

### XXXIII

#### HOW ERIC AND SKALLAGRIM FOUGHT THEIR LAST GREAT FIGHT

Now the thrall and those with him on the crest of the fell heard the murmur of the company of Gizur and Swanhild as they won the mountain side, though they could not see them because of the rocks.

"Now it is time to begin and knock these birds from their perch," said the thrall, "for that is an awkward corner for our folk to turn with Whitefire and the axe of Skallagrim waiting on the farther side."

So he balanced a great stone, as heavy as three men could lift, on the brow of the rock, and aimed it. Then he pushed and let it go. It smote the platform beneath with a crash, two fathoms behind the spot where Eric and Skallagrim sat. Then it flew into the air, and, just as Brighteyes turned at the sound, it struck the wings of his helm, and, bursting the straps, tore the golden helm-piece from his head and carried it away into the gulf beneath.

Skallagrim looked up and saw what had come about.

"They have gained the crest of the fell," he cried. "Now we must fly into the cave or down the narrow way and hold it."

"Down the narrow way, then," said Eric, and while rocks, spears and

arrows rushed between and around them, they stepped on to the stone and won the path beyond. It was clear, for Gizur's folk had not yet come, and they ran nearly to the mouth of it, where there was a bend in the way, and stood there side by side.

"Thou wast at death's door then, lord!" said Skallagrim.

"Head-piece is not head," answered Eric; "but I wonder how they won the crest of the fell. I have never heard tell of any path by which it might be gained."

"There they are at the least," said Skallagrim. "Now this is my will, that thou shouldst take my helm. I am Baresark and put little trust in harness, but rather in my axe and strength alone."

"I will not do that," said Eric. "Listen: I hear them come."

Presently the tumult of voices and the tramp of feet grew clearer, and after a while Gizur, Swanhild, and the men of their following turned the corner of the narrow way, and lo! there before them--ay within three paces of them--stood Eric and Skallagrim shoulder to shoulder, and the light poured down upon them from above.

They were terrible to see, and the light shone brightly on Eric's golden hair and Whitefire's flashing blade, and the shadows lay dark on the black helm of Skallagrim and in the fierce black eyes beneath.

Back surged Gizur and those with him. Skallagrim would have sprung upon them, but Eric caught him by the arm, saying: "A truce to thy Baresark ways. Rush not and move not! Let us stand here till they overwhelm us."

Now those behind Gizur cried out to know what ailed them that they pushed back.

"Only this," said Gizur, "that Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail stand like two grey wolves and hold the narrow way."

"Now we shall have fighting worth the telling of," quoth Ketel the viking. "On, Gizur, Ospakar's son, and cut them down!"

"Hold!" said Swanhild; "I will speak with Eric first," and, together with Gizur and Ketel, she passed round the corner of the path and came face to face with those who stood at bay there.

"Now yield, Eric," she cried. "Foes are behind and before thee. Thou art trapped, and hast little chance of life. Yield thee, I say, with thy black wolf-hound, so perchance thou mayest find mercy even at the hands of her whose husband thou didst wrong and slay."

"It is not my way to yield, lady," answered Eric, "and still less perchance is it the way of Skallagrim. Least of all will we yield to thee who, after working many ills, didst throw me in a witch-sleep, and

to him who slew the wife sleeping at my side. Hearken, Swanhild: here we stand, awaiting death, nor will we take mercy from thy hand. For know this, we shall not die alone. Last night as we sat on Mosfell we saw the Norns weave our web of fate upon their loom of darkness. They sat on Helca's dome and wove their pictures in living flame, then rent the web and flew upward and southward and westward, crying our doom to sky and earth and sea. Last night as we sat by the fire on Mosfell all the company of the dead were gathered round us--ay! and all the company of those who shall die to-day. Thou wast there, Gizur the murderer, Ospakar's son! thou wast there, Swanhild the witch, Groa's daughter! thou wast there, Ketel Viking! with many another man; and there were we two also. Valkyries have kissed us and death draws near. Therefore, talk no more, but come and make an end. Greeting, Gizur, thou woman-murderer!

Draw nigh! draw nigh! Out sword! up shield! and on, thou son of Ospakar!"

Swanhild spoke no more, and Gizur had no word.

"On, Gizur! Eric calls thee," quoth Ketel Viking; but Gizur slunk back, not forward.

