

HOW ASMUND THE PRIEST WAS BETROTHED TO UNNA

For a moment there was silence, for all that company was wonderstruck at the greatness of the deed. Then they cheered and cheered again, and to Eric it seemed that he slept, and the sound of shouting reached him but faintly, as though he heard through snow. Suddenly he woke and saw a man rush at him with axe aloft. It was Mord, Ospakar's son, mad at his father's overthrow. Eric sprang aside, or the blow had been his bane, and, as he sprang, smote with his fist, and it struck heavily on the head of Mord above the ear, so that the axe flew from his hand, and he fell senseless on his father in the snow.

Now swords flashed out, and men ringed round Eric to guard him, and it came near to the spilling of blood, for the people of Ospakar gnashed their teeth to see so great a hero overthrown by a youngling, while the southern folk of Middalhof and Ran River rejoiced loudly, for Eric was dear to their hearts.

"Down swords," cried Asmund the priest, "and haul yon carcass from the snow."

This then they did, and Ospakar sat up, breathing in great gasps, the blood running from his mouth and ears, and he was an evil sight to see, for what with blood and snow and rage his face was like the face of the

Swinefell Goblin.

But Swanhild spoke in the ear of Gudruda:

"Here," she said, looking at Eric, "we two have a man worth loving, foster-sister."

"Ay," answered Gudruda, "worth and well worth!"

Now Asmund drew near and before all men kissed Eric Brighteyes on the brow.

"In sooth," he said, "thou art a mighty man, Eric, and the glory of the south. This I prophesy of thee: that thou shalt do deeds such as have not been done in Iceland. Thou hast ill been served, for a knave unknown greased thy shoes. Yon swarthy Ospakar, the most mighty of all men in Iceland, could not overthrow thee, though, like a wolf, he fastened his fangs in thee, and, like a coward, stamped upon thy naked foot. Take thou the great sword that thou hast won and wear it worthily."

Now Eric took snow and wiped the blood from his brow. Then he grasped Whitefire and drew it from the scabbard, and high aloft flashed the war-blade. Thrice he wheeled it round his head, then sang aloud:

"Fast, yestermorn, down Golden Falls,
Fared young Eric to thy feast,

Asmund, father of Gudruda--
Maid whom much he longs to clasp.
But to-day on Giant Blacktooth
Hath he done a needful deed:
Hurling him in heaped-up snowdrift;
Winning Whitefire for his wage."

And again he sang:

"Lord, if in very truth thou thinkest
Brighteyes is a man midst men,
Swear to him, the stalwart suitor,
Handsel of thy sweet maid's hand:
Whom, long loved, to win, down Goldfoss
Swift he sped through frost and foam;
Whom, to win, to troll-like Ogre,
He, 'gainst Whitefire, waged his eye."

Men thought this well sung, and turned to hear Asmund's answer, nor must they wait long.

"Eric," he said, "I will promise thee this, that if thou goest on as thou hast begun, I will give Gudruda in marriage to no other man."

"That is good tidings, lord," said Eric.

"This I say further: in a year I will give thee full answer according as to how thou dost bear thyself between now and then, for this is no light gift thou askest; also that, if ye will it, you twain may now plight troth, for the blame shall be yours if it is broken, and not mine, and I give thee my hand on it."

Eric took his hand, and Gudruda heard her father's words and happiness shone in her dark eyes, and she grew faint for very joy. And now Eric turned to her, all torn and bloody from the fray, the great sword in his hand, and he spoke thus:

"Thou hast heard thy father's words, Gudruda? Now it seems that there is no great need of troth-plighting between us two. Still, here before all men I ask thee, if thou dost love me and art willing to take me to husband?"

Gudruda looked up into his face, and answered in a sweet, clear voice that could be heard by all:

"Eric, I say to thee now, what I have said before, that I love thee alone of all men, and, if it be my father's wish, I will wed no other whilst thou dost remain true to me and hold me dear."

"Those are good words," said Eric. "Now, in pledge of them, swear this troth of thine upon my sword that I have won."

Gudruda smiled, and, taking great Whitefire in her hand, she said the words again, and, in pledge of them, kissed the bright blade.

Then Eric took back the war-sword and spoke thus: "I swear that I will love thee, and thee only, Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter, whom I have desired all my days; and, if I fail of this my oath, then our troth is at an end, and thou mayst wed whom thou wilt," and in turn he put his lips upon the sword, while Swanhild watched them do the oath.

Now Ospakar was recovered from the fight, and he sat there upon the snow, with bowed head, for he knew well that he had won the greatest shame, and had lost both wife and sword. Black rage filled his heart as he listened, and he sprang to his feet.

"I came hither, Asmund," he said, "to ask this maid of thine in marriage, and methinks that had been a good match for her and thee. But I have been overthrown by witchcraft of this man in a wrestling-bout, and thereby lost my good sword; and now I must seem to hear him betrothed to the maid before me."

