

XIV

HOW ERIC DREAMED A DREAM

Now, when the men of Ospakar, who were gathered on the poop of the Raven, saw what had come about, they shouted aloud and made ready to slay the pair. But Eric and Skallagrim clambered to the mast and got their backs against it, and swiftly made themselves fast with a rope, so that they might not fall with the rolling of the ship. Then the people of Ospakar came on to cut them down.

But this was no easy task, for they might scarcely stand, and they could not shoot with the bow. Moreover, Eric and Skallagrim, being bound to the mast, had the use of both hands and were minded to die hard. Therefore Ospakar's folks got but one thing by their onslaught, and that was death, for three of their number fell beneath the long sweep of Whitefire, and one bowed before the axe of Skallagrim. Then they drew back and strove to throw spears at these two, but they flew wide because of the rolling of the vessel. One spear struck the mast near the head of Skallagrim. He drew it out, and, waiting till the ship steadied herself in the trough of the sea, hurled it at a knot of Ospakar's thralls, and a man got his death from it. After that they threw no more spears.

Thence once more the crew came on with swords and axes, but faint-heartedly, and the end of it was that they lost some more men dead and wounded and fell back again.

Skallagrim mocked at them with bitter words, and one of them, made mad by his scoffing, cast a heavy ballast-stone at him. It fell upon his shoulder and numbed him.

"Now I am unmeet for fight, lord," said Skallagrim, "for my right arm is dead and I can scarcely hold my axe."

"That is ill, then," said Eric, "for we have little help, except from each other, and I, too, am well-nigh spent. Well, we have done a great deed and now it is time to rest."

"My left arm is yet whole, lord, and I can make shift for a while with it. Cut loose the cord before they bait us to death, and let us rush upon these wolves and fall fighting."

"A good counsel," said Eric, "and a quick end; but stay a while: what plan have they now?"

Now the men of Ospakar, having little heart left in them for such work as this, had taken thought together.

"We have got great hurt, and little honour," said the mate. "There are but nineteen of us left alive, and that is scarcely enough to work the ship, and it seems that we shall be fewer before Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail lie quiet by yonder mast. They are mighty men,

indeed, and it would be better, methinks, to deal with them by craft, rather than by force."

The sailors said that this was a good word, for they were weary of the sight of Whitefire as he flamed on high and the sound of the axe of Skallagrim as it crashed through helm and byrnie; and as fear crept in valour fled out.

"This is my rede, then," said the mate: "that we go to them and give them peace, and lay them in bonds, swearing that we will put them ashore when we are come back to Iceland. But when we have them fast, as they sleep at night, we will creep on them and hurl them into the sea, and afterwards we will say that we slew them fighting."

"A shameful deed!" said a man.

"Then go thou up against them," answered the mate. "If we slay them not, then shall this tale be told against us throughout Iceland: that a ship's company were worsted by two men, and we may not live beneath that dishonour."

The man held his peace, and the mate, laying down his arms, crept forward alone, towards the mast, just as Eric and Skallagrim were about to cut themselves loose and rush on them.

"What wouldest thou?" shouted Eric. "Has it gone so well with you with

arms that ye are minded to come up against us bearing none?"

"It has gone ill, Eric," said the mate, "for ye twain are too mighty for us. We have lost many men, and we shall lose more ere ye are laid low. Therefore we make you this offer: that you lay down your weapons and suffer yourselves to be bound till such time as we touch land, where we will set you ashore, and give you your arms again. Meanwhile, we will deal with you in friendly fashion, giving you of the best we have; nor will we set foot any suit against you for those of our number whom ye two have slain."

"Wherefore then should we be bound?" said Eric.

"For this reason only: that we dare not leave you free within our ship. Now choose, and, if ye will, take peace, which we swear by all the Gods we will keep towards you, and, if ye will not, then we will bear you down with beams and sails and stones, and slay you."

"What thinkest thou, Skallagrim?" said Eric beneath his breath.

"I think that I find little faith in yon carle's face," answered Skallagrim. "Still, I am unfit to fight, and thy strength is spent, so it seems that we must lie low if we would rise again. They can scarcely be so base as to do murder having handselled peace to us."

"I am not so sure of that," said Eric; "still, starving beggars must eat

bones. Hearken thou: we take the terms, trusting to your honour; and I say this: that ye shall get shame and death if ye depart from them to harm us."

"Have no fear, lord," said the mate, "we are true men."

"That we shall look to your deeds to learn," said Eric, laying down his sword and shield.

