

II

HOW ERIC TOLD HIS LOVE TO GUDRUDA IN THE SNOW ON COLDBACK

Now, it must be told that, five years before the day of the death of Gudruda the Gentle, Saevuna, the wife of Thorgrimur Iron-Toe, gave birth to a son, at Coldback in the Marsh, on Ran River, and when his father came to look upon the child he called out aloud:

"Here we have a wondrous bairn, for his hair is yellow like gold and his eyes shine bright as stars." And Thorgrimur named him Eric Brighteyes.

Now, Coldback is but an hour's ride from Middalhof, and it chanced, in after years, that Thorgrimur went up to Middalhof, to keep the Yule feast and worship in the Temple, for he was in the priesthood of Asmund Asmundson, bringing the boy Eric with him. There also was Groa with Swanhild, for now she dwelt at Middalhof; and the three fair children were set together in the hall to play, and men thought it great sport to see them. Now, Gudruda had a horse of wood and would ride it while Eric pushed the horse along. But Swanhild smote her from the horse and called to Eric to make it move; but he comforted Gudruda and would not, and at that Swanhild was angry and lisped out:

"Push thou must, if I will it, Eric."

Then he pushed sideways and with such good will that Swanhild fell

almost into the fire of the hearth, and, leaping up, she snatched a brand and threw it at Gudruda, firing her clothes. Men laughed at this; but Groa, standing apart, frowned and muttered witch-words.

"Why lookest thou so darkly, housekeeper?" said Asmund; "the boy is bonny and high of heart."

"Ah, he is bonny as no child is, and he shall be bonny all his life-days. Nevertheless, she shall not stand against his ill luck. This I prophesy of him: that women shall bring him to his end, and he shall die a hero's death, but not at the hand of his foes."

And now the years went by peacefully. Groa dwelt with her daughter Swanhild up at Middalhof and was the love of Asmund Asmundson. But, though he forgot his oath thus far, yet he would never take her to wife. The witchwife was angered at this, and she schemed and plotted much to bring it about that Asmund should wed her. But still he would not, though in all things else she led him as it were by a halter.

Twenty full years had gone by since Gudruda the Gentle was laid in earth; and now Gudruda the Fair and Swanhild the Fatherless were women too. Eric, too, was a man of five-and-twenty years, and no such man had lived in Iceland. For he was strong and great of stature, his hair was yellow as gold, and his grey eyes shone with the light of swords. He

was gentle and loving as a woman, and even as a lad his strength was the strength of two men; and there were none in all the quarter who could leap or swim or wrestle against Eric Brighteyes. Men held him in honour and spoke well of him, though as yet he had done no deeds, but lived at home on Coldback, managing the farm, for now Thorgrimur Iron-Toe, his father, was dead. But women loved him much, and that was his bane--for of all women he loved but one, Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter. He loved her from a child, and her alone till his day of death, and she, too, loved him and him only. For now Gudruda was a maid of maids, most beautiful to see and sweet to hear. Her hair, like the hair of Eric, was golden, and she was white as the snow on Hecla; but her eyes were large and dark, and black lashes drooped above them. For the rest she was tall and strong and comely, merry of face, yet tender, and the most witty of women.

Swanhild also was very fair; she was slender, small of limb, and dark of hue, having eyes blue as the deep sea, and brown curling hair, enough to veil her to the knees, and a mind of which none knew the end, for, though she was open in her talk, her thoughts were dark and secret. This was her joy: to draw the hearts of men to her and then to mock them. She beguiled many in this fashion, for she was the cunningest girl in matters of love, and she knew well the arts of women, with which they bring men to nothing. Nevertheless she was cold at heart, and desired power and wealth greatly, and she studied magic much, of which her mother Groa also had a store. But Swanhild, too, loved a man, and that was the joint in her harness by which the shaft of Fate entered her

heart, for that man was Eric Brighteyes, who loved her not. But she desired him so sorely that, without him, all the world was dark to her, and her soul but as a ship driven rudderless upon a winter night. Therefore she put out all her strength to win him, and bent her witcheries upon him, and they were not few nor small. Nevertheless they went by him like the wind, for he dreamed ever of Gudruda alone, and he saw no eyes but hers, though as yet they spoke no word of love one to the other.

