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#### HOW THE DAWN CAME

The dawn broke over Middalhof. Slowly the light gathered in the empty hall, it crept slowly into the little chamber where Eric slept, and Gudruda slept also with a deeper sleep.

Now the two women came from their chamber at the far end of the hall, and drew near the hearth, shivering, for the air was cold. They knelt by the fire, blowing at the embers till the sticks they cast upon them crackled to a blaze.

"It seems that Gudruda is not yet gone," said one to the other. "I thought she should ride away with Eric before the dawn."

"Newly wed lie long abed!" laughed the other.

"I am glad to see the blessed light," said the first woman, "for last night I dreamed that once again this hall ran red with blood, as at the marriage-feast of Ospakar."

"Ah," answered the other, "it will be well for the south when Eric Brighteyes and Gudruda are gone over sea, for their loves have brought much bloodshed upon the land."

"Well, indeed!" sighed the first. "Had Asmund the Priest never found Groa, Ran's gift, singing by the sea, Valhalla had not been so full to-day. Mindest thou the day he brought her here?"

"I remember it well," she answered, "though I was but a girl at the time. Still, when I saw those dark eyes of hers--just such eyes as Swanhild's!--I knew her for a witch, as all Finn women are. It is an evil world: my husband is dead by the sword; dead are both my sons, fighting for Eric; dead is Unna, Thorod's daughter; Asmund, my lord, is dead, and dead is Björn; and now Gudruda the Fair, whom I have rocked to sleep, leaves us to go over sea. I may not go with her, for my daughter's sake; yet I almost wish that I too were dead."

"That will come soon enough," said the other, who was young and fair.

Now the witch-sleep began to roll from Eric's heart, though his eyes were not yet open. But the talk of the women echoed in his ears, and the words "\_dead!\_" "\_dead!\_" "\_dead!\_" fell heavily on his slumbering sense. At length he opened his eyes, only to shut them again, because of a bright gleam of light that ran up and down something at his side. Heavily he wondered what this might be, that shone so keen and bright--that shone like a naked sword.

Now he looked again. Yes, it was a sword which stood by him upon the

bed, and the golden hilt was like the hilt of Whitefire. He lifted up his hand to touch it, thinking that he dreamed. Lo! his hand and arm were red!

Then he remembered, and the thought of Gudruda flashed through his heart. He sat up, gazing down into the shadow at his side.

Presently the women at the fire heard a sound as of a great man falling to earth.

"What is that noise?" said one.

"Eric leaping from his bed," answered the other. "He has slept too long, as we have also."

As they spoke the curtain of the shut bed was pushed away, and through it staggered Eric in his night-gear, and lo! the left side of it was red. His eyes were wide with horror, his mouth was open, and his face was white as ice.

He stopped, looking at them, made as though to speak, and could not. Then, while they shrank from him in terror, he turned, and, walking like a drunken man, staggered from the hall down that passage which led to the store-chamber. The door stood wide, the shutter was wide, and on the

floor, soaked in the dregs of ale, Skallagrim yet lay snoring, his axe in one hand and a cup in the other.

Eric looked and understood.

"Awake, drunkard!" he cried, in so terrible a voice that the room shook.

"Awake, and look upon thy work!"

Skallagrim sat up, yawning.

"Forsooth, my head swims," he said. "Give me ale, I am thirsty."

"Never wilt thou look on ale again, Skallagrim, when thou hast seen that which I have to show!" said Eric, in the same dread voice.

Then Skallagrim rose to his feet and gaped upon him.

"What means this, lord? Is it time to ride? and say! why is thy shirt red with blood?"

"Follow me, drunkard, and look upon thy work!" Eric said again.

Then Skallagrim grew altogether sober, and grasping his axe, followed after Brighteyes, sore afraid of what he might see.

They went down the passage, past the high seat of the hall, till they

came to the curtain of the shut bed; and after them followed the women. Eric seized the curtain in his hand, rent it from its fastenings, and cast it on the ground. Now the light flowed in and struck upon the bed. It fell upon the bed, it fell upon Whitefire's hilt and ran along the blade, it gleamed on a woman's snowy breast and golden hair, and shone in her staring eyes--a woman who lay stiff and cold upon the bed, the great sword fixed within her heart!

"Look upon thy work, drunkard!" Eric cried again, while the women who peeped behind sent their long wail of woe echoing down the panelled hall.

"Hearken!" said Eric: "while thou didst lie wallowing in thy swine's sleep, foes crept across thy carcass, and this is their handiwork:--yonder she lies who was my bride!--now is Gudruda the Fair a death-wife who last night was my bride! This is thy work, drunkard! and now what meed for thee?"

Skallagrim looked. Then he spoke in a hoarse slow voice:

"What meed, lord? But one--death!"

Then with one hand he covered his eyes and with the other held out his axe to Eric Brighteyes.