Then Ketel grew mad with rage and shame. He called to the men, and they drew near, as many as might, and looked doubtfully at the pair who stood before them like rocks upon a plain. Eric laughed aloud and Skallagrim gnawed the edge of his shield. Eric laughed aloud and the sound of his

laughter ran up the rocks.

"We are but two," he cried, "and ye are many! Is there never a pair among you will stand face to face with a Baresark and a helmless man?" and he tossed Whitefire high into the air and caught it by the hilt.

Then Ketel and another man of his following sprang forward with an oath, and their axes thundered loud on the shields of Eric and of Skallagrim. But Whitefire flickered up and the axe of Skallagrim crashed, and at once their knees were loosened, so that they sank down dead.

"More men! more men!" cried Eric. "These were brave, but their might was little. More men for the Grey Wolf's maw!"

Then Swanhild lashed the folk with bitter words, and two of them sprang on. They sprang on like hounds upon a deer at bay, and they rolled back as gored hounds roll from the deer's horns.

"More men! more men!" cried Eric. "Here lie but four and a hundred press behind. Now he shall win great honour who lays Brighteyes low and brings down the helm of Skallagrim."

Again two came on, but they found no luck, for presently they also were down upon the bodies of those who went before. Now none could be found to come up against the pair, for they fought like Baldur and Thor, and

none could touch them, and no harness might withstand the weight of their blows that shore through shield and helm and byrnie, deep to the bone beneath. Then Eric and Skallagrim leaned upon their weapons and mocked their foes, while these cursed and tore their beards with rage and shame.

Now it is to be told that when the thrall and those with him saw Eric and Skallagrim had escaped their rocks and spears, they took counsel, and the end of it was that they slid down a rope to the platform that is under the crest of the fell. Thence, though they could see nothing, they could hear the clang of blows and the shouts of those who fought and fell--ay! and the mocking of Eric and of Skallagrim.

"Now it goes thus," said the thrall, who was a cunning man: "Eric and Skallagrim hold the narrow way and none can stand against them. This, then, is my rede: that we turn the rock and take them in the back."

His fellows thought this a good saying, and one by one they stood upon the little rock and won the narrow way. They crept along this till they were near to Eric and Skallagrim. Now Swanhild, looking up, saw them and started. Skallagrim noted this and glanced over his shoulder, and that not too soon, for, as he looked, the thrall lifted sword to smite the head of Eric.

With a shout of "Back to back!" the Baresark swung round and ere ever the sword might fall his axe was buried deep in the thrall's breast.

"Now we must cut our path through them," said Skallagrim, "and, if it may be, win the space that is before the cave. Keep them off in front, and I will mind these mannikins."

Now Gizur's folk, seeing what had come about, took heart and fell upon Eric with a rush, and those who were with the dead thrall rushed at Skallagrim, and there began such a fight as has not been known in Iceland. But the way was so narrow that scarce more than one man could come to each of them at a time. And so fierce and true were the blows of Eric and Skallagrim that of those who came on few went back. Down they fell, and where they fell they died, and for every man who died Eric and Skallagrim won a pace towards the point of rock. Whitefire flamed so swift and swept so wide that it seemed to Swanhild, watching, as though three swords were aloft at once, and the axe of Skallagrim thundered down like the axe of a woodman against a tree, and those groaned on whom it fell as groans a falling tree. Now the shields of these twain were hewn through and through, and cast away, and their blood ran from many wounds. Still, their life was whole in them and they plied axe and sword with both hands. And ever men fell, and ever, fighting hard, they drew nearer to the point of rock.

Now it was won, and now all the company that came with the thrall from over the mountain brow were dead or sorely wounded at the hands of black Skallagrim. Lo! one springs on Eric, and Gizur creeps behind him. Whitefire leaps to meet the man and does not leap in vain; but Gizur

smites a coward blow at Eric's uncovered head, and wounds him sorely, so that he falls to his knee.

"Now I am smitten to the death, Skallagrim," cries Eric. "Win the rock and leave me." Yet he rises from his knee.

Then Skallagrim turns, red with blood and terrible to see.

"'Tis but a scratch. Climb thou the rock--I follow," he says, and, screaming like a horse, with weapon aloft he leaps alone upon the foe. They break before the Baresark rush; they break, they fall--they are cloven by Baresark axe and trodden of Baresark feet! They roll back, leaving the way clear--save for the dead. Then Skallagrim follows Brighteyes to the rock.

