

## XXVIII

### HOW SWANHILD WON TIDINGS OF ERIC

Now Eric's strength came back to him and his heart opened in the light of Gudruda's eyes like a flower in the sunshine. For all day long she sat at his side, holding his hand and talking to him, and they found much to say.

But on the fifth day from the day of his awakening she spoke thus:

"Eric, now I must go back to Middalhof. Thou art safe and it is not well that I should stay here."

"Not yet, Gudruda," he said; "leave me not yet."

"Yes, love, I must leave thee. The moon is bright, the sky has cleared, and the snow is hard with frost and fit for the hoofs of horses. I must go before more storms come. Listen now: in the second week of spring, if all is well, I will send thee a messenger with words of token, then shalt thou come down secretly to Middalhof, and there, Eric, we will be wed. Then, on the next day, we will sail for England in a trading-ship that I shall get ready, to seek our fortune there."

"It will be a good fortune if thou art by my side," said Eric, "so good that I doubt greatly if I may find it, for I am Eric the Unlucky."

Swanhild must yet be reckoned with, Gudruda. Yes, thou art right: thou must go hence, Gudruda, and swiftly, though it grieves me much to part with thee."

Then Eric called Skallagrim and bade him make things ready to ride down to Middalhof with the Lady Gudruda.

This Skallagrim did swiftly, and afterwards Eric and Gudruda kissed and parted, and they were sad at heart to part.

Now on the fifth day after the going of Gudruda, Skallagrim came back to Mosfell somewhat cold and weary. And he told Eric, who could now walk and grew strong again, that he and Jon had ridden with Gudruda the Fair to Horse-Head Heights, seeing no man, and had left her there to go on with her thralls. He had come back also seeing no one, for the weather was too cold for the men of Gizur to watch the fell in the snows.

Now Gudruda came safely to Middalhof, having been eleven days gone, and found that few had visited the house, and that these had been told that she lay sick abed. Her secret had been well kept, and, though Swanhild had no lack of spies, many days went by before she learned that Gudruda had gone up to Mosfell to nurse Eric.

After this Gudruda began to make ready for her flight from Iceland. She

called in the moneys that she had out at interest, and with them bought from a certain chapman a good trading-ship which lay in its shed under the shelter of Westman Isles. This ship she began to make ready for sea so soon as the heart of the winter was broken, putting it about that she intended to send her on a trading voyage to Scotland in the spring. And also to give colour to this tale she bought many pelts and other goods, such as chapmen deal in.

Thus the days passed on--not so badly for Gudruda, who strove to fill their emptiness in making ready for the full and happy time; but for Eric in his cave they were very heavy, for he could find nothing to do except to sleep and eat, and think of Gudruda, whom he might not see.

For Swanhild also, sitting at Coldback, the days did not go well. She was weary of the courting of Gizur, whom she played with as a cat plays with a rat, and her heart was sick with love, hate, and jealousy. For she well knew that Gudruda and Eric still clung to each other and found means of greeting, if not of speech. At that time she wished to kill Eric if she could, though she would rather kill Gudruda if she dared. Still, she could not come at Eric, for her men feared to try the narrow way of Mosfell, and when they met him in the open they fled before him.

Presently it came to her ears that Gudruda made a ship ready to sail to Scotland on a trading voyage, and she was perplexed by this tale, for she knew that Gudruda had no love of trading and never thought of gain. So she set spies to watch the ship. Still, the slow days drew on, and

at length the air grew soft with spring, and flowers showed through the snow.

Eric sat in his mountain nest waiting for tidings, and watched the nesting eagles wheel about the cliffs. At length news came. For one morning, as he rose, Skallagrim told him that a man wanted to speak with him. He had come to the mountain in the darkness, and had lain in a dell till the breaking of the light, for, now that the snows were melting, the men of Gizur and Swanhild watched the ways.

Eric bade them bring the man to him. When he saw him he knew that he was a thrall of Gudruda's and welcomed him heartily.

"What tidings?" he asked.

"This, lord," said the thrall: "Gudruda the Fair bids me say that she is well and that the snows melt on the roof of Middalhof."

Now this was the signal word that had been agreed upon between Eric and Gudruda, that she should send him when all was ready.

"Good," said Eric, "ride back to Gudruda the Fair and say that Eric Brighteyes is well, but on Hecla the snows melt not."

