

HOW SWANHILD WALKED THE SEAS

Within two days afterwards, the Gudruda being bound for sea, Eric went up to bid farewell to the King. But Edmund was so angry with him because of his going that he would not see him. Thereon Eric took horse and rode down sadly from the Palace to the river-bank where the Gudruda lay. But when he was about to give the word to get out the oars, the King himself rode up, and with him men bearing costly gifts. Eric went ashore to speak with him.

"I am angry with thee, Brighteyes," said Edmund, "yet it is not in my heart to let thee go without words and gifts of farewell. This only I ask of thee now, that, if things go not well with thee there, out in Iceland, thou wilt come back to me."

"I will--that I promise thee, King," said Eric, "for I shall never find a better lord."

"Nor I a braver servant," said the King. Then he gave him the gifts and kissed him before all men. To Skallagrim also he gave a good byrnie of Welsh steel coloured black.

Then Eric went aboard again and dropped down the river with the tide.

For five days all went well with them, the sea being calm and the winds light and favourable. But on the fifth night, as they sailed slowly along the coasts of East Anglia over against Yarmouth sands, the moon rose red and ringed and the sea fell dead calm.

"Yonder hangs a storm-lamp, lord," said Skallagrim, pointing to the angry moon. "We shall soon be bailing, for the autumn gales draw near."

"Wait till they come, then speak," said Eric. "Thou croakest ever like a raven."

"And ravens croak before foul weather," answered Skallagrim, and just as he spoke a sudden gust of wind came up from the south-east and laid the Gudruda over. After this it came on to blow, and so fiercely that for whole days and nights their clothes were scarcely dry. They ran northwards before the storm and still northward, sighting no land and seeing no stars. And ever as they scudded on the gale grew fiercer, till at length the men were worn out with bailing and starved with wet and cold. Three of their number also were washed away by the seas, and all were in sorry plight.

It was the fourth night of the gale. Eric stood at the helm, and by him Skallagrim. They were alone, for their comrades were spent and lay beneath decks, waiting for death. The ship was half full of water, but they had no more strength to bail. Eric seemed grim and gaunt in the white light of the moon, and his long hair streamed about him wildly.

Grimmer yet was Skallagrim as he clung to the shield-rail and stared across the deep.

"She rolls heavily, lord," he shouted, "and the water gains fast."

"Can the men bail no more?" asked Eric.

"Nay, they are outworn and wait for death."

"They need not wait long," said Eric. "What do they say of me?"

"Nothing."

Then Eric groaned aloud. "It was my stubbornness that brought us to this pass," he said; "I care little for myself, but it is ill that all should die for one man's folly."

"Grieve not, lord," answered Skallagrim, "that is the world's way, and there are worse things than to drown. Listen! methinks I hear the roar of breakers yonder," and he pointed to the left.

"Breakers they surely are," said Eric. "Now the end is near. But see, is not that land looming up on the right, or is it cloud?"

"It is land," said Skallagrim, "and I am sure of this, that we run into a firth. Look, the seas boil like a hot spring. Hold on thy course,

lord, perchance we may yet steer between rocks and land. Already the wind falls and the current lessens the seas."

"Ay," said Eric, "already the fog and rain come up," and he pointed ahead where dense clouds gathered in the shape of a giant, whose head reached to the skies and moved towards them, hiding the moon.

Skallagrim looked, then spoke: "Now here, it seems, is witchwork. Say, lord, hast thou ever seen mist travel against wind as it travels now?"

"Never before," said Eric, and as he spoke the light of the moon went out.

Swanhild, Atli's wife, sat in beauty in her bower on Straumey Isle and looked with wide eyes towards the sea. It was midnight. None stirred in Atli's hall, but still Swanhild looked out towards the sea.

Now she turned and spoke into the darkness, for there was no light in the bower save the light of her great eyes.

"Art thou there?" she said. "I have summoned thee thrice in the words thou knowest. Say, Toad, art there?"

"Ay, Swanhild the Fatherless! Swanhild, Groa's daughter! Witch-mother's

witch-child! I am here. What is thy will with me?" piped a thin voice like the voice of a dying babe.

Swanhild shuddered a little and her eyes grew brighter--as bright as the eyes of a cat.

"This first," she said: "that thou show thyself. Hideous as thou art, I had rather see thee, than speak with thee seeing thee not."

"Mock not my form, lady," answered the thin voice, "for it is as thou dost fashion it in thy thought. To the good I am fair as day; to the evil, foul as their heart. Toad thou didst call me: look, now I come as a toad!"