"Thou hast heard aright, Ospakar," said Asmund, "and thy wooing is soon sped. Get thee back whence thou camest and seek a wife in thine own quarter, for thou art unfit in age and aspect to have so sweet a maid. Moreover, here in the south we hold men of small account, however great and rich they be, who do not shame to seek to overcome a foe by foul means. With my own eyes I saw thee stamp on the naked foot of Eric,

Thorgrimur's son; with my own eyes I saw thee, like a wolf, fasten that black fang of thine upon him--there is the mark of it; and, as for the matter of the greased shoes, thou knowest best what hand thou hadst in it."

"I had no hand. If any did this thing, it was Groa the Witch, thy Finnish bedmate. For the rest, I was mad and know not what I did. But hearken, Asmund: ill shall befall thee and thy house, and I will ever be thy foe. Moreover, I will yet wed this maid of thine. And now, thou Eric, hearken also: I will have another game with thee. This one was but the sport of boys; when we meet again--and the time shall not be long--swords shall be aloft, and thou shalt learn the play of men. I tell thee that I will slay thee, and tear Gudruda, shrieking, from thy arms to be my wife! I tell thee that, with yonder good sword Whitefire, I will yet hew off thy head!"--and he choked and stopped.

"Thou art much foam and little water," said Eric. "These things are easily put to proof. If thou willest it, to-morrow I will come with thee to a holmgang, and there we may set the twigs and finish what we have begun to-day."

"I cannot do that, for thou hast my sword; and, till I am suited with another weapon, I may fight no holmgang. Still, fear not: we shall soon meet with weapons aloft and byrnie on breast."

"Never too soon can the hour come, Blacktooth," said Eric, and turning

on his heel, he limped to the hall to clothe himself afresh. On the threshold of the men's door he met Groa the Witch.

"Thou didst put grease upon my shoes, carline and witch-hag that thou art," he said.

"It is not true, Brighteyes."

"There thou liest, and for all this I will repay thee. Thou art not yet the wife of Asmund, nor shalt be, for a plan comes into my head about it."

Groa looked at him strangely. "If thou speakest so, take heed to thy meat and drink," she said. "I was not born among the Finns for nothing; and know, I am still minded to wed Asmund. For thy shoes, I would to the Gods that they were Hell-shoon, and that I was now binding them on thy dead feet."

"Oh! the cat begins to spit," said Eric. "But know this: thou mayest grease my shoes--fit work for a carline!--but thou mayest never bind them on. Thou art a witch, and wilt come to the end of witches; and what thy daughter is, that I will not say," and he pushed past her and entered the hall.

Presently Asmund came to seek Eric there, and prayed him to be gone to his stead on Ran River. The horses of Ospakar had strayed, and he must

stop at Middalhof till they were found; but, if these two should abide under the same roof, bloodshed would come of it, and that Asmund knew.

Eric said yea to this, and, when he had rested a while, he kissed Gudruda, and, taking a horse, rode away to Coldback, bearing the sword Whitefire with him, and for a time he saw no more of Ospakar.

When he came there, his mother Saevuna greeted him as one risen from the dead, and hung about his neck. Then he told her all that had come to pass, and she thought it a marvellous story, and sorrowed that Thorgrimur, her husband, was not alive to know it. But Eric mused a while, and spoke.

"Mother," he said, "now my uncle Thorod of Greenfell is dead, and his daughter, my cousin Unna, has no home. She is a fair woman and skilled in all things. It comes into my mind that we should bid her here to dwell with us."

"Why, I thought thou wast betrothed to Gudruda the Fair," said Saevuna.

"Wherefore, then, wouldst thou bring Unna hither?"

"For this cause," said Eric; "because it seems that Asmund the Priest wearies of Groa the Witch, and would take another wife, and I wish to draw the bands between us tighter, if it may befall so."

"Groa will take it ill," said Saevuna.

"Things cannot be worse between us than they are now, therefore I do not fear Groa," he answered.

"It shall be as thou wilt, son; to-morrow we will send to Unna and bid her here, if it pleases her to come."

Now Ospakar stayed three more days at Middalhof, till his horses were found, and he was fit to travel, for Eric had shaken him sorely. But he had no words with Gudruda and few with Asmund. Still, he saw Swanhild, and she bid him to be of good cheer, for he should yet have Gudruda. For now that the maid had passed from him the mind of Ospakar was set in winning her. Björn also, Asmund's son, spoke words of good comfort to him, for he envied Eric his great fame, and he thought the match with Blacktooth would be good. And so at length Ospakar rode away to Swinefell with all his company; but Gizur, his son, left his heart behind.

For Swanhild had not been idle this while. Her heart was sore, but she must follow her ill-nature, and so she had put out her woman's strength and beguiled Gizur into loving her. But she did not love him at all, and the temper of Asmund the Priest was so angry that Gizur dared not ask her in marriage. So nothing was said of the matter.

