

XXV

HOW THE FEAST ENDED

For a moment there was silence in the hall, for men had known no such fight as this.

"Why, then, do ye gape?" laughed Skallagrim, pointing with the spear. "Dead is Ospakar!--slain by the swordless man! Eric Brighteyes hath slain Ospakar Blacktooth!"

Then there went up such a shout as never was heard in the hall of Middalhof.

Now when Gudruda knew that Ospakar was sped, she looked at Eric as he rested, leaning on his sword, and her heart was filled with awe and love. She sprang from her seat, and, coming to where Brighteyes stood, she greeted him.

"Welcome to Iceland, Eric!" she said. "Welcome, thou glory of the south!"

Now Swanhild grew wild, for she saw that Eric was about to take Gudruda in his arms and kiss her before all men.

"Say, Björn," she cried; "wilt thou suffer that this outlaw, having

slain Ospakar, should lead Gudruda hence as wife?"

"He shall never do so while I live," cried Björn, nearly mad with rage.

"This is my command, sister: that thou dost see Eric no more."

"Say, Björn," answered Gudruda, "did I dream, or did I indeed see thee thrust the broken buckler before Eric's feet, so that he stumbled on it and fell?"

"That thou sawest, lady," said Skallagrim; "for I saw it also."

Now Björn grew white in his anger. He did not answer Gudruda, but called aloud to his men to slay Eric and Skallagrim. Gizur called also to the folk of Ospakar, and Swanhild to those who came with her.

Then Gudruda fled back to her seat.

But Eric cried aloud also: "Ye who love me, cleave to me. Suffer it not that Brighteyes be cut down of northerners and outland men. Hear me, Atli's folk; hear me, carles of Coldback and of Middalhof!"

And so greatly did many love Eric that half of the thralls of Björn, and almost all of the company of Swanhild who had been Atli's shield-men and Brighteyes' comrades, drew swords, shouting "Eric! Eric!" But the carles of Ospakar came on to make an end of him.

Björn saw, and, drawing sword, smote at Brighteyes, taking him unawares. But Skallagrim caught the blow upon his axe, and before Björn could smite again Whitefire was aloft and down fell Björn, dead!

That was the end of Björn, Asmund's son.

"Thou hast squeaked thy last, rat! What did I tell thee?" cried Skallagrim. "Take Björn's shield and back to back, lord, for here come foes."

"There goes one," answered Eric, pointing to the door.

Now Hall of Lithdale slunk through the doorway--Hall, the liar, who cut the grapnel-chain--for he wished to see the last of Skallagrim. But the Baresark still held Eric's spear in his hand. He whirled it aloft, and it hissed through the air. The aim was good, for, as he crept away, the spear struck Hall between neck and shoulder, pinning him to the doorpost, and there the liar died.

"Now the weasel is nailed to the beam," said Skallagrim. "Hall of Lithdale, what did I promise thee?"

"Guard thy head and my back," quoth Eric; "blows fall!"

Now men smote at Eric and Skallagrim, nor did they spare to smite in turn. And as foes fell before him, Eric stepped one pace forward towards

the door, and Skallagrim, who, back to back with him, held off those who pressed behind, took one step rearwards. Thus, a foe for every step, they won their way down the long hall. Fierce raged the fray around them, for, made with hate and drink and the lust of fight, Swanhild's folk--Eric's friends--remembering the words of Atli, fell on Ospakar's; and the people of Björn fell on each other, brother on brother, and father on son--nor might the fray be stayed. The boards were overthrown, dead men lay among the meats and mead, and the blood of freeman, lord and thrall ran adown the floor. Everywhere through the dusky hall glittered the sheen of flashing swords and rose the clang of war. Darts clove the air like tongues of flame, and the clamour of battle beat against the roof.

Blinded of the Norns who brought these things to pass, men sought no mercy and they gave none, but smote and slew till few were left to slay.

And still Gudruda sat in her bride-seat, and, with eyes fixed in horror, watched the waxing of the war. Near to her stood Swanhild, marking all things with a fierce-set face, and calling down curses on her folk, who one and all cried "Eric! Eric!" and swept the thralls of Ospakar as corn is swept of the sickle.

And there, nigh to the door, pale of face and beautiful to see, golden Eric clove his way, and with him went black Skallagrim. Terrible was the flare of Whitefire as he flicked aloft like the levin in the cloud. Terrible was the flare of Whitefire; but more terrible was the light

of Eric's eyes, for they seemed to flame in his head, and wherever that fire fell it lighted men the way to death. Whitefire sung and flickered, and crashed the axe of Skallagrim, and still through the press of war they won their way. Now Gizur stands before them, spear aloft, and Whitefire leaps up to meet him. Lo! he turns and flies. The coward son of Ospakar does not seek the fate of Ospakar!

