

HOW ERIC VENTURED DOWN TO MIDDALHOF AND WHAT HE FOUND

Gizur went north to Swinefell, and Swanhild went with him. For now that Ospakar was dead at Eric's hand, Gizur ruled in his place at Swinefell, and was the greatest lord in all the north. He loved Swanhild, and desired to make her his wife; but she played with him, talking darkly of what might be. Swanhild was not minded to be the wife of any man, except of Eric; to all others she was cold as the winter earth. Still, she fooled Gizur as she had fooled Atli the Good, and he grew blind with love of her. For still the beauty of Swanhild waxed as the moon waxes in the sky, and her wicked eyes shone as the stars shine when the moon has set.

Now they came to Swinefell, and there Gizur buried Ospakar Blacktooth, his father, with much state. He set him in a chamber of rock and timbers on a mountain-top, whence he might see all the lands that once were his, and built up a great mound of earth above him. To this day people tell that here on Yule night black Ospakar bursts out, and golden Eric rides down the blast to meet him. Then come the clang of swords, and groans, and the sound of riven helms, till presently Brighteyes passes southward on the wind, bearing in his hand the half of a cloven shield.

So Gizur bound the Hell-shoes on his father, and swore that he would neither rest nor stay till Eric Brighteyes was dead and dead was

Skallagrim Lambstail. Then he gathered a great force of men and rode south to Coldback, to the slaying of Eric, and with him went Swanhild.

Gudruda sat alone in the haunted hall of Middalhof and brooded on her love and on her fate. Eric, too, sat in Mosfell cave and brooded on his evil chance. His heart was sick with sorrow, and there was little that he could do except think about the past. He would not go to foray, after the fashion of outlaws, and there was no need of this. For the talk of his mighty deeds spread through the land, so that the people spoke of little else. And the men of his quarter were so proud of these deeds of Eric's that, though some of their kind had fallen at his hands in the great fight of Middalhof and some at the hands of Skallagrim, yet they spoke of him as men speak of a God. Moreover they brought him gifts of food and clothing and arms, as many as his people could carry away, and laid them in a booth that is on the plain near the foot of Mosfell, which thenceforth was named Ericsfell. Further, they bade his thralls tell him that, if he wished it, they would find him a good ship of war to take him from Iceland--ay, and man it with loyal men and true.

Eric thanked them through Jon his thrall, but answered that he wished to die here in Iceland.

Now, when Eric had sat two months and more in Mosfell cave and autumn was coming, he learned that Gizur and Swanhild had moved down to Coldback, and with them a great company of men who were sworn to slay him. He asked if Gudruda the Fair had also gathered men for his slaying. They told him no; that Gudruda stayed with her thralls and women at Middalhof, mourning for Björn her brother. From these tidings Eric took some heart of hope: at the least Gudruda laid no blood-feud against him. For he waited, thinking, if indeed she yet loved him, that Gudruda would send him some word or token of her love. But no word came, since between them ran the blood of Björn. On the morrow of these tidings Skallagrim spoke to Eric.

"This is my counsel, lord," he said, "that we ride out by night and fall on the folk of Gizur at Coldback, and burn the stead over them, putting them to the sword. I am weary of sitting here like an eagle in a cage."

"Such is no counsel of mine, Skallagrim," answered Brighteyes. "I am weary of sitting here, indeed; but I am yet more weary of bringing men to their death. I will shed no more blood, unless it is to save my own head. When the people of Gizur came to seek me on Mosfell, they shall find me here; but I will not go to them."

"Thy heart is out of thee, lord," said Skallagrim; "thou wast not wont to speak thus."

"Ay, Skallagrim," said Eric, "the heart is out of me. Yet I ride from

Mosfell to-day."

"Whither, lord?"

"To Middalhof, to have speech with Gudruda the Fair."

"Like enough, then, thou wilt be silent thereafter."

"It well may be," said Eric. "Yet I will ride. I can bear this doubt no longer."

"Then I shall come with thee," said Skallagrim.

"As thou wilt," answered Eric.

So at midday Eric and Skallagrim rode away from Mosfell in a storm of rain. The rain was so heavy that those of Gizur's spies who watched the mountain did not see them. All that day they rode and all the night, till by morning they came to Middalhof. Eric told Skallagrim to stay with the horses and let them feed, while he went on foot to see if by chance he might get speech with Gudruda. This the Baresark did, though he grumbled at the task, fearing lest Eric should be done to death, and he not there to die with him.

Now Eric walked to within two bowshots of the house, then sat down in a dell by the river, from the edge of which he could see those who passed

in and out. Presently his heart gave a leap, for there came out from the woman's door a lady tall and beautiful to see, and with golden hair that flowed about her breast. It was Gudruda, and he saw that she bore a napkin in her hand. Then Eric knew, according to her custom on the warm mornings, that she came alone to bathe in the river, as she had always done from a child. It was her habit to bathe here in this place: for at the bottom of the dell was a spot where reeds and bushes grew thick, and the water lay in a basin of rock and was clear and still. For at this spot a hot spring ran into the river.