Eric took the axe, and while the women ran thence screaming, he whirled

it thrice about his head. Then he smote down towards the skull of Skallagrim, but as he smote it seemed to him that a voice whispered in his ear: "\_Thy oath!\_"--and he remembered that he had sworn to slay no more, save for his own life's sake.

The mighty blow was falling and he might only do this--loose the axe before it clove Skallagrim in twain. He loosed and away the great axe flew. It passed over the head of Skallagrim, and sped like light across the wide hall, till it crashed through the panelling on the further side, and buried itself to the haft in the wall beyond.

"It is not for me to kill thee, drunkard! Go, die in thy drink!"

"Then I will kill myself!" cried the Baresark, and, rushing across the hall he tore the great axe from its bed.

"Hold!" said Eric; "perhaps there is yet a deed for thee to do. Then thou mayest die, if it pleases thee."

"Ay," said Skallagrim coming back, "perchance there is still a deed to do!"

And, flinging down the axe, Skallagrim Lambstail the Baresark fell upon the floor and wept.

But Eric did not weep. Only he drew Whitefire from the heart of Gudruda

and looked at it.

"Thou art a strange sword, Whitefire," he said, "who slayest both friend and foe! Shame on thee, Whitefire! We swore our oath on thee, Whitefire, and thou hast cut its chain! Now I am minded to shatter thee." And as Eric looked on the great blade, lo! it hummed strangely in answer.

"'First must thou be the death of some,' thou sayest? Well, maybe, Whitefire! But never yet didst thou drink so sweet a life as hers who now lies dead, nor ever shalt again."

Then he sheathed the sword, but neither then nor afterwards did he wipe the blood of Gudruda from its blade.

"Last night a-marrying--to-day a-burying," said Eric, and he called to the women to bring spades. Then, having clothed himself, he went to the centre of the hall, and, brushing away the sand, broke the hard clay-flooring, dealing great blows on it with an axe. Now Skallagrim, seeing his purpose, came to him and took one of the spades, and together they laboured in silence till they had dug a grave a fathom deep.

"Here," said Eric, "here, in thine own hall where thou wast born and lived, Gudruda the Fair, thou shalt sleep at the last. And of Middalhof I say this: that none shall live there henceforth. It shall be haunted and accursed till the rafters rot and the walls fall in, making thy barrow, Gudruda."

Now this indeed came to pass, for none have lived in Middalhof since the days of Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter. It has been ruined these many years, and now it is but a pile of stones.

When the grave was dug, Eric washed himself and ate some food. Then he went in to where Gudruda lay dead, and bade the women make her ready for burial. This they did. When she was washed and clad in a clean white robe, Eric came to her, and with his own hand bound the Hell-shoes on her feet and closed her eyes.

It was just then that a man came who said that the people of Gizur and of Swanhild had burned Gudruda's ship, driving the crew ashore.

"It is well," said Eric. "We need the ship no more; now hath she whom it should bear wings with which to fly." Then he went in and sat down on the bed by the body of Gudruda, while Skallagrim crouched on the ground without, tearing at his beard and muttering. For the fierce heart of Skallagrim was broken because of that evil which his drunkenness had brought about.

All day Eric sat thus, looking on his dead love's face, till the hour came round when he and Gudruda had drunk the bride-cup. Then he rose and



kissed dead Gudruda on the lips, saying:

"I did not look to part with thee thus, sweet! It is sad that thou shouldst have gone and left me here. Natheless, I shall soon follow on thy path."

Then he called aloud:

"Art sober, drunkard?"

Skallagrim came and stood before him, saying nothing.

"Take thou the feet of her whom thou didst bring to death, and I will take her head."

So they lifted up Gudruda and bore her to the grave. Then Eric stood near the grave, and, taking dead Gudruda in his arms, looked upon her face by the light of the fire and of the candles that were set about.

He looked thrice, then sang aloud:

"Long ago, when swept the snow-blast,  
Close we clung and plighted troth.  
Many a year, through storm and sword-song,  
Sore I strove to win thee, sweet!  
But last night I held thee, Fairest,

Lock'd, a wife, in lover's arms.  
Now, Gudruda, in thy death-rest,  
Sleep thou soft till Eric come!

"Hence I go to wreak thy murder.  
Hissing fire of flaming stead,  
Groan of spear-carles, wail of women,  
Soon shall startle through the night.  
Then on Mosfell, Kirtle-Wearer,  
Eric waits the face of Death.  
Freed from weary life and sorrow,  
Soon we'll kiss in Hela's halls!"

Then he laid her in the grave, and, having shrouded a sheet over her, they filled it in together, hiding Gudruda the Fair from the sight of men for ever.

Afterwards Eric armed himself, and this Skallagrim did also. Then he strode from the hall, and Skallagrim followed him. In the yard those horses were still tied that should have carried them to the ship, and on one was the saddle of Gudruda. She had ridden on this horse for many years, and loved it much, for it would follow her like a dog. Eric looked at him, then said aloud:

"Gudruda may need thee where she is, Blackmane," for so the horse was named. "At the least, none shall ride thee more!" And he snatched the

axe from the hand of Skallagrim and slew the horse at a blow.

