

XXXII

HOW ERIC AND SKALLAGRIM GREW FEY

Now the night came down upon Mosfell, and of all nights this was the strangest. The air was quiet and heavy, yet no rain fell. It was so silent, moreover, that, did a stone slip upon the mountain side or a horse neigh far off on the plains, the sound of it crept up the fell and was echoed from the crags.

Eric and Skallagrim sat together on the open space of rock that is before the cave, and great heaviness and fear came into their hearts, so that they had no desire to sleep.

"Methinks the night is ghost-ridden," said Eric, "and I am fey, for I grow cold, and it seems to me that one strokes my hair."

"It is ghost-ridden, lord," answered Skallagrim. "Trolls are abroad, and the God-kind gather to see Eric die."

For a while they sat in silence, then suddenly the mountain heaved up gently beneath them. Thrice it seemed to heave like a woman's breast, and left them frightened.

"Now the dwarf-folk come from their caves," quoth Skallagrim, "and great deeds may be looked for, since they are not drawn to the upper earth by

a little thing."

Then once more they sat silent; and thick darkness came down upon the mountain, hiding the stars.

"Look," said Eric of a sudden, and he pointed to Hecla.

Skallagrim looked, and lo! the snowy dome of Hecla was aglow with a rosy flame like the light of dawn.

"Winter lights," said Lambstail, shuddering.

"Death lights!" answered Eric. "Look again!"

They looked, and behold! in the rosy glow there sat three giant forms of fire, and their shapes were the shapes of women. Before them was a loom of blackness that stretched from earth to sky, and they wove at it with threads of flame. They were splendid and terrible to see. Their hair streamed behind them like meteor flames, their eyes shone like lightning, and their breasts gleamed like the polished bucklers of the gods. They wove fiercely at the loom of blackness, and as they wove they sang. The voice of the one was as the wind whistling through the pines; the voice of the other was as the sound of rain hissing on deep waters; and the voice of the third was as the moan of the sea. They wove fearfully and they sang loudly, but what they sang might not be known. Now the web grew and the woof grew, and a picture came upon the loom--a

great picture written in fire.

Behold! it was the semblance of a storm-awakened sea, and a giant ship fled before the gale--a dragon of war, and in the ship were piled the corpses of men, and on these lay another corse, as one lies upon a bed. They looked, and the face of the corse grew bright. It was the face of Eric, and his head rested upon the dead heart of Skallagrim.

Clinging to each other, Eric and Skallagrim saw the sight of fear that was written on the loom of the Norns. They saw it for a breath. Then, with a laugh like the wail of wolves, the shapes of fire sprang up and rent the web asunder. Then the first passed upward to the sky, the second southward towards Middalhof, but the third swept over Mosfell, so that the brightness of her flaming form shone on the rock where they sat by the cave, and the lightning of her eyes was mirrored in the byrnie of Skallagrim and on Eric's golden helm. She swept past, pointing downwards as she went, and lo! she was gone, and once more darkness and silence lay upon the earth.

Now this sight was seen of Jon the thrall also, and he told it in his story of the deeds of Eric. For Jon lay hid in a secret place on Mosfell, waiting for tidings of what came to pass.

For a while Eric and Skallagrim clung to each other. Then Skallagrim

spoke.

"We have seen the Valkyries," he said.

"Nay," answered Eric, "we have seen the Norns--who are come to warn us of our doom! We shall die to-morrow."

"At the least," said Skallagrim, "we shall not die alone: we had a goodly bed on yonder goblin ship, and all of our own slaying methinks. It is not so ill to die thus, lord!"

"Not so ill!" said Eric; "and yet I am weary of blood and war, of glory and of my strength. Now I desire rest alone. Light fire--I can bear this darkness no longer; the marrow freezes in my bones."

"Fire can be seen of foes," said Skallagrim.

"It matters little now," said Eric, "we are feyfolk."

So Skallagrim lighted the fire, piling much brushwood and dry turf over it, till presently it burnt up brightly, throwing light on all the space of rock, and heavy shadows against the cliff behind. They sat thus a while in the light of the flames, looking towards the deep gulf, till suddenly there came a sound as of one who climbed the gulf.

