

IV

HOW ERIC CAME DOWN GOLDEN FALLS

Now Ospakar rode up to Middalhof on the day before the Yule-feast. He was splendidly apparelled, and with him came his two sons, Gizur the Lawman and Mord, young men of promise, and many armed thralls and servants. Gudruda, watching at the women's door, saw his face in the moonlight and loathed him.

"What thinkest thou of him who comes to seek thee in marriage, foster-sister?" asked Swanhild, watching at her side.

"I think he is like a troll, and that, seek as he will, he shall not find me. I had rather lie in the pool beneath Golden Falls than in Ospakar's hall."

"That shall be proved," said Swanhild. "At the least he is rich and noble, and the greatest of men in size. It would go hard with Eric were those arms about him."

"I am not so sure of that," said Gudruda; "but it is not likely to be known."

"Comes Eric to the feast by the road of Golden Falls, Gudruda?"

"Nay, no man may try that path and live."

"Then he will die, for Eric will risk it."

Now Gudruda thought, and a great fire burned in her heart and shone through her eyes. "If Eric dies," she said, "on thee be his blood, Swanhild--on thee and that dark mother of thine, for ye have plotted to bring this evil on us. How have I harmed thee that thou shouldst deal thus with me?"

Swanhild turned white and wicked-looking, for passion mastered her, and she gazed into Gudruda's face and answered: "How hast thou harmed me? Surely I will tell thee. Thy beauty has robbed me of Eric's love."

"It would be better to prate of Eric's love when he had told it thee, Swanhild."

"Thou hast robbed me and therefore I hate thee, and therefore I will deliver thee to Ospakar, whom thou dost loath--ay and yet win Brighteyes to myself. Am I not also fair and can I not also love, and shall I see thee snatch my joy? By the Gods, never! I will see thee dead, and Eric with thee, ere it shall be so! but first I will see thee shamed!"

"Thy words are ill-suited to a maiden's lips, Swanhild! But of this be sure: I fear thee not, and shall never fear thee. And one thing I know well that, whether thou or I prevail, in the end thou shalt harvest the

greatest shame, and in times to come men shall speak of thee with hatred and name thee by ill names. Moreover, Eric shall never love thee; from year to year he shall hate thee with a deeper hate, though it may well be that thou wilt bring ruin on him. And now I thank thee that thou hast told me all thy mind, showing me what indeed thou art!" And Gudruda turned scornfully upon her heel and walked away.

Now Asmund the Priest went out into the courtyard, and meeting Ospakar Blacktooth, greeted him heartily, though he did not like his looks, and took him by the hand and led him to the hall, that was bravely decked with tapestries, and seated him by his side on the high seat. And Ospakar's thralls brought good gifts for Asmund, who thanked the giver well.

Now it was supper time, and Gudruda came in, and after her walked Swanhild. Ospakar gazed hard at Gudruda and a great desire entered into him to make her his wife. But she passed coldly by, nor looked on him at all.

"This, then, is that maid of thine of whom I have heard tell, Asmund? I will say this: fairer was never born of woman."

Then men ate and Ospakar drank much ale, but all the while he stared at Gudruda and listened for her voice. But as yet he said nothing of what he came to seek, though all knew his errand. And his two sons, Gizur and Mord, stared also at Gudruda, for they thought her most wonderfully

fair. But Gizur found Swanhild also fair.

And so the night wore on till it was time to sleep.

On this same day Eric rode up from his farm on Ran River and took his road along the brow of Coldback till he came to Stonefell. Now all along Coldback and Stonefell is a steep cliff facing to the south, that grows ever higher till it comes to that point where Golden River falls over it and, parting its waters below, runs east and west--the branch to the east being called Ran River and that to the west Laxà--for these two streams girdle round the rich plain of Middalhof, till at length they reach the sea. But in the midst of Golden River, on the edge of the cliff, a mass of rock juts up called Sheep-saddle, dividing the waters of the fall, and over this the spray flies, and in winter the ice gathers, but the river does not cover it. The great fall is thirty fathoms deep, and shaped like a horseshoe, of which the points lie towards Middalhof. Yet if he could but gain the Sheep-saddle rock that divides the midst of the waters, a strong and hardy man might climb down some fifteen fathoms of this depth and scarcely wet his feet.

Now here at the foot of Sheep-saddle rock the double arches of waters meet, and fall in one torrent into the bottomless pool below. But, some three fathoms from this point of the meeting waters, and beneath it, just where the curve is deepest, a single crag, as large as a

drinking-table and no larger, juts through the foam, and, if a man could reach it, he might leap from it some twelve fathoms, sheer into the spray-hidden pit beneath, there to sink or swim as it might befall. This crag is called Wolf's Fang.

