

## XVIII

### HOW EARL ATLI FOUND ERIC AND SKALLAGRIM ON THE SOUTHERN ROCKS OF STRAUMEY ISLE

Swanhild, robed in white, as though new risen from sleep, stood, candle in hand, by the bed of Atli the Earl, her lord, crying "Awake!"

"What passes now?" said Atli, lifting himself upon his arm. "What passes, Swanhild, and why dost thou ever wander alone at nights, looking so strangely? I love not thy dark witch-ways, Swanhild, and I was wed to thee in an ill hour, wife who art no wife."

"In an ill hour indeed, Earl Atli," she answered, "an ill hour for thee and me, for, as thou hast said, eld and youth are strange yokefellows and pull different paths. Arise now, Earl, for I have dreamed a dream."

"Tell it to me on the morrow, then," quoth Atli; "there is small joyousness in thy dreams, that always point to evil, and I must bear enough evil of late."

"Nay, lord, my rede may not be put aside so. Listen now: I have dreamed that a great dragon of war has been cast away upon Straumey's south-western rocks. The cries of those who drowned rang in my ears. But I thought that some came living to the shore, and lie there senseless, to perish of the cold. Arise, therefore, take men and go down to the

rocks."

"I will go at daybreak," said Atli, letting his head fall upon the pillow. "I have little faith in such visions, and it is too late for ships of war to try the passage of the Firth."

"Arise, I say," answered Swanhild sternly, "and do my bidding, else I will myself go to search the rocks."

Then Atli rose grumbling, and shook the heavy sleep from his eyes: for of all living folk he most feared Swanhild his wife. He donned his garments, threw a thick cloak about him, and, going to the hall where men snored around the dying fires, for the night was bitter, he awoke some of them. Now among those men whom he called was Hall of Lithdale, Hall the mate who had cut the grapnel-chain. For this Hall, fearing to return to Iceland, had come hither saying that he had been wounded off Fareys, in the great fight between Eric and Ospakar's men, and left there to grow well of his hurt or die. Then Atli, not knowing that the carle lied, had bid him welcome for Eric's sake, for he still loved Eric above all men.

But Hall loved not labour and nightfarings to search for shipwrecked men of whom the Lady Swanhild had chanced to dream. So he turned himself upon his side and slept again. Still, certain of Atli's folk rose at his bidding, and they went together down to the south-western rocks.

But Swanhild, a cloak thrown over her night-gear, sat herself in the high seat of the hall and fixing her eyes, now upon the dying fires and now upon the blood-marks in her arm, waited in silence. The night was cold and windy, but the moon shone bright, and by its light Atli and his people made their way to the south-western rocks, on which the sea beat madly.

"What lies yonder?" said Atli, pointing to some black things that lay beneath them upon the rock, cast there by the waves. A man climbed down the cliff's side that is here as though it were cut in steps, and then cried aloud:

"A ship's mast, new broken, lord."

"It seems that Swanhild dreams true," muttered Atli; "but I am sure of this: that none have come ashore alive in such a sea."

Presently the man who searched the rocks below cried aloud again:

"Here lie two great men, locked in each other's arms. They seem to be dead."

Now all the men climb down the slippery rocks as best they may, though the spray wets them, and with them goes Atli. The Earl is a brisk man, though old in years, and he comes first to where the two lie. He who

was undermost lay upon his back, but his face is hid by the thick golden hair that flowed across it.

"Man's body indeed, but woman's locks," said Atli as he put out his hand and drew the hair away, so that the light of the moon fell on the face beneath.

He looked, then staggered back against the rock.

"By Thor!" he cried, "here lies the corpse of Eric Brighteyes!" and Atli wrung his hands and wept, for he loved Eric much.

"Be not so sure that the men are dead, Earl," said one, "I thought I saw yon great carle move but now."

"He is Skallagrim Lambstail, Eric's Death-shadow," said Atli again. "Up with them, lads--see, yonder lies a plank--and away to the hall. I will give twenty in silver to each of you if Eric lives," and he unclasped his cloak and threw it over both of them.

Then with much labour they loosed the grip of the two men one from the other, and they set Skallagrim on the plank. But eight men bore Eric up the cliff between them, and the task was not light, though the Earl held his head, from which the golden hair hung like seaweed from a rock.

At length they came to the hall and carried them in. Swanhild, seeing

them come, moved down from the high seat.

"Bring lamps, and pile up the fires," cried Atli. "A strange thing has come to pass, Swanhild, and thou dost dream wisely, indeed, for here we have Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail. They were locked like lovers in each other's arms, but I know not if they are dead or living."

Now Swanhild started and came on swiftly. Had the Familiar tricked her and had she paid the price for nothing? Was Eric taken from Gudruda and given to her indeed--but given dead? She bent over him, gazing keenly on his face. Then she spoke.