Eric went down the dell, hid himself close in the bushes and waited, for he feared to speak with Gudruda in the open field. A while passed, and presently the shadow of the lady crept over the edge of the dell, then she came herself in that beauty which since her day has not been known in Iceland. Her face was sad and sweet, her dark and lovely eyes were sad. On she came, till she stood within a spear's length of where Eric lay, crouched in the bush, and looking at her through the hedge of reeds. Here a flat rock overhung the water, and Gudruda sat herself on this rock, and, shaking off her shoes, dipped her white feet in the water. Then suddenly she threw aside her cloak, baring her arms, and, gazing upon the shadow of her beauty in the mirror of the water, sighed and sighed again, while Eric looked at her with a bursting heart, for as yet he could find no words to say.

Now she spoke aloud. "Of what use to be so fair?" she said. "Oh, wherefore was I born so fair to bring death to many and sorrow on myself

and him I love?" And she shook her golden hair about her arms of snow, and, holding the napkin to her eyes, wept softly. But it seemed to Eric that between her sobs she called upon his name.

Now Eric could no longer bear the sight of Gudruda weeping. While she wept, hiding her eyes, he rose from behind the screen of reeds and stood beside her in such fashion that his shadow fell upon her. She felt the sunlight pass and looked up. Lo! it was no cloud, but the shape of Eric, and the sun glittered on his golden helm and hair.

"Eric!" Gudruda cried; "Eric!" Then, remembering how she was attired, snatching her cloak, she threw it about her arms and thrust her wet feet into her shoes. "Out upon thee!" she said; "is it not enough, then, that thou shouldst break thy troth for Swanhild's sake, that thou shouldst slay my brother and turn my hall to shambles? Wouldst now steal upon me thus!"

"Methought that thou didst weep and call upon my name, Gudruda," he said humbly.

"By what right art thou here to hearken to my words?" she answered. "Is it, then, strange that I should speak the name of him who slew my brother? Is it strange that I should weep over that brother whom thou didst slay? Get thee gone, Brighteyes, before I call my folk to kill thee!"

"Call on, Gudruda. I set little price upon my life. I laid it in the hands of chance when I came from Mosfell to speak with thee, and now I will pay it down if so it pleases thee. Fear not, thy thralls shall have an easy task: for I shall scarcely care to hold my own. Say, shall I call for thee?"

"Hush! Speak not so loud! Folk may hear thee, Eric, and then thou wilt be in danger--I would say that, then shall ill things be told of me, because I am found with him who slew my brother?"

"I slew Ospakar too, Gudruda. Surely the death of him by whose side thou didst sit as wife is more to thee than the death of Björn?"

"The bride-cup was not yet drunk, Eric; therefore I have no blood-feud for Ospakar."

"Is it, then, thy will that I should go, lady?"

"Yes, go!--go! Never let me see thy face again!"

Brighteyes turned without a word. He took three paces and Gudruda watched him as he went.

"Eric!" she called. "Eric! thou mayest not go yet: for at this hour the thralls bring down the kine to milk, and they will see thee. Liest thou hid here. I--I will go. For though, indeed, thou dost deserve to die, I

am not willing to bring thee to thy end--because of old friendship I am not willing!"

"If thou goest, I will go also," said Eric. "Thralls or no thralls, I will go, Gudruda."

"Thou art cruel to drive me to such a choice, and I have a mind to give thee to thy fate."

"As thou wilt," said Eric; but she made as though she did not hear his words.

"Now," she said, "if we must stay here, it is better that we hide where thou didst hide, lest some come upon thee." And she passed through the screen of rushes and sat down in a grassy place beyond, and spoke again.

"Nay, sit not near me; sit yonder. I would not touch thee, nor look upon thee, who wast Swanhild's love, and didst slay Björn my brother."

"Say, Gudruda," said Eric, "did I not tell thee of the magic arts of Swanhild? Did I not tell thee before all men yonder in the hall, and didst thou not say that thou didst believe my words? Speak."

"That is true," said Gudruda.

"Wherefore, then, dost thou taunt me with being Swanhild's love--with

being the love of her whom of all alive I hate the most--and whose wicked guile has brought these sorrows on us?"

But Gudruda did not answer.

"And for this matter of the death of Björn at my hands, think, Gudruda: was I to blame in it? Did not Björn thrust the cloven shield before my feet, and thus give me into the hand of Ospakar? Did he not afterwards smite at me from behind, and would he not have slain me if Skallagrim had not caught the blow? Was I, then, to blame if I smote back and if the sword flew home? Wilt thou let the needful deed rise up against our love? Speak, Gudruda!"

