

## XXIII

### HOW ERIC WAS A GUEST AT THE WEDDING-FEAST OF GUDRUDA THE FAIR

Eric looked, but said nothing.

"Who art thou?" whined the carline, gazing up at him with tear-blinded eyes. But Eric's face was in the shadow, and she only saw the glint of his golden hair and the flash of the golden helm. For Eric could not speak yet a while.

"Art thou one of the Swanhild's folk, come to drive me hence with the rest? Good sir, I cannot go to the fells, my limbs are too weak. Slay me, if thou wilt, but drive me not from this," and she pointed to the corpse. "Say now, will thou not help me to give it burial? It is unmeet that she who in her time had husband, and goods, and son, should lie unburied like a dead cow on the fells. I have still a hundred in silver, if I might but come at it. It is hidden, sir, and I will pay thee if thou wilt help me to bury her. These old hands are too feeble to dig a grave, nor could I bear her there alone if it were dug. Thou wilt not help me?--then may thine own mother's bones lie uncovered, and be picked of gulls and ravens. Oh, that Eric Brighteyes would come home again! Oh, that Eric was here! there is work to do and never a man to do it."

Now Eric gave a great sob and cried, "Nurse, nurse! knowest thou me not!

\_I\_ am Eric Brighteyes."

She uttered a loud cry, and, clasping him by the knees, looked up into his face.

"Thanks be to Odin! Thou art Eric--Eric come home again! But alas, thou hast come too late!"

"What has happened, then?" said Eric.

"What has happened? All evil things. Thou art outlawed, Eric, at the suit of Swanhild for the slaying of Atli the Earl. Swanhild sits here in Coldback, for she hath seized thy lands. Saevuna, thy mother, died two days ago in the hall of Middalhof, whither she went to speak with Gudruda."

"Gudruda! what of Gudruda?" cried Eric.

"This, Brighteyes: to-day she weds Ospakar Blacktooth."

Eric covered his face with his hand. Presently he lifted it.

"Thou art rich in evil tidings, nurse, though, it would seem, poor in all besides. Tell me at what hour is the wedding-feast?"

"An hour after noon, Eric; but now Swanhild has ridden thither with her

company."

"Then room must be found at Middalhof for one more guest," said Eric, and laughed aloud. "Go on!--pour out thy evil news and spare me not!--for nothing has any more power to harm me now! Come hither, Skallagrim, and see and hearken."

Skallagrim came and looked on the face of dead Saevuna.

"I am outlawed at Swanhild's suit, Lambstail. My life lies in thy hand, if so be thou wouldst take it! Hew off my head, if thou wilt, and bear it to Gudruda the Fair--she will thank thee for the gift. Lay on, Lambstail; lay on with that axe of thine."

"Child's talk!" said Skallagrim.

"Child's talk, but man's work! Thou hast not heard the tale out. Swanhild hath seized my lands and sits here at Coldback! And--what thinkest thou, Skallagrim?--but now she has ridden a-guesting to the marriage-feast of Ospakar Blacktooth with Gudruda the Fair! Swanhild at Gudruda's wedding!--the eagle in the wild swan's nest! But there will be another guest," and again he laughed aloud.

"\_Two\_ other guests," said Skallagrim.

"More of thy tale, old nurse!--more of thy tale!" quoth Eric. "No better

didst thou ever tell me when, as a lad, I sat by thee, in the ingle o' winter nights--and the company is fitting to the tale!" and he pointed to dead Saevuna.

Then the carline told on. She told how Hall of Lithdale had come out to Iceland, and of the story that he bore to Gudruda, and of the giving of the lock of hair.

"What did I say, lord?" broke in Skallagrim--"that in Hall thou hadst let a weasel go who would live to nip thee?"

"Him I will surely live to shorten by a head," quoth Eric.

"Nay, lord, this one for me--Ospakar for thee, Hall for me!"

"As thou wilt, Baresark. Among so many there is room to pick and choose. Tell on, nurse!"