Skallagrim did likewise, though with no good grace. Then men came with strong cords and bound them fast hand and foot, handling them fearsomely as men handle a live bear in a net. Then they led them forward to the prow.

As they went Eric looked up. Yonder, twenty furlongs and more away, sailed the Gudruda.

"This is good fellowship," said Skallagrim, "thus to leave us in the trap."

"Nay," answered Eric. "They cannot put about in such a sea, and doubtless also they think us dead. Nevertheless, if ever it comes about that Hall and I stand face to face again, there will be need for me to think of gentleness."

"I shall think little thereon," growled Skallagrim.

Now they were come to the prow, and there was a half deck under which they were set, out of reach of the wind and water. In the deck was a stout iron ring, and the men made them fast with ropes to it, so that they might move but little, and they set their helms and weapons behind them in such fashion that they could not come at them. Then they flung cloaks about them, and brought them food and drink, of which they stood much in need, and treated them well in every way. But for all this Skallagrim trusted them no more.

"We are new-hooked, lord," he said, "and they give us line. Presently they will haul us in."

"Evil comes soon enough," answered Eric, "no need to run to greet it," and he fell to thinking of Gudruda, and of the day's deeds, till presently he dropped asleep, for he was very weary.

Now it chanced that as Eric slept he dreamed a dream so strong and strange that it seemed to live within him. He dreamed that he slept there beneath the Raven's deck, and that a rat came and whispered spells into his ear. Then he dreamed that Swanhild glided towards him, walking on the stormy seas. He saw her afar, and she came swiftly, and ever the sea grew smooth before her feet, nor did the wind so much as stir her hair. Presently she stood by him in the ship, and, bending over him,

touched him on the shoulder, saying:

"Awake, Eric Brighteyes! Awake! awake!"

It seemed to him that he awoke and said "What tidings, Swanhild?" and that she answered:

"Ill tidings, Eric--so ill that I am come hither from Straumey[*] to tell of them--ay, come walking on the seas. Had Gudruda done so much, thinkest thou?"

[*] Stroma, the southernmost of the Orkneys.

"Gudruda is no witch," he said in his dream.

"Nay, but I am a witch, and it is well for thee, Eric. Ay, I am a witch. Now do I seem to sleep at Atli's side, and lo! here I stand by thine, and I must journey back again many a league before another day be born--ay, many a league, and all for love of thee, Eric! Hearken, for not long may the spell endure. I have seen this by my magic: that these men who bound thee come even now to take thee, sleeping, and cast thee and thy thrall into the deep, there to drown."

"If it is fated it will befall," he said in his dream.

"Nay, it shall not befall. Put forth all thy might and burst thy bonds.

Then fetch Whitefire; cut away the bonds of Skallagrim, and give him his axe and shield. This done, cover yourselves with your cloaks, and wait till ye hear the murderers come. Then rise and rush upon them, the two of you, and they shall melt before your might. I have journeyed over the great deep to tell thee this, Eric! Had Gudruda done as much, thinkest thou?"

And it seemed to him that the wraith of Swanhild kissed him on the brow, sighed and vanished, bearing the rat in her bosom.

Eric awoke suddenly, just as though he had never slept, and looked around. He knew by the lowness of the sun that it was far into the night, and that he had slept for many hours. They were alone beneath the deck, and far aft, beyond the mast, as the vessel rose upon the waves--for the sea was still rough, though the wind had fallen--Eric saw the mate of the Raven talking earnestly with some men of his crew. Skallagrim snored beside him.

"Awake!" Eric said in his ear, "awake and listen!"

He yawned and roused himself. "What now, lord?" he said.

"This," said Eric, and he told him the dream that he had dreamed.

"That was a fey dream," said Skallagrim, "and now we must do as the wraith bade thee."

"Easy to say, but hard to do," quoth Eric; "this is a great rope that holds us, and a strong."

"Yes, it is great and strong; still, we must burst it."

Now Eric and Skallagrim were made fast in this fashion: their hands were bound behind them, and their legs were lashed above the feet and above the knee. Moreover, a thick cord was fixed about the waist of each, and this cord was passed through the iron ring and knotted there. But it chanced that beneath the hollows of their knees ran an oaken beam, which held the forepart of the dragon together.

"We may try this," said Eric: "to set our feet against the beam and strain with all our strength upon the rope; though I think that no two men can part it."

"We shall know that presently," said Skallagrim, gathering up his legs.

