

XXIV

HOW THE FEAST WENT

"Hearken all men!" said Eric.

"Thrust him out!" quoth Björn.

"Nay, cut him down!" said Ospakar, "he is an outlawed man."

"Words first, then deeds," answered Skallagrim. "Thou shalt have thy fill of both, Blacktooth, before day is done."

"Let Eric say his say," said Gudruda, lifting her head. "He has been doomed unheard, and it is my will that he shall say his say."

"What hast thou to do with Eric?" snarled Ospakar.

"The bride-cup is not yet drunk, lord," she answered.

"To thee, then, I will speak, lady," quoth Eric. "How comes it that, being betrothed to me, thou dost sit there the bride of Ospakar?"

"Ask of Swanhild," said Gudruda in a low voice. "Ask also of Hall of Lithdale yonder, who brought me Swanhild's gift from Straumey."

"I must ask much of Hall and he must answer much," said Eric. "What tale, then, did he bring thee from Straumey?"

"He said this, Eric," Gudruda answered: "that thou wast Swanhild's love; that for Swanhild's sake thou hadst basely killed Atli the Good, and that thou wast about to wed Swanhild's self and take the Earl's seat in Orkneys."

"And for what cause was I made outlaw at the Althing?"

"For this cause, Eric," said Björn, "that thou hadst dealt evilly with Swanhild, bringing her to shame against her will, and thereafter that thou hadst slain the Earl, her husband."

"Which, then, of these tales is true? for both cannot be true," said Brighteyes. "Speak, Swanhild."

"Thou knowest well that the last is true," said Swanhild boldly.

"How then comes it that thou didst charge Hall with that message to Gudruda? How then comes it that thou didst send her the lock of hair which thou didst cozen me to give thee?"

"I charged Hall with no message, and I sent no lock of hair," Swanhild answered.

"Stand thou forward, Hall!" said Eric, "and liar and coward though thou art, dare not to speak other than the truth! Nay, look not at the door: for, if thou stirrest, this spear shall find thee before thou hast gone a pace!"

Now Hall stood forward, trembling with fear, for he saw the eye of Skallagrim watching him close, and while Lambstail watched, his fingers toyed with the handle of his axe.

"It is true, lord, that Swanhild charged me with that message which I gave to the Lady Gudruda. Also she bade me give the lock of hair."

"And for this service thou didst take money, Hall?"

"Ay, lord, she gave me money for my faring."

"And all the while thou knewest the tidings false?"

Hall made no reply.

"Answer!" thundered Eric--"answer the truth, knave, or by every God that passes the hundred gates I will not spare thee twice!"

"It is so, lord," said Hall.

"Thou liest, fox!" cried Swanhild, white with wrath and casting a fierce

look upon Hall. But men took no heed of Swanhild's words, for all eyes were bent on Eric.

"Is it now your pleasure, comrades, that I should tell you the truth?"
said Brighteyes.

The most part of the company shouted "Yea!" but the men of Ospakar stood silent.

"Speak on, Eric," quoth Gudruda.

"This is the truth, then: Swanhild the Fatherless, Atli's wife, has always sought my love, and she has ever hated Gudruda whom I loved. From a child she has striven to work mischief between us. Ay, and she did this, though till now it has been hidden: she strove to murder Gudruda; it was on the day that Skallagrim and I overcame Ospakar and his band on Horse-Head Heights. She thrust Gudruda from the brink of Golden Falls while she sat looking on the waters, and as she hung there I dragged her back. Is it not so, Gudruda?"

"It is so," said Gudruda.

Now men murmured and looked at Swanhild. But she shrank back, plucking at her purple cloak.

"It was for this cause," said Eric, "that Asmund, Swanhild's father, gave her choice to wed Atli the Earl and pass over sea or to take her trial in the Doom-Ring. She wedded Atli and went away. Afterwards, by witchcraft, she brought my ship to wreck on Straumey's Isle--ay, she walked the waters like a shape of light and lured us on to ruin, so that all were drowned except Skallagrim and myself. Is it not so, Skallagrim?"

"It is so, lord. I saw her with my eyes."

Again folk murmured.

"Then we must sit in Atli's hall," said Eric, "and there we dwelt last winter. For a while Swanhild did no harm, till I feared her no more. But some three months ago, I was left with her: and a man called Koll, Groa's thrall, of whom ye know, came out from Iceland, bringing news of the death of Asmund the priest, of Unna my cousin, and of Groa the witch. To these ill-tidings Swanhild bribed him to add something. She bribed him to add this: that thou, Gudruda, wast betrothed to Ospakar, and wouldst wed him on last Yule Day. Moreover, he gave me a certain message from thee, Gudruda, and, in token of its truth, the half of that coin which I broke with thee long years ago. Say now, lady, didst thou send the coin?"