"Who comes now, climbing where no man may pass?" cried Eric, seizing

Whitefire and springing to his feet. Presently he sank down again with white face and staring eyes, and pointed at the edge of the cliff. And as he pointed, the neck of a man rose in the shadow above the brink, and the hands of a man grasped the rock. But there was no head on the neck. The shape of the headless man drew itself slowly over the brink, it walked slowly into the light towards the fire, then sat itself down in the glare of the flames, which shrank away from it as from a draught of wind. Pale with terror, Eric and Skallagrim looked on the headless thing and knew it. It was the wraith of the Baresark that Brighteyes had slain--the first of all the men he slew.

"It is my mate, Eric, whom thou didst kill years ago and whose severed head spoke with thee!" gasped Skallagrim.

"It is he, sure enough!" said Eric; "but where may his head be?"

"Perchance the head will come," answered Skallagrim. "He is an evil sight to see, surely. Say, lord, shall I fall upon him, though I love not the task?"

"Nay, Skallagrim, let him bide; he does but come to warn us of our fate. Moreover, ghosts can only be laid in one way--by the hewing off of the head and the laying of it at the thigh. But this one has no head to hew."

Now as he spoke the headless man turned his neck as though to look.

Once more there came the sound of feet and lo! men marched in from the darkness on either side. Eric and Skallagrim looked up and knew them. They were those of Ospakar's folk whom they had slain on Horse-Head Heights; all their wounds were on them and in front of them marched Mord, Ospakar's son. The ghosts gazed upon Eric and Skallagrim with cold dead eyes, then they too sat down by the fire. Now once more there came the sound of feet, and from every side men poured in who had died at the hands of Eric and Skallagrim. First came those who fell on that ship of Ospakar's which Eric sank by Westmans; then the crew of the Raven who had perished upon the sea-path. Even as the man died, so did each ghost come. Some had been drowned and their harness dripped water! Some had died of spear-thrusts and the spears were yet fixed in their breasts! Some had fallen beneath the flash of Whitefire and the weight of the axe of Skallagrim, and there they sat, looking on their wide wounds!

Then came more and more. There were those whom Eric and Skallagrim had slain upon the seas, those who had fallen before them in the English wars, and all that company who had been drowned in the waters of the Pentland Firth when the witchcraft of Swanhild had brought the Gudruda to her wreck.

"Now here we have a goodly crew," said Eric at length. "Is it done, thinkest thou, or will Mosfell send forth more dead?"

As he spoke the wraith of a grey-headed man drew near. He had but one arm, for the other was hewn from him, and the byrnie on his left side

was red with blood.

"Welcome, Earl Atli!" cried Eric. "Sit thou over against me, who to-morrow shall be with thee."

The ghost of the Earl seated itself and looked on Eric with sad eyes, but it spake never a word.

Then came another company, and at their head stalked black Ospakar.

"These be they who died at Middalhof," cried Eric. "Welcome, Ospakar! that marriage-feast of thine went ill!"

"Now methinks we are overdone with trolls," said Skallagrim; "but see! here come more."

As he spoke, Hall of Lithdale came, and with him Koll the Half-witted, and others. And so it went on till all the men whom Eric and Skallagrim had slain, or who had died because of them, or at their side, were gathered in deep ranks before them.

"Now it is surely done," said Eric.

"There is yet a space," said Skallagrim, pointing to the other side of the fire, "and Hell holds many dead."

Even as the words left his lips there came a noise of the galloping of horse's hoofs, and one clad in white rode up. It was a woman, for her golden hair flowed down about her white arms. Then she slid from the horse and stood in the light of the fire, and behold! her white robe was red with blood, a great sword was set in her heart, and the face and eyes were the face and eyes of Gudruda the Fair, and the horse she rode was Blackmane, that Eric had slain.

Now when Brighteyes saw her he gave a great cry.

"Greeting, sweet!" he said. "I am no longer afraid, since thou comest to bear me company. Thou art dear to my sight--ay even in yon death-sheet. Greeting, sweet, my May! I laid thee stiff and cold in the earth at Middalhof, but, like a loving wife, thou hast burst thy bonds, and art come to save me from the grip of trolls. Thou art welcome, Gudruda, Asmund's daughter! Come, wife, sit thou at my side."

The ghost of Gudruda spake no word. She walked through the fire towards him, and the flames went out beneath her feet, to burn up again when she had passed. Then she sat down over against Eric and looked on him with wide and tender eyes. Thrice he stretched out his arms to clasp her, but thrice their strength left them and they fell back to his side. It was as though they struck a wall of ice and were numbed by the bitter cold.

