

HOW ASMUND SPOKE WITH SWANHILD

Now as the days went, though Atli's ship was bound for sea, she did not sail, and it came about that the Earl sank ever deeper in the toils of Swanhild. He called to mind many wise saws, but these availed him little: for when Love rises like the sun, wisdom melts like the mists. So at length it came to this, that on the day of Eric's coming back, Atli went to Asmund the Priest, and asked him for the hand of Swanhild the Fatherless in marriage. Asmund heard and was glad, for he knew well that things went badly between Swanhild and Gudruda, and it seemed good to him that seas should be set between them. Nevertheless, he thought it honest to warn the Earl that Swanhild was apart from other women.

"Thou dost great honour, earl, to my foster-daughter and my house," he said. "Still, it behoves me to move gently in this matter. Swanhild is fair, and she shall not go hence a wife undowered. But I must tell thee this: that her ways are dark and secret, and strange and fiery are her moods, and I think that she will bring evil on the man who weds her. Now, I love thee, Atli, were it only for our youth's sake, and thou art not altogether fit to mate with such a maid, for age has met thee on thy way. For, as thou wouldst say, youth draws to youth as the tide to the shore, and falls away from eld as the wave from the rock. Think, then: is it well that thou shouldst take her, Atli?"

"I have thought much and overmuch," answered the Earl, stroking his grey beard; "but ships old and new drive before a gale."

"Ay, Atli, and the new ship rides, where the old one founders."

"A true rede, a heavy rede, Asmund; yet I am minded to sail this sea, and, if it sink me--well, I have known fair weather! Great longing has got hold of me, and I think the maid looks gently on me, and that things may yet go well between us. I have many things to give such as women love. At the least, if thou givest me thy good word, I will risk it, Asmund: for the bold thrower sometimes wins the stake. Only I say this, that, if Swanhild is unwilling, let there be an end of my wooing, for I do not wish to take a bride who turns from my grey hairs."

Asmund said that it should be so, and they made an end of talking just as the light faded.

Now Asmund went out seeking Swanhild, and presently he met her near the stead. He could not see her face, and that was well, for it was not good to look on, but her mien was wondrous wild.

"Where hast thou been, Swanhild?" he asked.

"Mourning Eric Brighteyes," she made answer.

"It is meeter for Gudruda to mourn over Eric than for thee, for her loss

is heavy," Asmund said sternly. "What hast thou to do with Eric?"

"Little, or much; or all--read it as thou wilt, foster-father. Still, all wept for are not lost, nor all who are lost wept for."

"Little do I know of thy dark redes," said Asmund. "Where is Gudruda now?"

"High is she or low, sleeping or perchance awakened: naught reck I. She also mourned for Eric, and we went nigh to mingling tears--near together were brown curls and golden," and she laughed aloud.

"Thou art surely fey, thou evil girl!" said Asmund.

"Ay, foster-father, fey: yet is this but the first of my feydom. Here starts the road that I must travel, and my feet shall be red ere the journey's done."

"Leave thy dark talk," said Asmund, "for to me it is as the wind's song, and listen: a good thing has befallen thee--ay, good beyond thy deserving."

"Is it so? Well, I stand greatly in need of good. What is thy tidings, foster-father?"

"This: Atli the Earl asks thee in marriage, and he is a mighty man, well

honoured in his own land, and set higher, moreover, than I had looked for thee."

"Ay," answered Swanhild, "set like the snow above the fells, set in the years that long are dead. Nay, foster-father, this white-bearded dotard is no mate for me. What! shall I mix my fire with his frost, my breathing youth with the creeping palsy of his age? Never! If Swanhild weds she weds not so, for it is better to go maiden to the grave than thus to shrink and wither at the touch of eld. Now is Atli's wooing sped, and there's an end."

Asmund heard and grew wroth, for the matter seemed strange to him; nor are maidens wont thus to put aside the word of those set over them.

"There is no end," he said; "I will not be answered thus by a girl who lives upon my bounty. It is my rede that thou weddest Atli, or else thou goest hence. I have loved thee, and for that love's sake I have borne thy wickedness, thy dark secret ways, and evil words; but I will be crossed no more by thee, Swanhild."

"Thou wouldst drive me hence with Groa my mother, though perchance thou hast yet more reason to hold me dear, foster-father. Fear not: I will go--perhaps further than thou thinkest," and once more Swanhild laughed, and passed from him into the darkness.

But Asmund stood looking after her. "Truly," he said in his heart, "ill

deeds are arrows that pierce him who shot them. I have sowed evilly, and now I reap the harvest. What means she with her talk of Gudruda and the rest?"

Now as he thought, he saw men and horses draw near, and one man, whose helm gleamed in the moonlight, bore something in his arms.

