

THE PASSING OF SWEYN

A Tale of the Vikings

By RAY WYNN

THE huge Viking ship, her great sail distended almost to the bursting point, lurched heavily onward before the ever-increasing gale. Perched upon his high platform in the stern, the helmsman wielded the heavy tiller, straining his toil-hardened muscles in a mad endeavor to keep the ship dead before wind and sea. He and he alone, of those aboard her, was attentive to his duty.

For upon the deck before him, there was high wassail and rejoicing. The horns of wine passed joyously around among the Vikings there—a round score in number. And frequent healths were drunk to the young leader—a great bulk of a man, with long flowing, golden locks, and to his companion, a woman, young and tall and stately, a fitting mate for such a man.

As they drank the generous wine and their spirits rose, they chanted in ever higher and higher tones a tale of conquest, of the downfall of an ancient enemy of their leader's house, of a brutal lust for vengeance satiated.

"Sweyn, the son of Sweyn, has fallen," they cried. "His strength is gone. His fangs are drawn. No more shall his swift *Raven* pillage our coast. No more shall he bear away our maidens. Sweyn, the son of Sweyn, has fallen."

While they reveled, the sun set. His rays, gleaming like fire through a break in the dull canopy of cloud which overhung the sea, rested for a moment upon the Viking ship, coloring everything they touched with the hue of blood.

"The sun sets red," cried the leader. "He sets red, the sign of our victory, the sign of blood; the gods are with us in our enterprise. Sweyn, the son of Sweyn, has fallen."

In the forward part of the Viking ship, wounded and shackled, sat Sweyn, the son of Sweyn. Marauder and pirate, son of a marauder and pirate, he had fought his last fight. Only too well did he know it. What mercy could a wolf of the sea, such as he had been, expect from his enemies? He had not pleaded for it, knowing that such a boon was beyond hope of attainment. As he would have done to them, had they fallen into his power, so they

would shortly do to him. It was but the fortune of war. For the first time in his long and adventurous career the scales of fortune had turned against him and his life must be the forfeit.

So much for his own personal danger in the transaction. But as to the manner in which he had come to his present condition, that was different. He had been betrayed by a woman's smile, lured by her false pleadings and protestations of her love for him. And now, when it was far too late for the knowledge to avail him anything, he realized that it had all been a plot to secure possession of his person, to strike a fatal blow at the enemy who had been as a thorn in the side of her people, as his sire had been before him. How she had drawn him on; how he had wooed her, knowing all the while that her father, Harold of the Black Hair, would never give his consent that she should become the bride of the sea-wolf Sweyn; but confident that her love for him would cause her to break all the bonds of friendship and of blood; how he had planned this raid, after many secret meetings with her, when he, disguised as a simple peasant, visited her father's stronghold; how she had consented to flee with him, urging him to bring with him but the one ship, instead of the several which he had contemplated bringing; how he had blindly obeyed her behest, because, love-smitten fool that he was, she had asked it of him. And then, the bitterest thought of all, how his lone ship had been pursued by a fleet of the enemy's ships, overtaken, overwhelmed; how his uncles, his brothers, his cousins, his friends, all good men and true, to the number of more than a score, had fallen, fighting bravely to the very last; how he, himself, had been overpowered by sheer force of numbers, after being desperately wounded. All these things passed in review before him.

And now, Edra, the fair and false, Edra, whom he had so madly loved, rejoiced with his conquerors. He had never doubted her faith until after he was captured. Then, when he saw her go over to the other side, he realized that he had been betrayed. As he sat there, he could hear the clear, high tones of her voice rising above those of her

companions. And the sound brought foam to his lips, wild fury to his brain, the strength of a giant to his wearied muscles, as they strove against his bonds. But the effort was in vain; they were too strong for mortal frame to break. And gradually the fit passed from him and he settled back in his former, listless attitude, indifferent to his fate. The gods were against him; they had delivered him, bound, into the hands of his enemies. Why strive further against their will?

So the hours of the night wore slowly away. Despite his wounds, the pain of his bonds, the chill cold of the ever-increasing gale, Sweyn slept.