But Swanhild in her wrath took counsel with her mother Groa, though there was little liking between them; and, when she had heard the maiden's tale, Groa laughed aloud:

"Dost think me blind, girl?" she said; "all of this I have seen, yea and foreseen, and I tell thee thou art mad. Let this yeoman Eric go and I will find thee finer fowl to fly at."

"Nay, that I will not," quoth Swanhild: "for I love this man alone, and I would win him; and Gudruda I hate, and I would overthrow her. Give me of thy counsel."

Groa laughed again. "Things must be as they are fated. This now is my rede: Asmund would turn Gudruda's beauty to account, and that man must be rich in friends and money who gets her to wife, and in this matter the mind of Björn is as the mind of his father. Now we will watch, and, when a good time chances, we will bear tales of Gudruda to Asmund and to

her brother Björn, and swear that she oversteps her modesty with Eric. Then shall Asmund be wroth and drive Eric from Gudruda's side. Meanwhile, I will do this: In the north there dwells a man mighty in all things and blown up with pride. He is named Ospakar Blacktooth. His wife is but lately dead, and he has given out that he will wed the fairest maid in Iceland. Now, it is in my mind to send Koll the Half-witted, my thrall, whom Asmund gave to me, to Ospakar as though by chance. He is a great talker and very clever, for in his half-wits is more cunning than in the brains of most; and he shall so bepraise Gudruda's beauty that Ospakar will come hither to ask her in marriage; and in this fashion, if things go well, thou shalt be rid of thy rival, and I of one who looks scornfully upon me. But, if this fail, then there are two roads left on which strong feet may travel to their end; and of these, one is that thou shouldest win Eric away with thine own beauty, and that is not little. All men are frail, and I have a draught that will make the heart as wax; but yet the other path is surer."

"And what is that path, my mother?"

"It runs through blood to blackness. By thy side is a knife and in Gudruda's bosom beats a heart. Dead women are unmeet for love!"

Swanhild tossed her head and looked upon the dark face of Groa her mother.

"Methinks, with such an end to win, I should not fear to tread that

path, if there be need, my mother."

"Now I see thou art indeed my daughter. Happiness is to the bold. To each it comes in uncertain shape. Some love power, some wealth, and some--a man. Take that which thou lovest--I say, cut thy path to it and take it; else shall thy life be but a weariness: for what does it serve to win the wealth and power when thou lovest a man alone, or the man when thou dost desire gold and the pride of place? This is wisdom: to satisfy the longing of thy youth; for age creeps on apace and beyond is darkness. Therefore, if thou seekest this man, and Gudruda blocks thy path, slay her, girl--by witchcraft or by steel--and take him, and in his arms forget that thine own are red. But first let us try the easier plan. Daughter, I too hate this proud girl, who scorns me as her father's light-of-love. I too long to see that bright head of hers dull with the dust of death, or, at the least, those proud eyes weeping tears of shame as the man she hates leads her hence as a bride. Were it not for her I should be Asmund's wife, and, when she is gone, with thy help--for he loves thee much and has cause to love thee--this I may be yet. So in this matter, if in no other, let us go hand in hand and match our wits against her innocence."

Now, Koll the Half-witted went upon his errand, and the time passed till it lacked but a month to Yule, and men sat indoors, for the season was dark and much snow fell. At length came frost, and with it a clear sky, and Gudruda, ceasing from her spinning in the hall, went to the woman's

porch, and, looking out, saw that the snow was hard, and a great longing came upon her to breathe the fresh air, for there was still an hour of daylight. So she threw a cloak about her and walked forth, taking the road towards Coldback in the Marsh that is by Ran River. But Swanhild watched her till she was over the hill. Then she also took a cloak and followed on that path, for she always watched Gudruda.

