

XXIX

HOW WENT THE BRIDAL NIGHT

Now Eric and Gudruda sat silent in the high seat of the hall at Middalhof till they heard Skallagrim enter by the women's door. Then they came down from the high seat, and stood hand in hand by the fire on the hearth. Skallagrim greeted Gudruda, looking at her askance, for Skallagrim stood in fear of women alone.

"What counsel now, lord?" said the Baresark.

"Tell us thy plans, Gudruda," said Eric, for as yet no word had passed between them of what they should do.

"This is my plan, Eric," she answered. "First, that we eat; then that thy men take horse and ride hence through the night to where the ship lies, bearing word that we will be there at dawn when the tide serves, and bidding the mate make everything ready for sailing. But thou and I and Skallagrim will stay here till to-morrow is three hours old, and this because I have tidings that Gizur's folk will search the ship to-night. Now, when they search and do not find us, they will go away. Then, at the dawning, thou and I and Skallagrim will row on board the ship as she lies at anchor, and, slipping the cable, put to sea before they know we are there, and so bid farewell to Swanhild and our woes."

"Yet it is a risk for us to sleep here alone," said Eric.

"There is little danger," said Gudruda. "Nearly all of Gizur's men watch the ship; and I have learned this from a spy, that, two days ago, Gizur, Swanhild, and one thrall rode from Coldback towards Mosfell, and they have not come back yet. Moreover, the place is strong, and thou and Skallagrim are here to guard it."

"So be it, then," answered Eric, for indeed he had little thought left for anything, except Gudruda.

After this the women came in and set meat on the board, and all ate.

Now, when they had eaten, Eric bade Skallagrim fill a cup, and bring it to him as he sat on the high seat with Gudruda. Skallagrim did so; and then, looking deep into each other's eyes, Eric Brighteyes and Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter, drank the bride's cup.

"There are few guests to grace our marriage-feast, husband," said Gudruda.

"Yet shall our vows hold true, wife," said Eric.

"Ay, Brighteyes," she answered, "in life and in death, now and for ever!" and they kissed.

"It is time for us to be going, methinks," growled Skallagrim to those about him. "We are not wanted here."

Then the men who were to go on to the ship rose, fetched their horses, and rode away. Also they caught the horses of Skallagrim, Eric, and Gudruda, saddled them and, slipping their bridles, made them fast in a shed in the yard, giving them hay to eat. Afterwards Skallagrim barred the men's door and the women's door, and, going to Gudruda, asked where he should stay the night till it was time to ride for the sea.

"In the store-chamber," she answered, "for there is a shutter of which the latch has gone. See that thou watch it well, Skallagrim; though I think none will come to trouble thee."

"I know the place. It shall go badly with the head that looks through yonder hole," said Skallagrim, glancing at his axe.

Now Gudruda forgot this, that in the store-chamber were casks of strong ale.

Then Gudruda told him to wake them when the morrow was two hours old, for Eric had neither eyes nor words except for Gudruda alone, and Skallagrim went.

The women went also to their shut bed at the end of the hall, leaving Brighteyes and Gudruda alone. Eric looked at her.

"Where do I sleep to-night?" he asked.

"Thou sleepest with me, husband," she answered soft, "for nothing, except Death, shall come between us any more."

Now Skallagrim went to the store-room, and sat down with his back against a cask. His heart was heavy in him, for he boded no good of this marriage. Moreover, he was jealous. Skallagrim loved but one thing in the world truly, and that was Eric Brighteyes, his lord. Now he knew that henceforth he must take a second place, and that for one thought which Eric gave to him, he would give ten to Gudruda. Therefore Skallagrim was very sad at heart.

"A pest upon the women!" he said to himself, "for from them comes all evil. Brighteyes owes his ill luck to Swanhild and this fair wife of his, and that is scarcely done with yet. Well, well, 'tis nature; but would that we were safe at sea! Had I my will, we had not slept here to-night. But they are newly wed, and--well, 'tis nature! Better the bride loves to lie abed than to ride the cold wolds and seek the common deck."

