

## HOW ERIC WAS NAMED ANEW

Eric dreamed. He dreamed that Gudruda stood by him looking at him with soft, sad eyes, while with her hand she pointed to his hair, and spake.

"Thou hast done ill, Eric," she seemed to say. "Thou hast done ill to doubt me; and now thou art for ever shamed, for thou hast betrayed Atli, thy friend. Thou hast broken thy oath, and therefore hast thou fallen into this pit; for when Swanhild shore that lock of thine, my watching Spirit passed, leaving thee to Swanhild and thy fate. Now, I tell thee this: that shame shall lead to shame, and many lives shall pay forfeit for thy sin, Eric."

Eric awoke, thinking that this was indeed an evil dream which he had dreamed. He woke, and lo! by him was Swanhild, Atli's wife. He looked upon her beauty, and fear and shame crept into his heart, for now he knew that it was no dream, but he was lost indeed. He looked again at Swanhild, and hatred and loathing of her shook him. She had overcome him by her arts; that cup was drugged which he had drunk, and he was mad

with grief. Yes, she had played upon his woe like a harper on a harp, and now he was ashamed--now he had betrayed his friend who loved him! Had Whitefire been to his hand at that moment, Eric had surely slain himself. But the great sword was not there, for it hung in Swanhild's

bower. Eric groaned aloud, and Swanhild turned at the sound. But he sprang away and stood over her, cursing her.

"Thou witch!" he cried, "what hast thou done? What didst thou mix in that cup yestre'en? Thou hast brought me to this that I have betrayed Atli, my friend--Atli, thy lord, who left thee in my keeping!"

He seemed so terrible in his woe and rage that Swanhild shrank from him, and, throwing her hair about her face, peeped at him through its meshes as once she had peeped at Asmund.

"It is like a man," she said, gathering up her courage and her wit; "'tis like a man, having won my love, now to turn upon me and upbraid me. Fie upon thee, Eric! thou hast dealt ill with me to bring me to this."

Now Eric ceased his raving, and spoke more calmly.

"Well thou knowest the truth, Swanhild," he said.

"Hearken, Eric," she answered. "Let this be secret between us. Atli is old, and methinks that not for long shall he bide here in Straumey. Soon he will die; it is upon my mind that he soon will die, and, being childless, his lands and goods pass to me. Then, Eric, thou shalt sit in Atli's hall, and in all honour shall Atli's wife become thy bride."

Eric listened coldly. "I can well believe," he said, "that thou hast it in mind to slay thy lord, for all evil is in thy heart, Swanhild. Now know this: that if in honour or dishonour my lips touch that fair face of thine again, may the limbs rot from thy trunk, and may I lie a log for ever in the halls of Hela! If ever my eyes of their own will look again upon thy beauty, may I go blind and beg my meat from homestead to homestead! If ever my tongue whisper word of love into thy ears, may dumbness seize it, and may it wither to the root!"

Swanhild heard and sank upon the ground before him, her head bowed almost to her feet.

"Now, Swanhild, fare thee well," said Eric. "Living or dead, may I never see thy face again!"

She gazed up through her falling hair; her face was wild and white, and her eyes glowed in it as live embers glow in the ashes of burnt wood.

"We are not so easily parted, Eric," she said. "Not for this came I to witchcraft and to sin. Thou fool! hast thou never heard that, of all the foes a man may have, none is so terrible as the woman he has scorned? Thou shalt learn this lesson, Eric Brighteyes, Thorgrimur's son: for here we have but the beginning of the tale. For its end, I will write it in runes of blood."

"Write on," said Eric. "Thou canst do no worse than thou hast done," and

he passed thence.

For a while Swanhild crouched upon the ground, brooding in silence. Then she rose, and, throwing up her arms, wept aloud.

"Is it for this that I have sold my soul to the Hell-hag?" she cried.

"Is it for this that I have become a witch, and sunk so low as I sank last night--to be scorned, to be hated, to be betrayed? Now Eric will go to Atli and tell this tale. Nay, there I will be beforehand with him, and with another story--an ancient wile of women truly, but one that never yet has failed them, nor ever will. And then for vengeance! I will see thee dead, Eric, and dead will I see Gudruda at thy side! Afterwards let darkness come--ay, though the horror rides it! Swift!--I must be swift!"

Eric passed into Swanhild's bower, and, finding Whitefire, bore it thence. On the table was food. He took it. Then, going to the place where he was wont to sleep, he armed himself, girding his byrnie on his breast and his golden helm upon his head, and taking shield and spear in his hand. Then he passed out. By the men's door he found some women spreading fish in the sun. Eric greeted them, saying that when the Earl came back, for he was to come on that morning, he would find him on the south-western rocks nigh to where the Gudruda sank. This he begged of them to tell Atli, for he desired speech with him.

The women wondered that Brighteyes should go forth thus and fully armed, but, holding that he had some deed to do, they said nothing.