Now Unna came to Coldback, to dwell with Saevuna, Eric's mother, and she

was a fair and buxom woman. She had been once wedded, but within a month of her marriage her husband was lost at sea, this two years gone. At first Gudruda was somewhat jealous of this coming of Unna to Coldback; but Eric showed her what was in his mind, and she fell into the plan, for she hated and feared Groa greatly, and desired to be rid of her.

Since this matter of the greasing of Eric's wrestling-shoes great loathing of Groa had come into Asmund's mind, and he bethought him often of those words that his wife Gudruda the Gentle spoke as she lay dying, and grieved that the oath which he swore then had in part been broken. He would have no more to do with Groa now, but he could not be rid of her; and, notwithstanding her evil doings, he still loved Swanhild. But Groa grew thin with spite and rage, and wandered about the place glaring with her great black eyes, and people hated her more and more.

Now Asmund went to visit at Coldback, and there he saw Unna, and was pleased with her, for she was a blithe woman and a bonny. The end of it was that he asked her in marriage of Eric; at which Brighteyes was glad, but said that he must know Unna's mind. Unna hearkened, and did not say no, for though Asmund was somewhat gone in years, still he was an upstanding man, wealthy in lands, goods, and moneys out at interest, and having many friends. So they plighted troth, and the wedding-feast was to be in the autumn after hay-harvest. Now Asmund rode back to Middalhof somewhat troubled at heart, for these tidings must be told to Groa, and he feared her and her witchcraft. In the hall he found her, standing

alone.

"Where hast thou been, lord?" she asked.

"At Coldback," he answered.

"To see Unna, Eric's cousin, perchance?"

"That is so."

"What is Unna to thee, then, lord?"

"This much, that after hay-harvest she will be my wife, and that is ill news for thee, Groa."

Now Groa turned and grasped fiercely at the air with her thin hands. Her eyes started out, foam was on her lips, and she shook in her fury like a birch-tree in the wind, looking so evil that Asmund drew back a little way, saying:

"Now a veil is lifted from thee and I see thee as thou art. Thou hast cast a glamour over me these many years, Groa, and it is gone."

"Mayhap, Asmund Asmundson--mayhap, thou knowest me; but I tell thee that

thou shalt see me in a worse guise before thou weddest Unna. What! have

I borne the greatest shame, lying by thy side these many years, and shall I live to see a rival, young and fair, creep into my place with honour? That I will not while runes have power and spells can conjure the evil thing upon thee. I call down ruin on thee and thine--yea and on Brighteyes also, for he has brought this thing to pass. Death take ye all! May thy blood no longer run in mortal veins anywhere on the earth! Go down to Hela, Asmund, and be forgotten!" and she began to mutter runes swiftly.

Now Asmund turned white with wrath. "Cease thy evil talk," he said, "or thou shalt be hurled as a witch into Goldfoss pool."

"Into Goldfoss pool?--yea, there I may lie. I see it!--I seem to see this shape of mine rolling where the waters boil fiercest--but thine eyes shall never see it! _Thy_ eyes are shut, and shut are the eyes of Unna, for ye have gone before!--I do but follow after," and thrice Groa shrieked aloud, throwing up her arms, then fell foaming on the sanded floor.

"An evil woman and a fey!" said Asmund as he called people to her. "It had been better for me if I had never seen her dark face."

Now it is to be told that Groa lay beside herself for ten full days, and Swanhild nursed her. Then she found her sense again, and craved to see Asmund, and spoke thus to him:

"It seems to me, lord, if indeed it be aught but a vision of my dreams, that before this sickness struck me I spoke mad and angry words against thee, because thou hast plighted troth to Unna, Thorod's daughter."

"That is so, in truth," said Asmund.

"I have to say this, then, lord: that most humbly I crave thy pardon for my ill words, and ask thee to put them away from thy mind. Sore heart makes sour speech, and thou knowest well that, howsoever great my faults, at least I have always loved thee and laboured for thee, and methinks that in some fashion thy fortunes are the debtor to my wisdom. Therefore when my ears heard that thou hadst of a truth put me away, and that another woman comes an honoured wife to rule in Middalhof, my tongue forgot its courtesy, and I spoke words that are of all words the farthest from my mind. For I know well that I grow old, and have put off that beauty with which I was adorned of yore, and that held thee to me. '_Carline_' Eric Brighteyes named me, and 'carline' I am--an old hag, no more! Now, forgive me, and, in memory of all that has been between us, let me creep to my place in the ingle and still watch and serve thee and thine till my service is outworn. Out of Ran's net I came to thee, and, if thou drivest me hence, I tell thee that I will lie down and die upon thy threshold, and when thou sinkest into eld surely the memory of it shall grieve thee."

Thus she spoke and wept much, till Asmund's heart softened in him, and, though with a doubting mind, he said it should be as she willed.

So Groa stayed on at Middalhof, and was lowly in her bearing and soft of speech.