Swanhild looked, and behold! a ring of the darkness grew white with light, and in it crouched a thing hideous to see. It was shaped as a great spotted toad, and on it was set a hag's face, with white locks hanging down on either side. Its eyes were blood-red and sunken, black were its fangs, and its skin was dead yellow. It grinned horribly as Swanhild shrank from it, then spoke again:

"Grey Wolf thou didst call me once, Swanhild, when thou wouldst have thrust Gudruda down Goldfoss gulf, and as a grey wolf I came, and gave thee counsel that thou tookest but ill. Rat didst thou call me once, when thou wouldst save Brighteyes from the carles of Ospakar, and as a rat I came and in thy shape I walked the seas. Toad thou callest me

now, and as a toad I creep about thy feet. Name thy will, Swanhild, and I will name my price. But be swift, for there are other fair ladies whose wish I must do ere dawn."

"Thou art hideous to look on!" said Swanhild, placing her hand before her eyes.

"Say not so, lady; say not so. Look at this face of mine. Knowest thou it not? It is thy mother's--dead Groa lent it me. I took it from where she lies; and my toad's skin I drew from thy spotted heart, Swanhild, and more hideous than I am shalt thou be in a day to come, as once I was more fair than thou art to-day."

Swanhild opened her lips to shriek, but no sound came.

"Troll," she whispered, "mock me not with lies, but hearken to my bidding: where sails Eric now?"

"Look out into the night, lady, and thou shalt see."

Swanhild looked, and the ways of the darkness opened before her witch-sight. There at the mouth of Pentland Firth the Gudruda laboured heavily in the great seas, and by the tiller stood Eric, and with him Skallagrim.

"Seest thou thy love?" asked the Familiar.

"Yea," she answered, "full clearly; he is worn with wind and sea, but more glorious than aforetime, and his hair is long. Say, what shall befall him if thou aidest not?"

"This, that he shall safely pass the Firth, for the gale falls, and come safely to Fareys, and from Fareys isles to Gudruda's arms."

"And what canst thou do, Goblin?"

"This: I can lure Eric's ship to wreck, and give his comrades, all save Skallagrim, to Ran's net, and bring him to thy arms, Swanhild, witch-mother's witch-child!"

She hearkened. Her breast heaved and her eyes flashed.

"And thy price, Toad?"

"_Thou_ art the price, lady," piped the goblin. "Thou shalt give thyself to me when thy day is done, and merrily will we sisters dwell in Hela's halls, and merrily for ever will we fare about the earth o' nights, doing such tasks as this task of thine, Swanhild, and working wicked woe till the last woe is worked on us. Art thou content?"

Swanhild thought. Twice her breath went from her lips in great sighs. Then she stood, pale and silent.

"Safely shall he sail the Firth," piped the thin voice. "Safely shall he sit in Fareys. Safely shall he lie in white Gudruda's arms--_hee! hee!_ Think of it, lady!"

Then Swanhild shook like a birth-tree in the gale, and her face grew ashen.

"I am content," she said.

"_Hee! hee!_ Brave lady! She is content! Ah, we sisters shall be merry. Hearken: if I aid thee thus I may do no more. Thrice has the night-owl come at thy call--now it must wing away. Yet things will be as I have said; thine own wisdom shall guide the rest. Ere morn Brighteyes shall stand in Atli's hall, ere spring he will be thy love, and ere autumn Gudruda shall sit on the high seat in the hall of Middalhof the bride of Ospakar. Draw nigh, give me thine arm, sister, that blood may seal our bargain."

Swanhild drew near the toad, and, shuddering, stretched out her arm, and then and there the red blood ran, and there they sealed their sisterhood. And as the nameless deed was wrought, it seemed to Swanhild as though fire shot through her veins, and fire surged before her eyes, and in the fire a shape passed up weeping.

"It is done, Blood-sister," piped the voice; "now I must away in thy

form to be about thy tasks. Seat thee here before me--so. Now lay thy brow upon my brow--fear not, it was thy mother's--life on death! curling locks on corpse hair! See, so we change--we change. Now thou art the Death-toad and I am Swanhild, Atli's wife, who shall be Eric's love."

Then Swanhild knew that her beauty had entered into the foulness of the toad, and the foulness of the toad into her beauty, for there before her stood her own shape and here she crouched a toad upon the floor.

"Away to work, away!" said a soft low voice, her own voice speaking from her own body that stood before her, and lo! it was gone.

But Swanhild crouched, in the shape of a hag-headed toad, upon the ground in her bower of Atli's hall, and felt wickedness and evil longings and hate boil and seethe within her heart. She looked out through her sunken horny eyes and she seemed to see strange sights. She saw Atli, her lord, dead upon the grass. She saw a woman asleep, and above her flashed a sword. She saw the hall of Middalhof red with blood. She saw a great gulf in a mountain's heart, and men fell down it. And, last, she saw a war-ship sailing fast out on the sea, afire, and vanish there.

Now the witch-hag who wore Swanhild's loveliness stood upon the cliffs of Straumey and tossed her white arms towards the north.

"Come, fog! come, sleet!" she cried. "Come, fog! come, sleet! Put out

the moon and blind the eyes of Eric!" And as she called, the fog rose up like a giant and stretched his arms from shore to shore.