Now, as Skallagrim grumbled, fear gathered in his heart, he knew not of what. He began to think on trolls and goblins. It was dark in the store-room, except for a little line of light that crept through the crack of the shutter. At length he could bear the darkness and his

thoughts no longer, but, rising, threw the shutter wide and let the bright moonlight pour into the chamber, whence he could see the hillside behind, and watch the shadows of the clouds as they floated across it. Again Skallagrim sat down against his cask, and as he sat it moved, and he heard the wash of ale inside it.

"That is a good sound," said Skallagrim, and he turned and smelt at the cask; "aye, and a good smell, too! We tasted little ale yonder on Mosfell, and we shall find less at sea." Again he looked at the cask. There was a spigot in it, and lo! on the shelf stood horn cups.

"It surely is on draught," he said; "and now it will stand till it goes sour. 'Tis a pity; but I will not drink. I fear ale--ale is another man! No, I will not drink," and all the while his hand went up to the cups upon the shelf. "Eric is better lain yonder in Gudruda's chamber than I am here alone with evil thoughts and trolls," he said. "Why, what fish was that we ate at supper? My throat is cracked with thirst! If there were water now I'd drink it, but I see none. Well, one cup to wish them joy! There is no harm in a cup of ale," and he drew the spigot from the cask and watched the brown drink flow into the cup. Then he lifted it to his lips and drank, saying "Skoll! skoll!"[*] nor did he cease till the horn was drained. "This is wondrous good ale," said Skallagrim as he wiped his grizzled beard. "One more cup, and evil thoughts shall cease to haunt me."

[*] "Health! health!"

Again he filled, drank, sat down, and for a while was merry. But presently the black thoughts came back into his mind. He rose, looked through the shutter-hole to the hillside. He could see nothing on it except the shadows of the clouds.

"Trolls walk the winds to-night," he said. "I feel them pulling at my beard. One more cup to frighten them."

He drank another draught of ale and grew merry. Then ale called for ale, and Skallagrim drained cup on cup, singing as he drained, till at last heavy sleep overcame him, and he sank drunken on the ground there by the barrel, while the brown ale trickled round him.

Now Eric Brighteyes and Gudruda the Fair slept side by side, locked in each other's arms. Presently Gudruda was wide awake.

"Rouse thee, Eric," she said, "I have dreamed an evil dream."

He awoke and kissed her.

"What, then, was thy dream, sweet?" he said. "This is no hour for bad dreams."

"No hour for bad dreams, truly, husband; yet dreams do not weigh the hour of their coming. I dreamed this: that I lay dead beside thee and thou knewest it not, while Swanhild looked at thee and mocked."

"An evil dream, truly," said Eric; "but see, thou art not dead. Thou hast thought too much on Swanhild of late."

Now they slept once more, till presently Eric was wide awake.

"Rouse thee, Gudruda," he said, "I too have dreamed a dream, and it is full of evil."

"What, then, was thy dream, husband?" she asked.

"I dreamed that Atli the Earl, whom I slew, stood by the bed. His face was white, and white as snow was his beard, and blood from his great wound ran down his byrnie. 'Eric Brighteyes,' he said, 'I am he whom thou didst slay, and I come to tell thee this: that before the moon is young again thou shalt lie stiff, with Hell-shoes on thy feet. Thou art Eric the Unlucky! Take thy joy and say thy say to her who lies at thy side, for wet and cold is the bed that waits thee and soon shall thy white lips be dumb.' Then he was gone, and lo! in his place stood Asmund, thy father, and he also spoke to me, saying, 'Thou who dost lie in my bed and at my daughter's side, know this: the words of Atli are true; but I add these to them: ye shall die, yet is death but the gate of life and love and rest,' and he was gone."

Now Gudruda shivered with fear, and crept closer to Eric's side.

"We are surely fey, for the Norns speak with the voices of Atli and of Asmund," she said. "Oh, Eric! Eric! whither go we when we die? Will Valhalla take thee, being so mighty a man, and must I away to Hela's halls, where thou art not? Oh! that would be death indeed! Say, Eric, whither do we go?"

"What said the voice of Asmund?" answered Brighteyes. "That death is but the gate of life and love and rest. Hearken, Gudruda, my May! Odin does not reign over all the world, for when I sat out yonder in England, a certain holy man taught me of another God--a God who loves not slaughter, a God who died that men might live for ever in peace with those they love."

