

HOW SWANHILD BID FAREWELL TO ERIC

Now all this while Asmund sat deep in thought; but when, at length, men were sunk in sleep, he took a candle of fat and passed to the shut bed where Swanhild slept alone. She lay on her bed, and her curling hair was all about her. She was awake, for the light gleamed in her blue eyes, and on a naked knife that was on the bed beside her, half hidden by her hair.

"What wouldst thou, foster-father?" she asked, rising in the couch. Asmund closed the curtains, then looked at her sternly and spoke in a low voice:

"Thou art fair to be so vile a thing, Swanhild," he said. "Who now would have dreamed that heart of thine could talk with goblins and with were-wolves--that those eyes of thine could bear to look on murder and those white hands find strength to do the sin?"

She held up her shapely arms and, looking on them, laughed. "Would that they had been fashioned in a stronger mould," she said. "May they wither in their woman's weakness! else had the deed been done outright. Now my crime is as heavy upon me and nothing gained by it. Say what fate for me, foster-father--the Stone of Doom and the pool where faithless women lie? Ah, then might Gudruda laugh indeed, and I will not live to hear

that laugh. See," and she gripped the dagger at her side: "along this bright edge runs the path to peace and freedom, and, if need be, I will tread it."

"Be silent," said Asmund. "This Gudruda, my daughter, whom thou wouldst have foully done to death, is thine own sister, and it is she who, pitying thee, hath pleaded for thy life."

"I will naught of her pity who have no pity," she answered; "and this I say to thee who art my father: shame be on thee who hast not dared to own thy child!"

"Hadst thou not been my child, Swanhild, and had I not loved thee secretly as my child, be sure of this, I had long since driven thee hence; for my eyes have been open to much that I have not seemed to see. But at length thy wickedness has overcome my love, and I will see thy face no more. Listen: none have heard of this shameful deed of thine save those who saw it, and their tongues are sealed. Now I give thee choice: wed Atli and go, or stand in the Doom-ring and take thy fate."

"Have I not said, father, while death may be sought otherwise, that I will never do this last? Nor will I do the first. I am not all of the tame breed of you Iceland folk--other and quicker blood runs in my veins; nor will I be sold in marriage to a dotard as a mare is sold at a market. I have answered."

"Fool! think again, for I go not back upon my word. Wed Atli or die--by thy own hand, if thou wilt--there I will not gainsay thee; or, if thou fearest this, then anon in the Doom-ring."

Now Swanhild covered her eyes with her hands and shook the long hair about her face, and she seemed wondrous fair to Asmund the Priest who watched. And as she sat thus, it came into her mind that marriage is not the end of a young maid's life--that old husbands have been known to die, and that she might rule this Atli and his earldom and become a rich and honoured woman, setting her sails in such fashion that when the wind turned it would fill them. Otherwise she must die--ay, die shamed and leave Gudruda with her love.

Suddenly she slipped from the bed to the floor of the chamber, and, clasping the knees of Asmund, looked up through the meshes of her hair, while tears streamed from her beautiful eyes:

"I have sinned," she sobbed--"I have sinned greatly against thee and my sister. Hearken: I was mad with love of Eric, whom from a child I have turned to, and Gudruda is fairer than I and she took him from me. Most of all was I mad this night when I wrought the deed of shame, for ill things counselled me--things that I did not call; and oh, I thank the Gods--if there are Gods--that Gudruda died not at my hand. See now, father, I put this evil from me and tear Eric from my heart," and she made as though she rent her bosom--"I will wed Atli, and be a good housewife to him, and I crave but this of Gudruda: that she forgive me

her wrong; for it was not done of my will, but of my madness, and of the driving of those whom my mother taught me to know."

Asmund listened and the springs of his love thawed within him. "Now thou dost take good counsel," he said, "and of this be sure, that so long as thou art in that mood none shall harm thee; and for Gudruda, she is the most gentle of women, and it may well be that she will put away thy sin. So weep no more, and have no more dealings with thy Finnish witchcraft, but sleep; and to-morrow I will bear thy word to Atli, for his ship is bound and thou must swiftly be made a wife."

He went out, bearing the light with him; but Swanhild rose from the ground and sat on the edge of the bed, staring into the darkness and shuddering from time to time.

