

## IX

### HOW SWANHILD DEALT WITH GUDRUDA

Now Jon, Eric's thrall, watched all night on Mosfell, but saw nothing except the light of Whitefire as it smote the Baresark's head from his shoulders. He stayed there till daylight, much afraid; then, making sure that Eric was slain, Jon rode hard and fast for Middalhof, whither he came at evening.

Gudruda was watching by the women's door. She strained her eyes towards Mosfell to catch the light gleaming on Eric's golden helm, and presently it gleamed indeed, white not red.

"See," said Swanhild at her side, "Eric comes!"

"Not Eric, but his thrall," answered Gudruda, "to tell us that Eric is sped."

They waited in silence while Jon galloped towards them.

"What news of Brighteyes?" cried Swanhild.

"Little need to ask," said Gudruda, "look at his face."

Now Jon told his tale and Gudruda listened, clinging to the door post.

But Swanhild cursed him for a coward, so that he shrank before her eyes.

Gudruda turned and walked into the hall and her face was like the face of death. Men saw her, and Asmund asked why she wore so strange a mien.

Then Gudruda sang this song:

"Up to Mosfell, battle eager,  
Rode helmed Brighteyen to the fray.  
Back from Mosfell, battle shunning.  
Slunk yon coward thrall I ween.  
Now shall maid Gudruda never  
Know a husband's dear embrace;  
Widowed is she--sunk in sorrow,  
Eric treads Valhalla's halls!"

And with this she walked from the stead, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

"Let the maid be," said Atli the Earl. "Grief fares best alone. But my heart is sore for Eric. It should go ill with that Baresark if I might get a grip of him."

"That I will have before summer is gone," said Asmund, for the death of Eric seemed to him the worst of sorrows.

Gudruda walked far, and, crossing Laxà by the stepping stones, climbed

Stonefell till she came to the head of Golden Falls, for, like a stricken thing, she desired to be alone in her grief. But Swanhild saw her and followed, coming on her as she sat watching the water thunder down the mighty cleft. Presently Swanhild's shadow fell athwart her, and Gudruda looked up.

"What wouldst thou with me, Swanhild?" she asked. "Art thou come to mock my grief?"

"Nay, foster-sister, for then I must mock my own. I come to mix my tears with thine. See, we loved Eric, thou and I, and Eric is dead. Let our hate be buried in his grave, whence neither may draw him back."

Gudruda looked upon her coldly, for nothing could stir her now.

"Get thee gone," she said. "Weep thine own tears and leave me to weep mine. Not with thee will I mourn Eric."

Swanhild frowned and bit her lip. "I will not come to thee with words of peace a second time, my rival," she said. "Eric is dead, but my hate that was born of Eric's love for thee lives on and grows, and its flower shall be thy death, Gudruda!"

"Now that Brighteyes is dead, I would fain follow on his path: so, if thou listest, throw the gates wide," Gudruda answered, and heeded her no more.

Swanhild went, but not far. On the further side of a knoll of grass she flung herself to earth and grieved as her fierce heart might. She shed no tears, but sat silently, looking with empty eyes adown the past, and onward to the future, and finding no good therein.

But Gudruda wept as the weight of her loss pressed in upon her--wept heavy silent tears and cried in her heart to Eric who was gone--cried to death to come upon her and bring her sleep or Eric.

So she sat and so she grieved till, quite outworn with sorrow, sleep stole upon her and she dreamed. Gudruda dreamed that she was dead and that she sat nigh to the golden door that is in Odin's house at Valhalla, by which the warriors pass and repass for ever. There she sat from age to age, listening to the thunder of ten thousand thousand tramping feet, and watching the fierce faces of the chosen as they marched out in armies to do battle in the meads. And as she sat, at length a one-eyed man, clad in gleaming garments, drew near and spoke to her. He was glorious to look on, and old, and she knew him for Odin the Allfather.

"Whom seekest thou, maid Gudruda?" he asked, and the voice he spoke with

was the voice of waters.

"I seek Eric Brighteyes," she answered, "who passed hither a thousand

years ago, and for love of whom I am heart-broken."

"Eric Brighteyes, Thorgrimur's son?" quoth Odin. "I know him well; no briskeer warrior enters at Valhalla's doors, and none shall do more service at the coming of grey wolf Fenrir.[\*] Pass on and leave him to his glory and his God."

[\*] The foe destined to bring destruction on the Norse gods.

Then, in her dream, she wept sore, and prayed of Odin by the name of Freya that he would give Eric to her for a little space.

"What wilt thou pay, then, maid Gudruda?" said Odin.

"My life," she answered.

