

XVII

HOW ASMUND THE PRIEST WEDDED UNNA, THOROD'S DAUGHTER

Now the story goes back to Iceland.

When Brighteyes was gone, for a while Gudruda the Fair moved sadly about the stead, like one new-widowed. Then came tidings. Men told how Ospakar Blacktooth had waylaid Eric on the seas with two long ships, dragons of war, and how Eric had given him battle and sunk one dragon with great loss to Ospakar. They told also how Blacktooth's other dragon, the Raven, had sailed away before the wind, and Eric had sailed after it in a rising gale. But of what befell these ships no news came for many a month, and it was rumoured that this had befallen them--that both had sunk in the gale, and that Eric was dead.

But Gudruda would not believe this. When Asmund the Priest, her father, asked her why she did not believe it, she answered that, had Eric been dead, her heart would surely have spoken to her of it. To this Asmund said that it might be so.

Hay-harvest being done, Asmund made ready for his wedding with Unna, Thorod's daughter and Eric's cousin.

Now it was agreed that the marriage-feast should be held at Middalhof; for Asmund wished to ask a great company to the wedding, and there was

no place at Coldback to hold so many. Also some of the kin of Thorod, Unna's father, were bidden to the feast from the east and north. At length all was prepared and the guests came in great companies, for no such feast had been made in this quarter for many years.

On the eve of the marriage Asmund spoke with Groa. The witch-wife had borne herself humbly since she was recovered from her sickness. She passed about the stead like a rat at night, speaking few words and with downcast eyes. She was busy also making all things ready for the feasting.

Now as Asmund went up the hall seeing that everything was in order, Groa drew near to him and touched him gently on the shoulder.

"Are things to thy mind, lord?" she said.

"Yes, Groa," he answered, "more to my mind than to thine I fear."

"Fear not, lord; thy will is my will."

"Say, Groa, is it thy wish to bide here in Middalhof when Unna is my housewife?"

"It is my wish to serve thee as aforetime," she answered softly, "if so be that Unna wills it."

"That is her desire," said Asmund and went his ways.

But Groa stood looking after him and her face was fierce and evil.

"While bane has virtue, while runes have power, and while hand has cunning, never, Unna, shalt thou take my place at Asmund's side! Out of the water I came to thee, Asmund; into the water I go again. Unquiet shall I lie there--unquiet shall I wend through Hela's halls; but Unna shall rest at Asmund's side--in Asmund's cairn!"

Then again she moved about the hall, making all things ready for the feast. But at midnight, when the light was low and folk slept, Groa rose, and, veiled in a black robe, with a basket in her hand, passed like a shadow through the mists that hang about the river's edge, and in silence, always looking behind her, like one who fears a hidden foe, culled flowers of noisome plants that grow in the marsh. Her basket being filled, she passed round the stead to a hidden dell upon the mountain side. Here a man stood waiting, and near him burned a fire of turf. In his hand he held an iron-pot. It was Koll the Half-witted, Groa's thrall.

"Are all things ready, Koll?" she said.

"Yes," he answered; "but I like not these tasks of thine, mistress. Say now, what wouldst thou do with the fire and the pot?"

"This, then, Koll. I would brew a love-potion for Asmund the Priest as he has bidden me to do."

"I have done many an ill deed for thee, mistress, but of all of them I love this the least," said the thrall, doubtfully.

"I have done many a good deed for thee, Koll. It was I who saved thee from the Doom-stone, seeming to prove thee innocent--ay, even when thy back was stretched on it, because thou hadst slain a man in his sleep. Is it not so?"

"Yea, mistress."

"And yet thou wast guilty, Koll. And I have given thee many good gifts, is it not so?"

"Yes, it is so."

"Listen then: serve me this once and I will give thee one last gift--thy freedom, and with it two hundred in silver."

Koll's eyes glistened. "What must I do, mistress?"

"To-day at the wedding-feast it will be thy part to pour the cups while Asmund calls the toasts. Last of all, when men are merry, thou wilt mix

that cup in which Asmund shall pledge Unna his wife and Unna must pledge

Asmund. Now, when thou hast poured, thou shalt pass the cup to me, as I stand at the foot of the high seat, waiting to give the bride greeting on behalf of the serving-women of the household. Thou shalt hand the cup to me as though in error, and that is but a little thing to ask of thee."