"Who passes?" he called.

"Eric Brighteyes, Skallagrim Lambstail, and Gudruda, Asmund's daughter," answered a voice; "who art thou?"

Then Asmund the Priest sprang forward, most glad at heart, for he never thought to see Eric again.

"Welcome, and thrice welcome art thou, Eric," he cried; "for, know, we deemed thee dead."

"I have lately gone near to death, lord," said Eric, for he knew the voice; "but I am hale and whole, though somewhat weary."

"What has come to pass, then?" asked Asmund, "and why holdest thou Gudruda in thy arms? Is the maid dead?"

"Nay, she does but swoon. See, even now she stirs," and as he spake Gudruda awoke, shuddering, and with a little cry threw her arms about

the neck of Eric.

He set her down and comforted her, then once more turned to Asmund:

"Three things have come about," he said. "First, I have slain one Baresark, and won another to be my thrall, and for him I crave thy peace, for he has served me well. Next, we two were set upon by Ospakar Blacktooth and his fellowship, and, fighting for our hands, have wounded Ospakar, slain Mord his son, and six other men of his following."

"That is good news and bad," said Asmund, "since Ospakar will ask a great weregild[*] for these men, and thou wilt be outlawed, Eric."

[*] The penalty for manslaying.

"That may happen, lord. There is time enough to think of it. Now there are other tidings to tell. Coming to the head of Goldfoss I found Gudruda, my betrothed, mourning my death, and spoke with her. Afterwards I left her, and presently returned again, to see her hanging over the gulf, and Swanhild hurling rocks upon her to crush her."

"These are tidings in truth," said Asmund--"such tidings as my heart feared! Is this true, Gudruda?"

"It is true, my father," answered Gudruda, trembling. "As I sat on the

brink of Goldfoss, Swanhild crept behind me and thrust me into the gulf. There I clung above the waters, and she brought a rock to hurl upon me, when suddenly I saw Eric's face, and after that my mind left me and I can tell no more."

Now Asmund grew as one mad. He plucked at his beard and stamped on the ground. "Maid though she be," he cried, "yet shall Swanhild's back be broken on the Stone of Doom for a witch and a murderess, and her body hurled into the pool of faithless women, and the earth will be well rid of her!"

Now Gudruda looked up and smiled: "It would be ill to wreak such a vengeance on her, father," she said; "and this would also bring the greatest shame on thee, and all our house. I am saved, by the mercy of the Gods and the might of Eric's arm, and this is my counsel: that nothing be told of this tale, but that Swanhild be sent away where she can harm us no more."

"She must be sent to the grave, then," said Asmund, and fell to thinking. Presently he spoke again: "Bid yon man fall back, I would speak with you twain," and Skallagrim went grumbling.

"Hearken now, Eric and Gudruda: only an hour ago hath Atli the Good asked Swanhild of me in marriage. But now I met Swanhild here, and her mien was wild. Still, I spoke of the matter to her, and she would have none of it. Now, this is my counsel: that choice be given to Swanhild,

either that she go hence Atli's wife, or take her trial in the Doom-ring."

"That will be bad for the Earl then," said Eric. "Methinks he is too good a man to be played on thus."

"_Bairn first, then friend_," answered Asmund.

"Now I will tell thee something that, till this hour, I have hidden from all, for it is my shame. This Swanhild is my daughter, and therefore I have loved her and put away her evil deeds, and she is half-sister to thee, Gudruda. See, then, how sore is my straight, who must avenge daughter upon daughter."

"Knows thy son Björn of this?" asked Eric.

"None knew it till this hour, except Groa and I."

"Yet I have feared it long, father," said Gudruda, "and therefore I have also borne with Swanhild, though she hates me much and has striven hard to draw my betrothed from me. Now thou canst only take one counsel, and it is: to give choice to Swanhild of these two things, though it is unworthy that Atli should be deceived, and at the best little good can come of it."

"Yet it must be done, for honour is often slain of heavy need," said

Asmund. "But we must first swear this Baresark thrall of thine, though little faith lives in Baresark's breast."

Now Eric called to Skallagrim and charged him strictly that he should tell nothing of Swanhild, and of the wolf that he saw by her, and of how Gudruda was found hanging over the gulf.

"Fear not," growled the Baresark, "my tongue is now my master's. What is it to me if women do their wickedness one on another? Let them work magic, hate and slay by stealth, so shall evil be lessened in the world."

"Peace!" said Eric; "if anything of this passes thy lips thou art no longer a thrall of mine, and I give thee up to the men of thy quarter."

"And I cleave that wolf's head of thine down to thy hawk's eyes; but, otherwise, I give thee peace, and will hold thee from harm, wood-dweller as thou art," said Asmund.