Now Eric wipes the gore from his eyes and sees. Then, slowly, and with a reeling brain, he steps down upon the giddy point. He goes near to falling, yet does not fall, for now he lies upon the open space, and creeps on hands and knees to the rock-wall that is by the cave, and sits resting his back against it, Whitefire on his knee.

Before he is there, Skallagrim staggers to his side with a rush.

"Now we have time to breathe, lord," he gasps. "See, here is water," and he takes a pitcher that stands by, and gives Eric to drink from the pool, then drinks himself and pours the rest of the water on Eric's



wound. Then new life comes to them, and they both stand on their feet and win back their breath.

"We have not done so badly!" says Skallagrim, "and we are still a match for one or two. See, they come! Say, where shall we meet them, lord?"

"Here," quoth Eric; "I cannot stand well upon my legs without the help of the rock. Now I am all unmeet for fight."

"Yet shall this last stand of thine be sung of!" says Skallagrim.

Now finding none to stay them, the men of Gizur climb one by one upon the rock and win the space that is beyond. Swanhild goes first of all, because she knows well that Eric will not harm her, and after her come Gizur and the others. But many do not come, for they will lift sword no more.

Now Swanhild draws near and looks on Eric and mocks him in the fierceness of her heart and the rage of her wolf-love.

"Now," she says, "now are Brighteyes dim eyes! What! weepst thou, Eric?"

"Ay, Swanhild," he answered, "I weep tears of blood for those whom thou hast brought to doom."

She draws nearer and speaks low to him: "Hearken, Eric. Yield thee! Thou hast done enough for honour, and thou art not smitten to the death of yonder cowardly hound. Yield and I will nurse thee back to health and bear thee hence, and together we will forget our hates and woes."

"Not twice may a man lie in a witch's bed," said Eric, "and my troth is plighted to other than thee, Swanhild."

"She is dead," says Swanhild.

"Yes, she is dead, Swanhild; and I go to seek her amongst the dead--I go to seek her and to find her!"

But the face of Swanhild grew fierce as the winter sea.

"Thou hast put me away for the last time, Eric! Now thou shalt die, as I have promised thee and as I promised Gudruda the Fair!"

"So shall I the more quickly find Gudruda and lose sight of thy evil face, Swanhild the harlot! Swanhild the murderess! Swanhild the witch! For I know this: thou shalt not escape!--thy doom draws on also!--and haunted and accursed shalt thou be for ever! Fare thee well, Swanhild; we shall meet no more, and the hour comes when thou shalt grieve that thou wast ever born!"

Now Swanhild turned and called to the folk: "Come, cut down these outlaw

rogues and make an end. Come, cut them down, for night draws on."

Then once more the men of Gizur closed in upon them. Eric smote thrice and thrice the blow went home, then he could smite no more, for his strength was spent with toil and wounds, and he sank upon the ground. For a while Skallagrim stood over him like a she-bear o'er her young and held the mob at bay. Then Gizur, watching, cast a spear at Eric. It entered his side through a cleft in his byrnie and pierced him deep.

"I am sped, Skallagrim Lambstail," cried Eric in a loud voice, and all men drew back to see giant Brighteyes die. Now his head fell against the rock and his eyes closed.

Then Skallagrim, stooping, drew out the spear and kissed Eric on the forehead.

"Farewell, Eric Brighteyes!" he said. "Iceland shall never see such another man, and few have died so great a death. Tarry a while, lord; tarry a while--I come--I come!"

Then crying "\_Eric! Eric!\_" the Baresark fit took him, and once more and for the last time Skallagrim rushed screaming upon the foe, and once more they rolled to earth before him. To and fro he rushed, dealing great blows, and ever as he went they stabbed and cut and thrust at his side and back, for they dared not stand before him, till he bled from a hundred wounds. Now, having slain three more men, and wounded two

others, Skallagrim might no more. He stood a moment swaying to and fro, then let his axe drop, threw his arms high above him, and with one loud cry of "\_Eric!\_" fell as a rock falls--dead upon the dead.

But Eric was not yet gone. He opened his eyes and saw the death of Skallagrim and smiled.

"Well ended, Lambstail!" he said in a faint voice.

"Lo!" cried Gizur, "yon outlawed hound still lives! Now I will do a needful task and make an end of him, and so shall Ospakar's sword come back to Ospakar's son."

