

XIX

HOW KOLL THE HALF-WITTED BROUGHT TIDINGS FROM ICELAND

Presently as Eric walked he met Atli the Earl seeking him. Atli greeted him.

"I have seen strange things, Eric," he said, "but none more strange than this coming of thine and the manner of it. Swanhild is foresighted, and that was a doom-dream of hers."

"I think her foresighted also," said Eric. "And now, Earl, knowest thou this: that little good can come to thee at the hands of one whom thou hast saved from the sea."

"I set no faith in such old wives' tales," answered Atli. "Here thou art come, and it is my will that thou shouldest sit here. At the least, I will give thee no help to go hence."

"Then we must bide in Straumey, it seems," said Eric: "for of all my goods and gear this alone is left me," and he looked at Whitefire.

"Thou hast still a gold ring or two upon thy arm," answered the Earl, laughing. "But surely, Eric, thou wouldst not begone?"

"I know not, Earl. Listen: it is well that I should be plain with thee.

Once, before thou didst wed Swanhild, she had another mind."

"I have heard something of that, and I have guessed more, Brighteyes; but methinks Swanhild is little given to gadding now. She is as cold as ice, and no good wife for any man," and Atli sighed, "'Snow melts not if sun shines not,' so runs the saw. Thou art an honest man, Eric, and no whisperer in the ears of others' wives."

"I am not minded indeed to do thee such harm, Earl, but this thou knowest: that woman's guile and beauty are swords few shields can brook. Now I have spoken--and they are hard words to speak--be it as thou wilt."

"It is my will that thou shouldest sit here this winter, Eric. Had I my way, indeed, never wouldest thou sit elsewhere. Listen: things have not gone well with me of late. Age hath a grip of me, and foes rise up against one who has no sons. That was an ill marriage, too, which I made with Swanhild yonder: for she loves me not, and I have found no luck since first I saw her face. Moreover, it is in my mind that my days are almost sped. Swanhild has already foretold my death, and, as thou knowest well, she is foresighted. So I pray thee, Eric, bide thou here while thou mayest, for I would have thee at my side."

"It shall be as thou wilt, Earl," said Eric.

So Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail sat that winter in the hall of Atli the Earl at Straumey. For many weeks all things went well and Eric forgot his fears. Swanhild was gentle to him and kindly. She loved much to talk with him, even of Gudruda her rival; but no word of love passed her lips. Nevertheless, she did but bide her time, for when she struck she determined to strike home. Atli and Eric were ever side by side, and Eric gave the Earl much good counsel. He promised to do this also, for now, being simple-minded, his doubts had passed and he had no more fear of Swanhild. On the mainland lived a certain chief who had seized large lands of Atli's, and held them for a year or more. Now Eric gave his word that, before he sailed for Iceland in the early summer, he would go up against this man and drive him from the lands, if he could. For Brighteyes might not come to Iceland till hard upon midsummer, when his three years of outlawry were spent.

The winter wore away and the spring came. Then Atli gathered his men and went with Eric in boats to where the chief dwelt who held his lands. There they fell on him and there was a fierce fight. But in the end the man was slain by Skallagrim, and Eric did great deeds, as was his wont. Now in this fray Eric was wounded in the foot by a spear, so that he must be borne back to Straumey, and he lay there in the hall for many days. Swanhild nursed him, and most days he sat talking with her in her bower.

When Eric was nearly healed of his hurt, the Earl went with all his

people to a certain island of the Orkneys to gather scat[*] that was unpaid, and Skallagrim went with him. But Eric did not go, because of his hurt, fearing lest the wound should open if he walked overmuch. Thus it came to pass that, except for some women, he was left almost alone with Swanhild.

[*] Tribute.

Now, when Atli had been gone three days, it chanced on an afternoon that Swanhild heard how a man from Iceland sought speech with her. She bade them bring him in to where she was alone in her bower, for Eric was not there, having gone down to the sea to fish.

The man came and she knew him at once for Koll the Half-witted, who had been her mother Groa's thrall. On his shoulders was the cloak that Ospakar Blacktooth had given him; it was much torn now, and he had a worn and hungry look.

"Whence comest thou, Koll?" she asked, "and what are thy tidings?"

"From Scotland last, lady, where I sat this winter; before that, from Iceland. As for my tidings, they are heavy, if thou hast not heard them. Asmund the Priest is dead, and dead is Unna his wife, poisoned by thy mother, Groa, at their marriage-feast. Dead, too, is thy mother, Groa. Björn, Asmund's son, shot her with an arrow, and she lies in Goldfoss pool."

Now Swanhild hid her face for a while in her hands. Then she lifted it and it was white to see. "Speakest thou truth, fox? If thou liest, this I swear to thee--thy tongue shall be dragged from thee by the roots!"