Then they rode away, heading for Coldback. The night was wild and windy, and the sky dark with scudding clouds, through which the moon peeped out at times. Eric looked up, then spoke to Skallagrim:

"A good night for burning, drunkard!"

"Ay, lord; the flames will fly briskly," answered Skallagrim.

"How many, thinkest thou, walked over thee, drunkard, when thou didst lie yonder in the ale?"

"I know not," groaned Skallagrim; "but I found this in the soft earth without: the print of a man's and a woman's feet; and this on the hill side: the track of two horses ridden hard."

"Gizur and Swanhild, drunkard," said Eric. "Swanhild cast us into deep sleep by witchcraft, and Gizur dealt the blow. Better for him that he had never been born than that he has lived to deal that coward's blow!"

Then they rode on, and when midnight was a little while gone they came to the stead at Coldback. Now this house was roofed with turves, and the windows were barred so that none could pass through them. Also in the

yard were faggots of birch and a stack of hay.

Eric and Skallagrim tied their horses in a dell that is to the north of the stead and crept up to the house. All was still; but a fire burnt in the hall, and, looking through a crack, Eric could see many men sleeping about it. Then he made signs to Skallagrim and together, very silently, they fetched hay and faggots, piling them against the north door of the house, for the wind blew from the north. Now Eric spoke to Skallagrim, bidding him stand, axe in hand, by the south door, and slay those who came out when the reek began to smart them: but he went himself to fire the pile.

When Brighteyes had made all things ready for the burning, it came into his mind that, perhaps, Gizur and Swanhild were not in the house. But he would not hold his hand for this, for he was mad with grief and rage. So once more he prepared for the deed, when again he heard a voice in his ear--the voice of Gudruda, and it seemed to say:

"\_Thine oath, Eric! remember thine oath!\_"

Then he turned and the rage went out of his heart.

"Let them seek me on Mosfell," he said, "I will not slay them secretly and by reek, the innocent and the guilty together." And he strode round the house to where Skallagrim stood at the south door, axe aloft and watching.

"Does the fire burn, lord? I see no smoke," whispered Skallagrim.

"Nay, I have made none. I will shed no more blood, except to save my life. I leave vengeance to the Norns."

Now Skallagrim thought that Brighteyes was mad, but he dared say nothing. So they went to their horses, and when they found them, Eric rode back to the house. Presently they drew near, and Eric told Skallagrim to stay where he was, and riding on to the house, smote heavy blows upon the door, just as Skallagrim once had smitten, before Eric went up to Mosfell.

Now Swanhild lay in her shut bed; but she could not sleep, because of what she saw in the eyes of Gudruda. Little may she ever sleep again, for when she shuts her eyes once more she sees that which was written in the dead eyes of Gudruda. So, as she lay, she heard the blows upon the door, and sprang frightened from her bed. Now there was tumult in the hall, for every man rose to his feet in fear, searching for his weapons. Again the loud knocks came.

"It is the ghost of Eric!" cried one, for Gizur had given out that Eric was dead at his hand in fair fight.

"Open!" said Gizur, and they opened, and there, a little way from the door, sat Brighteyes on a horse, great and shadowy to see, and behind

him was Skallagrim the Baresark.

"It is the ghost of Eric!" they cried again.

"I am no ghost," said Brighteyes. "I am no ghost, ye men of Swanhild. Tell me: is Gizur, the son of Ospakar, among you?"

"Gizur is here," said a voice; "but he swore he slew thee last night."

"Then he lied," quoth Eric. "Gizur did not slay me--he murdered Gudruda the Fair as she lay asleep at my side. See!" and he drew Whitefire from its scabbard and held it in the rays of the moon that now shone out between the cloud rifts. "Whitefire is red with Gudruda's blood--Gudruda slaughtered in her sleep by Gizur's coward hand!"

Now men murmured, for this seemed to them the most shameful of all deeds. But Gizur, hearing, shrank back aghast.

"Listen again!" said Eric. "I was minded but now to burn you all as ye slept--ay, the firing is piled against the door. Still, I held my hand, for I have sworn to slay no more, except to save my life. Now I ride hence to Mosfell. Thither let Gizur come, Gizur the murderer, and Swanhild the witch, and with them all who will. There I will give them greeting, and wipe away the blood of Gudruda from Whitefire's blade."

"Fear not, Eric," cried Swanhild, "I will come, and there thou mayst

kill me, if thou canst."

"Against thee, Swanhild," said Eric, "I lift no hand. Do thy worst, I leave thee to thy fate and the vengeance of the Norns. I am no woman-slayer. But to Gizur the murderer I say, come."

Then he turned and went, and Skallagrim went with him.

"Up, men, and cut Eric down!" cried Gizur, seeking to cover his shame.

But no man stirred.