Now Eric stood for a long while on the edge of the fall and looked, measuring every thing with his eye. Then he went up above, where the river swirls down to the precipice, and looked again, for it is from this bank that the dividing island-rock Sheep-saddle must be reached.

"A man may hardly do this thing; yet I will try it," he said to himself at last. "My honour shall be great for the feat, if I chance to live, and if I die--well, there is an end of troubling after maids and all other things."

So he went home and sat silent that evening. Now, since Thorgrimur Iron-Toe's death, his housewife, Saevuna, Eric's mother, had grown dim of sight, and, though she peered and peered again from her seat in the ingle nook, she could not see the face of her son.

"What ails thee, Eric, that thou sittest so silent? Was not the meat, then, to thy mind at supper?"

"Yes, mother, the meat was well enough, though a little undersmoked."

"Now I see that thou art not thyself, son, for thou hadst no meat, but

only stock-fish--and I never knew a man forget his supper on the night of its eating, except he was distraught or deep in love."

"Was it so?" said Brighteyes.

"What troubles thee, Eric?--that sweet lass yonder?"

"Ay, somewhat, mother."

"What more, then?"

"This, that I go down Golden Falls to-morrow, and I do not know how I may come from Sheep-saddle rock to Wolf's Fang crag and keep my life whole in me; and now, I pray thee, weary me not with words, for my brain is slow, and I must use it."

When she heard this Saevuna screamed aloud, and threw herself before Eric, praying him to forgo his mad venture. But he would not listen to her, for he was slow to make up his mind, but, that being made up, nothing could change it. Then, when she learned that it was to get sight of Gudruda that he purposed thus to throw his life away, she was very angry and cursed her and all her kith and kin.

"It is likely enough that thou wilt have cause to use such words before all this tale is told," said Eric; "nevertheless, mother, forbear to curse Gudruda, who is in no way to blame for these matters."

"Thou art a faithless son," Saevuna said, "who wilt slay thyself striving to win speech with thy May, and leave thy mother childless."

Eric said that it seemed so indeed, but he was plighted to it and the feat must be tried. Then he kissed her, and she sought her bed, weeping.

Now it was the day of the Yule-feast, and there was no sun till one hour before noon. But Eric, having kissed his mother and bidden her farewell, called a thrall, Jon by name, and giving him a sealskin bag full of his best apparel, bade him ride to Middalhof and tell Asmund the Priest that Eric Brighteyes would come down Golden Falls an hour after mid-day, to join his feast; and thence go to the foot of the Golden Falls, to await him there. And the man went, wondering, for he thought his master mad.

Then Eric took a good rope, and a staff tipped with iron, and, so soon as the light served, mounted his horse, forded Ran River, and rode along Coldback till he came to the lip of Golden Falls. Here he stayed a while till at length he saw many people streaming up the snow from Middalhof far beneath, and, among them, two women who by their stature should be Gudruda and Swanhild, and, near to them, a great man whom he did not know. Then he showed himself for a space on the brink of the gulf and turned his horse up stream. The sun shone bright upon the edge of the sky, but the frost bit like a sword. Still, he must strip off his

garments, so that nothing remained on him except his sheepskin shoes, shirt and hose, and take the water. Now here the river runs mightily, and he must cross full thirty fathoms of the swirling water before he can reach Sheep-saddle, and woe to him if his foot slip on the boulders, for certainly he must be swept over the brink.

Eric rested the staff against the stony bottom and, leaning his weight on it, took the stream, and he was so strong that it could not prevail against him till at length he was rather more than half-way across and the water swept above his shoulders. Now he was lifted from his feet and, letting the staff float, he swam for his life, and with such mighty strokes that he felt little of that icy cold. Down he was swept--now the lip of the fall was but three fathoms away on his left, and already the green water boiled beneath him. A fathom from him was the corner of Sheep-saddle. If he may grasp it, all is well; if not, he dies.

Three great strokes and he held it. His feet were swept out over the brink of the fall, but he clung on grimly, and by the strength of his arms drew himself on to the rock and rested a while. Presently he stood up, for the cold began to nip him, and the people below became aware that he had swum the river above the fall and raised a shout, for the deed was great. Now Eric must begin to clamber down Sheep-saddle, and this was no easy task, for the rock is almost sheer, and slippery with ice, and on either side the waters rushed and thundered, throwing their blinding spray about him as they leapt to the depths beneath. He looked down, studying the rock; then, feeling that he grew afraid, made an end

of doubt and, grasping a point with both hands, swung himself down his own length and more. Now for many minutes he climbed down Sheep-saddle,

and the task was hard, for he was bewildered with the booming of the waters that bent out on either side of him like the arc of a bow, and the rock was very steep and slippery. Still, he came down all those fifteen fathoms and fell not, though twice he was near to falling, and the watchers below marvelled greatly at his hardihood.