"I speak the truth, lady," he answered. But still he spoke not all the truth, for he said nothing of the part which he had played in the deaths of Asmund and Unna. Then he told her of the manner of their end.

Swanhild listened silently--then said:

"What news of Gudruda, Asmund's daughter? Is she wed?"

"Nay, lady. Folk spoke of her and Ospakar, that was all."

"Hearken, Koll," said Swanhild, "bearing such heavy tidings, canst thou not weight the ship a little more? Eric Brighteyes is here. Canst thou not swear to him that, when thou didst leave Iceland it was said without question that Gudruda had betrothed herself to Ospakar, and that the wedding-feast was set for this last Yule? Thou hast a hungry look, Koll, and methinks that things have not gone altogether well with thee of late. Now, if thou canst so charge thy memory, thou shalt lose little by it. But, if thou canst not, then thou goest hence from Straumey with never a luck-penny in thy purse, and never a sup to stay thy stomach with."

Now of all things Koll least desired to be sent from Straumey; for, though Swanhild did not know it, he was sought for on the mainland as a thief.

"That I may do, lady," he said, looking at her cunningly. "Now I remember that Gudruda the Fair charged me with a certain message for Eric Brighteyes, if I should chance to see him as I journeyed."

Then Swanhild, Atli's wife, and Koll the Half-witted talked long and earnestly together.

At nightfall Eric came in from his fishing. His heart was light, for the time drew near when he should sail for home, and he did not think on evil. For now he feared Swanhild no longer, and, no fresh tidings having come from Iceland about Ospakar and Gudruda, he had almost put the matter from his mind. On he walked to the hall, limping somewhat from his wound, but singing as he came, and bearing his fish slung upon a pole.

At the men's door of the hall a woman stood waiting. She told Eric that the lady Swanhild would speak with him in her bower. Thither he went and knocked. Getting no answer he knocked again, then entered.

Swanhild sat on a couch. She was weeping, and her hair fell about her

face.

"What now, Swanhild?" he said.

She looked up heavily. "Ill news for thee and me, Eric. Koll, who was my mother's thrall, has come hither from Iceland, and these are his tidings: that Asmund is dead, and Unna, thy cousin, Thorod of Greenfell's daughter, is dead, and my mother Groa is dead also."

"Heavy tidings, truly!" said Eric; "and what of Gudruda, is she also dead?"

"Nay, Eric she is wed--wed to Ospakar."

Now Eric reeled against the wall, clutching it, and for a space all things swam round him. "Where is this Koll?" he gasped. "Send me Koll hither."

Presently he came, and Eric questioned him coldly and calmly. But Koll could lie full well. It is said that in his day there was no one in Iceland who could lie so well as Koll the Half-witted. He told Eric how it was said that Gudruda was plighted to Ospakar, and how the match had been agreed on at the Althing in the summer that was gone (and indeed there had been some such talk), and how that the feast was to be at Middalhof on last Yule Day.

"Is that all thy tidings?" said Eric. "If so, I give no heed to them: for ever, Koll, I have known thee for a liar!"

"Nay, Eric, it is not all," answered Koll. "As it chanced, two days before the ship in which I sailed was bound, I saw Gudruda the Fair. Then she asked me whither I was going, and I told her that I would journey to London, where men said thou wert, and asked her if she would send a message. Then she alighted from her horse, Blackmane, and spoke with me apart. 'Koll,' she said, 'it well may happen that thou wilt see Eric Brighteyes in London town. Now, if thou seest him, I charge thee straightly tell him this. Tell him that my father is dead, and my brother Björn, who rules in his place, is a hard man, and has ever urged me on to wed Ospakar, till at last, having no choice, I have consented to it. And say to Eric that I grieve much and sorely, and that, though we twain should never meet more, yet I shall always hold his memory dear.'"

"It is not like Gudruda to speak thus," said Eric: "she had ever a stout heart and these are craven words. Koll, I hold that thou liest; and, if indeed I find it so, I'll wring the head from off thee!"

"Nay, Eric, I lie not. Wherefore should I lie? Hearken: thou hast not heard all my tale. When the lady Gudruda had made an end of speaking she drew something from her breast and gave it me, saying: 'Give this to Eric, in witness of my words.'"

"Show me the token," said Eric.

Now, many years ago, when they were yet boy and girl, it chanced that Eric had given to Gudruda the half of an ancient gold piece that he had found upon the shore. He had given her half, and half he had kept, wearing it next his heart. But he knew not this, for she feared to tell him, that Gudruda had lost her half. Nor indeed had she lost it, for Swanhild had taken the love-token and hidden it away. Now she brought it forth for Koll to build his lies upon.

Then Koll drew out the half-piece from a leather purse and passed it to him. Eric plunged his hand into his breast and found his half. He placed the two side by side, while Swanhild watched him. Lo! they fitted well.