The flare of a torch, passed before his eyes, aroused him. For a moment, his bewildered senses failed to act. Then he saw, and understood. Before him stood Edra and Magnus, the Commander of the Viking ship. They hailed him with mocking words, describing with taunting gesture and voice the pleasures which they expected to enjoy in the future. For Magnus was Edra's accepted lover and had been, during all the time that Sweyn wooed her.

Sweyn listened, dully, to Edra; but when Magnus spoke, his voice thick and his ordinarily dull intellect still further blunted by the wine he had taken, Sweyn's ire was aroused. This great bulk of a man before him was a coward. Five times, during the course of that day's mad battle upon the deck and in the hold of Sweyn's *Raven*, had Magnus avoided him. And each time that he had done so, a braver man had fallen a victim in his stead. Sweyn had seen his craven face whiten with fear as he pressed forward toward him, brandishing his great sword. He had termed him coward, he had called him "niddering," the worst term of reproach that could be used to a Northman. Yet even these things could not make him fight. And now this coward stood before him taunting him with his misfortune. It was too much to bear unmoved.

"Magnus," he said, sternly. "Go. What right has a coward to taunt a man who fell, sword in hand, because his foes were too many for him? The very winds and waves cry 'coward' against you. Five good men and brave fell beneath my sword today, because their leader was a 'niddering' cur. Go."

Sodden as he was with drink, Sweyn's bitter words struck home with Magnus. He fairly bellowed with rage, but his eye fell before the steady, scornful look of Sweyn's. Then, thickly muttering an oath, he turned away and staggered

aft, to rejoin his companions.

Edra lingered. And the glance which she cast upon Sweyn was one of forced admiration. He was a man and something within her responded involuntarily to the dauntless spirit which he showed. After Magnus left, Sweyn closed his eyes; but he felt her presence and opened them again.

"Why do you linger?" he asked, scornfully. "Is it to gaze upon the ruin you have wrought, with your fair face and false tongue? Is it not enough for you to know that it is done, without tormenting me with your hateful presence? Go."

She did not leave, but stood for many minutes regarding him, intently.

"I have been true to my people," she said at last; "you have harried and persecuted them for years, following in the path of your father before you. Why should I not seek to revenge their wrongs upon the man who has caused them? I never loved you. I admired your strength, even while I feared you. You are a man; Magnus is a coward, as you have said. Yet of the two, I love him, because he is of my people."

"Listen, Edra," replied Sweyn. He had risen as far as his shackles would permit. His manner was wild and solemn. "Listen. I must die, and soon, even before Magnus and his men can get me ashore to wreak their vengeance upon me. I know this for one has whispered to me in the darkness of the night, one who never whispers in vain." Edra shivered, as with sudden cold, but she preserved a stony composure. "My end is near. There is given to those about to die the power to see for a space into the future; for them the veil which hangs before that which is to come is rent and they can see, dimly, what lies beyond; and there are three things which I have seen."

He paused and Edra bent over him, listening eagerly for his next words.

"You have seen," she whispered, breathlessly.

"Weak as I am and wounded unto death, Magnus will yet fall by my hand, ere I depart to the Halls of the Gods."

"What else, what else?" she was trembling now. "What else?"

"This ship and all within her will be lost."

"What else?"

"You will tell me with your own lips and unasked that you love me; and it will be the truth and no lie, such as the others you have told. And we shall die together; you will be mine, mine

forever.”

He closed his eyes and sank back, overcome by the effort he had made; a thin stream of blood ran from a reopened wound in his breast, a terrible, ghastly thing which the cold and his quiet had kept closed for hours. Edra seeing it, tore away part of her skirt and bound the wound tightly to prevent further bleeding. Her face was inscrutable as a mask while she did so. Then she called him by name, but he did not answer. He was unconscious. She rose to her feet and moved away. Her face was still expressionless as she rejoined the revelers.

Many minutes passed before Sweyn recovered consciousness. The wind and the sea had increased still further and the ship labored heavily her massive timbers groaning under the strain. She was old and much in need of repair. But she was swift though weak, and she had been chosen for that very reason, before a newer and slower ship. Water, as cold as ice, was washing about Sweyn's feet. Used as he was to ships, Sweyn knew that there must be a leak somewhere in the rotten bottom timbers, caused by her straining in the heavy seas. It must be a small one, for his foot rested upon the keel and there was only enough water to cover it, when he placed it flat upon the timber.

