

HOW ERIC DWELT IN LONDON TOWN

Men stood astonished, but Hall the mate slunk back.

"Hold, comrade," said Eric, "I have something to say that songs cannot carry. Hearken, my shield-mates: we swore to be true to each other, even to death: is it not so? What then shall be said of that man who cut loose the Gudruda and left us two to die at the foeman's hand?"

"Who was the man?" asked a voice.

"That man was Hall of Lithdale," said Eric.

"It is false!" said Hall, gathering up his courage; "the cable parted beneath the straining of the ship, and afterwards we could not put about because of the great sea."

"Thou art false!" roared Skallagrim. "With my eyes I saw thee let thine axe fall upon the cable. Liar art thou and dastard! Thou art jealous also of Brighteyes thy lord, and this was in thy mind: to let him die upon the Raven and then to bind his shoes upon thy cowardly feet. Though none else saw, I saw; and I say this: that if I may have my will, I will string thee, living, to the prow in that same cable till gulls tear out thy fox-heart!"

Now Hall grew very white and his knees trembled beneath him. "It is true," he said, "that I cut the chain, but not from any thought of evil. Had I not cut it the vessel must have sunk and all been lost."

"Did we not swear, Hall," said Eric sternly, "together to fight and together to fall--together to fare and, if need be, together to cease from faring, and dost thou read the oath thus? Say, mates, what reward shall be paid to this man for his good fellowship to us and his tenderness for your lives?"

As with one voice the men answered "\_Death!\_"

"Thou hearest, Hall?" said Eric. "Yet I would deal more gently with one to whom I swore fellowship so lately. Get thee gone from our company, and let us see thy cur's face no more. Get thee gone, I say, before I repent of my mercy."

Then amidst a loud hooting, Hall took his weapons and without a word slunk into the boat of the Raven that lay astern, and rowed ashore; nor did Eric see his face for many months.

"Thou hast done foolishly, lord, to let that weasel go," said Skallagrim, "for he will live to nip thy hand."

"For good or evil, he is gone," said Eric, "and now I am worn out and

desire to sleep."

After this Eric and Skallagrim rested three full days, and they were so weary that they were awake for little of this time. But on the third day they rose up, strong and well, except for their hurts and soreness. Then they told the men of that which had come to pass, and all wondered at their might and hardihood. To them indeed Eric seemed as a God, for few such deeds as his had been told of since the God-kind were on earth.

But Brighteyes thought little of his deeds, and much of Gudruda. At times also he thought of Swanhild, and of that witch-dream she sent him: for it was wonderful to him that she should have saved him thus from Ran's net.

Eric was heartily welcomed by the Earl of the Farey Isles, for, when he heard his deeds, he made a feast in his honour, and set him in the high seat. It was a great feast, but Skallagrim became drunk at it and ran down the chamber, axe aloft, roaring for Hall of Lithdale.

This angered Eric much and he would scarcely speak to Skallagrim for many days, though the great Baresark slunk about after him like his shadow, or a whipped hound at its master's heel, and at length humbled his pride so far as to ask pardon for his fault.

"I grant it for thy deeds' sake," said Eric shortly; "but this is upon my mind: that thou wilt err thus again, and it shall be my cause of death--ay, and that of many more."

"First may my bones be white," said Skallagrim.

"They shall be white thereafter," answered Eric.

At Fareys Eric shipped twelve good men and true, to take the seats of those who had been slain by Ospakar's folk. Afterwards, when the wounded were well of their hurts (except one man who died), and the Gudruda was made fit to take the sea again, Brighteyes bade farewell to the Earl of those Isles, who gave him a good cloak and a gold ring at parting, and sailed away.

Now it were too long to tell of all the deeds that Eric and his men did. Never, so scalds sing, was there a viking like him for strength and skill and hardihood, and, in those days, no such war-dragon as the Gudruda had been known upon the sea. Wherever Eric joined battle, and that was in many places, he conquered, for none prevailed against him, till at last foes would fly before the terror of his name, and earls and kings would send from far craving the aid of his hands. Withal he was the best and gentlest of men. It is said of Eric that in all his days he did no base deed, nor hurt the weak, nor refused peace to him who prayed

it, nor lifted sword against prisoner or wounded foe. From traders he would take a toll of their merchandise only and let them go, and whatever gains he won he would share equally, asking no larger part than the meanest of his band. All men loved Eric, and even his foes gave him honour and spoke well of him. Now that Hall of Lithdale was gone, there was no man among his mates who would not have passed to death for him, for they held him dearer than their lives. Women, too, loved him much; but his heart was set upon Gudruda, and he seldom turned to look on them.

