

III

HOW ASMUND BADE ERIC TO HIS YULE-FEAST

Now it was supper-time and men sat at meat while the women waited upon them. But as she went to and fro, Gudruda always looked at Eric, and Swanhild watched them both. Supper being over, people gathered round the hearth, and, having finished her service, Gudruda came and sat by Eric, so that her sleeve might touch his. They spoke no word, but there they sat and were happy. Swanhild saw and bit her lip. Now, she was seated by Asmund and Björn his son.

"Look, foster-father," she said; "yonder sit a pretty pair!"

"That cannot be denied," answered Asmund. "One may ride many days to see

such another man as Eric Brighteyes, and no such maid as Gudruda flowers

between Middalhof and London town, unless it be thou, Swanhild. Well, so her mother said that it should be, and without doubt she was foresighted at her death."

"Nay, name me not with Gudruda, foster-father; I am but a grey goose by thy white swan. But these shall be well wed and that will be a good match for Eric."

"Let not thy tongue run on so fast," said Asmund sharply. "Who told thee

that Eric should have Gudruda?"

"None told me, but in truth, having eyes and ears, I grew certain of it," said Swanhild. "Look at them now: surely lovers wear such faces."

Now it chanced that Gudruda had rested her chin on her hand, and was gazing into Eric's eyes beneath the shadow of her hair.

"Methinks my sister will look higher than to wed a simple yeoman, though he is large as two other men," said Björn with a sneer. Now Björn was jealous of Eric's strength and beauty, and did not love him.

"Trust nothing that thou seest and little that thou hearest, girl," said Asmund, raising himself from thought: "so shall thy guesses be good. Eric, come here and tell us how thou didst chance on Gudruda in the snow."

"I was not so ill seated but that I could bear to stay," grumbled Eric beneath his breath; but Gudruda said "Go."

So he went and told his tale; but not all of it, for he intended to ask Gudruda in marriage on the morrow, though his heart prophesied no luck in the matter, and therefore he was not overswift with it.

"In this thing thou hast done me and mine good service," said Asmund coldly, searching Eric's face with his blue eyes. "It had been said if

my fair daughter had perished in the snow, for, know this: I would set her high in marriage, for her honour and the honour of my house, and so some rich and noble man had lost great joy. But take thou this gift in memory of the deed, and Gudruda's husband shall give thee another such upon the day that he makes her wife," and he drew a gold ring off his arm.

Now Eric's knees trembled as he heard, and his heart grew faint as though with fear. But he answered clear and straight:

"Thy gift had been better without thy words, ring-giver; but I pray thee to take it back, for I have done nothing to win it, though perhaps the time will come when I shall ask thee for a richer."

"My gifts have never been put away before," said Asmund, growing angry.

"This wealthy farmer holds the good gold of little worth. It is foolish to take fish to the sea, my father," sneered Björn.

"Nay, Björn, not so," Eric answered: "but, as thou sayest, I am but a farmer, and since my father, Thorgrimur Iron-Toe, died things have not gone too well on Ran River. But at the least I am a free man, and I will take no gifts that I cannot repay worth for worth. Therefore I will not have the ring."

"As thou wilt," said Asmund. "Pride is a good horse if thou ridest wisely," and he thrust the ring back upon his arm.

Then people go to rest; but Swanhild seeks her mother, and tells her all that has befallen her, nor does Groa fail to listen.

"Now I will make a plan," she says, "for these things have chanced well and Asmund is in a ripe humour. Eric shall come no more to Middalhof till Gudruda is gone hence, led by Ospakar Blacktooth."

"And if Eric does not come here, how shall I see his face? for, mother, I long for the sight of it."

"That is thy matter, thou lovesick fool. Know this: that if Eric comes hither and gets speech with Gudruda, there is an end of thy hopes; for, fair as thou art, she is too fair for thee, and, strong as thou art, in a way she is too strong. Thou hast heard how these two love, and such loves mock at the will of fathers. Eric will win his desire or die beneath the swords of Asmund and Björn, if such men can prevail against his might. Nay, the wolf Eric must be fenced from the lamb till he grows hungry. Then let him search the fold and make spoil of thee, for, when the best is gone, he will desire the good."

"So be it, mother. As I sat crouched behind Gudruda in the snow at Coldback, I had half a mind to end her love-words with this knife, for so I should have been free of her."

"Yes, and fast in the doom-ring, thou wildcat. The gods help this Eric, if thou winnest him. Nay, choose thy time and, if thou must strike, strike secretly and home. Remember also that cunning is mightier than strength, that lies pierce further than swords, and that witchcraft wins where honesty must fail. Now I will go to Asmund, and he shall be an angry man before to-morrow comes."

