

HOW HALL OF LITHDALE TOOK TIDINGS TO ICELAND

Now on the same night that Atli died at the hand of Eric, Swanhild spake with Hall of Lithdale, whom she had summoned from the mainland. She bade

him do this: take passage in a certain ship that should sail for Iceland on the morrow from the island that is called Westra, and there tell all these tidings of the ill-doings of Eric and of the slaying of Atli by his hand.

"Thou shalt say this," she went on, "that Eric had been my love for long, but that at length the matter came to the ears of Atli, the Earl. Then, holding this the greatest shame, he went on holmgang with Eric and was slain by him. This shalt thou add to thy tale also, that presently Eric and I will wed, and that Eric shall rule as Earl in Orkneys. Now these tidings must soon come to the ears of Gudruda the Fair, and she will send for thee, and question thee straightly concerning them, and thou shalt tell her the tale as thou toldest it at first. Then thou shalt give Gudruda this packet, which I send her as a gift, saying, that I bade her remember a certain oath which Eric took as to the cutting of his hair. And when she sees that which is within the packet is somewhat stained, tell her that is but the blood of Atli that is upon it, as his blood is upon Eric's hands. Now remember thou this, Hall, that if thou fail in the errand thy life shall pay forfeit, for presently I will also

come to Iceland and hear how thou hast sped."

Then Swanhild gave him faring-money and gifts of wadmal and gold rings, promising that he should have so much again when she came to Iceland.

Hall said that he would do all these things, and went at once; nor did he fail in his tasks.

Atli being dead, Eric loosed his hand and called to the men to take up his body and bear it to the hall. This they did. Eric stood and watched them till they were lost in the darkness.

"Whither now, lord?" said Skallagrim.

"It matters little," said Eric. "What is thy counsel?"

"This is my counsel. That we take ship and sail back to the King in London. There we will tell all this tale. It is a far cry from Straumey to London town, and there we shall sit in peace, for the King will think little of the slaying of an Orkney Earl in a brawl about a woman. Mayhap, too, the Lady Elfrida will not set great store by it. Therefore, I say, let us fare back to London."

"In but one place am I at home, and that is Iceland," said Eric.

"Thither I will go, Skallagrim, though it be but to miss friend from
stead and bride from bed. At the least I shall find Ospakar there."

"Listen, lord!" said Skallagrim. "Was it not my rede that we should bide
this winter through in London? Thou wouldst none of it, and what
came about? Our ship is sunk, gone are our comrades, thine honour is
tarnished, and dead is thy host at thine own hand. Yet I say all is not
lost. Let us hence south, and see no more of Swanhild, of Gudruda, of
Björn and Ospakar. So shall we break the spell. But if thou goest to
Iceland, I am sure of this: that the evil fate which Atli foretold will
fall on thee, and the days to come shall be even more unlucky than the
days that have been."

"It may be so," said Eric. "Methinks, indeed, it will be so. Henceforth
I am Eric the Unlucky. I will go back to Iceland and there play out
the game. I care little if I live or am slain--I have no more joy in my
life. I stand alone, like a fir upon a mountain-top, and every wind from
heaven and every storm of hail and snow beats upon my head. But I say to
thee, Skallagrim: go thy road, and leave a luckless man to his ill fate.
Otherwise it shall be thine also. Good friend hast thou been to me; now
let us part and wend south and north. The King will be glad to greet
thee yonder in London, Lambstail."

"But one severing shall we know, lord," said Skallagrim, "and that shall
be sword's work, nor will it be for long. It is ill to speak such words
as these of the parting of lord and thrall. Bethink thee of the oath I

swore on Mosfell. Let us go north, since it is thy will: in fifty years it will count for little which way we wended from the Isles."

So they went together down to the shore, and, finding a boat and men who as yet knew nothing of what had chanced to Atli, they sailed across the firth at the rising of the moon.

Two days afterwards they found a ship at Wick that was bound for Fareys, and sailed in her, Eric buying a passage with the half of a gold ring that the King had given him in London.