"He will be dashed to pieces where the waters meet," said Ospakar, "he can never gain Wolf's Fang crag beneath; and, if so it be that he come there and leaps to the pool, the weight of water will drive him down and drown him."

"It is certainly so," quoth Asmund, "and it grieves me much; for it was my jest that drove him to this perilous adventure, and we cannot spare such a man as Eric Brighteyes."

Now Swanhild turned white as death; but Gudruda said: "If great heart and strength and skill may avail at all, then Eric shall come safely down the waters."

"Thou fool!" whispered Swanhild in her ear, "how can these help him? No troll could live in yonder cauldron. Dead is Eric, and thou art the bait that lured him to his death!"

"Spare thy words," she answered; "as the Norns have ordered so it shall be."

Now Eric stood at the foot of Sheep-saddle, and within an arm's length the mighty waters met, tossing their yellow waves and seething furiously as they leapt to the mist-hid gulf beneath. He bent over and looked through the spray. Three fathoms under him the rock Wolf's Fang split the waters, and thence, if he can come thither, he may leap sheer into the pool below. Now he unwound the rope that was about his middle, and made one end fast to a knob of rock--and this was difficult, for his hands were stiff with cold--and the other end he passed through his leathern girdle. Then Eric looked again, and his heart sank within him. How might he give himself to this boiling flood and not be shattered? But as he looked, lo! a rainbow grew upon the face of the water, and one end of it lit upon him, and the other, like a glory from the Gods, fell full upon Gudruda as she stood a little way apart, watching at the foot of Golden Falls.

"Seest thou that," said Asmund to Groa, who was at his side, "the Gods build their Bifrost bridge between these two. Who now shall keep them asunder?"

"Read the portent thus," she answered: "they shall be united, but not here. Yon is a Spirit bridge, and, see: the waters of Death foam and fall between them!"

Eric, too, saw the omen and it seemed good to him, and all fear left his heart. Round about him the waters thundered, but amidst their roar he dreamed that he heard a voice calling:

"Be of good cheer, Eric Brighteyes; for thou shalt live to do mightier deeds than this, and in guerdon thou shalt win Gudruda."

So he paused no longer, but, shortening up the rope, pulled on it with all his strength, and then leapt out upon the arch of waters. They struck him and he was dashed out like a stone from a sling; again he fell against them and again was dashed away, so that his girdle burst. Eric felt it go and clung wildly to the rope and lo! with the inward swing, he fell on Wolf's Fang, where never a man has stood before and never a man shall stand again. Eric lay a little while on the rock till his breath came back to him, and he listened to the roar of the waters. Then, rising on his hands and knees, he crept to its point, for he could scarcely stand because of the trembling of the stone beneath the shock of the fall; and when the people below saw that he was not dead, they raised a great shout, and the sound of their voices came to him through the noise of the waters.

Now, twelve fathoms beneath him was the surface of the pool; but he could not see it because of the wreaths of spray. Nevertheless, he must leap and that swiftly, for he grew cold. So of a sudden Eric stood up to his full height, and, with a loud cry and a mighty spring, bounded out from the point of Wolf's Fang far into the air, beyond the reach of the

falling flood, and rushed headlong towards the gulf beneath. Now all men watching held their breath as his body travelled, and so great is the place and so high the leap that through the mist Eric seemed but as a big white stone hurled down the face of the arching waters.

He was gone, and the watchers rushed down to the foot of the pool, for there, if he rose at all, he must pass to the shallows. Swanhild could look no more, but sank upon the ground. The face of Gudruda was set like a stone with doubt and anguish. Ospakar saw and read the meaning, and he said to himself: "Now Odin grant that this youngling rise not again! for the maid loves him dearly, and he is too much a man to be lightly swept aside."

Eric struck the pool. Down he sank, and down and down--for the water falling from so far must almost reach the bottom of the pool before it can rise again--and he with it. Now he touched the bottom, but very gently, and slowly began to rise, and, as he rose, was carried along by the stream. But it was long before he could breathe, and it seemed to him that his lungs would burst. Still, he struggled up, striking great strokes with his legs.

"Farewell to Eric," said Asmund, "he will rise no more now."

But just as he spoke Gudruda pointed to something that gleamed, white and golden, beneath the surface of the current, and lo! the bright hair

of Eric rose from the water, and he drew a great breath, shaking his head like a seal, and, though but feebly, struck out for the shallows that are at the foot of the pool. Now he found footing, but was swept over by the fierce current, and cut his forehead, and he carried that scar till his death. Again he rose, and with a rush gained the bank unaided and fell upon the snow.

Now people gathered about him in silence and wondering, for none had known so great a deed. And presently Eric opened his eyes and looked up, and found the eyes of Gudruda fixed on his, and there was that in them which made him glad he had dared the path of Golden Falls.