Then Eric laughed aloud, a hard and bitter laugh. "There will be slaying," he cried, "before all this tale is told. Take thy fee and begone, thou messenger of ill," and he cast the broken piece at Koll. "For once thou hast spoken the truth."

Koll stooped, found the gold and went, leaving Brighteyes and Swanhild face to face.

He hid his brow in his arms and groaned aloud. Softly Swanhild crept up to him--softly she drew his hands away, holding them between her own.

"Heavy tidings, Eric," she said, "heavy tidings for thee and me! She is

a murderess who gave me birth and she has slain my own father--my father and thy cousin Unna also. Gudruda is a traitress, a traitress fair and false. I did ill to be born of such a woman; thou didst ill to put thy faith in such a woman. Together let us weep, for our woe is equal."

"Ay, let us weep together," Eric answered. "Nay, why should we weep? Together let us be merry, for we know the worst. All words are said--all hopes are sped! Let us be merry, then, for now we have no more tidings to fear."

"Ay," Swanhild answered, looking on him darkly, "we will be merry and laugh our sorrows down. Ah! thou foolish Eric, under what unlucky star wast thou born that thou knewest not true from false?" and she called the serving-women, bidding them bring food and wine.

Now Eric sat alone with Swanhild in her bower and made pretence to eat. But he could eat little, though he drank deep of the southern wine. Close beside him sat Swanhild, filling his cup. She was wondrous fair that night, and it seemed to Eric that her eyes gleamed like stars. Sweetly she spoke also and wisely. She told strange tales and she sang strange songs, and ever her eyes shone more and more, and ever she crept closer to him. Eric's brain was afire, though his heart was cold and dead. He laughed loud and mightily, he told great tales of deeds that he had done, growing boastful in his folly, and still Swanhild's eyes shone more and more, and still she crept closer, wooing him in many ways.

Now of a sudden Eric thought of his friend, Earl Atli, and his mind grew clear.

"This may not be, Swanhild," he said. "Yet I would that I had loved thee from the first, and not the false Gudruda: for, with all thy dark ways, at least thou art better than she."

"Thou speakest wisely, Eric," Swanhild answered, though she meant not that he should go. "The Norns have appointed us an evil fate, giving me as wife to an old man whom I do not love, and thee for a lover to a woman who has betrayed thee. Ah, Eric Brighteyes, thou foolish Eric! why knewest thou not the false from the true while yet there was time? Now are all words said and all things done--nor can they be undone. Go hence, Eric, ere ill come of it; but, before thou goest, drink one cup of parting, and then farewell."

And she slipped from him and filled the cup, mixing in it a certain love-portion that she had made ready.

"Give it me that I may swear an oath on it," said Eric.

Swanhild gave him the cup and stood before him, watching him.

"Hearken," he said: "I swear this, that before snow falls again in Iceland I will see Ospakar dead at my feet or lie dead at the feet of Ospakar."

"Well spoken, Eric," Swanhild answered. "Now, before thou drinkest, grant me one little boon. It is but a woman's fancy, and thou canst scarce deny me. The years will be long when thou art gone, for from this night it is best that we should meet no more, and I would keep something of thee to call back thy memory and the memories of our youth when thou hast passed away and I grow old."

"What wouldst have then, Swanhild? I have nothing left to give, except Whitefire alone."

"I do not ask Whitefire, Eric, though Whitefire shall kiss the gift. I ask nothing but one tress of that golden hair of thine."

"Once I swore that none should touch my hair again except Gudruda's self."

"It will grow long, then, Eric, for now Gudruda tends black locks and thinks little on golden. Broken are all oaths."

Eric groaned. "All oaths are broken in sooth," he said. "Have then thy will;" and, loosing the peace-strings, he drew Whitefire from its sheath and gave her the great war-sword.

Swanhild took it by the hilt, and, lifting a tress of Eric's yellow hair, she shore through it deftly with Whitefire's razor-edge, smiling

as she shore. With the same war-blade on which Eric and Gudruda had pledged their troth, did Swanhild cut the locks that Eric had sworn no hand should clip except Gudruda's.

He took back the sword and sheathed it, and, knotting the long tress, Swanhild hid it in her bosom.

"Now drink the cup, Eric," she said--"pledge me and go."

Eric drank to the dregs and cast the cup down, and lo! all things changed to him, for his blood was afire, and seas seemed to roll within his brain. Only before him stood Swanhild like a shape of light and glory, and he thought that she sang softly over him, always drawing nearer, and that with her came a scent of flowers like the scent of the Iceland meads in May.

"All oaths are broken, Eric," she murmured, "all oaths are broken indeed, and now must new oaths be sworn. For cut is thy golden hair, Brighteyes, and not by Gudruda's hand!"