Eric came to the rocks, and there he sat all day long looking on the sea, and grieving so bitterly that he thought his heart would burst within him. For of all the days of Eric's life this was the heaviest, except one other only.

But Swanhild, going to her bower, caused Koll the Half-witted to be summoned. To him she spoke long and earnestly, and they made a shameful plot together. Then she bade Koll watch for Atli's coming and, when he saw the Earl leave his boats, to run to him and say that she would speak with him.

After this Swanhild sent a man across the firth to the stead where Hall of Lithdale sat, bidding him to come to her at speed.

When the afternoon grew towards the evening, Koll, watching, saw the boats of Atli draw to the landing-place. Then he went down, and, going to the Earl, bowed before him:

"What wouldst thou, fellow, and who art thou?" asked Atli.

"I am a man from Iceland; perchance, lord, thou sawest me in Asmund's

hall at Middalhof. I am sent here by the Lady Swanhild to say that she desires speech with thee, and that at once." Then, seeing Skallagrim, Koll fled back to the house, for he feared Skallagrim.

Now Atli was uneasy in his mind, and, saying nothing, he hurried up to the hall, and through it into Swanhild's bower.

There she sat on a couch, her eyes red with weeping, and her curling hair unbound.

"What now, Swanhild?" he asked. "Why lookest thou thus?"

"Why look I thus, my lord?" she answered heavily. "Because I have to tell thee that which I cannot find words to fit," and she ceased.

"Speak on," he said. "Is aught wrong with Eric?"

Then Swanhild drew near and told him a false tale.

When it was done for a moment or so Atli stood still, and grew white beneath his ruddy skin, white as his beard. Then he staggered back against the wainscoting of the bower.

"Woman, thou liest!" he said. "Never will I believe so vile a thing of Eric Brighteyes, whom I have loved."

"Would that I could not believe it!" she answered. "Would that I could think it was but an evil dream! But alas! Nay, I will prove it. Suffer that I summon Koll, the Icelfander, who was my mother's thrall--Groa who now is dead, for I have that tidings also. He saw something of this thing, and he will bear me witness."

"Call the man," said Atli sternly.

So Koll was summoned, and told his lies with a bold face. He was so well taught, and so closely did his story tally with that of Swanhild, that Atli could find no flaw in it.

"Now I am sure, Swanhild, that thou speakest truth," said the Earl when Koll had gone. "And now also I have somewhat to say to this Eric. For thee, rest thyself; that which cannot be mended must be borne," and he went out.

Now, when Skallagrim came to the house he asked for Eric. The women told him that Brighteyes had gone down to the sea, fully armed, in the morning, and had not returned.

"Then there must be fighting toward, and that I am loth to miss," said Skallagrim, and, axe aloft, he started for the south-western rocks at a run. Skallagrim came to the rocks. There he found Eric, sitting in his

harness, looking out across the sea. The evening was wet and windy; the rain beat upon him as he sat, but Eric took no heed.

"What seekest thou, lord?" asked the Baresark.

"Rest," said Eric, "and I find none."

"Thou seekest rest helm on head and sword in hand? This is a strange thing, truly!"

"Stranger things have been Skallagrim. Wouldst thou hear a tale?" and he told him all.

"What said I?" asked Skallagrim. "We had fared better in London town. Flying from the dove thou hast found the falcon."

"I have found the falcon, comrade, and she has pecked out my eyes. Now I would speak with Atli, and then I go hence."

"Hence go the twain of us, lord. The Earl will be here presently and rough words will fly in this rough weather. Is Whitefire sharp, Brighteyes?"

"Whitefire was sharp enough to shear my hair, Skallagrim; but if Atli would strike let him lay on. Whitefire will not be aloft for him."



"That we shall see," said Skallagrim. "At least, if thou art harmed because of this loose quean, my axe will be aloft."

"Keep thou thine axe in its place," said Eric, and as he spoke Atli came, and with him many men.

Eric rose and turned to meet the Earl, looking on him with sad eyes. For Atli, his face was as the face of a trapped wolf, for he was mad with rage at the shame that had been put upon him and the ill tale that Swanhild had told of Eric's dealings with her.

"It seems that the Earl has heard of these tidings," said Skallagrim.

"Then I shall be spared the telling of them," answered Eric.

Now they stood face to face; Atli leaned upon his drawn sword, and his wrath was so fierce that for a while he could not speak. At length he found words.

"See ye that man, comrades?" he said, pointing at Eric with the sword.

"He has been my guest these many months. He has sat in my hall and eaten of my bread, and I have loved him as a son. And wot ye how he has repaid me? He has put me to the greatest shame, me and my wife the Lady Swanhild, whom I left in his guard--to such shame, indeed, that I cannot speak it."

"True words, Earl," said Eric, while folk murmured and handled their swords.

"True, but not all the truth," growled Skallagrim. "Methinks the Earl has heard a garbled tale."