"A little thing indeed," said Koll, staring at her, and pulling with his hand at his red hair, "yet I like it not. What if I say no, mistress?"

"Say no or speak of this and I will promise thee one thing only, thou knave, and it is, before winter comes, that the crows shall pick thy bones! Now, brave me, if thou darest," and straightway Groa began to mutter some witch-words.

"Nay," said Koll, holding up his hand as though to ward away a blow.

"Curse me not: I will do as thou wilt. But when shall I touch the two hundred in silver?"

"I will give thee half before the feast begins, and half when it is ended, and with it freedom to go where thou wilt. And now leave me, and on thy life see that thou fail me not."

"I have never failed thee yet," said Koll, and went his ways.

Now Groa set the pot upon the fire, and, placing in it the herbs that she had gathered, poured water on them. Presently they began to boil and as they boiled she stirred them with a peeled stick and muttered spells over them. For long she sat in that dim and lonely place stirring the pot and muttering spells, till at length the brew was done.

She lifted the pot from the fire and smelt at it. Then drawing a phial from her robe she poured out the liquor and held it to the sky. The witch-water was white as milk, but presently it grew clear. She looked at it, then smiled evilly.

"Here is a love-draught for a queen--ah, a love-draught for a queen!" she said, and, still smiling, she placed the phial in her breast.

Then, having scattered the fire with her foot, Groa took the pot and threw it into a deep pool of water, where it could not be found readily, and crept back to the stead before men were awake.

Now the day wore on and all the company were gathered at the marriage-feast to the number of nearly two hundred. Unna sat in the high seat, and men thought her a bonny bride, and by her side sat Asmund the Priest. He was a hale, strong man to look on, though he had seen some three-score winters; but his mien was sad, and his heart heavy. He drank cup after cup to cheer him, but all without avail. For his thought sped

back across the years and once more he seemed to see the face of Gudruda the Gentle as she lay dying, and to hear her voice when she foretold evil to him if he had aught to do with Groa the Witch-wife. And now it seemed to him that the evil was at hand, though whence it should come he knew not. He looked up. There Groa moved along the hall, ministering to the guests; but he saw as she moved that her eyes were always fixed, now on him and now on Unna. He remembered that curse also which Groa had called down upon him when he had told her that he was betrothed to Unna, and his heart grew cold with fear. "Now I will change my counsel," Asmund said to himself: "Groa shall not stay here in this stead, for I will look no longer on that dark face of hers. She goes hence to-morrow."

Not far from Asmund sat Björn, his son. As Gudruda the Fair, his sister, brought him mead he caught her by the sleeve, whispering in her ear. "Methinks our father is sad. What weighs upon his heart?"

"I know not," said Gudruda, but as she spoke she looked first on Asmund, then at Groa.

"It is ill that Groa should stop here," whispered Björn again.

"It is ill," answered Gudruda, and glided away.

Asmund saw their talk and guessed its purport. Rousing himself he

laughed aloud and called to Koll the Half-witted to pour the cups that he might name the toasts.

Koll filled, and, as Asmund called the toasts one by one, Koll handed the cups to him. Asmund drank deep of each, till at length his sorrow passed from him, and, together with all who sat there, he grew merry.

Last of all came the toast of the bride's cup. But before Asmund called it, the women of the household drew near the high seat to welcome Unna, when she should have drunk. Gudruda stood foremost, and Groa was next to her.

Now Koll filled as before, and it was a great cup of gold that he filled.

Asmund rose to call the toast, and with him all who were in the hall. Koll brought up the cup, and handed it, not to Asmund, but to Groa; but there were few who noted this, for all were listening to Asmund's toast and most of the guests were somewhat drunken.

"The cup," cried Asmund--"give me the cup that I may drink."

Then Groa started forward, and as she did so she seemed to stumble, so that for a moment her robe covered up the great bride-cup. Then she gathered herself together slowly, and, smiling, passed up the cup.

Asmund lifted it to his lips and drank deep. Then he turned and gave it to Unna his wife, but before she drank he kissed her on the lips.