"He is not dead but senseless. Bring dry clothes, and make water hot," and, kneeling down, she loosed Eric's helm and harness and ungirded Whitefire from his side.

For long Swanhild and Atli tended Eric at one fire, and the serving women tended Skallagrim at the other. Presently there came a cry that Skallagrim stirred, and Atli with others ran to see. At this moment also the eyes of Eric were unsealed, and Swanhild saw them looking at her dimly from beneath. Moved to it by her passion and her joy that he yet lived, Swanhild let her face fall till his was hidden in her unbound hair, and kissed him upon the lips. Eric shut his eyes again, sighing heavily, and presently he was asleep. They bore him to a bed and heaped warm wrappings upon him. At daybreak he woke, and Atli, who sat watching

at his side, gave him hot mead to drink.

"Do I dream?" said Eric, "or is it Earl Atli who tends me, and did I but now see the face of Swanhild bending over me?"

"It is no dream, Eric, but the truth. Thou hast been cast away here on my isle of Straumey."

"And Skallagrim--where is Skallagrim?"

"Skallagrim lives--fear not!"

"And my comrades, how went it with them?"

"But ill, Eric. Ran has them all. Now sleep!"

Eric groaned aloud. "I had rather died also than live to hear such heavy tidings," he said. "Witch-work! witch-work! and that fair witch-face wrought it." And once again he slept, nor did he wake till the sun was high. But Atli could make nothing of his words.

When Swanhild left the side of Eric she met Hall of Lithdale face to face and his looks were troubled.

"Say, lady," he asked, "will Brighteyes live?"

"Grieve not, Hall," she answered, "Eric will surely live and he will be glad to find a messmate here to greet him, having left so many yonder," and she pointed to the sea.

"I shall not be glad," said Hall, letting his eyes fall.

"Why not, Hall? Fearest thou Skallagrim? or hast thou done ill by Eric?"

"Ay, lady, I fear Skallagrim, for he swore to slay me, and that kind of promise he ever keeps. Also, if the truth must out, I have not dealt altogether well with Eric, and of all men I least wish to talk with him."

"Speak on," she said.

Then, being forced to it, Hall told her something of the tale of the cutting of the cable, being careful to put another colour on it.

"Now it seems that thou art a coward, Hall," Swanhild said when he had done, "and I scarcely looked for that in thee," for she had not been deceived by the glozing of his speech. "It will be bad for thee to meet Eric and Skallagrim, and this is my counsel: that thou goest hence before they wake, for they will sit this winter here in Atli's hall."

"And whither shall I go, lady?"

Swanhild gazed on him, and as she did so a dark thought came into her heart: here was a knave who might serve her ends.

"Hall," she said, "thou art an Icelander, and I have known of thee from a child, and therefore I wish to serve thee in thy strait, though thou deservest it little. See now, Atli the Earl has a farm on the mainland not two hours' ride from the sea. Thither thou shalt go, if thou art wise, and thou shalt sit there this winter and be hidden from Eric and Skallagrim. Nay, thank me not, but listen: it may chance that I shall have a service for thee to do before spring is come."

"Lady, I shall wait upon thy word," said Hall.

"Good. Now, so soon as it is light, I will find a man to sail with thee across the Firth, for the sea falls, and bear my message to the steward at Atli's farm. Also if thou needest faring-money thou shalt have it. Farewell."

Thus then did Hall fly before Eric and Skallagrim.

On the morrow Eric and Skallagrim arose, sick and bruised indeed, but not at all harmed, and went down to the shore. There they found many



dead men of their company, but never a one in whom the breath of life remained.

Skallagrim looked at Eric and spoke: "Last night the mist came up against the wind: last night we saw Swanhild's wraith upon the waves, and there is the path it showed, and there"--and he pointed to the dead men--"is the witch-seed's flower. Now to-day we sit in Atli's hall and here we must stay this winter at Swanhild's side, and in all this there lies a riddle that I cannot read."

But Eric shook his head, making no answer. Then, leaving Skallagrim with the dead, he turned, and striding back alone towards the hall, sat down on a rock in the home meadows and, covering his face with his hands, wept for his comrades.

As he wept Swanhild came to him, for she had seen him from afar, and touched him gently on the arm.

"Why weepest thou, Eric?" she said.

"I weep for the dead, Swanhild," he answered.

"Weep not for the dead--they are at peace; if thou must weep, weep for the living. Nay, weep not at all; rejoice rather that thou art here to mourn. Hast thou no word of greeting for me who have not heard thy voice these many months?"

"How shall I greet thee, Swanhild, who would never have seen thy face again if I might have had my will? Knowest thou that yesternight, as we laboured in yonder Firth, we saw a shape walking the waters to lead us to our doom? How shall I greet thee, Swanhild, who art a witch and evil?"