Here at Fareys they sat a month or more; but not in the Earl's hall as when Eric came with honour in the Gudruda, but in a farmer's stead. For the tale of Eric's dealings with Atli and Atli's wife had reached Fareys, and the Earl there had been a friend of Atli's. Moreover, Eric was now a poor man, having neither ship nor goods, nor friends. Therefore all looked coldly on him, though they wondered at his beauty and his might. Still, they dared not to speak ill or make a mock of him; for, two men having done so, were nearly slain of Skallagrim, who seized the twain by the throat, one in either hand, and dashed their heads together. After that men said little.

They sat there a month, till at length a chapman put in at Fareys, bound for Iceland, and they took passage with him, Eric paying the other half of his gold ring for ship-room. The chapman was not willing to give them place at first, for he, too, had heard the tale; but Skallagrim offered

him choice, either to do so or to go on holmgang with him. Then the chapman gave them passage.

Now it is told that when his thralls and house-carles bore the corpse of Atli the Earl to his hall in Straumey, Swanhild met it and wept over it.

And when the spokesman among them stood forward and told her those words

that Atli had bidden them to say to her, sparing none, she spoke thus:

"My lord was distraught and weak with loss of blood when he spoke thus. The tale I told him was true, and now Eric has added to his sin by shedding the blood of him whom he wronged so sorely."

And thereafter she spoke so sweetly and with so much gentleness, craft, and wisdom that, though they still doubted them, all men held her words weighty. For Swanhild had this art, that she could make the false sound true in the ears of men and the true sound false.

Still, being mindful of their oath, they hunted for Koll and found him. And when the thrall knew that they would slay him he ran thence screaming. Nor did Swanhild lift a hand to save his life, for she desired that Koll should die, lest he should bear witness against her. Away he ran towards the cliffs, and after him sped Atli's house-carles, till he came to the great cliffs that edge in the sea. Now they were

close upon him and their swords were aloft. Then, sooner than know the kiss of steel, the liar leapt from the cliffs and was crushed, dying miserably on the rocks below. This was the end of Koll the Half-witted, Groa's thrall.

Swanhild sat in Straumey for a while, and took all Atli's heritage into her keeping, for he had no male kin; nor did any say her nay. Also she called in the moneys that he had out at interest, and that was a great sum, for Atli was a careful and a wealthy man. Then Swanhild made ready to go to Iceland. Atli had a great dragon of war, and she manned that ship and filled it with stores and all things needful. This done, she set stewards and grieves over the Orkney lands and farms, and, when the Earl was six weeks dead, she sailed for Iceland, giving out that she went thither to set a blood-suit on foot against Eric for the death of Atli, her lord. There she came in safety just as folk rode to the Thing.

Now Hall of Lithdale came to Iceland and told his tale of the doings of Eric and the death of Atli. Oft and loud he told it, and soon people gossiped of it in field and fair and stead. Björn, Asmund's son, heard this talk and sent for Hall. To him also Hall told the tale.

"Now," said Björn, "we will go to my sister Gudruda the Fair, and learn how she takes these tidings."

So they went in to where Gudruda sat spinning in the hall, singing as she span.

"Greeting, Gudruda," said Björn; "say, hast thou tidings of Eric Brighteyes, thy betrothed?"

"I have no tidings," said Gudruda.

"Then here is one who brings them."

Now for the first time Gudruda the Fair saw Hall of Lithdale. Up she sprang. "Thou hast tidings of Eric, Hall? Ah! thou art welcome, for no tidings have come of him for many a month. Speak on," and she pressed her hand against her heart and leaned towards him.

"My tidings are ill, lady."

"Is Eric dead? Say not that my love is dead!"

"He is worse than dead," said Hall. "He is shamed."

"There thou liest, Hall," she answered. "Shame and Eric are things apart."

"Mayst thou think so when thou hast heard my tale, lady," said Hall, "for I am sad at heart to speak it of one who was my mate."

"Speak on, I say," answered Gudruda, in such a voice that Hall shrank from her. "Speak on; but of this I warn thee: that if in one word thou liest, that shall be thy death when Eric comes."