Then Groa went to the shut bed where Asmund the Priest slept. He was sitting on the bed and asked her why she came.

"For love of thee, Asmund, and thy house, though thou dost treat me ill, who hast profited so much by me and my foresight. Say now: wilt thou that this daughter of thine, Gudruda the Fair, should be the light May of yonder long-legged yeoman?"

"That is not in my mind," said Asmund, stroking his beard.

"Knowest thou, then, that this very day your white Gudruda sat on Eric's lap in the snow, while he fondled her to his heart's content?"

"Most likely it was for warmth. Men do not dream on love in the hour of death. Who saw this?"

"Swanhild, who was behind, and hid herself for shame, and therefore she held that these two must soon be wed! Ah, thou art foolish now, Asmund.

Young blood makes light of cold or death. Art thou blind, or dost thou not see that these two turn on each other like birds at nesting-time?"

"They might do worse," said Asmund, "for they are a proper pair, and it seems to me that each was born for each."

"Then all goes well. Still, it is a pity to see so fair a maid cast like rotten bait upon the waters to hook this troutlet of a yeoman. Thou hast enemies, Asmund; thou art too prosperous, and there are many who hate thee for thy state and wealth. Were it not wise to use this girl of thine to build a wall about thee against the evil day?"

"I have been more wont, housekeeper, to trust to my own arm than to bought friends. But tell me, for at the least thou art far-seeing, how may this be done? As things are, though I spoke roughly to him last night, I am inclined to let Eric Brighteyes take Gudruda. I have always loved the lad, and he will go far."

"Listen, Asmund! Surely thou hast heard of Ospakar Blacktooth--the priest who dwells in the north?"

"Ay, I have heard of him, and I know him; there is no man like him for ugliness, or strength, or wealth and power. We sailed together on a viking cruise many years ago, and he did things at which my blood turned, and in those days I had no chicken heart."

"With time men change their temper. Unless I am mistaken, this Ospakar wishes above all to have Gudruda in marriage, for, now that everything is his, this alone is left for him to ask--the fairest woman in Iceland as a housewife. Think then, with Ospakar for a son-in-law, who is there that can stand against thee?"

"I am not so sure of this matter, nor do I altogether trust thee, Groa. Of a truth it seems to me that thou hast some stake upon the race. This Ospakar is evil and hideous. It were a shame to give Gudruda over to him when she looks elsewhere. Knowest thou that I swore to love and cherish her, and how runs this with my oath? If Eric is not too rich, yet he is of good birth and kin, and, moreover, a man of men. If he take her good will come of it."

"It is like thee, Asmund, always to mistrust those who spend their days in plotting for thy weal. Do as thou wilt: let Eric take this treasure of thine--for whom earls would give their state--and live to rue it. But I say this: if he have thy leave to roam here with his dove the matter will soon grow, for these two sicken each to each, and young blood is hot and ill at waiting, and it is not always snow-time. So betroth her or let him go. And now I have said."

"Thy tongue runs too fast. The man is quite unproved and I will try him. To-morrow I will warn him from my door; then things shall go as they are fated. And now peace, for I weary of thy talk, and, moreover, it is false; for thou lackest one thing--a little honesty to season all thy

craft. What fee has Ospakar paid thee, I wonder. Thou at least hadst never refused the gold ring to-night, for thou wouldst do much for gold."

"And more for love, and most of all for hate," Groa said, and laughed aloud; nor did they speak more on this matter that night.

Now, early in the morning Asmund rose, and, going to the hall, awoke Eric, who slept by the centre hearth, saying that he would talk with him without. Then Eric followed him to the back of the hall.

"Say now, Eric," he said, when they stood in the grey light outside the house, "who was it taught thee that kisses keep out the cold on snowy days?"

Now Eric reddened to his yellow hair, but he answered: "Who was it told thee, lord, that I tried this medicine?"

"The snow hides much, but there are eyes that can pierce the snow. Nay, more, thou wast seen, and there's an end. Now know this--I like thee well, but Gudruda is not for thee; she is far above thee, who art but a deedless yeoman."

"Then I love to no end," said Eric; "I long for one thing only, and that is Gudruda. It was in my mind to ask her in marriage of thee to-day."

"Then, lad, thou hast thy answer before thou askest. Be sure of one thing: if but once again I find thee alone with Gudruda, it is my axe shall kiss thee and not her lips."

"That may yet be put to the proof, lord," said Eric, and turned to seek his horse, when suddenly Gudruda came and stood between them, and his heart leapt at the sight of her.

"Listen, Gudruda," Eric said. "This is thy father's word: that we two speak together no more."

"Then it is an ill saying for us," said Gudruda, laying her hand upon her breast.