"Talk no more of love to me, Eric," she answered; "the blood of Björn has blotted out our love: it cries to me for vengeance. How may I speak of love with him who slew my brother? Listen!" she went on, looking on him sidelong, as one who wished to look and yet not seem to see: "here thou must hide an hour, and, since thou wilt not sit in silence, speak no tender words to me, for it is not fitting; but tell me of those deeds thou didst in the south lands over sea, before thou wentest to woo Swanhild and camest hither to kill my brother. For till then thou wast mine--till then I loved thee--who now love thee not. Therefore I would hear of the deeds of that Eric whom once I loved, before he became as one dead to me."

"Heavy words, lady," said Eric--"words to make death easy."

"Speak not so," she said; "it is unmanly thus to work upon my fears.
Tell me those tidings of which I ask."

So Eric told her all his deeds, though he showed small boastfulness about them. He told her how he had smitten the war-dragons of Ospakar, how he had boarded the Raven and with Skallagrim slain those who sailed in her. He told her also of his deeds in Ireland, and of how he took the viking ships and came to London town.

And as he told, Gudruda listened as one who hung upon her lover's dying words, and there was but one light in the world for her, the light of Eric's eyes, and there was but one music, the music of his voice. Now she looked upon him sidelong no longer, but with open eyes and parted lips she drank in his words, and always, though she knew it not herself, she crept closer to his side.

Then he told her how he had been greatly honoured of the King of England, and of the battles he had fought in at his side. Lastly, Eric told her how the King would have given him a certain great lady of royal blood in marriage, and how Edmund had been angered because he would not stay in England.

"Tell me of this lady," said Gudruda, quickly. "Is she fair, and how is she named?"

"She is fair, and her name is Elfrida," said Eric.

"And didst thou have speech with her on this matter?"

"Somewhat."

Now Gudruda drew herself away from Eric's side.

"What was the purport of thy speech?" she said, looking down. "Speak truly, Eric."

"It came to little," he answered. "I told her that there was one in Iceland to whom I was betrothed, and to Iceland I must go."

"And what said this Elfrida, then?"

"She said that I should get little luck at the hands of Gudruda the Fair. Moreover, she asked, should my betrothed be faithless to me, or put me from her, if I should come again to England."

Now Gudruda looked him in the face and spoke. "Say, Eric, is it in thy mind to sail for England in the spring, if thou canst escape thy foes so long?"

Now Eric took counsel with himself, and in his love and doubt grew

guileful as he had never been before. For he knew well that Gudruda had this weakness--she was a jealous woman.

"Since thou dost put me from thee, that is in my mind, lady," he answered.

Gudruda heard. She thought on the great and beautiful Lady Elfrida, far away in England, and of Eric walking at her side, and sorrow took hold of her. She said no word, but fixed her dark eyes on Brighteyes' face, and lo! they filled with tears.

Eric might not bear this sight, for his heart beat within him as though it would burst the byrnie over it. Suddenly he stretched out his arms and swept her to his breast. Soft and sweet he kissed her, again and yet again, and she struggled not, though she wept a little.

"It is small blame to me," she whispered, "if thou dost hold me on thy breast and kiss me, for thou art more strong than I. Björn must know this if his dead eyes see aught. Yet for thee, Eric, it is the greatest shame of all thy shames."

"Talk not, my sweet; talk not," said Eric, "but kiss thou me: for thou knowest well that thou lovest me yet as I love thee."

Now the end of it was that Gudruda yielded and kissed him whom she had not kissed for many years.

"Loose me, Eric," she said; "I would speak with thee," and he loosed her, though unwillingly.

"Hearken," she went on, hiding her fair face in her hands: "it is true that for life and death I love thee now as ever--how much thou mayest never know. Though Björn be dead at thy hands, yet I love thee; but how I may wed thee and not win the greatest shame, that I know not. I am sure of one thing, that we may not bide here in Iceland. Now if, indeed, thou lovest me, listen to my rede. Get thee back to Mosfell, Eric, and sit there in safety through this winter, for they may not come at thee yonder on Mosfell. Then, if thou art willing, in the spring I will make ready a ship, for I have no ship now, and, moreover, it is too late to sail. Then, perchance, leaving all my lands and goods, I will take thy hand, Eric, and we will fare together to England, seeking such fortune as the Norns may give us. What sayest thou?"

"I say it is a good rede, and would that the spring were come."

"Ay, Eric, would that the spring were come. Our lot has been hard, and I doubt much if things will go well with us at the last. And now thou must hence, for presently the serving-women will come to seek me. Guard thyself, Eric, as thou lovest me--guard thyself, and beware of Swanhild!" Then once more they kissed soft and long, and Eric went.

But Gudruda sat a while behind the screen of reeds, and was very happy

for a space. For it was as though the winter were past and summer shone upon her heart again.