"I shall soon be made his wife," she murmured, "who would be but one man's wife--and methinks I shall soon be made a widow also. Thou wilt have me, dotard--take me and thy fate! Well, well; better to wed an Earl than to be shamed and stretched across the Doom-stone. Oh, weak arms that failed me at my need, no more will I put trust in you! When next I wound, it shall be with the tongue; when next I strive to slay, it shall be by another's hand. Curses on thee, thou ill counsellor of darkness, who didst betray me at the last! Is it for this that I worshipped thee and swore the oath?"

The morning came, and at the first light Asmund sought the Earl. His heart was heavy because of the guile that his tongue must practise, and his face was dark as a winter dawn.

"What news, Asmund?" asked Atli. "_Early tidings are bad tidings_, so runs the saw, and thy looks give weight to it."

"Not altogether bad, Earl. Swanhild gives herself to thee."

"Of her own will, Asmund?"

"Ay, of her own will. But I have warned thee of her temper."

"Her temper! Little hangs to a maid's temper. Once a wife and it will melt in softness like the snow when summer comes. These are glad tidings, comrade, and methinks I grow young again beneath the breath of them. Why art thou so glum then?"

"There is something that must yet be told of Swanhild," said Asmund.

"She is called the Fatherless, but, if thou wilt have the truth, why here it is for thee--she is my daughter, born out of wedlock, and I know not how that will please thee."

Atli laughed aloud, and his bright eyes shone in his wrinkled face. "It pleases me well, Asmund, for then the maid is sprung from a sound stock.

The name of the Priest of Middalhof is famous far south of Iceland; and never that Iceland bred a comelier girl. Is that all?"

"One more thing, Earl. This I charge thee: watch thy wife, and hold her back from witchcraft and from dealings with evil things and trolls of darkness. She is of Finnish blood and the women of the Finns are much given to such wicked work."

"I set little store by witchwork, goblins and their kin," said Atli. "I doubt me much of their power, and I shall soon wean Swanhild from such ways, if indeed she practise them."

Then they fell to talking of Swanhild's dower, and that was not small. Afterwards Asmund sought Eric and Gudruda, and told them what had come to pass, and they were glad at the news, though they grieved for Atli the Earl. And when Swanhild met Gudruda, she came to her humbly, and humbly kissed her hand, and with tears craved pardon of her evil doing, saying that she had been mad; nor did Gudruda withhold it, for of all women she was the gentlest and most forgiving. But to Eric, Swanhild said nothing.

The wedding-feast must be held on the third day from this, for Atli would sail on that same day, since his people wearied of waiting and his ship might lie bound no longer. Blithe was Atli the Earl, and Swanhild was all changed, for now she seemed the gentlest of maids, and, as

befitted one about to be made a wife, moved through the house with soft words and downcast eyes. But Skallagrim, watching her, bethought him of the grey wolf that he had seen by Goldfoss, and this seemed not well to him.

"It would be bad now," he said to Eric, as they rode to Coldback, "to stand in yon old earl's shoes. This woman's weather has changed too fast, and after such a calm there'll come a storm indeed. I am now minded of Thorunna, for she went just so the day before she gave herself to Ospakar, and me to shame and bonds."

"Talk not of the raven till you hear his croak," said Eric.

"He is on the wing, lord," answered Skallagrim.

Now Eric came to Coldback in the Marsh, and Saevuna his mother and Unna, Thorod's daughter, the betrothed of Asmund, were glad to welcome him; for the tidings of his mighty deeds and of the overthrow of Ospakar and the slaying of Mord were noised far and wide. But at Skallagrim Lambstail they looked askance. Still, when they heard of those things that he had wrought on Horse-Head Heights, they welcomed him for his deed's sake.

Eric sat two nights at Coldback, and on the second day Saevuna his mother and Unna rode thence with their servants to the wedding-feast of

Swanhild the Fatherless. But Eric stopped at Coldback that night, saying that he would be at Middalhof within two hours of sunrise, for he must talk with a shepherd who came from the fells.

Saevuna and her company came to Middalhof and was asked, first by Gudruda, then by Swanhild, why Brighteyes tarried. She answered that he would be there early on the morrow. Next morning, before it was light, Eric girded on Whitefire, took horse and rode from Coldback alone, for he would not bring Skallagrim, fearing lest he should get drunk at the feast and shed some man's blood.