Then they set their feet against the beam and pulled till it groaned; but, though the rope gave somewhat, it would not break. They rested a while, then strained again till the sweat burst out upon them and the rope cut into their flesh, but still it would not part.

"We have found our match," said Eric.

"That is not altogether proved yet," answered the Baresark. "Many a shield is riven at the third stroke."

So once again they set their feet against the beam, and put out all their strength.

"The ring bends," gasped Eric. "Now, when the roll of the ship throws our weight to leeward, in the name of Thor pull!"

They waited, then put out their might, and lo! though the rope did not break, the iron ring burst asunder and they rolled upon the deck.

"Well pulled, truly," said Skallagrim as he struggled to his haunches:

"I am marked about the middle with rope-twists for many a day to come, that I will swear. What next, lord?"

"Whitefire," answered Eric.

Now, their arms were piled a fathom or more from where they sat, and right in the prow of the ship. Hither, then, they must crawl upon their knees, and this was weary work, for ever as the ship rolled they fell, and could in no wise save themselves from hurt. Eric was bleeding at the brow, and bloody was the hooked nose of Skallagrim, before they came to where Whitefire was. At length they reached the sword, and pushed aside

the bucklers that were over it with their heads. The great war-blade was sheathed, and Eric must needs lie upon his breast and draw the weapon somewhat with his teeth.

"This is an ill razor to shave with," he said, rising, for the keen blade had cut his chin.

"So some have thought and perchance more shall think," answered Skallagrim. "Now set the rope on the edge and rub."

This they did, and presently the thick cord that bound them was in two. Then Eric knelt upon the deck and pressed the bonds that bound his legs upon the blade, and after him Skallagrim. They were free now, except for their hands, and it was no easy thing to cut away the bonds upon their wrists. It was done thus: Skallagrim sat upon the deck, and Eric pushed the sword between his fingers with his feet. Then the Baresark rose, holding the sword, and Eric, turning back to back with him, fretted the cords upon his wrists against the blade. Twice he cut himself, but the third time the cord parted and he was free. He stretched his arms, for they were stiff; then took Whitefire and cut away the bonds of Skallagrim.

"How goes it with that hurt of thine?" he asked.

"Better than I had thought," answered Skallagrim; "the soreness has come out with the bruise."

"That is good news," said Eric, "for methinks, unless Swanhild walked the seas for nothing, thou wilt soon need thine arms."

"They have never failed me yet," said Skallagrim and took his axe and shield. "What counsel now?"

"This, Skallagrim: that we lie down as we were, and put the cloaks about us as though we were yet in bonds. Then, if these knaves come, we can take them unawares as they think to take us."

So they went again to where they had been bound, and lay down upon their shields and weapons, drawing cloaks over them. Scarcely had they done this and rested a while, when they saw the mate and all the crew coming along both boards towards them. They bore no weapons in their hands.

"None too soon did Swanhild walk," said Eric; "now we shall learn their purpose. Be thou ready to leap forth when I give the word."

"Ay, lord," answered Skallagrim as he worked his stiff arms to and fro.

"In such matters few have thought me backward."

"What news, friends?" cried Eric as the men drew near.

"Bad news for thee, Brighteyes," answered the mate, "and that Baresark thrall of thine, for we must loose your bands."

"That is good news, then," said Eric, "for our limbs are numb and dead because of the nipping of the cords. Is land in sight?"

"Nay, nor will be for thee, Eric."

"How now, friend? how now? Sure, having handselled peace to us, ye mean no harm towards two unarmed men?"

"We swore to do you no harm, nor will we, Eric; this only will we do: deliver you, bound, to Ran, and leave her to deal with you as she may."

"Bethink you, sirs," said Eric: "this is a cruel deed and most unmanly. We yielded to you in faith--will ye break your troth?"

"War has no troth," he answered, "ye are too great to let slip between our fingers. Shall it be said of us that two men overcame us all?"

"Mayhap!" murmured Skallagrim beneath his breath.

"Oh, sirs, I beseech you," said Eric; "I am young, and there is a maid who waits me out in Iceland, and it is hard to die," and he made as though he wept, while Skallagrim laughed within his sleeve, for it was strange to see Eric feigning fear.

But the men mocked aloud.

"This is the great man," they cried, "this is that Eric of whose deeds folk sing! Look! he weeps like a child when he sees the water. Drag him forth and away with him into the sea!"