"How is this God named, Eric?"

"They name Him the White Christ, and there are many who cling to Him."

"Would that I knew this Christ, Eric. I am weary of death and blood and evil deeds, such as are pleasing to our Gods. Oh, Eric, if I am taken from thee, swear this to me: that thou wilt slay no more, save for thy life's sake only."

"I swear that, sweet," he made answer. "For I too am weary of death and

blood, and desire peace most of all things. The world is sad, and sad have been our days. Yet it is well to have lived, for through many heavy days we have wandered to this happy night."

"Yea, Eric, it is well to have lived; though I think that death draws on. Now this is my counsel: that we rise, and that thou dost put on thy harness and summon Skallagrim, so that, if evil comes, thou mayst meet it armed. Surely I thought I heard a sound--yonder in the hall!"

"There is little use in that," said Eric, "for things will befall as they are fated. We may do nothing of our own will, I am sure of this, and it is no good to struggle with the Norns. Yet I will rise."

So he kissed her, and made ready to leave the bed, when suddenly, as he lingered, a great heaviness seized him.

"Gudruda," he said, "I am pressed down with sleep."

"That I am also, Eric," she said. "My eyes shut of themselves and I can scarcely stir my limbs. Ah, Eric, we are fey indeed, and this is--death that comes!"

"Perchance!" he said, speaking heavily.

"Eric!--wake, Eric! Thou canst not move? Yet hearken to me--ah! this weight of sleep! Thou lovest me, Eric!--is it not so?"

"Yea," he answered.

"Now and for ever thou lovest me--and wilt cleave to me always wherever we go?"

"Surely, sweet. Oh, sweet, farewell!" he said, and his voice sounded like the voice of one who speaks across the water.

"Farewell, Eric Brighteyes!--my love--my love, farewell!" she answered very slowly, and together they sank into a sleep that was heavy as death.

Now Gizur, Ospakar's son, and Swanhild, Atli's widow, rode fast and hard from Mosfell, giving no rest to their horses, and with them rode that thrall who had showed the secret path to Gizur. They stayed a while on Horse-Head Heights till the moon rose. Now one path led hence to the shore that is against the Westmans, where Gudruda's ship lay bound. Then Swanhild turned to the thrall. Her beautiful face was fierce and she had said few words all this while, but in her heart raged a fire of hate and jealousy which shone through her blue eyes.

"Listen," she said to the thrall. "Thou shalt ride hence to the bay where the ship of Gudruda the Fair lies at anchor. Thou knowest where

our folk are in hiding. Thou shalt speak thus to them. Before it is dawn they must take boats and board Gudruda's ship and search her. And, if they find Eric, the outlaw, aboard, they shall slay him, if they may."

"That will be no easy task," said the thrall.

"And if they find Gudruda they shall keep her prisoner. But if they find neither the one nor the other, they shall do this: they shall drive the crew ashore, killing as few as may be, and burn the ship."

"It is an ill deed thus to burn another's ship," said Gizur.

"Good or ill, it shall be done," answered Swanhild fiercely. "Thou art a lawman, and well canst thou meet the suit; moreover Gudruda has wedded an outlaw and shall suffer for her sin. Now go, and see thou tarry not, or thy back shall pay the price."

The man rode away swiftly. Then Gizur turned to Swanhild, asking:

"Whither, then, go we?"

"I have said to Middalhof."

"That is into the wolf's den, if Eric and Skallagrim are there," he answered: "I have little chance against the two of them."

"Nay, nor against the one, Gizur. Why, if Eric's right hand were hewn from him, and he stood unarmed, he would still slay thee with his left, as, swordless, he slew Ospakar thy father. Yet I shall find a way to come at him, if he is there."

Then they rode on, and Gizur's heart was heavy for fear of Eric and Skallagrim the Baresark. So fiercely did they ride that, within one hour after midnight, they were at the stead of Middalhof.

"We will leave the horses here in the field," said Swanhild.

So they leaped to earth and, tying the reins of the horses together, left them to feed on the growing grass. Then they crept into the yard and listened. Presently there came a sound of horses stamping in the far corner of the yard. They went thither, and there they found a horse and two geldings saddled, but with the bits slipped, and on the horse was such a saddle as women use.