And with the knowledge of the leak, came a sudden inspiration. His revenge was at hand. If he could but find and enlarge the present leak, or make another one, to add its volume to the water already coming in, the ship was doomed. Eagerly he cast about him for some means of accomplishing the desired end. Near him lying in a heap of broken armor and spear heads, he saw the hilt of a heavy sword; how much of the blade remained he could not tell in the dim light cast by the torches, which flared in the after part of the ship; the hilt itself he could not have seen, had it not been that it stood up above the rest of the pile. And now to reach it. He moved the loop of chain which formed one end of his shackles along the beam; the rattling of the chain was borne away, ahead of the ship, upon the wings of the howling gale and he succeeded in getting it to a point opposite to the pile of debris without attracting the attention of his captors; then he leaned forward, straining his muscles to the utmost in an effort to get hold of the hilt. After several efforts, he succeeded and a grim smile of exultation lit up his haggard face as his fingers closed, slowly and painfully, upon it. Both the opportunity and the instrument of vengeance now

were his.

Again he looked aft, carefully noting the positions and occupations of his enemies. The revelers were quiet; most of them lay upon the deck, where they had fallen, overcome with wine. But Magnus and the helmsman and one or two others were still alert. Edra also was awake, sitting, wrapped in a heavy robe, at some distance from the rest, and apparently lost in deep reflection, for she made no answer to the remarks which Magnus addressed to her from time to time.

Then he looked at the broken sword. About a foot of the blade remained, enough for his purpose. Summoning his strength, he drove it into the rotten planking at his feet; the jagged end bit deeply into the soft wood. Again and again he struck, each time driving it deeper and deeper. His reopened wounds bled freely; his breath came in short, harsh gasps; a red mist swam before his eyes; and at last, he was compelled to cease for rest. It was many minutes before he took his hands from his face and looked warily aft, before resuming his efforts. And the sight which he saw there lent him renewed strength.

Magnus sat upon the deck by Edra, his arms about her; she submitted, passively, to his caresses, but her manner was listless, her gaze vacant, her thoughts apparently upon other things.

Almost blinded with rage, Sweyn seized the sword and struck a savage, downward blow. It buried to the hilt and he wrenched it around and around, then withdrew it. A heavy jet of water followed. Swiftly it rose, lapping about his ankles, his calves, his knees, until finally it was about his waist. But he never noticed it; his glowing eyes ever rested upon the faces of the pair in the stern of the ship.

The helmsman was the first to take the alarm. He noticed that the ship labored more heavily and that she did not respond to the helm as before. Then his keen ears caught the sound of the heavy wash of water in the hold and he called sharply to the others.

“The ship is filling,” he cried; “she has strained her seams open.”

Magnus sprang to his feet and gazed down into the hold of the ship. And his ruddy face went white at what he saw there. Then he cast a long and anxious look astern for some sign of his consorts. For once the speed of the ship had proved a bane to those aboard her. The darkness of the night

revealed nothing in the shape of a sail. Then he strove to awaken the drunken sleepers about him. The effort was vain. They were oblivious alike to his curses and his blows. The water rose, more slowly, now, but none the less surely. The ship no longer rose freely, but staggered along, tottering under the weight of the unstable ballast within her, sheering drunkenly from side to side.

Then Magnus and his two companions fell to bailing desperately, using their hollow shields for the purpose. But the water gained upon them; new leaks appeared to augment those already existing; and at last, exhausted and despairing, they ceased their efforts and retreated to the stern of the ship.

Sweyn had listened with grim exultation to their labored breathing, their cries, now of joy, now of despair, their imprecations and their prayers. And now, as they gave up, beaten, his scornful laugh rang out, louder than the noise of the wind and waves. The water was at his throat; his shackled body swung to and fro with the wash of the waters in the hold; death was but a matter of minutes now. But all these things mattered little to him; his enemies must share his fate; to him this knowledge was ample compensation for all that had gone before.