"Little need for that," cried Eric, and lo! the cloaks about him and Skallagrim flew aside. Out they came with a roar; they came out as a she-bear from her cave, and high above Brighteyes' golden curls Whitefire shone in the pale light, and nigh to it shone the axe of Skallagrim. Whitefire flared aloft, then down he fell and sought the false heart of the mate. The great axe of Skallagrim shone and was lost in the breast of the carle who stood before him.

"Trolls!" shrieked one. "Here are trolls!" and turned to fly. But again Whitefire was up and that man flew not far--one pace, and no more. Then they fled screaming and after them came axe and sword. They fled, they fell, they leaped into the sea, till none were left to fall and leap, for they had no time or heart to find or draw their weapons, and presently Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail stood alone upon the deck--alone with the dead.

"Swanhild is a wise witch," gasped Eric, "and, whatever ill she has done, I will remember this to her honour."

"Little good comes of witchcraft," answered Skallagrim, wiping his brow: "to-day it works for our hands, to-morrow it shall work against them."

"To the helm," said Eric; "the ship yaws and comes side on to the seas."

Skallagrim sprang to the tiller and put his strength on it, and but just in time, for one big sea came aboard them and left much water in the hold.

"We owe this to thy Baresark ways," said Eric. "Hadst thou not slain the steersman we had not filled with water."

"True, lord," answered Skallagrim; "but when once my axe is aloft, it seems to fly of itself, till nothing is left before it. What course now?"

"The same on which the Gudruda was laid. Perhaps, if we may endure till we come to the Farey Isles,[*] we shall find her in harbour there."

[*] The Faroes.

"There is not much chance of that," said Skallagrim; "still, the wind is fair, and we fly fast before it."

Then they lashed the tiller and set to bailing. They bailed long, and it was heavy work, but they rid the ship of much water. After that they ate food, for it was now morning, and it came on to blow yet more strongly.

For three days and three nights it blew thus, and the Raven sped along before the gale. All this time, turn and turn about, Eric and Skallagrim stood at the helm and tended the sails. They had little time to eat, and none to sleep. They were so hard pressed also, and must harbour their strength so closely, that the bodies of the dead men yet cumbered the hold. Thus they grew very weary and like to fall from faintness, but still they held the Raven on her course. In the beginning of the fourth night a great sea struck the good ship so that she quivered from stem to stern.

"Methinks I hear water bubbling up," said Skallagrim in a hoarse voice.

Eric climbed down into the well and lifted the bottom planks, and there beneath them was a leak through which the water spouted in a thin stream. He stopped up the rent as best he might with garments from the dead men, and placed ballast stones upon them, then clambered on to the deck again.

"Our hours are short now," he said, "the water rushes in apace."

"Well, it is time to rest," said Skallagrim; "but see, lord!" and he pointed ahead. "What land is that?"

"It must be the Fareys," answered Eric; "now, if we can but keep afloat for three hours more, we may yet die ashore."

After this the wind began to fall, but still there was enough to drive the Raven on swiftly.

And ever the water gained in the hold.

Now they were not far from land, for ahead of them the bleak hills towered up, shining in the faint midnight light, and between the hills was a cleft that seemed to be a fjord. Another hour passed, and they were no more than ten furlongs from the mouth of the fjord, when suddenly the wind fell, and they were in calm water under shelter of the land. They went amidships and looked. The hold was half full of water, and in it floated the bodies of Ospakar's men.

"She has not long to live," said Skallagrim, "but we may still be saved if the boat is not broken."

Now aft, near the tiller, a small boat was bound on the half deck of the Raven. They went to it and looked; it was whole, with oars lashed in it, but half full of water, which they must bail out. This they did as swiftly as they might; then they cut the little boat loose, and, having made it fast with a rope, lifted it over the side-rail and let it fall into the sea, and that was no great way, for the Raven had sunk deep. It fell on an even keel, and Eric let himself down the rope into it and called to Skallagrim to follow.

"Bide a while, lord," he answered; "there is that which I would bring

with me."

For a space Eric waited and then called aloud, "Swift! thou fool; swift!
the ship sinks!"

And as he called, Skallagrim came, and his arms were full of swords and byrnies, and red rings of gold that he had found time to gather from the dead and out of the cabin.

"Throw all aside and come," said Eric, laying on to the oars, for the Raven wallowed before she sank.

"There is yet time, lord, and the gear is good," answered Skallagrim, and one by one he threw pieces down into the boat. As the last fell the Raven sank to her bulwarks. Then Skallagrim stepped from the sinking deck into the boat, and cut the cord, not too soon.

Eric gave way with all his strength, and, as he pulled, when he was no more than five fathoms from her, the Raven vanished with a huge swirl.