"True words, thyself thou sayest it," went on Atli "thou hound that I saved from the sea! 'Ran's gift, Hela's gift,' so runs the saw, and now from Ran to Hela thou shalt go, thou mishandler of defenceless women!"

"Here is somewhat of which I know nothing," said Eric.

"And here is something of which thou shalt know," answered Atli, and he shook his sword before Eric's eyes. "Guard thyself!"

"Nay, Earl; thou art old, and I have done the wrong--I may not fight with thee."

"Art thou a coward also?" said the Earl.

"Some have deemed otherwise," said Eric, "but it is true that heavy heart makes weak hand. Nevertheless this is my rede. With thee are ten men. Stand thou aside and let them fall on me till I am slain."

"The odds are too heavy even for thee," said Skallagrim. "Back to back,

lord, as we have stood aforetime, and let us play this game together."

"Not so," cried Atli, "this shame is mine, and I have sworn to Swanhild that I will wipe it out in Eric's blood. Stand thou before me and draw!"

Then Eric drew Whitefire and raised his shield. Atli the Earl rushed at him and smote a great two-handed blow. Eric caught it on his shield and suffered no harm; but he would not smite back.

Atli dropped his point. "Niddering art thou, and coward to the last!" he cried. "See, men, Eric Brighteyes fears to fight. I am not come to this that I will cut down a man who is too faint-hearted to give blow for blow. This is my word: take ye your spear-shafts and push this coward to the shore. Then put him in a boat and drive him hence."

Now Eric grew red as the red light of sunset, for his manhood might not bear this.

"Take shield," he said, "and, Earl, on thine own head be thy blood, for none shall live to call Eric niddering and coward."

Atli laughed in his folly and his rage. He took a shield, and, once more springing on Brighteyes, struck a great blow.

Eric parried, then whirled Whitefire on high and smote--once and once only! Down rushed the bright blade like a star through the night. Sword

and shield did Atli lift to catch the blow. Through shield it sheared,  
and arm that held the shield, through byrnie mail and deep into Earl  
Atli's side. He fell prone to earth, while men held their breath,  
wondering at the greatness of that stroke.

But Eric leaned on Whitefire and looked at the old Earl upon the rock.

"Now, Atli, thou hast had thy way," he said, "and methinks things are  
worse than they were before. But I will say this: would that I lay there  
and thou stoodest to watch me die, for as lief would I have slain my  
father as thee, Earl Atli. There lies Swanhild's work!"

Atli gazed upwards into Eric's sad eyes and, while he gazed so, his rage  
left him, and of a sudden a light brake upon his mind, as even then the  
light of the setting sun brake through the driving mist.

"Eric," he said, "draw near and speak with me ere I am sped. Methinks  
that I have been beguiled and that thou didst not do this thing that  
Swanhild said and Koll bore witness to."

"What did Swanhild say, then, Earl Atli?"

The Earl told him.

"It was to be looked for from her," said Eric, "though I never thought  
of it. Now hearken!" and he told him all.

Atli groaned aloud. "I know this now, Eric," he said: "that thou speakest truth, and once more I have been deceived. Eric, I forgive thee all, for no man may fight against woman's witchcraft, and witch's wine. Swanhild is evil to the heart. Yet, Eric, I lay this doom upon thee--I do not lay it of my own will, for I would not harm thee, whom I love, but because of the words that the Norns put in my mouth, for now I am fey in this the hour of my death. Thou hast sinned, and that thou didst sin against thy will shall avail thee nothing, for of thy sin fate shall fashion a handle to the spear which pierces thee. Henceforth thou art accursed. For I tell thee that this wicked woman Swanhild shall drag thee down to death, and worse than death, and with thee those thou lovest. By witchcraft she brought thee to Straumey, by lies she laid me here before thee. Now by hate and might and cruel deeds shall she bring thee to lie more low than I do. For, Eric, thou art bound to her, and thou shalt never loose the bond!"

Atli ceased a while, then spoke again more faintly:

"Hearken, comrades," he cried; "my strength is well-nigh spent. Ye shall swear four things to me--that ye will give Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail safe passage from Straumey. That ye will tell Swanhild the Fatherless, Groa's daughter and Atli's wife, that, at last, I know her for what she is--a murderess, a harlot, a witch and a liar; and that I forgive Eric whom she tricked, but that her I hate and spit upon. That ye will slay Koll the Half-witted, Groa's thrall, who came

hither about two days gone, since by his lies he hath set an edge upon this sword of falsehood. That ye will raise no blood-feud against Eric for this my slaying, for I goaded him to the deed. Do ye swear?"

"We swear," said the men.

"Then farewell! And to thee farewell, also, Eric Brighteyes! Now take my hand and hold it while I die. Behold! I give thee a new name, and by that name thou shalt be called in story. I name thee \_Eric the Unlucky\_. Of all tales that are told, thine shall be the greatest. A mighty stroke that was of thine--a mighty stroke! Farewell!"

Then his head fell back upon the rock and Earl Atli died. And as he died the last rays of light went out of the sky.