By this answer he meant that he would be with her presently, though the

thrall could make nothing of it. Then Skallagrim asked tidings of the man, and learned that Swanhild was still at Middalhof, and with her Gizur, and that they gave out that they wished to make an end of waiting and slay Eric.

"First snare your bird, then wring his neck," laughed Skallagrim.

Then Eric did this: among his men were some who he knew were not willing to sail from Iceland, and Jon, his thrall, was of them, for Jon did not love the angry sea. He bade these bide a while on Mosfell and make fires nightly on the platform of rock which is in front of the cave, that the spies of Gizur and Swanhild might be deceived by them, and think that Eric was still on the fell. Then, when they heard that he had sailed, they were to come down and hide themselves with friends till Gizur and his following rode north. But he told two of the men who would sail with him to make ready.

That night before the moon rose Eric said farewell to Jon and the others who stayed on Mosfell, and rode away with Skallagrim and the two who went with him. They passed the plain of black sand in safety, and so on to Horse-Head Heights. Now at length, as the afternoon drew on to evening, from Stonefell's crest they saw the Hall of Middalhof before them, and Eric's heart swelled in his breast. Yet they must wait till darkness fell before they dared enter the place, lest they should be seen and notice of their coming should be carried to Gizur and Swanhild. And this came into the mind of Eric, that of all the hours of his life

that hour of waiting was the longest. Scarcely, indeed, could Skallagrim hold him back from going down the mountain side, he was so set on coming to Gudruda whom he should wed that night.

At length the darkness fell, and they went on. Eric rode swiftly down the rough mountain path, while Skallagrim and the two men followed grumbling, for they feared that their horses would fall. At length they came to the place, and riding into the yard, Eric sprang from his horse and strode to the women's door. Now Gudruda stood in the porch, listening; and while he was yet some way off, she heard the clang of Brighteyen's harness, and the colour came and went upon her cheek. Then she turned and fled to the high seat of the hall, and sat down there. Only two women were left in Middalhof with her, and some thralls who tended the kine and horses. But these slept, not in the hall, but in an outhouse. Gudruda had sent the rest of her people down to the ship to help in the lading, for it was given out that the vessel sailed on the morrow. She had done this that there might be no talk of the coming of Eric to Middalhof.

Now Brighteyes came to the porch, and, finding the door wide, walked in. But Skallagrim and the men stayed without a while, and tended the horses. A fire burned upon the centre hearth in the hall, and threw shadows on the panelling. Eric walked on by its light, looking to left and right, but seeing neither man nor woman. Then a great fear took him lest Gudruda should be gone, or perhaps slain of Swanhild, Groa's daughter, and he trembled at the thought. He stood by the fire, and

Gudruda, watching from the shadow of the high seat, saw the dull light glow upon his golden helm, and a sigh of joy broke from her lips. Eric heard the sigh and looked, and as he looked a stick of pitchy driftwood fell into the fire and flared up fiercely. Then he saw. There, in the carved high seat, robed all in bridal white, sat Gudruda the Fair, his love. Her golden hair flowed about her breast, her white arms were stretched towards him, and on her sweet face shone such a look of love as he had never seen.

"\_Eric!" she whispered softly, and the breath of her voice ran down the empty panelled hall, that from all sides seemed to answer, "\_Eric.\_"

Slowly he drew near to her. He saw nothing but the glory of Gudruda's face and the light shining on Gudruda's hair; he heard nothing save the sighing of her breath; he knew nothing except that before him sat his fair bride, won after many years.

Now he had climbed the high seat, and now, wrapped in each other's arms, they sat and gazed into each other's eyes, and lo! the air of the great hall rolled round them a sea of glory, and sweet voices whispered in their ears. Now Freya smiled upon them and led them through her gates of love, and they were glad that they had been born.

Thus then they were wed.

Now the story tells that Swanhild spoke with Gizur, Ospakar's son, in the house at Coldback.

"I tire of this slow play," she said. "We have tarried here for many weeks, and Atli's blood yet cries out for vengeance, and cries for vengeance the blood of black Ospakar, thy father, and the blood of many another, dead at great Eric's hand."