Now while all men shouted such a welcome that the hall shook, and as Unna, smiling, drank from the cup, the eyes of Asmund fell upon Groa who stood beneath him, and lo! her eyes seemed to flame and her face was hideous as the face of a troll.

Asmund grew white and put his hand to his head, as though to think, then cried aloud:

"Drink not, Unna! the draught is drugged!" and he struck at the vessel with his hand.

He smote it indeed, and so hard that it flew from her hand far down the hall.

But Unna had already drunk deep.

"The draught is drugged!" Asmund cried, and pointed to Groa, while all men stood silent, not knowing what to do.

"The draught is drugged!" he cried a third time, "and that witch has drugged it!" And he began to tear at his breast.

Then Groa laughed so shrilly that men trembled to hear her.

"Yes, lord," she screamed, "the draught is drugged, and Groa the Witch-wife hath drugged it! Ay, tear thy heart out, Asmund, and Unna, grow thou white as snow--soon, if my medicine has virtue, thou shalt be whiter yet! Hearken all men. Asmund the Priest is Swanhild's father, and for many a year I have been Asmund's mate. What did I tell thee, lord?--that I would see the two of you dead ere Unna should take my place!--ay, and on Gudruda the Fair, thy daughter, and Björn thy son, and Eric Brighteyes, Gudruda's love, and many another man--on them too shall my curse fall! Tear thy heart out, Asmund! Unna, grow thou white as snow! The draught is drugged and Groa, Ran's gift! Groa the Witch-Wife! Groa, Asmund's love! hath drugged it!"

And ere ever a man might lift a hand to stay her Groa glided past the high seat and was gone.

For a space all stood silent. Asmund ceased clutching at his breast.

Rising he spoke heavily:

"Now I learn that sin is a stone to smite him who hurled it. Gudruda the Gentle spoke sooth when she warned me against this woman. _New wed, new dead!_ Unna, fare thee well!"

And straightway Asmund fell down and died there by the high seat in his

own hall.

Unna gazed at him with ashen face. Then, plucking at her bosom she sprang from the dais and rushed along the hall, screaming. Men made way for her, and at the door she also fell dead.

This then was the end of Asmund Asmundson the Priest, and Unna, Thorod's daughter, Eric's cousin, his new-made wife.

For a moment there was silence in the hall. But before the echoes of Unna's screams had died away, Björn cried aloud:

"The witch! where is the witch?"

Then with a yell of rage, men leaped to their feet, seizing their weapons, and rushed from the stead. Out they ran. There, on the hill-side far above them, a black shape climbed and leapt swiftly. They gave tongue like dogs set upon a wolf and sped up the hill.

They gained the crest of the hill, and now they were at Goldfoss brink. Lo! the witch-wife had crossed the bed of the torrent, for little rain

had fallen and the river was low. She stood on Sheep-saddle, the water running from her robes. On Sheep-saddle she stood and cursed them.

Björn took a bow and set a shaft upon the string. He drew it and the arrow sung through the air and smote her, speeding through her heart. With a cry Groa threw up her arms.

Then down she plunged. She fell on Wolf's Fang, where Eric once had stood and, bouncing thence, rushed to the boiling deeps below and was no more seen for ever.

Thus, then, did Asmund the Priest wed Unna, Thorod's daughter, and this was the end of the feasting.

Thereafter Björn, Asmund's son, ruled at Middalhof, and was Priest in his place. He sought for Koll the Half-witted to kill him, but Koll took the fells, and after many months he found passage in a ship that was bound for Scotland.

Now Björn was a hard man and a greedy. He was no friend to Eric Brighteyes, and always pressed it on Gudruda that she should wed Ospakar Blacktooth. But to this counsel Gudruda would not listen, for day and night she thought upon her love. Next summer there came tidings that Eric was safe in Ireland, and men spoke of his deeds, and of how he and Skallagrim had swept the ship of Ospakar single-handed. Now after these tidings, for a while Gudruda walked singing through the meads, and no

flower that grew in them was half so fair as she.

That summer also Ospakar Blacktooth met Björn, Asmund's son, at the Thing, and they talked much together in secret.