

XXVII

HOW GUDRUDA WENT UP TO MOSFELL

Eric walked warily till he came to the dell where he had left Skallagrim and the horses. It was the same dell in which Groa had brewed the poison-draught for Asmund the Priest and Unna, Thorod's daughter.

"What news, lord?" said Skallagrim. "Thou wast gone so long that I thought of seeking thee. Hast thou seen Gudruda?"

"Ay," said Eric, "and this is the upshot of it, that in the spring we sail for England and bid farewell to Iceland and our ill luck."

"Would, then, that it were spring," said Skallagrim, speaking Brighteyes' own words. "Why not sail now and make an end?"

"Gudruda has no ship and it is late to take the sea. Also I think that she would let a time go by because of the blood-feud which she has against me for the death of Björn."

"I would rather risk these things than stay the winter through in Iceland," said Skallagrim, "it is long from now to spring, and yon wolf's den is cold-lying in the dark months, as I know well."

"There is light beyond the darkness," said Eric, and they rode away.

Everything went well with them till late at night they came to the slopes of Mosfell. They were half asleep on their horses, being weary with much riding, and the horses were weary also. Suddenly, Skallagrim, looking up, caught the faint gleam of light from swords hidden behind some stones.

"Awake, lord!" he cried, "here are foes ahead."

Gizur's folk behind the stones heard his voice and came out from their ambush. There were six of them, and they formed in line before the pair. They were watching the mountain, for a rumour had reached them that Eric was abroad, and, seeing him, they had hidden hastily behind the stones.

"Now what counsel shall we take?" said Eric, drawing Whitefire.

"We have often stood against men more than six, and sometimes we have left more men than six to mark where we stood," answered Skallagrim. "It is my counsel that we ride at them!"

"So be it," said Eric, and he spurred his weary horse with his heels. Now when the six saw Eric and Skallagrim charge on them boldly, they wavered, and the end of it was that they broke and fled to either side before a blow was struck. For it had come to this pass, so great was the terror of the names of Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail, that no six men dared to stand before them in open fight.

So the path being clear they rode on up the slope. But when they had gone a little way, Skallagrim turned his horse, and mocked those who had lain in ambush, saying:

"Ye fight well, ye carles of Gizur, Ospakar's son! Ye are heroes, surely! Say now, mighty men, will ye stand there if I come down alone against you?"

At these words the men grew mad with wrath, and flung their spears. Skallagrim caught one on his shield and it fell to the earth, but another passed over his head and struck Eric on the left shoulder, near the neck, making a deep wound. Feeling the spear fast in him, Eric grasped it with his right hand, drew it forth, and turning, hurled it so hard, that the man before it got his death from the blow, for his shield did not serve to stay it. Then the rest fled.

Skallagrim bound up Eric's wound as well as he could, and they went on to the cave. But when Eric's folk, watching above, saw the fight they ran down and met him. Now the hurt was bad and Eric bled much; still, within ten days it healed up for the time.

But a little while after Eric's wound was skinned over, the snows set in on Mosfell, and the days grew short and the nights long. Once Gizur's men to the number of fifty came half way up the mountain to take it; but, when they saw how strong the place was, they feared, and went back, and after that returned no more, though they always watched the fell.

It was very dark and lonesome there upon the fell. For a while Eric kept in good heart, but as the days went by he grew troubled. For since he was wounded this had come upon him, that he feared the dark, and the death of Atli at his hand and Atli's words weighed more and more upon his mind. They had no candles on the fell, yet, rather than stay in the blackness of the cave, Eric would wrap sheepskins about him and sit by the edge of that gulf down which the head of the Baresark had foretold his fall, and look out at the wide plains and fells and ice-mountains, gleaming in the silver shine of the Northern lights or in the white beams of the stars.

It chanced that Eric had bidden the men who stayed with him to build a stone hut upon the flat space of rock before the cave, and to roof it with turves. He had done this that work might keep them in heart, also that they might have a place to store such goods as they had gathered. Now there was one stone lying near that no two men of their number could move, except Skallagrim and one other. One day, while it was light, Eric watched these two rolling the stone along to where it must stand, and it was slow work. Presently they stayed to rest. Then Eric came and putting his hands beneath the stone, lifted, and while men wondered, he rolled the mass alone, to where it should be set as the corner stone of the hut.

"Ye are all children," he said, and laughed merrily.

"Ay, when we set our strength against thine, lord," answered Skallagrim;
"but look: the blood runs from thy neck--the spear-wound has broken out
afresh."

"So it is, surely," said Eric. Then he washed the wound and bound it up,
thinking little of the matter.