"I tire also," said Gizur, "and I am much needed in the north. I say this to thee, Swanhild, that, hadst thou not so strictly laid it on me that Eric must die ere thou weddest me, I had flitted back to Swinefell before now, and there bided my time to bring Brighteyes to his end."

"I will never wed thee, Gizur, till Eric is dead," said Swanhild fiercely.

"How shall we come at him then?" he answered. "We may not go up that mountain path, for two men can hold it against all our strength, and folk do not love to meet Eric and Skallagrim in a narrow way."

"The place has been badly watched," said Swanhild. "I am sure of this, that Eric has been down to Middalhof and seen Gudruda, my half-sister. She is shameless, who still holds commune with him who slew her brother and my husband. Death should be her reward, and I am minded to slay her because of the shame that she has brought upon our blood."



"That is a deed which thou wilt do alone, then," said Gizur, "for I will have no hand in the murder of that fair maid--no, nor will any who live in Iceland!"

Swanhild glanced at him strangely. "Hearken, Gizur!" she said: "Gudruda makes a ship ready to sail with goods to Scotland and bring a cargo thence before winter comes again. Now I find this strange, for never before did I know Gudruda turn her thoughts to trading. I think that she has it in her mind to sail from Iceland with this outlaw Eric, and seek a home over seas, and that I will not bear."

"It may be," said Gizur, "and I should not be sorry to see the last of Brighteyes, for I think that more men will die at his hand before he stiffens in his barrow."

"Thou art cowardly-hearted, thou son of Ospakar!" Swanhild said. "Thou sayest thou lovest me and wouldest win me to wife: I tell thee that there is but one road to my arms, and it leads over the corpse of Eric. Now this is my counsel: that we send the most of our men to watch that ship of Gudruda's, and, when she lifts anchor, to board her and search, for she is already bound for sea. Also among the people here I have a carle who was born near Hecla, and he swears this to me, that, when he was a lad, searching for an eagle's eyrie, he found a path by which Mosfell might be climbed from the north, and that in the end he came to a large flat place, and, looking over, saw that platform where Eric

dwells with his thralls. But he could not see the cave, because of the overhanging brow of the rock. Now we will do this: thou and I, and the carle alone--no more, for I do not wish that our search should be noised abroad--to-morrow at the dawn we will ride away for Mosfell, and, passing under Hecla, come round the mountain and see if this path may still be scaled. For, if so, we will return with men and make an end of Brighteyes."

This plan pleased Gizur, and he said that it should be so.

So very early on the following morning Swanhild, having sent many men to watch Gudruda's ship, rode away secretly with Gizur and the thrall, and before it was again dawn they were on the northern slopes of Mosfell. It was on this same night that Eric went down from the mountain to wed Gudruda.

For a while the climbing was easy, but at length they came to a great wall of rock, a hundred fathoms high, on which no fox might find a foothold, nor anything that had not wings.

"Here now is an end of our journey," said Gizur, "and I only pray this, that Eric may not ride round the mountain before we are down again." For he did not know that Brighteyes already rode hard for Middalhof.

"Not so," said the thrall, "if only I can find the place by which, some thirty summers ago, I won yonder rift, and through it the crest of the

fell," and he pointed to a narrow cleft in the face of the rock high above their heads, that was clothed with grey moss.

Then he moved to the right and searched, peering behind stones and birch-bushes, till presently he held up his hand and whistled. They passed along the slope and found him standing by a little stream of water which welled from beneath a great rock.

"Here is the place," the man said.

"I see no place," answered Swanhild.

"Still, it is there, lady," and he climbed on to the rock, drawing her after him. At the back of it was a hole, almost overgrown with moss.

"Here is the path," he said again.

"Then it is one that I have no mind to follow," answered Swanhild.

"Gizur, go thou with the man and see if his tale is true. I will stay here till ye come back."

Then the thrall let himself down into the hole and Gizur went after him. But Swanhild sat there in the shadow of the rock, her chin resting on her hand, and waited. Presently, as she sat, she saw two men ride round the base of the fell, and strike off to the right towards a turf-booth which stood the half of an hour's ride away. Now Swanhild was the keenest-sighted of all women of her day in Iceland, and when she looked

at these two men she knew one of them for Jon, Eric's thrall, and she knew the horse also--it was a white horse with black patches, that Jon had ridden for many years. She watched them go till they came to the booth, and it seemed to her that they left their horses and entered.