"Nay, never!" cried Gudruda; "many years ago I lost the half thou gavest me, though I feared to tell thee."

"Perchance one stands there who found it," said Eric, pointing with his spear at Swanhild. "At the least I was deceived by it. Now the tale is short. Swanhild mourned with me, and in my sorrow I mourned bitterly. Then it was she asked a boon, that lock of mine, Gudruda, and, thinking thee faithless, I gave it, holding all oaths broken. Then too, when I would have left her, she drugged me with a witch-draught--ay, she drugged me, and I woke to find myself false to my oath, false to Atli, and false to thee, Gudruda. I cursed her and I left her, waiting for the Earl, to tell him all. But Swanhild outwitted me. She told him that other tale of shame that ye have heard, and brought Koll to him as witness of the tale. Atli was deceived by her, and not until I had cut him down in anger at the bitter words he spoke, calling me coward and niddering, did he know the truth. But before he died he knew it; and he died, holding my hand and bidding those about him find Koll and slay him. Is it not so, ye who were Atli's men?"

"It is so, Eric!" they cried; "we heard it with our own ears, and we slew Koll. But afterwards Swanhild brought us to believe that Earl Atli was distraught when he spoke thus, and that things were indeed as she had said."

Again men murmured, and a strange light shone in Gudruda's eyes.

"Now, Gudruda, thou hast heard all my story," said Eric. "Say, dost thou believe me?"

"I believe thee, Eric."

"Say then, wilt thou still wed yon Ospakar?"

Gudruda looked on Blacktooth, then she looked at golden Eric and opened her lips to speak. But before a word could pass them Ospakar rose in wrath, laying his hand upon his sword.

"Thinkest thou thus to lure away my dove, outlaw? First I will see thee food for crows."

"Well spoken, Blacktooth," laughed Eric. "I waited for such words from thee. Thrice have we striven together--once out yonder in the snow, once on Horse-Head Heights, and once by Westman Isles--and still we live to tell the tale. Come down, Ospakar: come down from that soft seat of thine and here and now let us put it to the proof who is the better man. When we met before, the stake was Whitefire set against my eye. Now the stake is our lives and fair Gudruda's hand. Talk no more, Ospakar, but fall to it."

"Gudruda shall never wed thee, while I live!" said Björn; "thou art a landless loon, a brawler, and an outlaw. Get thee gone, Eric, with thy wolf-hound!"

"Squeak not so loud, rat--squeak not so loud, lest hound's fang worry

thee!" said Skallagrim.

"Whether I wed Gudruda or whether I wed her not is a matter that shall be known in its season," said Eric. "For thy words, I say this: that it is risky to hurl names at such as I am, Björn, lest perchance I answer them with spear-thrusts. Thy answer, Ospakar! What need to wait? Thy answer!"

Now Ospakar looked at Brighteyes and grew afraid. He was a mighty man, but he knew the weight of Eric's arm.

"I will not fight with thee, carle," he said, "who hast naught to lose."

"Then thou art coward and niddering!" said Eric. "Ospakar _Niddering_ I name thee here before all men! What! thou couldst plot against me--thou couldst waylay me, ten to one and two ships to one, but face to face with me alone thou dost not dare to stand? Comrades, look on your lord!--look at Ospakar the _Niddering!_"

Now the swarthy brow of Blacktooth grew red with rage, and his breath came in great gasps. "Ho, men!" he cried, "drive this knave away. Strip his harness off him and whip him hence with rods."

"Let but a man stir towards me and this spear flies through thy heart, Niddering," cried Eric. "Gudruda, what thinkest thou of thy lord?"

"I know this," said Gudruda, "that I will not wed a man who is named 'Niddering' in the face of all and lifts no sword."

Gudruda spoke thus, because she was mad with love and fear and shame, and she desired that Eric should stand face to face with Ospakar Blacktooth, for thus, alone, she might perhaps be rid of Ospakar.

"Such words do not come well from gentle lips," said Björn.

"Is it to be borne, brother," answered Gudruda, "that the man who would call me wife should be named Ospakar the Niddering? When that shame is washed away, and then only, can I think on marriage. I will never be Niddering's bride!"

"Thou hearest, Ospakar Niddering?" said Eric. Then he gave the spear in his hand to Skallagrim, and, gripping Whitefire's hilt, he burst the peace-strings, and tore it from the scabbard.

Now the great sword shone on high like lightning leaping from a cloud, and as it shone men shouted, "_Ospakar! Ospakar Niddering!_ Come, win back Whitefire from Eric's hand, or be for ever shamed!"

