then with a shout Eric's men cast the irons and soon the ships were locked fast and the fight began. The spears flew thick, and on either side some got their death before them. Then the men of that vessel, named the Raven, which was to larboard of the Gudruda, made ready to board. On they came with a rush, and were driven back, though hardly, for they were many, and those who stood against them few. Again they came, scrambling over the bulwarks, and this time a score of them leapt aboard. Eric turned from the fight against the dragon of Ospakar and saw it. Then, with Skallagrim, he rushed to meet the boarders as they swarmed along the hold, and naught might they withstand the axe and sword.

Through and through them swept the mighty pair, now Whitefire flashed, and now the great axe fell, and at every stroke a man lay dead or wounded. Six of the boarders turned to fly, but just then the grappling-iron broke and their ship drifted out with the tide towards the open sea, and presently no man of that twenty was left alive.

Now the men of the ship of Ospakar and of the Gudruda pressed each other hard. Thrice did Ospakar strive to come aboard and thrice he was pushed back. Eric was ever where he was most needed, and with him Skallagrim,

for these two threw themselves from side to side, and were now here and now there, so that it seemed as though there were not one golden helm and one black, but rather four on board the Gudruda.

Eric looked and saw that the other ship was drawing round, though somewhat slowly, to come alongside of them once more.

"Now we must make an end of Ospakar, else our hands will be overfull," he said, and therewith sprang up upon the bulwarks and after him many men. Once they were driven back, but came on again, and now they thrust all Ospakar's men before them and passed up his ship on both boards. By the mast stood Ospakar and with him Gizur his son, and Eric strove to come to him. But many men were between them, and he could not do this.

Presently, while the fight yet went on hotly and men fell fast, Brighteyes felt the dragon of Ospakar strike, and, looking, saw that they had drifted with the send of the tide on to the rocks of the island. There was a great hole in the hull amidships and the water rushed in fast.

"Back! men; back!" he cried, and all his folk that were unhurt, ran, and leapt on board the Gudruda; but Ospakar and his men sprang into the sea and swam for the shore. Then Skallagrim cut loose the grappling-irons with his axe, and that not too soon, for, scarcely had they pushed clear with great toil when the long warship slipped from the rock and foundered, taking many dead and wounded men with her.

Now Ospakar and some of his people stood safe upon the rocks, and Eric called to him in mockery, bidding him come aboard the Gudruda.

Ospakar made no answer, but stood gnawing his hand, while the water ran from him. Only Gizur his son cursed them aloud.

Eric was greatly minded to follow them, and land and fight them there; but he might not do this, because of the rocks and of the other dragon, that hung about them, fearing to come on and yet not willing to go back.

"We will have her, at the least," said Eric, and bade the rowers get out their oars.

Now, when the men on board the other ship saw the Gudruda drawing on, they took to their oars at once and rowed swiftly for the sea, and at this a great roar of laughter went down Eric's ship.

"They shall not slip from us so easily," said Eric; "give way, comrades, and after them."

But the men were much wearied with fighting, and the decks were all cumbered with dead and wounded, so that by the time that the Gudruda had

put about, and come to the mouth of the waterway, Ospakar's vessel had shaken out her sails and caught the wind, that now blew strong off

shore, and sped away six furlongs or more from Eric's prow.

"Now we shall see how the Gudruda sails," said Eric, and they spread their canvas and gave chase.

Then Eric bade men clear the decks of the dead, and tend the wounded. He had lost seven men slain outright, and three were wounded, one to death. But on board the ship there lay of Ospakar's force twenty and three dead men.

When all were cast into the sea, men ate and rested.

"We have not done so badly," said Eric to Skallagrim.

"We shall do better yet," said Skallagrim to Eric; "rather had I seen Ospakar's head lying in the scuppers than those of all his carles; for he may get more men, but never another head!"

Now the wind freshened till by midnight it blew strongly. The mate Hall came to Eric and said:

"The Gudruda dips her nose deep in Ran's cup. Say, Eric, shall we shorten sail?"

"Nay," answered Eric, "keep her full and bail. Where yonder Raven flies, my Sea-stag must follow," and he pointed to the warship that rode the

waves before them.

After midnight clouds came up, with rain, and hid the face of the night-sun and the ship they sought. The wind blew ever harder, till at length, when the rain had passed and the clouds lifted, there was much water in the hold and the bailers could hardly stand at their work.

Men murmured, and Hall the mate murmured most of all; but still Eric held on, for there, not two furlongs ahead of them, rode the dragon of Ospakar. But now, being afraid of the wind and sea, she had lowered her sail somewhat, and made as though she would put about and run for Iceland.

"That she may not do," called Eric to Skallagrim, "if once she rolls side on to those seas Ran has her, for she must fill and sink."

"So they hold, lord," answered Skallagrim; "see, once more she runs!"

"Ay, but we run faster--she is outsailed. Up, men, up: for presently the fight begins."

"It is bad to join battle in such a sea," quoth Hall.

"Good or bad," growled Skallagrim, "do thou thy lord's bidding," and he half lifted up his axe.

The mate said no more, for he misdoubted him of Skallagrim Lambstail and his axe.

Then men made ready for the fray as best they might, and stood, sword in hand and drenched with foam, clinging to the bulwarks of the Gudruda as she wallowed through the seas.

Eric went aft to the helm and seized it. Now but a length ahead Ospakar's ship laboured on beneath her small sail, but the Gudruda rushed towards her with all canvas set and at every leap plunged her golden dragon beneath the surf and shook the water from her foredeck.

"Make ready the grapnel!" shouted Eric through the storm. Skallagrim seized the iron and stood by. Now the Gudruda rushed alongside the Raven, and Eric steered so skilfully that there was a fathom space, and no more, between the ships.

Skallagrim cast the iron well and truly, so that it hooked and held. On sped the Gudruda and the cable tautened--now her stern kissed the bow of Ospakar's ship, as though she was towing her, and thus for a space they travelled through the seas.

Eric's folk shouted and strove to cast spears; but they did this but ill, because of the rocking of the vessel. As for Ospakar's men, they clung to their bulwarks and did nothing, for all the heart was out of them between fear of Eric and terror of the sea. Eric called to a man to

hold the helm, and Skallagrim crept aft to where he stood.

"What counsel shall we take now?" said Eric, and as he spoke a sea broke over them--for the gale was strong.

"Board them and make an end," answered Skallagrim.

"Rough work; still, we will try it," said Eric, "for we may not lie thus for long, and I am loath to leave them."

Then Eric called for men to follow him, and many answered, creeping as best they might to where he stood.

"Thou art mad, Eric," said Hall the mate; "cut loose and let us drive, else we shall both founder, and that is a poor tale to tell."

Eric took no heed, but, watching his chance, leapt on to the bows of the Raven, and after him leapt Skallagrim. Even as he did so, a great sea came and swept past and over them, so that half the ship was hid for foam. Now, Hall the mate stood near to the grapnel cable, and, fearing lest they should sink, out of the cowardice of his heart, he let his axe fall upon the chain, and severed it so swiftly that no man saw him, except Skallagrim only. Forward sprang the Gudruda, freed from her burden, and rushed away before the wind, leaving Eric and Skallagrim alone upon the Raven's prow.

"Now we are in an evil plight," said Eric, "the cable has parted!"

"Ay," answered Skallagrim, "and that losel Hall hath parted it! I saw his axe fall."