

XXXI

HOW ERIC SENT AWAY HIS MEN FROM MOSFELL

Now Eric and Skallagrim came to Mosfell in safety, and during all that ride Brighteyes spoke no word. He rode in silence, and in silence Skallagrim rode after him. The heart of Skallagrim was broken because of the sorrow which his drunkenness had brought about, and the heart of Eric was buried in Gudruda's grave.

On Mosfell Eric found four of his own men, two of whom had been among those that the people of Gizur and Swanhild had driven from Gudruda's ship before they fired her. For no fight had been made on the ship. There also he found Jon, who had been loosed from his bands in the booth by one who heard his cries as he rode past. Now when Jon saw Brighteyes, he told him all, and fell at Eric's feet and wept because he had betrayed him in his fear.

But Eric spoke no angry word to him. Stooping down he raised him, saying, "Thou wast never overstout of heart, Jon, and thou art scarcely to be blamed because thou didst speak rather than die in torment, though perhaps some had chosen so to die and not to speak. Now I am a luckless man, and all things happen as they are fated, and the words of Atli come true, as was to be looked for. The Norns, against whom none may stand, did but work their will through thy mouth, Jon; so grieve no more for that which cannot be undone."

Then he turned away, but Jon wept long and loudly.

That night Eric slept well and dreamed no dreams. But on the morrow he woke at dawn, and clothed himself and ate. Then he called his men together, and with them Skallagrim. They came and stood before him, and Eric, drawing Whitefire, leaned upon it and spoke:

"Hearken, mates," he said: "I know this, that my hours are short and death draws on. My years have been few and evil, and I cannot read the purpose of my life. She whom I loved has been slain by the witchcraft of Swanhild and the coward hand of Gizur the murderer, and I go to seek her where she waits. I am very glad to go, for now I have no more joy in life, being but a luckless man; it is an ill world, friends, and all the ways are red with blood. I have shed much blood, though but one life haunts me now at the last, and that is the life of Atli the Earl, for he was no match for my might and he is dead because of my sin. With my own blood I will wash away the blood of Atli, and then I seek another place, leaving nothing but a tale to be told in the ingle when fall the winter snows. For to this end we all come at the last, and it matters little if it find us at midday or at nightfall. We live in sorrow, we die in pain and darkness: for this is the curse that the Gods have laid upon men and each must taste it in his season. But I have sworn that no more men shall die for me. I will fight the last great fight alone; for I know this: I shall not easily be overcome, and with my fallen foes I will tread on Bifrost Bridge. Therefore, farewell! When the bones of Eric

Brighteyes lie in their barrow, or are picked by ravens on the mountain side, Gizur will not trouble to hunt out those who clung to him, if indeed Gizur shall live to tell the tale. Nor need ye fear the hate of Swanhild, for she aims her spears at me alone. Go, therefore, and when I am dead, do not forget me, and do not seek to avenge me, for Death the avenger of all will find them also."

Now Eric's men heard and groaned aloud, saying that they would die with him, for they loved Eric one and all. Only Skallagrim said nothing.

Then Brighteyes spoke again: "Hear me, comrades. If ye will not go, my blood will be on your heads, for I will ride out alone, and meet the men of Gizur in the plain and fall there fighting."

Then one by one they crept away to seek their horses in the dell. And each man as he went came to Eric and kissed his hand, then passed thence weeping. Jon was the last to go, except Skallagrim only, and he was so moved that he could not speak at all.

It was this Jon who, in after years, when he was grown very old, wandered from stead to stead telling the deeds of Eric Brighteyes, and always finding a welcome because of his tale, till at length, as he journeyed, he was overtaken by a snowstorm and buried in a drift. For Jon, who lacked much, had this gift: he had a skald's tongue. Men have always held that it was to the honour of Jon that he told the tale thus, hiding nothing, seeing that some of it is against himself.

Now when all had gone, Eric looked at Skallagrim, who still stood near him, axe in hand.