The door is won. They stand without but little harmed, while women wail aloud.

"To horse!" cried Skallagrim; "to horse, ere our luck fail us!"

"There is no luck in this," gasped Eric; "for I have slain many men, and among them is Björn, the brother of her whom I would make my bride."

"Better one such fight than many brides," said Skallagrim, shaking his red axe. "We have won great glory this day, Brighteyes, and Ospakar is dead--slain by a swordless man!"

Now Eric and Skallagrim ran to their horses, none hindering them, and, mounting, rode towards Mosfell.

All that evening and all the night they rode, and at morning they came across the black sand to Mosfell slopes that are by the Hecla. Here they

rested, and, taking off their armour, washed themselves in the stream: for they were very weary and foul with blood and wounds. When they had finished washing and had buckled on their harness again, Skallagrim, peering across the plain with his hawk's eyes, saw men riding fast towards them.

"Foes are soon afoot, lord," he said. "I thought we had stayed their hunger for a while."

"Would that I might stay mine," quoth Eric. "I am weary, and unfit for fight."

"I have still strength for one or two," said Skallagrim, "and then good-night! But these are no foes. They are of the Coldback folk. The carline has kept her word."

Then Eric was glad, and presently six men, headed by Jon his thrall, the same man who had watched on Mosfell when Eric went up to slay the Baresark, rode to them and greeted them. "Beggar women," said Jon, "whom they met at Ran River, had told them of the death of Ospakar, and of the great slaying at Middalhof, and they would know if the tidings were true."

"It is true, Jon," said Eric; "but first give us food, if ye have it, for we are hungered and spent. When we have eaten we will speak."

So they led up a pack-horse and from it took stockfish and smoked meat, of which Eric and Skallagrim ate heartily, till their strength came back to them.

Then Eric spoke. "Comrades," he said, "I am an outlawed man, and, though I have not sought it, much blood is on my head. Atli is dead at my hand; Ospakar is dead at my hand; Björn the Priest, Asmund's son, is dead at my hand, and with them many another man. Nor may the matter stay here, for Gizur, Blacktooth's son, yet lives, and Björn has kin in the south, and Swanhild will buy friends with gold, and all of these will set on me to slay me, so that at the last I die by the sword."

"No need for that," said Skallagrim. "Our vengeance is wrought, and now, as before, the sea is open, and I think that a welcome awaits us in London."

"Now Gudruda is widowed before she was fully wed," said Eric, "therefore I bide an outlawed man here in Iceland. I go hence no more, though it be death to stay, unless indeed Gudruda the Fair goes with me."

"It will be death, then," said Skallagrim, "and the swords are forged that we shall feel. The odds are too heavy, lord."

"Mayhap," answered Eric. "No man may flee his fate, and I shall not altogether grieve when mine finds me. Hearken, comrades: I go up to Mosfell height, and there I stay, till those be found who can drag me

from my hole. But this is my counsel to you: that ye leave me to my doom, for I am an unlucky man who always chooses the wrong road."

"That will not I," said Skallagrim.

"Nor we," said Eric's folk; "Swanhild holds Coldback, and we are driven to the fells. To the fells then we will go with thee, Eric Brighteyes, and become cave-dwellers and outlaws for thy sake. Fear not, thou shalt still find many friends."

"I did not look for such a thing at your hands," said Eric; "but stormy waters show how the boat is built. May no bad luck come to you from your good fellowship. And now let us to our nest."

Then they caught the horses, and rode with Brighteyes up the steep side of Mosfell, till at length they came to that secret dell which Skallagrim had once shown to Eric. Here they turned the horses loose to feed, and, going forward on foot, reached the dark and narrow pass that Brighteyes had trod when he sought for the Baresark foe. Skallagrim led the way along it, then came Eric and the rest. One by one they stepped on to the giddy point of rock, and, catching at the birch-bush, entered the hole. So they gained the platform and the great cave beyond; and they found that no man had set foot there since the day when Eric had striven with Skallagrim. For there on the rock, rotten with the weather, lay that haft of wood which Brighteyes had hewed from the axe of Skallagrim, and in the cave were many things beside as the Baresark had

left them.

So they took up their dwelling in the cave, Eric, Skallagrim, and the six Coldback men, and there they dwelt many months. But Eric sent out his men, one at a time, and got together food and a store of sheepskins, and other needful things. For he knew this well: that Gizur and Swanhild would before long come up against them, and, if they could not take them by force, would set themselves to watch the mountain-path and starve them out.