Now Hall was afraid, thinking of the axe of Skallagrim. Still, he might not go back upon his word. So he began at the beginning, telling the story of how he was wounded in the fight with Ospakar's ships and left Farey isles, and how he came thence to Scotland and sat in Atli's hall on Orkneys. Then he told how the Gudruda was wrecked on Straumey, and, of all aboard, Eric and Skallagrim alone were saved because of Swanhild's dream.

"Herein I see witch-work," said Gudruda.

Then Hall told that Eric became Swanhild's love, but of the other tale which Swanhild had whispered to Atli he said nothing. For he knew that Gudruda would not believe this, and, moreover, if it were so, Swanhild had not sent the token which he should give.

"It may well be," said Gudruda, proudly; "Swanhild is fair and light of mind. Perchance she led Brighteyes into this snare." But, though she spoke thus, bitter jealousy and anger burned in her breast and she remembered the sight which she had seen when Eric and Swanhild met on the morn of Atli's wedding.

Then Hall told of the slaying of Atli the Good by Eric, but he said nothing of the Earl's dying words, nor of how he goaded Brighteyes with his bitter words.

"It was an ill deed in sooth," said Gudruda, "for Eric to slay an old man whom he had wronged. Still, it may chance that he was driven to it for his own life's sake."

Then Hall said that he had seen Swanhild after Atli's slaying, and that she had told him that she and Eric should wed shortly, and that Eric would rule in Orkneys by her side.

Gudruda asked if that was all his tale.

"Yes, lady," answered Hall, "that is all my tale, for after that I sailed and know not what happened. But I am charged to give something to thee, and that by the Lady Swanhild. She bade me say this also: that, when thou lookest on the gift, thou shouldst think on a certain oath which Eric took as to the cutting of his hair." And he drew a linen packet from his breast and gave it to her.

Thrice Gudruda looked on it, fearing to open it. Then, seeing the smile of mockery on Björn's cold face, she took the shears that hung at her side and cut the thread with them. And as she cut, a lock of golden hair rose from the packet, untwisting itself like a living snake. The lock was long, and its end was caked with gore.

"Whose hair is this?" said Gudruda, though she knew the hair well.

"Eric's hair," said Hall, "that Swanhild cut from his head with Eric's sword."

Now Gudruda put her hand to her bosom. She drew out a satchel, and from the satchel a lock of yellow hair. Side by side she placed the locks, looking first at one and then at the other.

"This is Eric's hair in sooth," she said--"Eric's hair that he swore none but I should cut! Eric's hair that Swanhild shore with Whitefire from Eric's head--Whitefire whereon we plighted troth! Say now, whose blood is this that stains the hair of Eric?"

"It is Atli's blood, whom Eric first dishonoured and then slew with his own hand," answered Hall.

Now there burned a fire on the hearth, for the day was cold. Gudruda the Fair stood over the fire and with either hand she let the two locks of Eric's hair fall upon the embers. Slowly they twisted up and burned. She watched them burn, then she threw up her hands and with a great cry fled from the hall.

Björn and Hall of Lithdale looked on each other.

"Thou hadst best go hence!" said Björn; "and of this I warn thee, Hall, though I hold thy tidings good, that, if thou hast spoken one false word, that will be thy death. For then it would be better for thee to face all the wolves in Iceland than to stand before Eric in his rage."

Again Hall bethought himself of the axe of Skallagrim, and he went out heavily.

That day a messenger came from Gudruda to Björn, saying that she would speak with him. He went to where she sat alone upon her bed. Her face was white as death, and her dark eyes glowed.

"Eric has dealt badly with thee, sister, to bring thee to this sorrow," said Björn.

"Speak no evil of Eric to me," Gudruda answered. "The evil that he has done will be paid back to him; there is little need for thee to heap words upon his head. Hearken, Björn my brother: is it yet thy will that I should wed Ospakar Blacktooth?"

"That is my will, surely. There is no match in Iceland as this Ospakar, and I should win many friends by it."

"Do this then, Björn. Send messengers to Swinefell and say to Ospakar

that if he would still wed Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter, let him come to Middalhof when folk ride from the Thing and he shall not go hence alone. Nay, I have done. Now, I pray thee speak no more to me of Eric or of Ospakar. Of the one I have seen and heard enough, and of the other I shall hear and see enough in the years that are to come."