Then she told how Swanhild came out to Iceland, and, having won Ospakar Blacktooth and Gizur to her side, had laid a suit against Eric at the Thing, and there bore false witness against him, so that Brighteyes was declared outlaw, being absent. She told, too, how Gudruda had betrothed herself to Ospakar, and how Swanhild had moved down to Coldback and seized the lands. Lastly she told of the rising of Saevuna from her deathbed, of her going to Middalhof, of the words she spoke to Björn and Ospakar, and of her death in the hall at Middalhof.

When all was told, Eric stooped and kissed the cold brow of his mother.

"There is little time to bury thee now, my mother," he said, "and perchance before six hours are sped there will be one to bury at thy side. Nevertheless, thou shalt sit in a better place than this."

Then he cut loose the cords that bound the body of Saevuna to the chair, and, lifting it in his arms, bore it to the hall. There he set the corpse in the high seat of the hall.

"We need not start yet a while, Skallagrim," said Eric, "if indeed thou wouldst go a-guesting with me to Middalhof. Therefore let us eat and drink, for there are deeds to do this day."

So they found meat and mead and ate and drank. Then Eric washed himself, combed out his golden locks, and looked well to his harness and to Whitefire's edge. Skallagrim also ground his great axe upon the whetstone in the yard, singing as he ground. When all was ready, the horses were caught, and Eric spoke to the carline:

"Hearken, nurse. If it may be that thou canst find any of our folk--and perchance now that they see that Swanhild has ridden to Middalhof some one of them will come down to spy--thou shalt say this to them. Thou shalt say that, if Eric Brighteyes yet lives, he will be at the foot of

Mosfell to-morrow before midday, and if, for the sake of old days and fellowship, they are minded to befriend a friendless man, let them come thither with food, for by then food will be needed, and I will speak with them. And now farewell," and Eric kissed her and went, leaving her weeping.

As it chanced, before another hour was sped, Jon, Eric's thrall, who had stayed at home in Iceland, seeing Coldback empty, crept down from the fells and looked in. The carline saw him, and told him these tidings. Then he went thence to find the other men. Having found them he told them Eric's words, and a great gladness came upon them when they learned that Brighteyes still lived, and was in Iceland. Then they gathered food and gear, and rode away to the foot of Mosfell that is now called Ericsfell.

Ospakar sat in the hall at Middalhof, near to the high seat. He was fully armed, and a black helm with a raven's crest was on his head. For, though he said nothing of it, not a little did he fear that Saevuna spoke sooth--that her words would come true, and, before this day was done, he and Eric should once more stand face to face. At his side sat Gudruda the Fair, robed in white, a worked head-dress on her head, golden clasps upon her breast and golden rings about her arms. Never had she been more beautiful to see; but her face was whiter than her robes. She looked with loathing on Blacktooth at her side, rough like a bear,

and hideous as a troll. But he looked on her with longing, and laughed from side to side of his great mouth when he thought that at last he had got her for his own.

"Ah, if Eric would but come, faithless though he be!--if Eric would but come!" thought Gudruda; but no Eric came to save her. The guests gathered fast, and presently Swanhild swept in with all her company, wrapped about in her purple cloak. She came up to the high seat where Gudruda sat, and bent the knee before her, looking on her with lovely mocking face and hate in her blue eyes.

"Greeting, Gudruda, my sister!" she said. "When last we met I sat, Atli's bride, where to-day thou sittest the bride of Ospakar. Then Eric Brighteyes held thy hand, and little thou didst think of wedding Ospakar. Now Eric is afar--so strangely do things come about--and Blacktooth, Brighteyes' foe, holds that fair hand of thine."

Gudruda looked on her and turned whiter yet in her pain, but she answered never a word.

"What! no word for me, sister?" said Swanhild. "And yet it is through me that thou comest to this glad hour. It is through me that thou art rid of Eric, and it is I who have given thee to the arms of mighty Ospakar. No word of thanks for so great a service!--fie on thee, Gudruda! fie!"

Then Gudruda spoke: "Strange tales are told of thee and Eric, Groa's

daughter! I have done with Eric, but I have done with thee also. Thou hast thrust thyself here against my will and, if I may, I would see thy face no more."

"Wouldst thou see Eric's face, Gudruda?--say, wouldst see Eric's face? I tell thee it is fair!"