When Eric and Skallagrim rode away from Middalhof the fight still raged fiercely in the hall, and nothing but death might stay it. The minds of men were mad, and they smote one another, and slew each other, till at length of all that marriage company few were left unharmed, except Gizur, Swanhild, and Gudruda. For the serving thralls and womenfolk had fled the hall, and with them some peaceful men.

Then Gudruda spoke as one in a dream.

"Saevuna's prophecy was true," she said, "red was the marriage-feast of Asmund my father, redder has been the marriage-feast of Ospakar! She saw the hall of Middalhof one gore of blood, and lo! it is so; look upon thy work, Swanhild," and she pointed to the piled-up dead--"look upon thy work, witch-sister, and grow fearful: for all this death is on thy

head!"

Swanhild laughed aloud. "I think it a merry sight," she cried. "The marriage-feast of Asmund our father was red, and thy marriage-feast, Gudruda, has been redder. Would that thy blood and the blood of Eric ran with the blood of Björn and Ospakar! That tale must yet be told, Gudruda. There shall be binding on of Hell-shoes at Middalhof, but I bind them not. My task is still to come: for I will live to fasten the Hell-shoes on the feet of Eric, and on thy feet, Gudruda! At the least, I have brought about this much, that thou canst scarcely wed Eric the outlaw: for with his own hand he slew Björn our brother, and because of this I count all that death as nothing. Thou canst not mate with Brighteyes, lest the wide wounds of Björn thy brother should take tongues and cry thy shame from sea to sea!"

Gudruda made no answer, but sat as one carved in stone. Then Swanhild spoke again:

"Let us away to the north, Gizur; there to gather strength to make an end of Eric. Say, wilt thou help us, Gudruda? The blood-feud for the death of Björn is thine."

"Ye are enough to bring about the fall of one unfriended man," Gudruda said. "Go, and leave me with my sorrow and the dead. Nay! before thou goest, listen, Swanhild, for there is that in my heart which tells me I shall never look again upon thy face. From evil to evil thou hast ever

gone, Swanhild, and from evil to evil thou wilt go. It may well chance that thy wickedness will win. It may well chance that thou wilt crown thy crimes with my slaying and the slaying of the man who loves me. But I tell thee this, traitress--murderess, as thou art--that here the tale ends not. Not by death, Swanhild, shalt thou escape the deeds of life! _There_ they shall rise up against thee, and _there_ every shame that thou hast worked, every sin that thou hast sinned, and every soul that thou hast brought to Hela's halls, shall come to haunt thee and to drive thee on from age to age! That witchcraft which thou lovest shall mesh thee. Shadows shall bewilder thee; from the bowl of empty longings thou shalt drink and drink, and not be satisfied. Yea! lusts shall mock and madden thee. Thou shalt ride the winds, thou shalt sail the seas, but thou shalt find no harbour, and never shalt thou set foot upon a shore of peace.

"Go on, Swanhild--dye those hands in blood--wade through the river of shame! Seek thy desire, and finding, lose! Work thy evil, and winning, fail! I yet shall triumph--I yet shall trample thee; and, in a place to come, with Eric at my side, I shall make a mock of Swanhild the murderess! Swanhild the liar, and the wanton, and the witch! Now get thee gone!"

Swanhild heard. She looked up at Gudruda's face and it was alight as with a fire. She strove to answer, but no words came. Then Groa's daughter turned and went, and with her went Gizur.

Now women and thralls came in and drew out the wounded and those who still breathed from among the dead, taking them to the temple. They bore away the body of Ospakar also, but they left the rest.

All night long Gudruda sat in the bride's seat. There she sat in the silver summer midnight, looking on the slain who were strewn about the great hall. All night she sat alone in the bride's seat thinking--ever thinking.

How, then, would it end? There her brother Björn lay a-cold--Björn the justly slain of Brighteyes; yet how could she wed the man who slew her brother? From Ospakar she was divorced by death; from Eric she was divorced by the blood of Björn her brother! How might she unravel this tangled skein and float to weal upon this sea of death? All things went amiss! The doom was on her! She had lived to an ill purpose--her love had wrought evil! What availed it to have been born to be fair among women and to have desired that which might not be? And she herself had brought these things to pass--she had loosed the rock which crushed her! Why had she hearkened to that false tale?

Gudruda sat on high in the bride's seat, asking wisdom of the piled-up dead, while the cold blue shadows of the nightless night gathered over

her and them--gathered, and waned, and grew at last to the glare of day.