"Wherefore goest thou not, drunkard?" he said. "Surely thou wilt find ale and mead in the vales or oversea. Here there is none. Hasten! I would be alone!"

Now the great body of Skallagrim shook with grief and shame, and the red blood poured up beneath his dark sin. Then he spoke in a thick voice:

"I did not think to live to hear such words from the lips of Eric Brighteyes. They are well earned, yet it is unmanly of thee, lord, thus to taunt one who loves thee. I would sooner die as Swanhild said yonder thrall should die than live to listen to such words. I have sinned against thee, indeed, and because of my sin my heart is broken. Hast thou, then, never sinned that thou wouldst tear it living from my breast as eagles tear a foundered horse? Think on thine own sins, Eric, and pity mine! Taunt me thus once more or bid me go once more and I will go indeed! I will go thus--on the edge of yonder gulf thou didst overcome me by thy naked might, and there I swore fealty to thee, Eric Brighteyes. Many a year have we wandered side by side, and, standing back to back, have struck many a blow. I am minded to do this: to stand by thee in the last great fight that draws on and to die there with

thee. I have loved no other man save thee, and I am too old to seek new lords. Yet, if still thou biddest me, I will go thus. Where I swore my oath to thee, there I will end it. For I will lay me down on the brink of yonder gulf, as once I lay when thy hand was at my throat, and call out that thou art no more my lord and I am no more thy thrall. Then I will roll into the depths beneath, and by this death of shame thou shalt be freed of me, Eric Brighteyes."

Eric looked at the great man--he looked long and sadly. Then he spoke:

"Skallagrim Lambstail, thou hast a true heart. I too have sinned, and now I put away thy sin, although Gudruda is dead through thee and I must die because of thee. Stay by me if thou wilt and let us fall together."

Then Skallagrim came to Eric, and, kneeling before him, took his hands and kissed them.

"Now I am once more a man," he said, "and I know this: we two shall die such a great death that it will be well to have lived to die it!" and he arose and shouted:

"A! hai! A! hai! I see foes pass in pride!

A! hai! A! hai! Valkyries ride the wind!

Hear the song of the sword!

Whitefire is aloft--aloft!

Bare is the axe of the Baresark!

Croak, ye nesting ravens;
Flap your wings, ye eagles,
For bright is Mosfell's cave with blood!
Lap! lap! thou Grey Wolf,
Laugh aloud, Odin!

"Laugh till shake the golden doors;
Heroes' feet are set on Bifrost,
Open, ye hundred gates!
A! hai! A! hai! red runs the fray!
A! hai! A! hai! Valkyries ride the wind!"

Then Skallagrim turned and went to clean his harness and the golden helm of Eric.

Now at Coldback Gizur spoke with Swanhild.

"Thou hast brought the greatest shame upon me," he said, "for thou hast caused me to slay a sleeping woman. Knowest thou that my own men will scarcely speak with me? I have come to this evil pass, through love of thee, that I have slain a sleeping woman!"

"It was not my fault that thou didst kill Gudruda," answered Swanhild;
"surely I thought it was Eric whom thy sword pierced! I have not sought

thy love, Gizur, and I say this to thee: go, if thou wilt, and leave me alone!"

Now Gizur looked at her, and was minded to go; but, as Swanhild knew well, she held him too fast in the net of her witcheries.

"I would go, if I might go!" answered Gizur; "but I am bound to thee for good or evil, since it is fated that I shall wed thee."

"Thou wilt never wed me while Eric lives," said Swanhild.

Now she spoke thus truthfully, and by chance, as it were, not as driving Gizur on to slay Eric--for, now that Gudruda was dead, she was in two minds as to this matter, since, if she might, she still desired to take Eric to herself--but meaning that while Eric lived she would wed no other man. But Gizur took it otherwise.

"Eric shall certainly die if I may bring it about," he answered, and went to speak with his men.