Gudruda walked on for the half of an hour or so, when she became aware that the clouds gathered in the sky, and that the air was heavy with snow to come. Seeing this she turned homewards, and Swanhild hid herself to let her pass. Now flakes floated down as big and soft as fife flowers. Quicker and more quick they came till all the plain was one white maze of mist, but through it Gudruda walked on, and after her crept Swanhild, like a shadow. And now the darkness gathered and the snow fell thick and fast, covering up the track of her footsteps and she wandered from the path, and after her wandered Swanhild, being loath to show herself. For an hour or more Gudruda wandered and then she called aloud and her voice fell heavily against the cloak of snow. At the last she grew weary and frightened, and sat down upon a shelving rock whence the snow had slipped away. Now, a little way behind was another rock and there Swanhild sat, for she wished to be unseen of Gudruda. So some time passed, and Swanhild grew heavy as though with sleep, when of a sudden a moving thing loomed upon the snowy darkness. Then Gudruda leapt to her feet and called. A man's voice answered:

"Who passes there?"

"I, Gudruda, Asmund's daughter."

The form came nearer; now Swanhild could hear the snorting of a horse, and now a man leapt from it, and that man was Eric Brighteyes.

"Is it thou indeed, Gudruda!" he said with a laugh, and his great shape showed darkly on the snow mist.

"Oh, is it thou, Eric?" she answered. "I was never more joyed to see thee; for of a truth thou dost come in a good hour. A little while and I had seen thee no more, for my eyes grow heavy with the death-sleep."

"Nay, say not so. Art lost, then? Why, so am I. I came out to seek three horses that are strayed, and was overtaken by the snow. May they dwell in Odin's stables, for they have led me to thee. Art thou cold, Gudruda?"

"But a little, Eric. Yea, there is place for thee here on the rock."

So he sat down by her on the stone, and Swanhild crept nearer; for now all weariness had left her. But still the snow fell thick.

"It comes into my mind that we two shall die here," said Gudruda presently.

"Thinkest thou so?" he answered. "Well, I will say this, that I ask no better end."

"It is a bad end for thee, Eric: to be choked in snow, and with all thy deeds to do."

"It is a good end, Gudruda, to die at thy side, for so I shall die happy; but I grieve for thee."

"Grieve not for me, Brighteyes, worse things might befall."

He drew nearer to her, and now he put his arms about her and clasped her to his bosom; nor did she say him nay. Swanhild saw and lifted herself up behind them, but for a while she heard nothing but the beating of her heart.

"Listen, Gudruda," Eric said at last. "Death draws near to us, and before it comes I would speak to thee, if speak I may."

"Speak on," she whispers from his breast.

"This I would say, then: that I love thee, and that I ask no better fate than to die in thy arms."

"First shalt thou see me die in thine, Eric."

"Be sure, if that is so, I shall not tarry for long. Oh! Gudruda, since I was a child I have loved thee with a mighty love, and now thou art all to me. Better to die thus than to live without thee. Speak, then, while there is time."

"I will not hide from thee, Eric, that thy words are sweet in my ears."

And now Gudruda sobs and the tears fall fast from her dark eyes.

"Nay, weep not. Dost thou, then, love me?"

"Ay, sure enough, Eric."

"Then kiss me before we pass. A man should not die thus, and yet men have died worse."

And so these two kissed, for the first time, out in the snow on Coldback, and that first kiss was long and sweet.

Swanhild heard and her blood seethed within her as water seethes in a boiling spring when the fires wake beneath. She put her hand to her kirtle and gripped the knife at her side. She half drew it, then drove it back.

"Cold kills as sure as steel," she said in her heart. "If I slay her I

cannot save myself or him. Let us die in peace, and let the snow cover up our troubling." And once more she listened.

"Ah, sweet," said Eric, "even in the midst of death there is hope of life. Swear to me, then, that if by chance we live thou wilt love me always as thou lovest me now."

"Ay, Eric, I swear that and readily."

"And swear, come what may, that thou wilt wed no man but me."

"I swear, if thou dost remain true to me, that I will wed none but thee, Eric."

"Then I am sure of thee."

"Boast not overmuch, Eric: if thou dost live thy days are all before thee, and with times come trials."

Now the snow whirled down faster and more thick, till these two, clasped heart to heart, were but a heap of white, and all white was the horse, and Swanhild was nearly buried.

"Where go we when we die, Eric?" said Gudruda; "in Odin's house there is no place for maids, and how shall my feet fare without thee?"

