

HOW ERIC CAME HOME AGAIN

Swanhild made a good passage from the Orkneys, and was in Iceland thirty-five days before Eric and Skallagrim set foot there. But she did not land by Westman Isles, for she had no wish to face Gudruda at that time, but by Reyjaness. Now she rode thence with her company to Thingvalla, for here all men were gathered for the Thing. At first people hung aloof from her, notwithstanding her wealth and beauty; but Swanhild knew well how to win the hearts of men. For now she told the same story of Eric that she had told to Atli, and there were none to say her nay. So it came to pass that she was believed, and Eric Brighteyes held to be shamed indeed. Now, too, she set a suit on foot against Eric for the death of Atli at his hand, claiming that sentence of the greater outlawry should be passed against him, and that his lands at Coldback in the Marsh on Ran River should be given, half to her in atonement for the Earl's death, and half to the men of Eric's quarter.

On the day of the opening of the Thing Ospakar Blacktooth came from the north, and with him his son Gizur and a great company of men. Ospakar was blithe, for from the Thing he should ride to Middalhof, there to wed Gudruda the Fair. Then Swanhild clad herself in beautiful attire, and, taking men with her, went to the booth of Ospakar.

Blacktooth sat in his booth and by him sat Gizur his son the Lawman.

When he saw a beauteous lady, very richly clad, enter the booth he did not know who it might be. But Gizur knew her well, for he could never put Swanhild from his mind.

"Lo! here comes Swanhild the Fatherless, Atli's widow," said Gizur, flushing red with joy at the sight of her.

Then Ospakar greeted her heartily, and made place for her by him at the top of the booth.

"Ospakar Blacktooth," she said, "I am come to ask this of thee: that thou shalt befriend me in the suit which I have against Eric Brighteyes for the slaying of Earl Atli, my husband."

"Thou couldst have come to no man who is more willing," said Ospakar, "for, if thou hast something against Eric, I have yet more."

"I would ask this, too, Ospakar: that thy son Gizur should take up my suit and plead it; for I know well that he is the most skilful of all lawmen."

"I will do that," said Gizur, his eyes yet fixed upon her face.

"I looked for no less from thee," said Swanhild, "and be sure of this, that thou shalt not plead for nothing," and she glanced at him meaningly. Then she set out her case with a lying tongue, and afterwards

went back to her booth, glad at heart. For now she learned that Hall had not failed in his errand, seeing that Gudruda was about to wed Ospakar.

Gizur gave warning of the blood-suit, and the end of it was that, though he had no notice and was not there to answer to the charge, against all right and custom Eric was declared outlaw and his lands were given, half to Swanhild and half to the men of his quarter. For now all held that Swanhild's was a true tale, and Eric the most shameful of men, and therefore they were willing to stretch the law against him. Also, being absent, he had few friends, and those men of small account; whereas Ospakar, who backed Swanhild's suit, was the most powerful of the northern chiefs, as Gizur was the most skilled lawman in Iceland. Moreover, Björn the Priest, Asmund's son, was among the judges, and, though Swanhild's tale seemed strange to him after that which he had heard from Hall of Lithdale, he loved Eric little. He feared also that if Eric came a free man to Iceland before Gudruda was wed to Ospakar, her love would conquer her anger, for he could see well that she still loved Brighteyes. Therefore he strove with might and main that Eric should be brought in guilty, nor did he fail in this.

So the end of it was that Eric Brighteyes was outlawed, his lands declared forfeit, and his head a wolf's head, to be taken by him who might, should he set foot in Iceland.

Thereafter, the Althing being ended, Björn, Gizur, and Ospakar, with all their company, rode away to Middalhof to sit at the marriage-feast. But

Swanhild and her folk went by sea in the long war-ship to Westmans. For this was her plan: to seize on Coldback and to sit there for a while, till she saw if Eric came out to Iceland. Also she desired to see the wedding of Ospakar and Gudruda, for she had been bidden to it by Björn, her half-brother.

Now Ospakar came to Middalhof, and found Gudruda waiting his coming.

She stood in the great hall, pale and cold as April snow, and greeted him courteously. But when he would have kissed her, she shrank from him, for now he was more hideous in her sight than he had ever been, and she loathed him in her heart.

That night there was feasting in the hall, and at the feast Gudruda heard that Eric had been made outlaw. Then she spoke:

"This is an ill deed, thus to judge an absent man."

"Say, Gudruda," said Björn in her ear, "hast thou not also judged Eric who is absent?"