It was Swanhild's wedding-day; but she greeted it with little lightsomeness of heart, and her eyes knew no sleep that night, though they were heavy with tears.

At the first light she rose, and, gliding from the house, walked through the heavy dew down the path by which Eric must draw near, for she desired to speak with him. Gudruda also rose a while after, though she did not know this, and followed on the same path, for she would greet her lover at his coming.

Now three furlongs or more from the stead stood a vetch stack, and Swanhild waited on the further side of this stack. Presently she heard a sound of singing come from behind the shoulder of the fell and of the tramp of a horse's hoofs. Then she saw the golden wings of Eric's helm all ablaze with the sunlight as he rode merrily along, and great

bitterness laid hold of her that Eric could be of such a joyous mood on the day when she who loved him must be made the wife of another man.

Presently he was before her, and Swanhild stepped from the shadow of the stack and laid her hand upon his horse's bridle.

"Eric," she said humbly and with bowed head, "Gudruda sleeps yet. Canst thou, then, find time to hearken to my words?"

He frowned and said: "Methinks, Swanhild, it would be better if thou gavest thy words to him who is thy lord."

She let the bridle-rein drop from her hands. "I am answered," she said; "ride on."

Now pity stirred in Eric's heart, for Swanhild's mien was most heavy, and he leaped down from his horse. "Nay," he said, "speak on, if thou hast anything to tell me."

"I have this to tell thee, Eric; that now, before we part for ever, I am come to ask thy pardon for my ill-doing--ay, and to wish all joy to thee and thy fair love," and she sobbed and choked.

"Speak no more of it, Swanhild," he said, "but let thy good deeds cover up the ill, which are not small; so thou shalt be happy."

She looked at him strangely, and her face was white with pain.

"How then are we so differently fashioned that thou, Eric, canst prate to me of happiness when my heart is racked with grief? Oh, Eric, I blame thee not, for thou hast not wrought this evil on me willingly; but I say this: that my heart is dead, as I would that I were dead. See those flowers: they smell sweet--for me they have no odour. Look on the light leaping from Coldback to the sea, from the sea to Westman Isles, and from the Westman crown of rocks far into the wide heavens above. It is beautiful, is it not? Yet I tell thee, Eric, that now to my eyes howling winter darkness is every whit as fair. Joy is dead within me, music's but a jangled madness in my ears, food hath no savour on my tongue, my youth is sped ere my dawn is day. Nothing is left to me, Eric, save this fair body that thou didst scorn, and the dreams which I may gather from my hours of scanty sleep, and such shame as befalls a loveless bride."

"Speak not so, Swanhild," he said, and clasped her by the hand, for, though he loathed her wickedness, being soft-hearted and but young, it grieved him to hear her words and see the anguish of her mind. For it is so with men, that they are easily moved by the pleading of a fair woman who loves them, even though they love her not.

"Yea, I will speak out all my mind before I seal it up for ever. See, Eric, this is my state and thou hast set this crown of sorrow on my brows: and thou comest singing down the fell, and I go weeping o'er the sea! I am not all so ill at heart. It was love of thee that drove me

down to sin, as love of thee might otherwise have lifted me to holiness. But, loving thee as thou seest, this day I wed a dotard, and go his chattel and his bride across the sea, and leave thee singing on the fell, and by thy side her who is my foe. Thou hast done great deeds, Brighteyes, and still greater shalt thou do; yet but as echoes they shall reach my ears. Thou wilt be to me as one dead, for it is Gudruda's to bind the byrnie on thy breast when thou goest forth to war, and hers to loose the winged helm from thy brow when thou returnest, battle-worn and conquering."

Now Swanhild ceased, and choked with grief; then spoke again:

"So now farewell; doubtless I weary thee, and--Gudruda waits. Nay, look not on my foolish tears: they are the heritage of woman, of naught else is she sure! While I live, Eric, morn by morn the thought of thee shall come to wake me as the sun wakes yon snowy peak, and night by night thy memory shall pass as at eve he passes from the valleys, but to dawn again in dreams. For, Eric, 'tis thee I wed to-day--at heart I am thy bride, thine and thine only; and when shalt thou find a wife who holds thee so dear as that Swanhild whom once thou knewest? So now farewell! Yes, this time thou shalt kiss away my tears; then let them stream for ever. Thus, Eric! and thus! and thus! do I take farewell of thee."