"Hold still," he said, "or we shall follow."

Round spun the boat in the eddy, she was sucked down till the water trickled over her gunwale, and for a moment they knew not if they were lost or saved. Eric held his breath and watched, then slowly the boat lifted her nose, and they were safe from the whirlpool of the lost

dragon.

"Greed is many a man's bane," said Eric, "and it was nearly thine and mine, Skallagrim."

"I had no heart to leave the good gear," he answered; "and thou seest, lord, it is safe and we with it."

Then they got the boat's head round slowly into the mouth of the fjord, pausing now and again to rest, for their strength was spent. For two hours they rowed down a gulf, as it were, and on either side of them were barren hills. At length the water-way opened out into a great basin, and there, on the further side of the basin, they saw green slopes running down to the water's edge, strewn with white stock-fish set to dry in the wind and sun, and above the slopes a large hall, and about it booths. Moreover, they saw a long dragon of war at anchor near the shore. For a while they rowed on, easing now and again. Then Eric spoke to Skallagrim.

"What thinkest thou of yonder ship, Lambstail?"

"I think this, lord: that she is fashioned wondrous like to the Gudruda."

"That is in my mind also," said Eric, "and our fortune is good if it is she."

They rowed on again, and presently a ray from the sun came over the hills--for now it was three hours past midnight--and, the ship having swung a little with the tide, lit upon her prow, and lo! there gleamed the golden dragon of the Gudruda.

"This is a strange thing," said Eric.

"Ay, lord, a strange and a merry, for now I shall talk with Hall the mate," and the Baresark smiled grimly.

"Thou shalt do no hurt to Hall," said Eric. "I am lord here, and I must judge."

"Thy will is my will," said Skallagrim; "but if my will were thine, he would hang on the mast till sea-birds nested amidst his bones."

Now they were close to the ship, but they could see no man. Skallagrim would have called aloud, but Eric bade him hold his peace.

"Either they are dead, and thy calling cannot wake them, or perchance they sleep and will wake of themselves. We will row under the stern, and, having made fast, climb aboard and see with our own eyes."

This, then, they did as silently as might be, and saw that the Gudruda had not been handled gently by the winds and waves, for her shield rail

was washed away. This they found also, that all men lay deep in sleep. Now, amidships a fire still burned, and by it was food. They came there and ate of the food, of which they had great need. Then they took two cloaks that lay on the deck, and, throwing them about them, warmed themselves over the fire: for they were cold and wet, ay, and utterly outworn.

As they sat thus warming themselves, a man of the crew awoke and saw them, and being amazed, at once called to his fellows, saying that two giants were aboard, warming themselves at the fire. Now men sprang up, and, seizing their weapons, ran towards them, and among them was Hall the mate.

Then suddenly Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail threw aside the cloaks and stood up. They were gaunt and grim to see. Their cheeks were hollow and their eyes stared wide with want of sleep. Thick was their harness with brine, and open wounds gaped upon their faces and their hands. Men saw and fell back in fear, for they held them to be wizards risen from the sea in the shapes of Eric and the Baresark.

Then Eric sang this song:

"Swift and sure across the Swan's Bath
Sped Sea-stag on Raven's track,
Heav'd Ran's breast in raging billows,
Stream'd gale-banners through the sky!

Yet did Eric the war-eager
Leap with Baresark-mate aboard,
Fierce their onset on the foemen!
Wherefore brake the grapnel-chain?"

Hall heard and slunk back, for now he saw that these were indeed Eric and Skallagrim come up alive from the sea, and that they knew his baseness.

Eric looked at him and sang again:

"Swift away sped ship Gudruda,
Left her lord in foeman's ring;
Brighteyes back to back with Baresark
Held his head 'gainst mighty odds.
Down amidst the ballast tumbling,
Ospakar's shield-carles were rolled.
Holy peace at length they handselled,
Eric must in bonds be laid!

"Came the Grey Rat, came the Earl's wife,
Came the witch-word from afar;
Cag'd wolves roused them, and with struggling
Tore their fetter from its hold.
Now they watch upon their weapons;
Now they weep and pray for life;

Now they leap forth like a torrent--
Swept away in foeman's strength!

"Then alone upon the Raven
Three long days they steer and sail,
Till the waters, welling upwards,
Wash dead men about their feet.
Fails the gale and sinks the dragon,
Barely may they win the boat:
Safe they stand on ship Gudruda--
Say, who cut the grapnel-chain?"