"Good," he said; "for a night Eric shall be thine. Then die, and let thy death be his cause of death." And Odin sang this song:

"Now, corse-choosing Daughters, hearken  
To the dread Allfather's word:  
When the gale of spears' breath gathers  
Count not Eric midst the slain,  
Till Brighteyen once hath slumbered,  
Wedded, at Gudruda's side--  
Then, Maidens, scream your battle call;

Whelmed with foes, let Eric fall!"

And Gudruda awoke, but in her ears the mighty waters still seemed to speak with Odin's voice, saying:

"Then, Maidens, scream your battle call;

Whelmed with foes, let Eric fall!"

She awoke from that fey sleep, and looked upwards, and lo! before her, with shattered shield and all besmeared with war's red rain, stood gold-helmed Eric. There he stood, great and beautiful to see, and she looked on him trembling and amazed.

"Is it indeed thou, Eric, or is it yet my dream?" she said.

"I am no dream, surely," said Eric; "but why lookest thou thus on me, Gudruda?"

She rose slowly. "Methought," she said, "methought that thou wast dead at the hand of Skallagrim." And with a great cry she fell into his arms and lay there sobbing.

It was a sweet sight thus to see Gudruda the Fair, her head of gold pillowed on Eric's war-stained byrnie, her dark eyes afloat with tears of joy; but not so thought Swanhild, watching. She shook in jealous rage, then crept away, and hid herself where she could see no more, lest

she should be smitten with madness.

"Whence camest thou? ah! whence camest thou?" said Gudruda. "I thought thee dead, my love; but now I dreamed that I prayed Odin, and he spared thee to me for a little."

"Well, and that he hath, though hardly," and he told her all that had happened, and how, as he rode with Skallagrim, who yet sat yonder on his horse, he caught sight of a woman seated on the grass and knew the colour of the cloak.

Then Gudruda kissed him for very joy, and they were happy each with each--for of all things that are sweet on earth, there is nothing more sweet than this: to find him we loved, and thought dead and cold, alive and at our side.

And so they talked and were very glad with the gladness of youth and love, till Eric said he must on to Middalhof before the light failed, for he could not come on horseback the way that Gudruda took, but must ride round the shoulder of the hill; and, moreover, he was spent with toil and hunger, and Skallagrim grew weary of waiting.

"Go!" said Gudruda; "I will be there presently!"

So he kissed her and went, and Swanhild saw the kiss and saw him go.

"Well, lord," said Skallagrim, "hast thou had thy fill of kissing?"

"Not altogether," answered Eric.

They rode a while in silence.

"I thought the maid seemed very fair!" said Skallagrim.

"There are women less favoured, Skallagrim."

"Rich bait for mighty fish!" said Skallagrim. "This I tell thee: that, strive as thou mayest against thy fate, that maid will be thy bane and mine also."

"Things foredoomed will happen," said Eric; "but if thou fearest a maid, the cure is easy: depart from my company."

"Who was the other?" asked the Baresark--"she who crept and peered, listened, then crept back again, hid her face in her hands, and talked with a grey wolf that came to her like a dog?"

"That must have been Swanhild," said Eric, "but I did not see her. Ever does she hide like a rat in the thatch, and as for the wolf, he must be her Familiar; for, like Groa, her mother, Swanhild plays much with witchcraft. Now I will away back to Gudruda, for my heart misdoubts me of this matter. Stay thou here till I come, Lambstail!" And Eric turns



and gallops back to the head of Goldfoss.

When Eric left her, Gudruda drew yet nearer to the edge of the mighty falls, and seated herself on their very brink. Her breast was full of joy, and there she sat and let the splendour of the night and the greatness of the rushing sounds sink into her heart. Yonder shone the setting sun, poised, as it were, on Westman's distant peaks, and here sped the waters, and by that path Eric had come back to her. Yea, and there on Sheep-saddle was the road that he had trod down Goldfoss; and but now he had slain one Baresark and won another to be his thrall, and they two alone had smitten the company of Ospakar, and come thence with honour and but little harmed. Surely no such man as Eric had ever lived--none so fair and strong and tender; and she was right happy in his love! She stretched out her arms towards him whom but an hour gone she had thought dead, but who had lived to come back to her with honour, and blessed his beloved name, and laughed aloud in her joyousness of heart, calling:

"\_Eric! Eric!\_"

But Swanhild, creeping behind her, did not laugh. She heard Gudruda's voice and guessed Gudruda's gladness, and jealousy arose within her and rent her. Should this fair rival like to take her joy from her?

"\_Grey Wolf, Grey Wolf! what sayest thou?\_"

See, now, if Gudruda were gone, if she rolled a corpse into those boiling waters, Eric might yet be hers; or, if he was not hers, yet Gudruda's he could never be.