The Baresark laughed: "My hands will hold my head against ten such mannikins as thou art, Priest. There was never but one man who might overcome me in fair fight and there he stands, and his bidding is my law. So waste no words and make not nidding threats against greater folk," and he slouched back to his horse.

"A mighty man and a rough," said Asmund, looking after him; "I like his

looks little."

"Natheless a strong in battle," quoth Eric; "had he not been at my back some six hours gone, by now the ravens had torn out these eyes of mine. Therefore, for my sake, bear with him."

Asmund said it should be so, and then they passed on to the stead.

Here Eric stripped off his harness, washed, and bound up his wounds. Then, followed by Skallagrim, axe in hand, he came into the hall as men made ready to sit at meat. Now the tale of the mighty deeds that he had done, except that of the saving of Gudruda, had gone abroad, and as Brighteyes came all men rose and with one voice shouted till the roof of the great hall rocked:

"_Welcome, Eric Brighteyes, thou glory of the south!_"

Only Björn, Asmund's son, bit his hand, and did not shout, for he hated Eric because of the fame that he had won.

Brighteyes stood still till the clamour died, then said:

"Much noise for little deeds, brethren. It is true that I overthrew the Mosfell Baresarks. See, here is one," and he turned to Skallagrim; "I strangled him in my arms on Mosfell's brink, and that was something of a deed. Then he swore fealty to me, and we are blood-brethren now, and

therefore I ask peace for him, comrades--even from those whom he has wronged or whose kin he has slain. I know this, that when thereafter we stood back to back and met the company of Ospakar Blacktooth, who came to slay us--ay, and Asmund also, and bear away Gudruda to be his wife--he warred right gallantly, till seven of their band lay stiff on Horse-Head Heights, overthrown of us, and among them Mord, Blacktooth's son; and Ospakar himself went thence sore smitten of this Skallagrim. Therefore, for my sake, do no harm to this man who was Baresark, but now is my thrall; and, moreover, I beg the aid and friendship of all men of this quarter in those suits that will be laid against me at the Althing for these slayings, which I hereby give out as done by my hand, and by the hand of Skallagrim Lambstail, the Baresark."

At these words all men shouted again; but Atli the Earl sprang from the high seat where Asmund had placed him, and, coming to Eric, kissed him, and, drawing a gold chain from his neck, flung it about the neck of Eric, crying:

"Thou art a glorious man, Eric Brighteyes. I thought the world had no more of such a breed. Listen to my bidding: come thou to the earldom in Orkneys and be a son to me, and I will give thee all good gifts, and, when I die, thou shalt sit in my seat after me."

But Eric thought of Swanhild, who must go from Iceland as wife to Atli, and answered:

"Thou doest me great honour, Earl, but this may not be. Where the fir is planted, there it must grow and fall. Iceland I love, and I will stay here among my own people till I am driven away."

"That may well happen, then," said Atli, "for be sure Ospakar and his kin will not let the matter of these slayings rest, and I think that it will not avail thee much that thou smotest for thine own hand. Then, come thou and be my man."

"Where the Norns lead there I must follow," said Eric, and sat down to meat. Skallagrim sat down also at the side-bench; but men shrank from him, and he glowered on them in answer.

Presently Gudruda entered, and she seemed pale and faint.

When he had done eating, Eric drew Gudruda on to his knee, and she sat there, resting her golden head upon his breast. But Swanhild did not come into the hall, though ever Earl Atli sought her dark face and lovely eyes of blue, and he wondered greatly how his wooing had sped. Still, at this time he spoke no more of it to Asmund.

Now Skallagrim drank much ale, and glared about him fiercely; for he had this fault, that at times he was drunken. In front of him were two thralls of Asmund's; they were brothers, and large-made men, and they watched Asmund's sheep upon the fells in winter. These two also grew drunk and jeered at Skallagrim, asking him what atonement he would make

for those ewes of Asmund's that he had stolen last Yule, and how it came to pass that he, a Baresark, had been overthrown of an unarmed man.

Skallagrim bore their gibes for a space as he drank on, but suddenly he rose and rushed at them, and, seizing a man's throat in either hand, thrust them to the ground beneath him and nearly choked them there.

Then Eric ran down the hall, and, putting out his strength, tore the Baresark from them.

"This then is thy peacefulness, thou wolf!" Eric cried. "Thou art drunk!"

"Ay," growled Skallagrim, "ale is many a man's doom."

"Have a care that it is not thine and mine, then!" said Eric. "Go, sleep; and know that, if I see thee thus once more, I see thee not again."

But after this men jeered no more at Skallagrim Lambstail, Eric's thrall.