The first summer of his outlawry Eric warred along the coast of Ireland, but in the winter he came to Dublin, and for a while served in the body-guard of the king of that town, who held him in honour, and would have had him stay there. But Eric would not bide there, and next spring, the Gudruda being ready for sea, he sailed for the shores of England. There he gave battle to two vikings' ships of war, and took them after a hard fight. It was in this fight that Skallagrim Lambstail was wounded almost to death. For when, having taken one ship, Eric boarded the other with but few men, he was driven back and fell over a beam, and would have been slain, had not Skallagrim thrown himself across his body, taking on his own back that blow of a battle-axe which was aimed at Eric's head. This was a great wound, for the axe shore through the steel of the byrnie and sank into the flesh. But when Eric's men saw their lord down, and Skallagrim, as they deemed, dead athwart him, they made so fierce a rush that the foemen fell before them like leaves before a winter gale, and the end of it was that the vikings prayed peace of

Eric. Skallagrim lay sick for many days, but he was hard to kill, and Eric nursed him back to life. After this these two loved each other as brother loves twin brother, and they could scarcely bear to be apart. But other people did not love Skallagrim, nor he them.

Eric sailed on up the Thames to London, bringing the viking ships with him, and he delivered their captains bound to Edmund, Edward's son, the king who was called Edmund the Magnificent. These captains the King hung, for they had wrought damage to his ships.

Eric found much favour with the King, and, indeed, his fame had gone before him. So when he came into the court, bravely clad, with Skallagrim at his back, who was now almost recovered of his wound, the King called out to him to draw near, saying that he desired to look on the bravest viking and most beauteous man who sailed the seas, and on that fierce Baresark whom men called "Eric's Death-shadow."

So Eric came forward up the long hall that was adorned with things more splendid than ever his eyes had seen, and stood before the King. With him came Skallagrim, driving the two captive viking chiefs before him with his axe, as a flesher drives lambs. Now, during these many months Brighteyes had grown yet more great in girth and glorious to look on than he was before. Moreover, his hair was now so long that it flowed like a flood of gold down towards his girdle, for since Gudruda trimmed it no shears had come near his head, and his locks grew fast as a woman's. The King looked at him and was astonished.

"Of a truth," he said, "men have not lied about thee, Icelander, nor concerning that great wolf-hound of thine," and he pointed at Skallagrim with his sword of state. "Never saw I such a man;" and he bade all the mightiest men of his body-guard stand forward that he might measure them against Eric. But Brighteyes was an inch taller than the tallest, and measured half a span more round the chest than the biggest.

"What wouldest thou of me, Icelander?" asked the King.

"This, lord," said Eric: "to serve thee a while, and all my men with me."

"That is an offer that few would turn from," answered the King. "Thou shalt go into my body-guard, and, if I have my will, thou shalt be near me in battle, and thy wolf-dog also."

Eric said that he asked no better, and thereafter he went up with Edmund the King to make war on the Danes of Mercia, and he and Skallagrim did great deeds before the eyes of the Englishmen.

That winter Eric and his company came back to London, and abode with the King in much state and honour. Now, there was a certain lady of the court named Elfrida. She was both fair and wealthy, the sweetest of women, and of royal blood by her mother's side. So soon as her eyes fell on Eric she loved him, and no one thing did she desire more than to

be his wife. But Brighteyes kept aloof from her, for he loved Gudruda alone; and so the winter wore away, and in the spring he went away warring, nor did he come back till autumn was at hand.

The Lady Elfrida sat at a window when Eric rode through London Town in the King's following, and as he passed she threw him a wreath of flowers. The King saw it and laughed.

"My cold kinswoman seems to melt before those bright eyes of thine, Icelander," he said, "as my foes melt before Whitefire's flame. Well, I could wish her a worse mate," and he looked on him strangely.

Eric bowed, but made no answer.

That night, as they sat at meat in the palace, the Lady Elfrida, being bidden in jest of Edmund the King to fill the cup of the bravest, passed down the board, and, before all men, poured wine into Eric's cup, and, as she did so, welcomed him back with short sweet words.

Eric grew red as dawn, and thanked her graciously; but after the feast he spoke with Skallagrim, asking him of the Gudruda, and when she could be ready to take the sea.