But that night, according to his custom, Eric sat on the edge of the
gulf and looked at the winter lights as they played over Hecla's snows.
He was sad and heavy at heart, for he thought of Gudruda and wondered
much if they should live to wed. Remembering Atli's words, he had little
faith in his good luck. Now as Eric sat and thought, the bandage on his
neck slipped, so that the hurt bled, and the frost got hold of the wound
and froze it, and froze his long hair to it also, in such fashion that
when he went to the cave where all men slept, he could not loose his
hair from the sore, but lay down with it frozen to him. On the morrow
the hair was caked so fast about his neck that it could only be freed by
shearing it. But this Eric would not suffer. None, he said, should shear
his hair, except Gudruda. Thus he had sworn, and when he broke the oath
misfortune had come of it. He would break that vow no more, if it cost
him his life. For sorrow and his ill luck had taken so great a hold of
Eric's mind that in some ways he was scarcely himself.

So it came to pass that he fell more and more sick, till at length
he could not rise from his bed in the cave, but lay there all day and
night, staring at the little light which pierced the gloom. Still, he

would not suffer that anyone should touch his hair. And when one stole upon him sleeping, thinking so to cut it before he woke, and come at the wound, suddenly he sat up and dealt the man such a buffet on the head that he went near to death from it.

Then Skallagrim spoke.

"On this matter," he said, "it seems that Brighteyes is mad. He will not suffer that any touch his hair, except Gudruda, and yet, if his hair is not shorn, he must die, for the wound will fester under it. Nor may we cut it by strength, for then he will kill himself in struggling. It is come to this then: either Gudruda must be brought hither or Eric will shortly die."

"That may not be," they answered. "How can the lady Gudruda come here across the snows, even if she will come?"

"Come she can, if she has the heart," said Skallagrim, "though I put little trust in women's hearts. Still, I ride down to Middalhof, and thou, Jon, shalt go with me. For the rest, I charge you watch your lord; for, if I come back and find anything amiss, that shall be the death of some, and if I do not come back but perish on the road, yet I will haunt you."

Now Jon liked not this task; still, for love of Eric and fear of Skallagrim, he set out with the Baresark. They had a hard journey

through the snow-drifts and the dark, but on the third day they came to Middalhof, knocked upon the door and entered.

Now it was supper-time, and people, sitting at meat, saw a great black man, covered with snow and rime, stalk up the hall, and after him another smaller man, who groaned with the cold, and they wondered at the sight. Gudruda sat on the high seat and the firelight beat upon her face.

"Who comes here?" she said.

"One who would speak with thee, lady," answered Skallagrim.

"Here is Skallagrim the Baresark," said a man. "He is an outlaw, let us kill him!"

"Ay, it is Skallagrim," he answered, "and if there is killing to be done, why here's that which shall do it," and he drew out his axe and smiled grimly.

Then all held their peace, for they feared the axe of Skallagrim.

"Lady," he said, "I do not come for slaying or such child's play, I come to speak a word in thine ear--but first I ask a cup of mead and a morsel of food, for we have spent three days in the snows."

So they ate and drank. Then Gudruda bade the Baresark draw near and tell her his tale.

"Lady," said he, "Eric, my lord, lies dying on Mosfell."

Gudruda turned white as the snow.

"Dying?--Eric lies dying?" she said. "Why, then, art thou here?"

"For this cause, lady: I think that thou canst save him, if he is not already sped." And he told her all the tale.

Now Gudruda thought a while.

"This is a hard journey," she said, "and it does not become a maid to visit outlaws in their caves. Yet I am come to this, that I will die before I shrink from anything that may save the life of Eric. When must we ride, Skallagrim?"

"This night," said the Baresark. "This night while the men sleep, for now night and day are almost the same. The snow is deep and we have no time to lose if we would find Brighteyes living."

"Then we will ride to-night," answered Gudruda.

Afterwards, when people slept, Gudruda the Fair summoned her women, and

bade them say to all who asked for her that she lay sick in bed. But she called three trusty thralls, bidding them bring two pack-horses laden with hay, food, drugs, candles made of sheep's fat, and other goods, and ride with her. Then, all being ready, they rode away secretly up Stonefell, Gudruda on her horse Blackmane, and the others on good geldings that had been hay-fed in the yard, and by daylight they passed up Horse-Head Heights. They slept two nights in the snow, and on the second night almost perished there, for much soft snow fell. But afterwards came frost and a bitter northerly wind and they passed on. Gudruda was a strong woman and great of heart and will, and so it came about that on the third day she reached Mosfell, weary but little harmed, though the fingers of her left hand were frostbitten. They climbed the mountain, and when they came to the dell where the horses were kept, certain of Eric's men met them and their faces were sad.

"How goes it now with Brighteyes?" said Skallagrim, for Gudruda could scarcely speak because of doubt and cold. "Is he dead, then?"

"Nay," they answered, "but like to die, for he is beside himself and raves wildly."

"Push on," quoth Gudruda; "push on, lest it be too late."

So they climbed the mountain on foot, won the pass and came to that

giddy point of rock where he must tread who would reach the platform that is before the cave. Now since she had hung by her hands over Goldfoss gulf, Gudruda had feared to tread upon a height with nothing to hold to. Skallagrim went first, then called to her to follow. Thrice she looked, and turned away, trembling, for the place was awful and the fall bottomless. Then she spoke aloud to herself:

"Eric did not fear to risk his life to save me when I hung over Golden Falls; less, then, should I fear to risk mine to save him," and she stepped boldly down upon the point. But when she stood there, over the giddy height, shivers ran along her body, and her mind grew dark. She clutched at the rock, gave one low cry and began to fall. Indeed she would have fallen and been lost, had not Skallagrim, lying on his breast in the narrow hole, stretched out his arms, caught her by the cloak and kirtle and dragged her to him. Presently her senses came back.