"Nay, sweet, my May, Valhalla shuts its gates to me, a deedless man; up Bifrost's rainbow bridge I may not travel, for I do not die with byrnie on breast and sword aloft. To Hela shall we go, and hand in hand."

"Art thou sure, Eric, that men find these abodes? To say sooth, at times I misdoubt me of them."

"I am not so sure but that I also doubt. Still, I know this: that where thou goest there I shall be, Gudruda."

"Then things are well, and well work the Norns.[*] Still, Eric, of a sudden I grow fey: for it comes upon me that I shall not die to-night, but that, nevertheless, I shall die with thy arms about me, and at thy side. There, I see it on the snow! I lie by thee, sleeping, and one comes with hands outstretched and sleep falls from them like a mist--by Freya, it is Swanhild's self! Oh! it is gone."

[*] The Northern Fates.

"It was nothing, Gudruda, but a vision of the snow--an untimely dream that comes before the sleep. I grow cold and my eyes are heavy; kiss me once again."

"It was no dream, Eric, and ever I doubt me of Swanhild, for I think she loves thee also, and she is fair and my enemy," says Gudruda, laying her snow-cold lips on his lips. "Oh, Eric, awake! awake! See, the snow is

done."

He stumbled to his feet and looked forth. Lo! out across the sky flared the wild Northern fires, throwing light upon the darkness.

"Now it seems that I know the land," said Eric. "Look: yonder are Golden Falls, though we did not hear them because of the snow; and there, out at sea, loom the Westmans; and that dark thing is the Temple Hof, and behind it stands the stead. We are saved, Gudruda, and thus far indeed thou wast fey. Now rise, ere thy limbs stiffen, and I will set thee on the horse, if he still can run, and lead thee down to Middalhof before the witchlights fail us."

"So it shall be, Eric."

Now he led Gudruda to the horse--that, seeing its master, snorted and shook the snow from its coat, for it was not frozen--and set her on the saddle, and put his arm about her waist, and they passed slowly through the deep snow. And Swanhild, too, crept from her place, for her burning rage had kept the life in her, and followed after them. Many times she fell, and once she was nearly swallowed in a drift of snow and cried out in her fear.

"Who called aloud?" said Eric, turning; "I thought I heard a voice."

"Nay," answers Gudruda, "it was but a night-hawk screaming."

Now Swanhild lay quiet in the drift, but she said in her heart:

"Ay, a night-hawk that shall tear out those dark eyes of thine, mine enemy!"

The two go on and at length they come to the banked roadway that runs past the Temple to Asmund's hall. Here Swanhild leaves them, and, climbing over the turf-wall into the home meadow, passes round the hall by the outbuildings and so comes to the west end of the house, and enters by the men's door unnoticed of any. For all the people, seeing a horse coming and a woman seated on it, were gathered in front of the hall. But Swanhild ran to that shut bed where she slept, and, closing the curtain, threw off her garments, shook the snow from her hair, and put on a linen kirtle. Then she rested a while, for she was weary, and, going to the kitchen, warmed herself at the fire.

Meanwhile Eric and Gudruda came to the house and there Asmund greeted them well, for he was troubled in his heart about his daughter, and very glad to know her living, seeing that men had but now begun to search for her, because of the snow and the darkness.

Now Gudruda told her tale, but not all of it, and Asmund bade Eric to the house. Then one asked about Swanhild, and Eric said that he had seen nothing of her, and Asmund was sad at this, for he loved Swanhild. But as he told all men to go and search, an old wife came and said that

Swanhild was in the kitchen, and while the carline spoke she came into the hall, dressed in white, very pale, and with shining eyes and fair to see.

"Where hast thou been, Swanhild?" said Asmund. "I thought certainly thou wast perishing with Gudruda in the snow, and now all men go to seek thee while the witchlights burn."

"Nay, foster-father, I have been to the Temple," she answered, lying.

"So Gudruda has but narrowly escaped the snow, thanks be to Brighteyes yonder! Surely I am glad of it, for we could ill spare our sweet sister," and, going up to her, she kissed her. But Gudruda saw that her eyes burned like fire and felt that her lips were cold as ice, and shrank back wondering.