"Thou art wondrous brave now that the bear lies dying!" said Swanhild.

Now it seemed that Eric heard the words, for suddenly his might came back to him, and he staggered to his knees and thence to his feet. Then, as folk fall from him, with all his strength he whirls Whitefire round his head till it shines like a wheel of fire. "Thy service is done and thou art clean of Gudruda's blood--go back to those who forged thee!" Brighteyes cries, and casts Whitefire from him towards the gulf.

Away speeds the great blade, flashing like lightning through the rays of the setting sun, and behold! as men watch it is gone--gone in mid-air!

Since that day no such sword as Whitefire has been known in Iceland.

"Now slay thou me, Gizur," says the dying Eric.

Gizur comes on with little eagerness, and Eric cries aloud:

"Swordless I slew thy father!--swordless, shieldless, and wounded to the death I will yet slay \_thee\_, Gizur the Murderer!" and with a loud cry he staggered towards him.

Gizur smites him with his sword, but Eric does not stay, and while men wait and wonder, Brighteyes sweeps him into his great arms--ay, sweeps him up, lifts him from the ground and reels on.

Eric reels on to the brink of the gulf. Gizur sees his purpose, struggles and shrieks aloud. But the strength of the dying Eric is more than the strength of Gizur. Now Brighteyes stands on the dizzy edge and the light of the passing sun flames about his head. And now, bearing Gizur with him, he hurls himself out into the gulf, and lo! the sun sinks!

Men stand wondering, but Swanhild cries aloud:

"Nobly done, Eric! nobly done! So I would have seen thee die who of all men wast the first!"

This then was the end of Eric Brighteyes the Unlucky, who of all warriors that have lived in Iceland was the mightiest, the goodliest, and the best beloved of women and of those who clung to him.

Now, on the morrow, Swanhild caused the body of Eric to be searched for in the cleft, and there they found it, floating in water and with the dead Gizur yet clasped in its bear-grip. Then she cleansed it and clothed it again in its rent armour, and bound on the Hell-shoes, and it was carried on horses to the sea-side, and with it were borne the bodies of Skallagrim Lambstail the Baresark, Eric's thrall, and of all those men whom they had slain in the last great fight on Mosfell, that is now named Ericsfell.

Then Swanhild drew her long dragon of war, in which she had come from Orkneys, from its shed over against Westman Isles, and in the centre of the ship, she piled the bodies of the slain in the shape of a bed, and lashed them fast. And on this bed she laid the corpse of Eric Brighteyes, and the breast of black Skallagrim the Baresark was his pillow, and the breast of Gizur, Ospakar's son, was his foot-rest.

Then she caused the sails to be hoisted, and went alone aboard the long ship, the rails of which were hung with the shields of the dead men.

And when at evening the breeze freshened to a gale that blew from the land, she cut the cable with her own hand, and the ship leapt forward

like a thing alive, and rushed out in the red light of the sunset  
towards the open sea.

Now ever the gale freshened and folk, standing on Westman Heights,  
saw the long ship plunge past, dipping her prow beneath the waves and  
sending the water in a rain of spray over the living Swanhild, over the  
dead Eric and those he lay upon.

And by the head of Eric Brighteyes, her hair streaming on the wind,  
stood Swanhild the Witch, clad in her purple cloak, and with rings of  
gold about her throat and arms. She stood by Eric's head, swaying with  
the rush of the ship, and singing so sweet and wild a song that men grew  
weak who heard it.

Now, as the people watched, two white swans came down from the clouds  
and sped on wide wings side by side over the vessel's mast.

The ship rushed on through the glow of sunset into the gathering night.  
On sped the ship, but still Swanhild sung, and still the swans flew over  
her.

The gale grew fierce, and fiercer yet. The darkness gathered deep upon  
the raging sea.

Now that ship was seen no more, and the death-song of Swanhild as she  
passed to doom was never heard again.

For swans and ship, and Swanhild, and dead Eric and his dead foes, were lost in the wind and the night.

But far out on the sea a great flame of fire leapt up towards the sky.

Now this is the tale of Eric Brighteyes, Thorgrimur's son; of Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter; of Swanhild the Fatherless, Atli's wife, and of Ounound, named Skallagrim Lambstail, the Baresark, Eric's thrall, all of whom lived and died before Thangbrand, Wilibald's son, preached the White Christ in Iceland.