"Saying good or ill, so it surely is, girl," answered Asmund. "No more shalt thou go a-kissing, in the snow or in the flowers."

"Now I seem to hear Swanhild's voice," she said. "Well, such things have happened to better folk, and a father's wish is to a maid what the wind is to the grass. Still, the sun is behind the cloud and it will shine again some day. Till then, Eric, fare thee well!"

"It is not thy will, lord," said Eric, "that I should come to thy Yule-feast as thou hast asked me these ten years past?"

Now Asmund grew wroth, and pointed with his hand towards the great

Golden Falls that thunder down the mountain named Stonefell that is behind Middalhof, and there are no greater water-falls in Iceland.

"A man may take two roads, Eric, from Coldback to Middalhof, one by the bridle-path over Coldback and the other down Golden Falls; but I never knew traveller to choose this way. Now, I bid thee to my feast by the path over Golden Falls; and, if thou comest that way, I promise thee this: if thou livest I will greet thee well, and if I find thee dead in the great pool I will bind on thy Hell-shoes and lay thee to earth neighbourly fashion. But if thou comest by any other path, then my thralls shall cut thee down at my door." And he stroked his beard and laughed.

Now Asmund spoke thus mockingly because he did not think it possible that any man should try the path of the Golden Falls.

Eric smiled and said, "I hold thee to thy word, lord; perhaps I shall be thy guest at Yule."

But Gudruda heard the thunder of the mighty Falls as the wind turned, and cried "Nay, nay--it were thy death!"

Then Eric finds his horse and rides away across the snow.

Now it must be told of Koll the Half-witted that at length he came to Swinefell in the north, having journeyed hard across the snow. Here

Ospakar Blacktooth had his great hall, in which day by day a hundred men sat down to meat. Now Koll entered the hall when Ospakar was at supper, and looked at him with big eyes, for he had never seen so wonderful a man. He was huge in stature--his hair was black, and black his beard, and on his lower lip there lay a great black fang. His eyes were small and narrow, but his cheekbones were set wide apart and high, like those of a horse. Koll thought him an ill man to deal with and half a troll,[*] and grew afraid of his errand, since in Koll's half-wittedness there was much cunning--for it was a cloak in which he wrapped himself. But as Ospakar sat in the high seat, clothed in a purple robe, with his sword Whitefire on his knee, he saw Koll, and called out in a great voice:

[*] An able-bodied Goblin.

"Who is this red fox that creeps into my earth?"

For, to look at, Koll was very like a fox.

"My name is Koll the Half-witted, Groa's thrall, lord. Am I welcome here?" he answered.

"That is as it may be. Why do they call thee half-witted?"

"Because I love not work overmuch, lord."

"Then all my thralls are fellow to thee. Say, what brings thee here?"

"This lord. It was told among men down in the south that thou wouldst give a good gift to him who should discover to thee the fairest maid in Iceland. So I asked leave of my mistress to come on a journey and tell thee of her."

"Then a lie was told thee. Still, I love to hear of fair maids, and seek one for a wife if she be but fair enough. So speak on, Koll the Fox, and lie not to me, I warn thee, else I will knock what wits are left there from that red head of thine."

So Koll took up the tale and greatly bepraised Gudruda's beauty; nor in truth, for all his talk, could he praise it too much. He told of her dark eyes and the whiteness of her skin, of the nobleness of her shape and the gold of her hair, of her wit and gentleness, till at length Ospakar grew afire to see this flower of maids.

"By Thor, thou Koll," he said, "if the girl be but half of what thou sayest, her luck is good, for she shall be wife to Ospakar. But if thou hast lied to me about her, beware! for soon there shall be a knave the less in Iceland."

Now a man rose in the hall and said that Koll spoke truth, for he had seen Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter, and there was no maid like her in Iceland.

"I will do this now," said Blacktooth. "To-morrow I will send a messenger to Middalhof, saying to Asmund the Priest that I purpose to visit him at the time of the Yule-feast; then I shall see if the girl pleases me. Meanwhile, Koll, take thou a seat among the thralls, and here is something for thy pains," and he took off the purple cloak and threw it to him.

"Thanks to thee, Gold-scatterer," said Koll. "It is wise to go soon to Middalhof, for such a bloom as this maid does not lack a bee. There is a youngling in the south, named Eric Brighteyes, who loves Gudruda, and she, I think, loves him, though he is but a yeoman of small wealth and is only twenty-five years old."

"Ho! ho!" laughed great Ospakar, "and I am forty-five. But let not this suckling cross my desire, lest men call him Eric Holloweyes!"

Now the messenger of Ospakar came to Middalhof, and his words pleased Asmund and he made ready a great feast. And Swanhild smiled, but Gudruda was afraid.