She turned her head and spoke no more of Eric; but Björn's words fixed themselves in her heart like arrows. The tale was strange to her, for it seemed that Eric had been made outlaw at Swanhild's suit, and yet Eric was Swanhild's love: for Swanhild's self had sent the lock of Brighteyes' hair by Hall, saying that he was her love and soon would wed

her. How, then, did Swanhild bring a suit against him who should be her husband? Moreover, she heard that Swanhild sailed down to Coldback, and was bidden to the marriage-feast, that should be on the third day from now. Could it be, then, when all was said and done, that Eric was less faithless than she deemed? Gudruda's heart stood still and the blood rushed to her brow when she thought on it. Also, even if it were so, it was now too late. And surely it was not so, for had not Eric been made outlaw? Men were not made outlaw for a little thing. Nay, she would meet her fate, and ask no more of Eric and his doings.

On the morrow, as Gudruda sat in her chamber, it was told her that Saevuna, Thorgrimur's widow and Eric's mother, had come from Coldback to speak with her. For, after the death of Asmund and of Unna, Saevuna had moved back to Coldback on the Marsh.

"Nay, how can this be?" said Gudruda astonished, for she knew well that Saevuna was now both blind and bed-ridden.

"She has been borne here in a chair," said the woman who told her, "and that is a strange sight to see."

At first Gudruda was minded to say her nay; but her heart softened, and she bade them bring Saevuna in. Presently she came, being set in a chair upon the shoulders of four men. She was white to see, for sickness had aged her much, and she stared about her with sightless eyes. But she was

still tall and straight, and her face was stern to look on. To Gudruda it seemed like that of Eric when he was angered.

"Am I nigh to Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter?" asked Saevuna.

"Methinks I hear her breathe."

"I am here, mother," said Gudruda. "What is thy will with me?"

"Set down, carles, and begone!" quoth Saevuna; "that which I have to say I would say alone. When I summon you, come."

The carles set down the chair upon the floor and went.

"Gudruda," said the dame, "I am risen from my deathbed, and I have caused myself to be borne on my last journey here across the meads, that I may speak with thee and warn thee. I hear that thou hast put away my son, Eric Brighteyes, to whom thou art sworn in marriage, and art about to give thyself to Ospakar Blacktooth. I hear also that thou hast done this deed because a certain man, Hall of Lithdale--whom from his youth up I have known for a liar and a knave, and whom thou thyself didst mistrust in years gone by--has come hither to Iceland from Orkneys, bearing a tale of Eric's dealings with thy half-sister Swanhild. This I hear, further: that Swanhild, Atli's widow, hath come out to Iceland and laid a suit against Eric for the slaying of Atli the Earl, her husband, and that Eric has been outlawed and his lands at Coldback are forfeit. Tell me now, Gudruda, Asmund's daughter, if these tales be true?"

"The tales are true, mother," said Gudruda.

"Then hearken to me, girl. Eric sprang from my womb, who of all living men is the best and first, as he is the bravest and most strong. I have reared this Eric from a babe and I know his heart well. Now I tell thee this, that, whatever Eric has done or left undone, naught of dishonour is on his hands. Mayhap Swanhild has deceived him--thou art a woman, and thou knowest well the arts which women have, and the strength that Freya gives them. Well thou knowest, also, of what breed this Swanhild came; and perchance thou canst remember how she dealt with thee, and with what mind she looked on Eric. Perchance thou canst remember how she plotted against thee and Eric--ay, how she thrust thee from Goldfoss brink. Say, then, wilt thou take her word? Wilt thou take the word of this witch-daughter of a witch? Wilt thou not think on Groa, her mother, and of Groa's dealings with thy father, and with Unna my kinswoman? As the mother is, so shall the daughter be. Wilt thou cast Eric aside, and that unheard?"

"There is no more room for doubt, mother," said Gudruda. "I have proof of this: that Eric has forsaken me."

"So thou thinkest, child; but I tell thee that thou art wrong! Eric loves thee now as he loved thee aforetime, and will love thee always."

"Would that I could believe it!" said Gudruda. "If I could believe that Eric still loved me--ay, even though he had been faithless to me--I would die ere I wed Ospakar!"

"Thou art foolish, Gudruda, and thou shalt rue thy folly bitterly. I am outworn, and death draws near to me--far from me now are hates and loves, hopes and fears; but I know this: that woman is mad who, loving a man, weds where she loves not. Shame shall be her portion and bitterness her bread. Unhappy shall she live, and when she comes to die, but as a wilderness--but as the desolate winter snow, shall be the record of her days!"

Now Gudruda wept aloud. "What is done is done," she cried; "the bridegroom sits within the hall--the bride awaits him in the bower. What is done is done--I may hope no more to be saved from Ospakar."

"What is done is done, yet it can be brought to nothing; but soon that shall be done which may never be undone! Gudruda, fare thee well! Never shall I listen to thy voice again. I hold thee shameless, thou unfaithful woman, who in thy foolish jealousy art ready to sell thyself to the arms of one thou hatest! Ho! carles; come hither. Bear me hence!"

Now the men came in and took up Saevuna's chair. Gudruda watched them bear her forth. Then suddenly she sprang from her seat and ran after her into the hall, weeping bitterly.