"Eric Brighteyes, Skallagrim Lambstail, and Gudruda the Fair," whispered Swanhild, naming the horses and laughing evilly--"the birds are within! Now to snare them."

"Were it not best to meet them by the ship?" asked Gizur.

"Nay, thou fool; if once Eric and Skallagrim are back to back, and Whitefire is aloft, how many shall be dead before they are down,

thinkest thou? We shall not find them sleeping twice."

"It is shameful to slay sleeping men," said Gizur.

"They are outlaws," she answered. "Hearken, Ospakar's son. Thou sayest thou dost love me and wouldst wed me: know this, that if thou dost fail me now, I will never look upon thy face again, but will name thee Niddering in all men's ears."

Now Gizur loved Swanhild much, for she had thrown her glamour on him as once she did on Atli, and he thought of her day and night. For there was this strange thing about Swanhild that, though she was a witch and wicked, being both fair and gentle she could lead all men, except Eric, to love her.

But of men she loved Eric alone.

Then Gizur held his peace; but Swanhild spoke again:

"It will be of no use to try the doors, for they are strong. Yet when I was a child before now I have passed in and out the house at night by the store-room casement. Follow me, Gizur." Then she crept along the shadow of the wall, for she knew it every stone, till she came to the store-room, and lo! the shutter stood open, and through it the moonlight poured into the chamber. Swanhild lifted her head above the sill and looked, then started back.

"Hush!" she said, "Skallagrim lies asleep within."

"Pray the Gods he wake not!" said Gizur beneath his breath, and turned to go. But Swanhild caught him by the arm; then gently raised her head and looked again, long and steadily. Presently she turned and laughed softly.

"Things go well for us," she said; "the sot lies drunk. We have nothing to fear from him. He lies drunk in a pool of ale."

Then Gizur looked. The moonlight poured into the little room, and by it he saw the great shape of Skallagrim. His head was thrown back, his mouth was wide. He snored loudly in his drunken sleep, and all about him ran the brown ale, for the spigot of the cask lay upon the floor. In his left hand was a horn cup, but in his right he still grasped his axe.

"Now we must enter," said Swanhild. Gizur hung back, but she sprang upon the sill lightly as a fox, and slid thence into the store-room. Then Gizur must follow, and presently he stood beside her in the room, and at their feet lay drunken Skallagrim. Gizur looked first at his sword, then on the Baresark, and lastly at Swanhild.

"Nay," she whispered, "touch him not. Perchance he would cry out--and we seek higher game. He has that within him which will hold him fast for a while. Follow where I shall lead."

She took his hand and, gliding through the doorway, passed along the passage till she came to the great hall. Swanhild could see well in the dark, and moreover she knew the road. Presently they stood in the empty hall. The fire had burnt down, but two embers yet glowed upon the hearth, like red and angry eyes.

For a while Swanhild stood still listening, but there was nothing to hear. Then she drew near to the shut bed where Gudruda slept, and, with her ear to the curtain, listened once more. Gizur came with her, and as he came his foot struck against a bench and stirred it. Now Swanhild heard murmured words and the sound of kisses. She started back, and fury filled her heart. Gizur also heard the voice of Eric, saying: "I will rise." Then he would have fled, but Swanhild caught him by the arm.

"Fear not," she whispered, "they shall soon sleep sound."

He felt her stretch out her arms and presently he saw this wonderful thing: the eyes of Swanhild glowing in the darkness as the embers glowed upon the hearth. Now they glowed brightly, so brightly that he could see the outstretched arms and the hard white face beneath them, and now they grew dim, of a sudden to shine bright again. And all the while she hissed words through her clenched teeth.

Thus she hissed, fierce and low:

"Gudruda, Sister mine, hearken and sleep!
By the bond of blood I bid thee sleep!--
By the strength that is in me I bid thee sleep!--
Sleep! sleep sound!

"Eric Brighteyes, hearken and sleep!
By the bond of sin I charge thee sleep!--
By the blood of Atli I charge thee, sleep!--
Sleep! sleep sound!"