Swanhild waited upon the side of the fell for nearly two hours in all. Then, hearing a noise above her, she looked up, and there, black with dirt and wet with water, was Gizur, and with him was the thrall.

"What luck, Gizur?" she asked.

"This, Swanhild: Eric may hold Mosfell no more, for we have found a way to bolt the fox."

"That is good news, then," said Swanhild. "Say on."

"Yonder hole, Swanhild, leads to the cleft above, having been cut through the cliff by fire, or perhaps by water. Now up that cleft a man may climb, though hardly, as by a difficult stair, till he comes to the flat crest of the fell. Then, crossing the crest, on the further side, perhaps six fathoms below him, he sees that space of rock where is Eric's cave; but he cannot see the cave itself, because the brow of the cliff hangs over. And so it is that, if any come from the cave on to the space of rock, it will be an easy matter to roll stones upon them from above and crush them."

Now when Swanhild heard this she laughed aloud.

"Eric shall mock us no more," she said, "and his might can avail nothing against rocks rolled on him from above. Let us go back to Coldback and summon men to make an end of Brighteyes."

So they went on down the mountain till they came to the place where they had hidden their horses. Then Swanhild remembered Jon and the other man

whom she had seen riding to the booth, and she told Gizur of them.

"Now," she said, "we will snare these birds, and perchance they will twitter tidings when we squeeze them."

So they turned and rode for the booth, and drawing near, they saw two horses grazing without. Now they got off their horses, and creeping up to the booth, looked in through the door which was ajar. And they saw this, that one man sat on the ground with his back to the door, eating stock-fish, while Jon made bundles of fish and meal ready to tie on the horses. For it was here that those of his quarter who loved Eric brought food to be carried by his men to the cave on Mosfell.

Now Swanhild touched Gizur on the arm, pointing first to the man who sat eating the fish and then to the spear in Gizur's hand. Gizur thought a while, for he shrank from this deed.

Then Swanhild whispered in his ear, "Slay the man and seize the other; I would learn tidings from him."

So Gizur cast the spear, and it passed through the man's heart, and he was dead at once. Then he and the thrall leapt into the booth and threw themselves on Jon, hurling him to the ground, and holding swords over him. Now Jon was a man of small heart, and when he saw his plight and his fellow dead he was afraid, and prayed for mercy.

"If I spare thee, knave," said Swanhild, "thou shalt do this: thou shalt lead me up Mosfell to speak with Eric."

"I may not do that, lady," groaned Jon; "for Eric is not on Mosfell."

"Where is he, then?" asked Swanhild.

Now Jon saw that he had said an unlucky thing, and answered:

"Nay, I know not. Last night he rode from Mosfell with Skallagrim Lambstail."

"Thou liest, knave," said Swanhild. "Speak, or thou shalt be slain."

"Slay on," groaned Jon, glancing at the swords above him, and shutting his eyes. For, though he feared much to die, he had no will to make known Eric's plans.

"Look not at the swords; thou shalt not die so easily. Hearken: speak, and speak truly, or thou shalt seek Hela's lap after this fashion," and, bending down, she whispered in his ear, then laughed aloud.

Now Jon grew faint with fear; his lips turned blue, and his teeth chattered at the thought of how he should be made to die. Still, he would say nothing.

Then Swanhild spoke to Gizur and the thrall, and bade them bind him with a rope, tear the garments from him, and bring snow. They did this, and pushed the matter to the drawing of knives. But when he saw the steel Jon cried aloud that he would tell all.

"Now thou takest good counsel," said Swanhild.

Then in his fear Jon told how Eric had gone down to Middalhof to wed Gudruda, and thence to fly with her to England.

Now Swanhild was mad with wrath, for she had sooner died than that this should come about.

"Let us away," she said to Gizur. "But first kill this man."

"Nay," said Gizur, "I will not do that. He has told his tidings; let him go free."

"Thou art chicken-hearted," said Swanhild, who, after the fashion of witches, had no mercy in her. "At the least, he shall not go hence to warn Eric and Gudruda of our coming. If thou wilt not kill him, then bind him and leave him."

So Jon was bound, and there in the booth he sat two days before anyone came to loose him.

"Whither away?" said Gizur to Swanhild.

"To Middalhof first," Swanhild answered.