Now as Saevuna, Eric's mother, was carried out she was met by Ospakar and Björn.

"Stay," said Björn. "What does this carline here?--and why weeps Gudruda, my sister?"

The men halted. "Who calls me 'carline'?" said Saevuna. "Is the voice I hear the voice of Björn, Asmund's son?"

"It is my voice, truly," said Björn, "and I would know this--and this would Ospakar, who stands at my side, know also--why thou comest here, carline? and why Gudruda weeps?"

"Gudruda weeps because she has good cause to weep, Björn. She weeps because she has betrayed her love, Eric Brighteyes, my son, and is about to be sold in marriage--to be sold to thee, Ospakar Blacktooth, like a heifer at a fair."

Then Björn grew angry and cursed Saevuna, nor did Ospakar spare to add his ill words. But the old dame sat in her chair, listening silently till all their curses were spent.

"Ye are evil, the twain of you," she said, "and ye have told lies of Eric, my son; and ye have taken his bride for lust and greed, playing on the jealous folly of a maid like harpers on a harp. Now I tell you this, Björn and Ospakar! My blind eyes are opened and I see this hall

of Middalhof, and lo! it is but a gore of blood! Blood flows upon the board--blood streams along the floor, and ye--ye twain!--lie dead thereon, and about your shapes are shrouds, and on her feet are Hell-shoon! Eric comes and Whitefire is aloft, and no more shall ye stand before him whom ye have slandered than stands the birch before the lightning stroke! Eric comes! I see his angry eyes--I see his helm flash in the door-place! Red was that marriage-feast at which sat Unna, my kinswoman, and Asmund, thy father--redder shall be the feast where sit Gudruda, thy sister, and Ospakar! The wolf howls at thy door, Björn! the grave-worm opens his mouth! trolls run to and fro upon thy threshold, and the ghosts of men speed Hellwards! Ill were the deeds of Groa--worse shall be the deeds of Groa's daughter! Red is thy hall with blood, Björn!--for Whitefire is aloft and--_I tell thee Eric comes!_"--and with one great cry she fell back--dead.

Now they stood amazed, and trembling in their fear.

"Saevuna hath spoken strange words," said Björn.

"Shall we be frightened by a dead hag?" quoth Ospakar, drawing his breath again. "Fellows, bear this carrion forth, or we fling it to the dogs."

Then the men tied the body of Saevuna, Thorgrimur's widow, Eric's mother, fast in the chair, and bore it thence. But when at length they came to Coldback, they found that Swanhild was there with all her

following, and had driven Eric's grievance and his folk to the fells. But one old carline, who had been nurse to Eric, was left there, and she sat wailing in an outhouse, being too weak to move.

Then the men set down the corpse of Saevuna in the outhouse, and, having told all their tale to the carline, they fled also.

That night passed, and passed the morrow; but on the next day at dawn Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail landed near Westman Isles. They had made a bad passage from Fareys, having been beat about by contrary winds; but at length they came safe and well to land.

Now this was the day of the marriage-feast of Gudruda the Fair and Ospakar; but Eric knew nothing of these tidings.

"Where to now, lord?" said Skallagrim.

"To Coldback first, to see my mother, if she yet lives, and to learn tidings of Gudruda. Then as it may chance."

Near to the beach was a yeoman's house. Thither they went to hire horses; but none were in the house, for all had gone to Gudruda's marriage-feast. In the home meadow ran two good horses, and in the outhouses were saddles and bridles. They caught the horses, saddled them and rode for Coldback. When they had ridden for something over an hour they came to the crest of a height whence they could see Coldback in the

Marsh.

Eric drew rein and looked, and his heart swelled within him at the sight of the place where he was born. But as he looked he saw a great train of people ride away from Coldback towards Middalhof--and in the company a woman wearing a purple cloak.

"Now what may this mean?" said Eric.

"Ride on and we shall learn," answered Skallagrim.

So they rode on, and as they rode Eric's breast grew heavy with fear.

Now they passed up the banked way through the home meadows of the house,

but they could see no one; and now they were at the door. Down sprang Eric and walked into the hall. But none were there to greet him, though a fire yet burned upon the earth. Only a gaunt hound wandered about the hall, and, seeing him, sprang towards him, growling. Eric knew him for his old wolf-hound, and called him by his name. The dog listened, then ran up and smelt his hands, and straightway howled with joy and leapt upon him. For a while he leapt thus, while Eric stared around him wondering and sad at heart. Then the dog ran to the door and stopped, whining. Eric followed after him. The hound passed through the entrance, and across the yard till he came to an outhouse. Here the dog stopped and scratched at the door, still whining. Eric thrust it open. Lo! there before him sat Saevuna, his mother, dead in a chair, and at her feet

crouched the carline--she who had been Eric's nurse.

Now he grasped the door-posts to steady himself, and his shadow fell upon the white face of his mother and the old carline at her feet.