"I am safe!" she gasped, "but by a very little. Methinks that here in this place I must live and die, for I can never tread yonder rock again."

"Thou shalt pass it safe enough, lady, with a rope round thee," said Skallagrim, and led the way to the cave.

Gudruda entered, forgetting all things in her love of Eric. A great fire of turf burned in the mouth of the cave to temper the bitter wind and frost, and by its light Gudruda saw her love through the smoke-reek. He

lay upon a bed of skins at the far end of the cave and his bright grey eyes were wild, his wan face was white, and now of a sudden it grew red with fever, and then was white again. He had thrown the sheepskins from his mighty chest, the bones of which stood out grimly. His long arms were thrust through the locks of his golden hair, and on one side of his neck the hair clung to him and it was but a black mass.

He raved loudly in his madness. "Touch me not, carles, touch me not; ye think me spent and weak, but, by Thor! if ye touch my hair, I will loosen the knees of some. Gudruda alone shall shear my hair: I have sworn and I will keep the oath that I once broke. Give me snow! snow! my throat burns! Heap snow on my head, I bid you. Ye will not? Ye mock me, thinking me weak! Where, then, is Whitefire?--I have yet a deed to do! Who comes yonder? Is it a woman's shape or is it but a smoke-wraith? 'Tis Swanhild the Fatherless who walks the waters. Begone, Swanhild, thou witch! thou hast worked evil enough upon me. Nay, it is not Swanhild, it is Elfrida; lady, here in England I may not stay. In Iceland I am at home. Yea, yea, things go crossly; perchance in this garden we may speak again!"

Now Gudruda could bear his words no longer, bur ran to him and knelt beside him.

"Peace, Eric!" she whispered. "Peace! It is I, thy love. It is Gudruda, who am come to thee."

He turned his head and looked upon her strangely.

"No, no," he said, "it is not Gudruda the Fair. She will have little to do with outlaws, and this is too rough a place for her to come to. It is dark also and Atli speaks in the darkness. If thou art Gudruda, give me a sign. Why comest thou here and where is Skallagrim? Ah! that was a good fight--

"Down among the ballast tumbling
Ospakar's shield-carles were rolled.

"But he should never have slain the steersman. The axe goes first and Skallagrim follows after. Ha, ha! Ay, Swanhild, we'll mingle tears. Give me the cup. Why, what is this? Thou art afire, a glory glows about thee, and from thee floats a scent like the scent of the Iceland meads in May."

"Eric! Eric!" cried Gudruda, "I am come to shear thy hair, as thou didst swear that I alone should do."

"Now I know that thou art Gudruda," said the crazed man. "Cut, cut; but let not those knaves touch my head, lest I should slay them."

Then Gudruda drew out her shears, and without more ado shore off Brighteyes' golden locks. It was no easy task, for they were thick as a horse's mane, and glued to the wound. Yet when she had cut them, she

loosened the hair from the flesh with water which she heated upon the fire. The wound was in a bad state and blue, still Eric never winced while she dragged the hair from it. Then she washed the sore clean, and put sweet ointment on it and covered it with napkins.

This done, she gave Eric broth and he drank. Then, laying her hand upon his head, she looked into his eyes and bade him sleep. And presently he slept--which he had scarcely done for many days--slept like a little child.

Eric slept for a day and a night. But at that same hour of the evening, when he had fallen asleep, Gudruda, watching him by the light of a taper that was set upon a rock, saw him smile in his dreams. Presently he opened his eyes and stared at the fire which glowed in the mouth of the cave, and the great shadows that fell upon the rocks.

"Strange!" she heard him murmur, "it is very strange! but I dreamed I slept, and that Gudruda the Fair leaned over me as I slept. Where, then, is Skallagrim? Perhaps I am dead and that is Hela's fire," and he tried to lift himself upon his arm, but fell back from faintness, for he was very weak. Then Gudruda took his hand, and, leaning over him, spoke:

"Hush, Eric!" she said; "that was no dream, for I am here. Thou hast been sick to death, Eric; but now, if thou wilt rest, things shall go well with thee."

"_Thou_ art here?" said Eric, turning his white face towards her. "Do I still dream, or how comest thou here to Mosfell, Gudruda?"

"I came through the snows, Eric, to cut thy hair, which clung to the festering wound, for in thy madness thou wouldst not suffer anyone to touch it."

"Thou camest through the snows--over the snows--to nurse me, Gudruda? Thou must love me much then," and he was so weak that, as he spoke, the tears rolled down Eric's cheeks.

Then Gudruda kissed him, weeping also, and, laying her face by his, bade him be at peace, for she was there to watch him.