"Look, here are more," groaned Skallagrim.



Then Eric looked, and lo! the empty space to the left of the fire was filled with shadowy shapes like shapes of mist. Amongst them was Gizur, Ospakar's son, and many a man of his company. There, too, was Swanhild, Groa's daughter, and a toad nestled in her breast. She looked with wide eyes upon the eyes of dead Gudruda's ghost, that seemed not to see her, and a stare of fear was set on her lovely face. Nor was this all; for there, before that shadowy throng, stood two great shapes clad in their harness, and one was the shape of Eric and one the shape of Skallagrim.

Thus, being yet alive, did these two look upon their own wraiths!

Then Eric and Skallagrim cried out aloud and their brains swam and their senses left them, so that they swooned.

When they opened their eyes and life came back to them the fire was dead, and it was day. Nor was there any sign of that company which had been gathered on the rock before them.

"Skallagrim," quoth Eric, "it seems that I have dreamed a strange dream--a most strange dream of Norns and trolls!"

"Tell me thy dream, lord," said Skallagrim.

So Eric told all the vision, and the Baresark listened in silence.

"It was no dream, lord," said Skallagrim, "for I myself have seen the same things. Now this is in my mind, that yonder sun is the last that we shall see, for we have beheld the death-shadows. All those who were gathered here last night wait to welcome us on Bifrost Bridge. And the mist-shapes who sat there, amongst whom our wraiths were numbered, are the shapes of those who shall die in the great fight to-day. For days are fled and we are sped!"

"I would not have it otherwise," said Eric. "We have been greatly honoured of the Gods, and of the ghost-kind that are around us and above us. Now let us make ready to die as becomes men who have never turned back to blow, for the end of the story should fit the beginning, and of us there is a tale to tell."

"A good word, lord," answered Skallagrim: "I have struck few strokes to be shamed of, and I do not fear to tread Bifrost Bridge in thy company. Now we will wash ourselves and eat, so that our strength may be whole in us."

So they washed themselves with water, and ate merrily, and for the first time for many months Eric was merry. For now that the end was at hand his heart grew light within him. And when they had put the desire of food from them, and buckled on their harness, they looked out from their mountain height, and saw a cloud of dust rise in the desert plain of black sand beneath, and through it the sheen of spears.

"Here come those of whom, if there is truth in visions, some few shall never go back again," said Eric. "Now, what counsel hast thou, Skallagrim? Where shall we meet them? Here on the space of rock, or yonder in the deep way of the cliff?"

"My counsel is that we meet them here," said Skallagrim, "and cut them down one by one as they try to turn the rock. They can scarcely come at us to slay us here so long as our arms have strength to smite."

"Yet they will come, though I know not how," answered Eric, "for I am sure of this, that our death lies before us. Here, then, we will meet them."

Now the cloud of dust drew nearer, and they saw that this was a great company which came up against them. At the foot of the fell the men stayed and rested a while, and it was not till afternoon that they began to climb the mountain.

"Night will be at hand before the game is played," said Skallagrim.

"See, they climb slowly, saving their strength, and yonder among them is Swanhild in a purple cloak."

"Ay, night will be at hand, Skallagrim--a last long night! A hundred to two--the odds are heavy; yet some shall wish them heavier. Now let us bind on our helms."

Meanwhile Gizur and his folk crept up the paths from below. Now that thrall who knew the secret way had gone on with six chosen men, and already they climbed the watercourse and drew near to the flat crest of the fell. But Eric and Skallagrim knew nothing of this. So they sat down by the turning place that is over the gulf and waited, singing of the taking of the Raven and of the slaying in the stead at Middalhof, and telling tales of deeds that they had done. And the thrall and his six men climbed on till at length they gained the crest of the fell, and, looking over, saw Eric and Skallagrim beneath them.

"The birds are in the snare, and hark! they sing," said the thrall; "now bring rocks and be silent."

But Gizur and his people, having learned that Eric and Skallagrim were alone upon the mountain, pushed on.

"We have not much to fear from two men," said Gizur.

"That we shall learn presently," answered Swanhild. "I tell thee this, that I saw strange sights last night, though I did not sleep. I may sleep little now that Gudruda is dead, for that which I saw in her eyes haunts me."

Then they went on, and the face of Gizur grew white with fear.