And now she clung about his neck, gazing on him with great dewy eyes till things grew strange and dim, and he must kiss her if only for her love and tender beauty's sake. And so he kissed, and it chanced that

as they clung thus, Gudruda, passing by this path to give her betrothed greeting, came upon them and stood astonished. Then she turned and, putting her hands to her head, fled back swiftly to the stead, and waited there, great anger burning in her heart; for Gudruda had this fault, that she was very jealous.

Now Eric and Swanhild did not see her, and presently they parted, and Swanhild wiped her eyes and glided thence.

As she drew near the stead she found Gudruda watching.

"Where hast thou been, Swanhild?" she said.

"To bid farewell to Brighteyes, Gudruda."

"Then thou art foolish, for doubtless he thrust thee from him."

"Nay, Gudruda, he drew me to him. Hearken, I say, thou sister. Vex me not, for I go my ways and thou goest thine. Thou art strong and fair, and hitherto thou hast overcome me. But I am also fair, and, if I find space to strike in, I also have a show of strength. Pray thou that I find not space, Gudruda. Now is Eric thine. Perchance one day he may be mine. It lies in the lap of the Norns."

"Fair words from Atli's bride," mocked Gudruda.

"Ay, Atli's bride, but never Atli's love!" said Swanhild, and swept on.

A while after Eric rode up. He was shamefaced and vexed at heart, because he had yielded thus to Swanhild's beauty, and been melted by her tender words and kissed her. Then he saw Gudruda, and at the sight of her all thought of Swanhild passed from him, for he loved Gudruda and her alone. He leapt down from his horse and ran to her. But, drawn to her full height, she stood with dark flashing eyes and fair face set in anger.

Still, he would have greeted her loverwise; but she lifted her hand and waved him back, and fear took hold of him.

"What now, Gudruda?" he asked, faltering.

"What now, Eric?" she answered, faltering not. "Hast seen Swanhild?"

"Yea, I have seen Swanhild. She came to bid farewell to me. What of it?"

"What of it? Why '_thus! and thus! and thus!_' didst thou bid farewell to Atli's bride. Ay, 'thus and thus,' with clinging lips and twined arms. Warm and soft was thy farewell kiss to her who would have slain me, Brighteyes!"

"Gudruda, thou speakest truth, though how thou sawest I know not. Think no ill of it, and scourge me not with words, for, sooth to say, I was

melted by her grief and the music of her talk."

"It is shame to thee so to speak of her whom but now thou heldest in thine arms. By the grief and the music of the talk of her who would have murdered me thou wast melted into kisses, Eric!--for I saw it with these eyes. Knowest thou what I am minded to say to thee? It is this: 'Go hence and see me no more;' for I have little wish to cleave to such a feather-man, to one so blown about by the first breath of woman's tempting."

"Yet, methinks, Gudruda, I have withstood some such winds. I tell thee that, hadst thou been in my place, thyself hadst yielded to Swanhild and kissed her in farewell, for she was more than woman in that hour."

"Nay, Eric, I am no weak man to be led astray thus. Yet she is more than woman--troll is she also, that I know; but less than man art thou, Eric, thus to fall before her who hates me. Time may come when she shall woo thee after a stronger sort, and what wilt thou say to her then, thou who art so ready with thy kisses?"

"I will withstand her, Gudruda, for I love thee only, and this is well known to thee."

"Truly I know thou lovest me, Eric; but tell me of what worth is this love of man that eyes of beauty and tongue of craft may so readily bewray? I doubt me of thee, Eric!"

"Nay, doubt me not, Gudruda. I love thee alone, but I grew soft as wax beneath her pleading. My heart consented not, yet I did consent. I have no more to say."

Now Gudruda looked on him long and steadfastly. "Thy plight is sorry, Eric," she said, "and this once I forgive thee. Look to it that thou givest me no more cause to doubt thee, for then I shall remember how thou didst bid farewell to Swanhild."

"I will give none," he answered, and would have embraced her; but this she would not suffer then, nor for many days after, for she was angry with him. But with Swanhild she was still more angry, though she said nothing of it. That Swanhild had tried to murder her, Gudruda could forgive, for there she had failed; but not that she had won Eric to kiss her, for in this she had succeeded well.