But Gudruda answered nothing, and Swanhild fell back, laughing.

Now the feast began, and men waxed merry. But ever Gudruda's heart grew heavier, for in it echoed those words that Saevuna had spoken. Her eyes were dim, and she seemed to see naught but the face of Eric as it had looked when he came back to her that day on the brink of Goldfoss Falls and she had thought him dead. Oh! what if he still loved her and were yet true at heart? Swanhild mocked her!--what if this was a plot of Swanhild's? Had not Swanhild plotted aforetime, and could a wolf cease from ravening or a witch from witch-work? Nay, she had seen Eric's hair--that he had sworn none save she should touch! Perchance he had been drugged, and the hair shorn from him in his sleep? Too late to think! Of what use was thought?--beside her sat Ospakar, in one short hour she would be his. Ah! that she could see him dead--the troll who had trafficked her to shame, the foe she had summoned in her wrath and jealousy! She had done ill--she had fallen into Swanhild's snare, and now Swanhild came to mock her!

The feast went on--cup followed cup. Now they poured the bride-cup!



Before her heart beat two hundred times she would be the wife of  
Ospakar!

Blacktooth took the cup--pledged her in it, and drank deep. Then he  
turned and strove to kiss her. But Gudruda shrank from him with horror  
in her eyes, and all men wondered. Still she must drink the bridal cup.  
She took it. Dimly she saw the upturned faces, faintly she heard the  
murmur of a hundred voices.

What was that voice she caught above them all--there--without the hall?

Holding the cup in her hand, Gudruda bent forward, staring down the  
skali. Then she cried aloud, pointing to the door, and the cup fell  
clattering from her hand and rolled along the ground.

Men turned and looked. They saw this: there on the threshold stood a  
man, glorious to look at, and from his winged helm of gold the rays of  
light flashed through the dusky hall. The man was great and beautiful to  
see. He had long yellow hair bound in about his girdle, and in his left  
hand he held a pointed shield, in his right a spear, and at his thigh  
there hung a mighty sword. Nor was he alone, for by his side, a broad  
axe on his shoulder and shield in hand, stood another man, clad in  
black-hued mail--a man well-nigh as broad and big, with hawk's eyes,  
eagle beak, and black hair streaked with grey.

For a moment there was silence. Then a voice spoke:

"Lo! here be the Gods Baldur and Thor!--come from Valhalla to grace the marriage-feast!"

Then the man with golden hair cried aloud in a voice that made the rafters ring:

"Here are Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail, his thrall, come from over sea to grace the feast, indeed!"

"I could have looked for no worse guests," said Björn, beneath his breath, and rose to bid men thrust them out. But before he could speak, lo! gold-helmed Eric and black-helmed Skallagrim were stalking up the length of that great hall. Side by side they stalked, with faces fierce and cold; nor stayed they till they stood before the high seat. Eric looked up and round, and the light of his eyes was as the light of a sword. Men marvelled at his greatness and his wonderful beauty, and to Gudruda he seemed like a God.

"Here I see faces that are known to me," said Eric. "Greetings, comrades!"

"Greetings, Brighteyes!" shouted the Middalhof folk and the company of Swanhild; but the carles of Ospakar laid hand on sword--they too knew Eric. For still all men loved Eric, and the people of his quarter were proud of the deeds he had done oversea.

"Greeting, Björn, Asmund's son!" quoth Eric. "Greeting, Ospakar Blacktooth! Greeting, Swanhild the Fatherless, Atli's witch-wife--Groa's witch-bairn! Greeting, Hall of Lithdale, Hall the liar--Hall who cut the grapnel-chain! And to thee, sweet Bride, to thee Gudruda the Fair, greeting!"

Now Björn spoke: "I will take no greeting from a shamed and outlawed man. Get thee gone, Eric Brighteyes, and take thy wolf-hound with thee, lest thou bidest here stiff and cold."

"Speak not so loud, rat, lest hound's fang worry thee!" growled Skallagrim.

But Eric laughed aloud and cried--

"Words must be said, and perchance men shall die, ere ever I leave this hall, Björn!"