Blacktooth could endure this no more. He snatched sword and shield, and, like a bear from a cave, like a wolf from his lair, rushed roaring from his seat. On he came, and the ground shook beneath his bulk.

"At last, Niddering!" cried Eric, and sprang to meet him.

"Back! all men, back!" shouted Skallagrim, "now we shall see blows."

As he spoke the great swords flashed aloft and clanged upon the iron shields. So heavy were the blows that fire leapt out from them. Ospakar reeled back beneath the shock, and Eric was beaten to his knee. Now he was up, but as he rushed, Ospakar struck again and swept away half of Brighteyen's pointed shield so that it fell upon the floor. Eric smote also, but Ospakar dropped his knee to earth and the sword hissed over him. Blacktooth cut at Eric's legs; but Brighteyes sprang from the ground and took no harm.

Now some cried, "_Eric! Eric!_" and some cried "_Ospakar! Ospakar!_" for no one knew how the fight would go.

Gudruda sat watching in the high seat, and as blows fell her colour came and went.

Swanhild drew near, watching also, and she desired in her fierce heart to see Eric brought to shame and death, for, should he win, then Gudruda would be rid of Ospakar. Now by her side stood Gizur, Ospakar's son, and near to her was Björn. These two held their breath, for, if Eric conquered, all their plans were brought to nothing.

Even as he sprang into the air, Eric smote down with all his strength.

The blow fell on Ospakar's shield. It shored through the shield and struck on the shoulder beneath. But Blacktooth's byrnie was good, nor did the sword bite into it. Still the stroke was so heavy that Ospakar staggered back four paces beneath it, then fell upon the ground.

Now folk raised a shout of "_Eric! Eric!_" for it seemed that Ospakar was sped. Brighteyes, too, cried aloud, then rushed forward. Now, as he came, Swanhild whispered an eager word into the ear of Björn. By Björn's foot lay that half of Eric's shield which had been shorn away by the sword of Ospakar. Gudruda, watching, saw Björn push it with his shoe so that it slid before the feet of Brighteyes. His right foot caught on it, he stumbled heavily--stumbled again, then fell prone on his face, and, as he fell, stretched out his sword hand to save himself, so that Whitefire flew from his grasp. The blade struck its hilt against the ground, then circled in the air and fixed itself, point downwards, in the clay of the flooring. The hand of Ospakar rising from the ground smote against the hilt of Whitefire. He saw it, with a shout he cast his own sword away and clasped Whitefire.

Away circled the sword of Ospakar; and of that cast this strange thing is told, false or true. Far in the corner of the hall lurked Thorunna, she who had betrayed Skallagrim when he was named Ounound. She had come with a heavy heart to Middalhof in the company of Ospakar; but when she saw Skallagrim, her husband--whom she had betrayed, and who had turned Baresark because of her wickedness--shame smote her, and she crept away

and hid herself behind the hangings of the hall. The sword sped along point first, it rushed like a spear through the air. It fell on the hangings, piercing them, piercing the heart of Thorunna, who cowered behind them, so that with one cry she sank dead to earth, slain by her lover's hand.

Now when men saw that Ospakar once more held Whitefire in his hand--Whitefire that Brighteyes had won from him--they called aloud that it was an omen. The sword of Blacktooth had come back to Blacktooth and now Eric would surely be slain of it!

Eric sprang from the ground. He heard the shouts and saw Whitefire blazing in Ospakar's hand.

"Now thou art weaponless, fly! Brighteyes; fly!" cried some.

Gudruda's cheek grew white with fear, and for a moment Eric's heart failed him.

"Fly not!" roared Skallagrim. "Björn tripped thee. Yet hast thou half a shield!"

Ospakar rushed on, and Whitefire flickered over Eric's helm. Down it came and shore one wing from the helm. Again it shone and fell, but

Brighteyes caught the blow on his broken shield.

Then, while men waited to see him slain, Eric gave a great war-shout and sprang forward.

"Thou art mad!" shouted the folk.

"Ye shall see! Ye shall see!" screamed Skallagrim.

Again Ospakar smote and again Eric caught the blow; and behold! he struck back, thrusting with the point of the shorn shield straight at the face of Ospakar.

"_Peck! Eagle; peck!_" cried Skallagrim.

Once more Whitefire shone above him. Eric rushed in beneath the sword, and with all his mighty strength thrust the buckler-point at Blacktooth's face. It struck fair and full, and lo! the helm of Ospakar burst asunder. He threw wide his giant arms, then fell as a pine falls upon the mountain edge. He fell back, and he lay still.

But Eric, stooping over him, took Whitefire from his hand.