At the sound of his laughter, Edra rose to her feet and approached Magnus, as he stood sullen, fearful and dejected, leaning against the side of the ship. What she said Sweyn could not hear, but she pointed in his direction. At first Magnus shook his head in dissent; but at that, her eyes flashed fire and her manner became imperious; and, after a moment of sullen hesitation, Magnus obeyed her. He spoke to the two men, pointing the while at Sweyn. They came wading forward through the hold, to where he sat; they unshackled his legs and body.

"Can you stand?" asked one of them.

"Nay," answered Sweyn, craftily. "I am sorely wounded and the cold has numbed my limbs. You must help me."

Together, they lifted his great bulk until he stood upon his feet. Then, half carrying, half leading him, they took him aft, where he fell upon the deck, across the bodies of two of the revelers, his eyes closed, apparently unconscious.

"Let him lie," said Edra, harshly, as Magnus approached with ropes to bind him anew. "Would you fetter a man, nearly dead? Let him lie, I say, or I shall begin to believe that which he said of you a few short hours since."

Magnus drew back, hesitating.

"He still lives," he said, hoarsely, "and while the breath of life is in him he is to be feared."

"Aye," replied Edra, scornfully; "he is a man. But numbers overpowered him before, they can do it again, if need should arise. Can you not see that the seal of death is upon his face?"

Magnus turned away, wincing under the pitiless lash of her scorn. And Sweyn, who had heard all, rejoiced greatly, for he had feared that they would bind him again. Beneath him, his hand resting upon its helve, lay the great battle-axe of one of the revelers, a mighty weapon, a host in itself, when wielded by a powerful arm. And this last a few minutes' rest coupled with his made desire for revenge, would give him.

He lay, watching with half-closed eyes the movements of his enemies. The helmsman he could not see, but he knew that he must still be at his post, for the ship still held upon her course, although her lurching and sheering grew ever greater and greater as she became more and more unmanageable. Edra sat to one side, leaning against the bulwark, her gaze fixed, her pallid lips moving soundlessly, as she framed petitions to the gods to free her from the peril which beset her. Magnus and his two associates stood, with their backs to him, gazing gloomily down into the hold of the ship. And at last, Sweyn was rested and ready for the fray.

He rose swiftly to his feet, axe in hand, glancing back over his shoulder at the helmsman as he did so. The latter was gazing intently astern of the ship, looking for the consorts upon whose coming all the hopes of safety for those aboard the doomed ship rested. For the moment, he was not to be feared. Raising the heavy weapon high above his head, Sweyn charged madly upon his enemies. A shrill cry from Edra aroused them to a sense of their impending danger. Magnus turned, just in time for the whistling axe to descend full upon his helmet. Sheering through iron and bone and brain, it clove him to the chin. A second sweeping blow disabled one of his companions and felled him in the hold of the ship, where he perished miserably by drowning. The other man did not wait for Sweyn's attack, but panic-stricken by what he had just seen, leaped madly into the sea.

And now but one enemy remained, the helmsman, a giant of a man, who had served Magnus and Magnus's father before him. "Jarl of

the Iron Side” he was called, a name bestowed upon him for his ability to withstand hard blows. Edra’s cry had caused him to turn his head, but all had passed so quickly that, by the time he had lashed the helm and seized his axe, his companions were gone and he and Sweyn alone were left to decide the bloody issue. The sight of his lord’s death had aroused in Jarl all of the old Berserker spirit, so that it was a wild animal, rather than a man, which charged upon Sweyn. So blind was his rage that he missed his aim, his axe whistling close over Sweyn’s head. Sweyn also missed his, and, worse misfortune still, for him, his axe was torn from his numbed fingers by the terrific force of the blow which had failed to land. There was no time to gather up another weapon, even if one could be found in the dim light cast by the torches as they burned low in their cressets. He closed with Jarl, grasping him about the waist in a mighty grip that made his ribs crack and forced him to drop his axe, also. Back and forth across the heaving deck they struggled, Jarl cursing madly, Sweyn grimly silent, wasting no breath in words.