"And knowest thou, Eric, that yesternight I woke from sleep, having dreamed that thou didst lie upon the shore, and thus I saved thee alive, as perchance I have saved thee aforetime? If thou didst see a shape walking the waters it was that shape which led thee here. Hadst thou sailed on, not only those thou mournest, but Skallagrim and thou thyself had now been numbered with the lost."

"Better so than thus," said Brighteyes. "Knowest thou also, Swanhild, that when last night my life came back again in Atli's hall, methought that Atli's wife leaned over me and kissed me on the lips? That was an ill dream, Swanhild."

"Some had found it none so ill, Eric," she made answer, looking on him strangely. "Still, it was but a dream. Thou didst dream that Atli's wife breathed back the breath of life into thy pale lips--be sure of it thou didst but dream. Ah, Eric, fear me no more; forget the evil that I have wrought in the blindness and folly of my youth. Now things are otherwise with me. Now I am a wedded wife and faithful hearted to my lord. Now, if I still love thee, it is with a sister's love. Therefore forget my

sins, remember only that as children we played upon the Iceland fells. Remember that, as boy and girl, we rode along the marshes, while the sea-mews clamoured round our heads. The world is cold, Eric, and few are the friends we find in it; many are already gone, and soon the friendless dark draws near. So put me not away, my brother and my friend; but, for a little space, whilst thou art here in Atli's hall, let us walk hand in hand as we walked long years ago in Iceland, gathering up the fífa-bloom, and watching the midnight shadows creep up the icy jökul's crest."

Thus Swanhild spoke to him most sweetly, in a low voice of music, while the tears gathered in her eyes, talking ever of Iceland that he loved, and of days long dead, till Eric's heart softened in him.

"Almost do I believe thee, Swanhild," he said, stretching out his hand; "but I know thus: that thou art never twice in the same mood, and that is beyond my measuring. Thou hast done much evil and thou hast striven to do more; also I love not those who seem to walk the seas o' nights. Still, hold thou to this last saying of thine and there shall be peace between us while I bide here."

She touched his hand humbly and turned to go. But as she went Eric spoke again: "Say, Swanhild, hast thou tidings from Iceland yonder? I have heard no word of Asmund or of Gudruda for two long years and more."

She stood still, and a dark shadow that he could not see flitted across

her face.

"I have few tidings, Eric," she said, turning, "and those few, if I may trust them, bad enough. For this is the rumour that I have heard: that Asmund the Priest, my father, is dead; that Groa, my mother, is dead--how, I know not; and, lastly, that Gudruda the Fair, thy love, is betrothed to Ospakar Blacktooth and weds him in the spring."

Now Eric sprang up with an oath and grasped the hilt of Whitefire. Then he sat down again upon the stone and covered his face with his hands.

"Grieve not, Eric," she said gently; "I put no faith in this news, for rumour, like the black-backed gull, often changes colour in its flight across the seas. Also I had it but at fifth hand. I am sure of this, at least, that Gudruda will never forsake thee without a cause."

"It shall go ill with Ospakar if this be true," said Eric, smiling grimly, "for Whitefire is yet left me and with it one true friend."

"Run not to meet the evil, Eric. Thou shalt come to Iceland with the summer flowers and find Gudruda faithful and yet fairer than of yore. Knowest thou that Hall of Lithdale, who was thy mate, has sat here these two months? He is gone but this morning, I know not whither, leaving a message that he returns no more."

"He did well to go," said Eric, and he told her how Hall had cut the

cable.

"Ay, well indeed," answered Swanhild. "Had Atli known this he would have scourged Hall hence with rods of seaweed. And now, Eric, I desire to ask thee one more thing: why wearest thou thy hair long like a woman's? Indeed, few women have such hair as thine is now."

"For this cause, Swanhild: I swore to Gudruda that none should cut my hair till she cut it once more. It is a great burden to me surely, for never did hair grow so fast and strong as mine, and once in a fray I was held fast by it and went near to the losing of my life. Still, I will keep the oath even if it grows on to my feet," and he laughed a little and shook back his golden locks.

Swanhild smiled also and, turning, went. But when her face was hidden from him she smiled no more.

"As I live," she said in her heart, "before spring rains fall I again will cause thee to break this oath, Eric. Ay, I will cut a lock of that bright hair of thine and send it for a love-token to Gudruda."

But Eric still sat upon the rock thinking. Swanhild had set an evil seed of doubt in his heart, and already it put forth roots. What if the tale were true? What if Gudruda had given herself to Ospakar? Well, if so--she should soon be a widow, that he swore.

Then he rose, and stalked grimly towards the hall.