"Move, fog! beat, rain!" she cried. "Move and beat against the gale, and blind the eyes of Eric!"

And the fog moved on against the wind, and with it sleet and rain.

"Now I am afeared," said Eric to Skallagrim, as they stood in darkness upon the ship: "the gale blows from behind us, and yet the mist drives fast in our faces. What comes now?"

"This is witch-work, lord," answered Skallagrim, "and in such things no counsel can avail. Hold the tiller straight and drive on, say I. Methinks the gale lessens more and more."

So they did for a little while, and all around them sounded the roar of breakers. Darker grew the sky and darker yet, till at the last, though they stood side by side, they could not see each other's shapes.

"This is strange sailing," said Eric. "I hear the roar of breakers as it were beneath the prow."

"Lash the helm, lord, and let us go forward. If there are breakers, perhaps we shall see their foam through the blackness," said Skallagrim.

Eric did so, and they crept forward on the starboard board right to the prow of the ship, and there Skallagrim peered into the fog and sleet.

"Lord," he whispered presently, and his voice shook strangely, "what is that yonder on the waters? Seest thou aught?"

Eric stared and said, "By Odin! I see a shape of light like to the shape of a woman; it walks upon the waters towards us and the mist melts before it, and the sea grows calm beneath its feet."

"I see that also!" said Skallagrim.

"She comes nigh!" gasped Eric. "See how swift she comes! By the dead, it is Swanhild's shape! Look, Skallagrim! look how her eyes flame!--look how her hair streams upon the wind!"

"It is Swanhild, and we are fey!" quoth Skallagrim, and they ran back to the helm, where Skallagrim sank upon the deck in fear.

"See, Skallagrim, she glides before the Gudruda's beak! she glides backwards and she points yonder--there to the right! Shall I put the helm down and follow her?"

"Nay, lord, nay; set no faith in witchcraft or evil will befall us."

As he spoke a great gust of wind shook the ship, the music of the

breakers roared in their ears, and the gleaming shape upon the waters tossed its arms wildly and pointed to the right.

"The breakers call ahead," said Eric. "The shape points yonder, where I hear no sound of sea. Once before, thou mindest, Swanhild walked the waves to warn us and thereby saved us from the men of Ospakar. Ever she swore she loved me; now she is surely come in love to save us and all our comrades. Say, shall I put about? Look: once more she waves her arms and points," and as he spoke he gripped the helm.

"I have no rede, lord," said Skallagrim, "and I love not witch-work. We can die but once, and death is all around; be it as thou wilt."

Eric put down the helm with all his might. The good ship answered, and her timbers groaned loudly, as though in woe, when the strain of the sea struck her abeam. Then once more she flew fast across the waters, and fast before her glided the wraith of Swanhild. Now it pointed here and now there, and as it pointed so Eric shaped his course. For a while the noise of breakers lessened, but now again came a thunder, like the thunder of waves smiting on a cliff, and about the sides of the Gudruda the waves hissed like snakes.

Suddenly the Shape threw up its arms and seemed to sink beneath the waves, while a sound like the sound of a great laugh went up from sea to sky.

"Now here is the end," said Skallagrim, "and we are lured to doom."

Ere ever the words had passed his lips the ship struck, and so fiercely that they were rolled upon the deck. Suddenly the sky grew clear, the moon shone out, and before them were cliffs and rocks, and behind them a great wave rushed on. From the hold of the ship there came a cry, for now their comrades were awake and they knew that death was here.

Eric gripped Skallagrim round the middle and looked aft. On rushed the wave, no such wave had he ever seen. Now it struck and the Gudruda burst asunder beneath the blow.

But Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail were lifted on its crest and knew no more.

Swanhild, crouching in hideous guise upon the ground in the bower of Atli's hall, looked upon the visions that passed before her. Suddenly a woman's shape, her own shape, was there.

"It is done, Blood-sister," said a voice, her own voice. "Merrily I walked the waves, and oh, merry was the cry of Eric's folk when Ran caught them in her net! Be thyself, again, Blood-sister--be fair as thou art foul; then arise, wake Atli thy lord, and go down to the sea's lip by the southern cliffs and see what thou shalt find. We shall meet no

more till all this game is played and another game is set," and the shape of Swanhild crouched upon the floor before the hag-headed toad muttering "Pass! pass!"

Then Swanhild felt her flesh come back to her, and as it grew upon her so the shape of the Death-headed toad faded away.

"Farewell, Blood-sister!" piped a voice; "make merry as thou mayest, but merrier shall be our nights when thou hast gone a-sailing with Eric on the sea. Farewell! farewell! _Were-wolf_ thou didst call me once, and as a wolf I came. _Rat_ thou didst call me once, and as a rat I came. _Toad_ didst thou call me once, and as a toad I came. Say, at the last, what wilt thou call me and in what shape shall I come, Blood-sister? Till then farewell!"

And all was gone and all was still.