Now all were gathered in the yard at Coldback, and that was a great company. But their looks were heavy because of the shame that Gizur, Ospakar's son, had brought upon them by the murder of Gudruda in her sleep.

"Hearken, comrades!" said Gizur: "great shame is come upon me because of

a deed that I have done unwittingly, for I aimed at the eagle Eric and I have slain the swan Gudruda."

Then a certain old viking in the company, named Ketel, whom Gizur had hired for the slaying of Eric, spoke:

"Man or woman, it is a niddering deed to kill folk in their sleep, Gizur! It is murder, and no less, and small luck can be hoped for from the stroke."

Now Gizur felt that his people looked on him askance and heavily, and knew that it would be hard to show them that he was driven to this deed against his will, and by the witchcraft of Swanhild. So, as was his nature, he turned to guile for shelter, like a fox to his hole, and spoke to them with the tongue of a lawman; for Gizur had great skill in speech.

"That tale was not all true which Eric Brighteyes told you," he said.

"He was mad with grief, and moreover it seems that he slept, and only woke to find Gudruda dead. It came about thus: I stood with the lady Swanhild, and was about to call aloud on Eric to arm himself and come forth and meet me face to face----"

"Then, lord, methinks thou hadst never met another foe," quoth the viking Ketel who had spoken first.

"When of a sudden," went on Gizur, taking no note of Ketel's words, "one clothed in white sprang from the bed and rushed on me. Then I, thinking that it was Eric, lifted sword, not to smite, but to ward him away; but the linen-wearer met the sword and fell down dead. Then I fled, fearing lest men should wake and trap us, and that is all the tale. It was no fault of mine if Gudruda died upon the sword."

Thus he spoke, but still men looked doubtfully upon him, for his eye was the eye of a liar--and Eric, as they knew, did not lie.

"It is hard to find the truth between lawman's brain and tongue," said the old viking Ketel. "Eric is no lawman, but a true man, and he sang another song. I would slay Eric indeed, for between him and me there is a blood-feud, since my brother died at his hand when, with Whitefire for a crook, Brighteyes drove armed men like sheep down the hall of Middalhof--ay and swordless, slew Ospakar. Yet I say that Eric is a true man, and, whether or no thou art true, Gizur the Lawman, that thou knowest best--thou and Swanhild the Fatherless, Groa's daughter. If thou didst slay Gudruda as thou tellest, say, how come Gudruda's blood on Whitefire's blade? How did it chance, Gizur, that thou heldest Whitefire in thy hand and not thine own sword? Now I tell thee this: either thou shalt go up against Eric and clear thyself by blows, or I leave thee; and methinks there are others among this company who will do the same, for we have no wish to be partners with murderers and their wickedness."

"Ay, a good word!" said many who stood by. "Let Gizur go up with us to

Mosfell, and there stand face to face with Eric and clear himself by blows."

"I ask no more," said Gizur; "we will ride to-night."

"But much more shalt thou get, liar," quoth Ketel to himself, "for that hour when thou lookest once again on Whitefire shall be thy last!"

So Gizur and Swanhild made ready to go up against Eric. That day they rode away with a great company, a hundred and one in all, and this was their plan. They sent six men with that thrall who had shown them the secret path, bidding him guide them to the mountain-top. Then, when they were come thither, and heard the shouts of those who sought to gain the platform from the south, they were to watch till Eric and his folk came out from the cave, and shoot them with arrows from above or crush them with stones. But if perchance Eric left the platform and came to meet his foes in the narrow pass, then they must let themselves down with ropes from the height above, and, creeping after him round the rock, must smite him in the back. Moreover, in secret, Gizur promised a great reward of ten hundreds in silver to him who should kill Eric, for he did not long to stand face to face with him alone. Swanhild also in secret made promise of reward to those who should bring Eric to her, bound, but living; and she bade them do this--to bear him down with shields and tie him with ropes.

So they rode away, the seven who should climb the mountain from behind going first, and on the morrow morning they crossed the sand and came to Mosfell.