Time after time, they fell, first one and then the other uppermost; time after time, they arose, neither relaxing the grip which he had gained. And as they strove for the mastery, Edra, who had arisen to her feet, circled about them, with pale face and eyes that were starting from their sockets in dumb horror at the sight of the fell struggle before her.

At last Sweyn drove Jarl with terrific force against the bulwark, the blow stunning him for the moment. As his muscles relaxed, Sweyn threw all his remaining strength into a mighty effort, in which he lifted his adversary’s heavy body high above his head and cast him over the bulwark into the raging sea.

Of all his enemies, none now remained, save Edra and the slumbering revelers. His work was finished. He was master of the Viking ship, even as he had planned. Weary and faint, he leaned against the massive bulwark. The ship, left without a guiding hand at the helm, deprived of the watchful vigilance of Jarl of the Iron Side, broached to and one great wave swept completely over her. But to this he paid no heed, save that the wave cast at his feet the body of Edra, who now cast her arms about his knees, as the nearest object to which she might cling to prevent being washed away. Before the next wave came sweeping over the deck, he dragged her to a position beside him and lashed her

securely. But he spoke no word to her, even when she again bound up the wound in his breast, which was bleeding frightfully from his recent desperate exertions.

Lower and lower the ship settled. And at last, when the first gray streaks of dawn in the east foretold the coming of the day, her decks were level with the surface of the sea; her great sail hung in tattered ribbons, which streamed out straight before the rushing gale, and there were great gaps in her side, where the planking had strained apart. As the light slowly diffused itself over the troubled surface of the sea, Sweyn’s first glance was in the direction of the point where his enemies, the consorts of the doomed ship, might be expected to appear. They were there. Grimly he counted them, eleven distant sail. Then he looked toward the opposite quarter of the horizon. There lay the land, leagues away, a dim, shadowy mass in the northern board. There was no hope that the ship would ever reach it. Already the waves were tearing her apart, piece by piece, like ravening monsters devouring their prey.

Then he turned to the shrinking girl by his side.

“Edra,” he said; “there is but one hope left. If the ship should float until the rest of the squadron can overtake her, you may be saved. Say but that you are sorry that you betrayed me, and all that one man can do for your safety shall be done.”

She heard him and for a moment was silent. Then:

“I am not sorry,” she answered, slowly and deliberately; “I hate you. I have always hated you.”

“Yet before you die, you shall love me,” he answered, unmoved. “The gods have said it.”

She made no reply. Once again he scanned the horizon. One ship, swifter than the rest, was within a league. But, even as he looked at her, the waves tore great pieces out of the bows of the Viking ship and the mast with its great yard fell athwart the decks, almost striking them where they stood, and breaking in half. Other waves swept over the ship, followed by the cracking and rending of timbers. There was no time to be lost. Hastily unlash Edra, Sweyn took her in his arms, despite her fierce struggles to escape, and lashed her to the part of the mast which still remained on deck. Then, half lifting, half dragging it, he bore the fragment of the spar to the ship’s side and cast it into the sea. He leaped with it and, catching it, he lashed himself fast. And as he did so, he cast a glance backward at

the Viking ship. She had vanished; in the place where she had floated was a whirling mass of torn and shattered timbers.

"You are mine, mine," he shouted to Edra, but she moved her head in token of dissent.

Then the fierce waves bore them away.

The next morning, the peasants upon one of the islands near the mainland were searching the shore for whatever of spoil the gale might have cast there. Some great ship must have been wrecked, for the rocky beach was strewn with huge timbers. But nothing of value was found and they were about to give up their search, when a cry from one of their number drew many of them to the spot where he stood.

There, lying upon the beach, their feet laved by the receding waves, were two bodies, those of a man and a woman, lashed insecurely to a fragment of spar. The man, a Norse warrior, had probably bled to death, for there was a great gaping wound in his breast; the woman, a Norse maiden, had drowned. Sheltered by the enfolding grasp of the man's arms and his huge body, there was not a bruise, or wound, to mar her fairness. Her head was nestled upon his breast and her sightless eyes were fixed upon his. Upon her face was a look of ineffable sweetness and content, upon his, a glow of fierce, exulting triumph.

Sweyn had passed and, with him, Edra, and their passing had been even as he had foretold.