"In ten days, lord," said Skallagrim; "but stay we not here with the King this winter? It is late to sail."



"Nay," said Eric, "we bide not here. I would winter this year in Fareys, for they are the nighest place to Iceland that I may reach. Next summer my three years of outlawry are over, and I would fare back homewards."

"Now, I see the shadow of a woman's hand," said Skallagrim. "It is very late to face the northern seas, and we may sail to Iceland from London in the spring."

"It is my will that we should sail," answered Eric.

"Past Orkneys runs the road to Fareys," said Skallagrim, "and in Orkneys sits a hawk to whom the Lady Elfrida is but a dove. In faring from ill we may hap on worse."

"It is my will that we sail," said Eric stubbornly.

"As thou wilt, and as the King wills," answered Skallagrim.

On the morrow Eric went in before the King, and craved a boon.

"There is little that thou canst ask, Brighteyes," said the King, "that I will not give thee, for, by my troth, I hold thee dear."

"I am come back to seek no great thing, lord," answered Eric, "but this only: leave to bid thee farewell. I would wend homeward."

"Say, Eric," said the King, "have I not dealt well with thee?"

"Well, and overwell, lord."

"Why, then, wouldst thou leave me? I have this in my mind--to bring thee to great honour. See, now, there is a fair lady in this court, and in her veins runs blood that even an Iceland viking might be proud to mate with. She has great lands, and, mayhap, she shall have more. Canst thou not find a home on them, thinkest thou, Brighteyes?"

"In Iceland only I am at home, lord," said Eric.

Then the King was wroth, and bade him begone when it pleased him, and Eric bowed before him and went out.

Two days afterwards, while Eric was walking in the Palace gardens he met the Lady Elfrida face to face. She held white flowers in her hand, and she was fair to see and pale as the flowers she bore.

He greeted her, and, after a while, she spoke to him in a gentle voice:

"They say that thou goest from England, Brighteyes?" she said.

"Yes, lady; I go," he answered.

She looked on him once and twice and then burst out weeping. "Why goest thou hence to that cold land of thine?" she sobbed--"that hateful land

of snow and ice! Is not England good enough for thee?"

"I am at home there, lady, and there my mother waits me."

"There thy mother waits thee, Eric?--say, does a maid called Gudruda the Fair wait thee there also?"

"There is such a maid in Iceland," said Eric.

"Yes; I know it--I know it all," she answered, drying her tears, and of a sudden growing cold and proud; "Eric, thou art betrothed to this Gudruda; and, for thy welfare, somewhat overfaithful to thy troth. For hearken, Eric Brighteyes. I know this: that little luck shall come to thee from the maid Gudruda. It would become me ill to say more; nevertheless, this is true--that here, in England, good fortune waits thy hand, and there in Iceland such fortune as men mete to their foes. Knowest thou this?"

Eric looked at her and answered: "Lady," he said, "men are not born of their own will, they live and do little that they will, they do and go, perchance, whither they would not. Yet it may happen to a man that one meets him whose hand he fain would hold, if it be but for an hour's travel over icy ways; and it is better to hold that hand for this short hour than to wend his life through at a stranger's side."

"Perhaps there is wisdom in thy folly," said the Lady Elfrida. "Still, I

tell thee this: that no good luck waits thee there in Iceland."

"It well may be," said Eric: "my days have been stormy, and the gale is still brewing. But it is a poor heart that fears the storm. Better to sink; for, coward or hero, all must sink at last."

"Say, Eric," said the lady, "if that hand thou dost desire to hold is lost to thee, what then?"

"If that hand is cold in death, then henceforth I wend my ways alone."

"And if it be held of another hand than thine?"

"Then I will journey back to England, lady, and here in this fair garden I may crave speech of thee again."

They looked one on another. "Fare thee well, Eric!" said the Lady Elfrida. "Here in this garden we may talk again; and, if we talk no more--why, fare thee well! Days come and go; the swallow takes flight at winter, and lo! at spring it twitters round the eaves. And if it come not again, then farewell to that swallow. The world is a great house, Eric, and there is room for many swallows. But alas! for her who is left desolate--alas, alas!" And she turned and went.

It is told of this lady Elfrida that she became very wealthy and was much honoured for her gentleness and wisdom, and that, when she was old,

she built a great church and named it Ericskirk. It is also told that, though many sought her in marriage, she wedded none.