"\_Grey Wolf, Grey Wolf! what is thy counsel?\_"

Right on the brink of the great gulf sat Gudruda. One stroke and all would be ended. Eric had gone; there was no eye to see--none save the Grey Wolf's; there was no tongue to tell the deed that might be done. Who could call her to account? The Gods! Who were the Gods? What were the Gods? Were they not dreams? There were no Gods save the Gods of Evil--the Gods she knew and communed with.

"\_Grey Wolf, Grey Wolf! what is thy rede?\_"

There sat Gudruda, laughing in the triumph of her joy, with the sunset-glow shining on her beauty, and there, behind her, Swanhild crept--crept like a fox upon his sleeping prey.

Now she is there--

"\_I hear thee, Grey Wolf! Back to my breast, Grey Wolf!\_"

Surely Gudruda heard something? She half turned her head, then again

fell to calling aloud to the waters:

"Eric! beloved Eric!--ah! is there ever a light like the light of thine eyes--is there ever a joy like the joy of thy kiss?"

Swanhild heard, and her springs of mercy froze. Hate and fury entered into her. She rose upon her knees and gathered up her strength:

"Seek, then, thy joy in Goldfoss," she cried aloud, and with all her force she thrust.

Gudruda fell a fathom or more, then, with a cry, she clutched wildly at a little ledge of rock, and hung there, her feet resting on the shelving bank. Thirty fathoms down swirled and poured and rolled the waters of the Golden Falls. A fathom above, red in the red light of evening, lowered the pitiless face of Swanhild. Gudruda looked beneath her and saw. Pale with agony she looked up and saw, but she said naught.

"Let go, my rival; let go!" cried Swanhild: "there is none to help thee, and none to tell thy tale. Let go, I say, and seek thy marriage-bed in Goldfoss!"

But Gudruda clung on and gazed upwards with white face and piteous eyes.

"What! art thou so fain of a moment's life?" said Swanhild. "Then I will save thee from thyself, for it must be ill to suffer thus!" and she ran

to seek a rock. Now she finds one and, staggering beneath its weight to the brink of the gulf, peers over. Still Gudruda hangs. Space yawns beneath her, the waters roar in her ears, the red sky glows above. She sees Swanhild come and shrieks aloud.

Eric is there, though Swanhild hears him not, for the sound of his horse's galloping feet is lost in the roar of waters. But that cry comes to his ears, he sees the poised rock, and all grows clear to him. He leaps from his horse, and even as she loses the stone, clutches Swanhild's kirtle and hurls her back. The rock bounds sideways and presently is lost in the waters.

Eric looks over. He sees Gudruda's white face gleaming in the gloom. Down he leaps upon the ledge, though this is no easy thing.

"Hold fast! I come; hold fast!" he cries.

"I can no more," gasps Gudruda, and one hand slips.

Eric grasps the rock and, stretching downward, grips her wrist; just as her hold loosens he grips it, and she swings loose, her weight hanging on his arm.

Now he must needs lift her up and that with one hand, for the ledge is narrow and he dare not lose his hold of the rock above. She swings over the great gulf and she is senseless as one dead. He gathers all his

mighty strength and lifts. His feet slip a little, then catch, and once more Gudruda swings. The sweat bursts out upon his forehead and his blood drums through him. Now it must be, or not at all. Again he lifts and his muscles strain and crack, and she lies beside him on the narrow ledge!

All is not yet done. The brink of the cleft is the height of a man above him. There he must lay her, for he may not leave her to find aid, lest she should wake and roll into the chasm. Loosing his hold of the cliff, he turns, facing the rock, and, bending over Gudruda, twists his hands in her kirtle below the breast and above the knee. Then once more Eric puts out his might and draws her up to the level of his breast, and rests. Again with all his force he lifts her above the crest of his helm and throws her forward, so that now she lies upon the brink of the great cliff. He almost falls backward at the effort, but, clutching the rock, he saves himself, and with a struggle gains her side, and lies there, panting like a wearied hound of chase.

Of all trials of strength that ever were put upon his might, Eric was wont to say, this lifting of Gudruda was the greatest; for she was no light woman, and there was little to stand on and almost nothing to cling to.

Presently Brighteyes rose and peered at Gudruda through the gloom. She still swooned. Then he gazed about him--but Swanhild, the witchgirl, was gone.

Then he took Gudruda in his arms, and, leading the horse, stumbled through the darkness, calling on Skallagrim. The Baresark answered, and presently his large form was seen looming in the gloom.

Eric told his tale in few words.

"The ways of womankind are evil," said Skallagrim; "but of all the deeds that I have known done at their hands, this is the worst. It had been well to hurl the wolf-witch from the cliff."

"Ay, well," said Eric; "but that song must yet be sung."

Now dimly lighted of the rising moon by turns they bore Gudruda down the mountain side, till at length, utterly fordone, they saw the fires of Middalhof.