Then thrice she tossed her hands aloft, saying:

"From love to sleep!
From sleep to death!
From death to Hela!
Say, lovers, where shall ye kiss again?"

Then the light went out of her eyes and she laughed low. And ever as she whispered, the spoken words of the two in the shut bed grew fainter and more faint, till at length they died away, and a silence fell upon the place.

"Thou hast no cause to fear the sword of Eric, Gizur," she said.

"Nothing will wake him now till daylight comes."

"Thou art awesome!" answered Gizur, for he shook with fear. "Look not on

me with those flaming eyes, I pray thee!"

"Fear not," she said, "the fire is out. Now to the work."

"What must we do, then?"

"_Thou_ must do this. Thou must enter and slay Eric."

"That I can not--that I will not!" said Gizur.

She turned and looked at him, and lo! her eyes began to flame again--upon his eyes they seemed to burn.

"Thou wilt do as I bid thee," she said. "With Eric's sword thou shalt slay Eric, else I will curse thee where thou art, and bring such evil on thee as thou knowest not of."

"Look not so, Swanhild," he said. "Lead on--I come."

Now they creep into the shut chamber of Gudruda. It is so dark that they can see nothing, and nothing can they hear except the heavy breathing of the sleepers.

This is to be told, that at this time Swanhild had it in her mind to kill, not Eric but Gudruda, for thus she would smite the heart of Brighteyes. Moreover, she loved Eric, and while he lived she might yet

win him; but Eric dead must be Eric lost. But on Gudruda she would be bitterly avenged--Gudruda, who, for all her scheming, had yet been a wife to Eric!

Now they stand by the bed. Swanhild puts out her hand, draws down the clothes, and feels the breast of Gudruda beneath, for Gudruda slept on the outside of the bed.

Then she searches by the head of the bed and finds Whitefire which hung there, and draws the sword.

"Here lies Eric, on the outside," she says to Gizur, "and here is Whitefire. Strike and strike home, leaving Whitefire in the wound."

Gizur takes the sword and lifts it. He is sore at heart that he must do such a coward deed; but the spell of Swanhild is upon him, and he may not flinch from it. Then a thought takes him and he also puts down his hand to feel. It lights upon Gudruda's golden hair, that hangs about her breast and falls from the bed to the ground.

"Here is woman's hair," he whispers.

"No," Swanhild answers, "it is Eric's hair. The hair of Eric is long, as thou hast seen."

Now neither of them knows that Gudruda cut Eric's locks when he lay sick

on Mosfell, though Swanhild knows well that it is not Brighteyes whom she bids Gizur slay.

Then Gizur, Ospakar's son, lifts the sword, and the faint starlight struggling into the chamber gathers and gleams upon the blade. Thrice he lifts it, and thrice it draws it back. Then with an oath he strikes--and drives it home with all his strength!

From the bed beneath there comes one long sigh and a sound as of limbs trembling against the bed-gear. Then all is still.

"It is done!" he says faintly.

Swanhild puts down her hand once more. Lo! it is wet and warm. Then she bends herself and looks, and behold! the dead eyes of Gudruda glare up into her eyes. She can see them plainly, but none know what she read there. At the least it was something that she loved not, for she reels back against the panelling, then falls upon the floor.

Presently, while Gizur stands as one in a dream, she rises, saying:

"I am avenged of the death of Atli. Let us hence!--ah! let us hence swiftly! Give me thy hand, Gizur, for I am faint!"

So Gizur gives her his hand and they pass thence. Presently they stand in the store-room, and there lies Skallagrim, still plunged in his drunken sleep.

"Must I do more murder?" asks Gizur hoarsely.

"Nay," Swanhild says. "I am sick with blood. Leave the knave."

They pass out by the casement into the yard and so on till they find their horses.

"Lift me, Gizur; I can no more," says Swanhild.

He lifts her to the saddle.

"Whither away?" he asks.

"To Coldback, Gizur, and thence to cold Death."

Thus did Gudruda, Eric's bride and Asmund's daughter, the fairest woman who ever lived in Iceland, die on her marriage night by the hand of Gizur, Ospakar's son, and through the hate and witchcraft of Swanhild the Fatherless, her half-sister.