

ERIC BRIGHTEYES.

BY
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"Allan Quatermain," Etc.

CHAPTER I.

HOW ASMUND THE PRIEST FOUND GROA
THE WITCH.

There lived a man in the south, before Thangbrand, Wilibald's son, preached the White Christ in Iceland. He was named Eric Brighteyes, Thorgrimur's son, and in those days there was no man like him for strength, beauty and daring, for in all these things he was the first. But he was not the first in good luck.

Two women lived in the south, not far from where the Westman Islands stand above the sea. Gudruda the Fair was the name of the one, and Swanbild, called the Fatherless, Groa's daughter, was the other. They were half-sisters, and there were none like them in those days, for they were the fairest of all women, though they had nothing in common except their blood and hate.

Now of Eric Brighteyes, of Gudruda the Fair, and of Swanbild the Fatherless, there is a tale to tell.

Those two fair women saw the light in the self-same hour. But Eric Brighteyes was their elder by five years. The father of Eric was Thorgrimur Iron-toe. He had been a mighty man; but in fighting with a Baresark, who fell upon him as he came up from sowing his wheat, his foot was hewn from him, so that afterward he went upon a wooden legshod with iron. Still, he slew the Baresark, standing on one leg and leaning against a rock, and for that deed people honored him much. Thorgrimur was a wealthy yeoman, slow to wrath, just, and rich in friends. Somewhat late in life he took to wife Saevuna, Thorod's daughter. She was the best of women, strong in mind, and second-sighted and she could cover herself in her hair. But these two never loved each other overmuch, and they had but one child, Eric, who was born when Saevuna was well on in years.

The father of Gudruda was Asmund Asmundson, the Priest of Middalhof. He was the wisest and the wealthiest of all men who lived in the south of Iceland in those days, owning many farms, and, also, two ships of merchandise and one long ship of war, and having much money out at interest. He had won his wealth by viking's work, robbing the English coasts, and black tales were told of his doings in his youth on the sea, for he was a "red-hand" viking. Asmund was a handsome man, with blue eyes and a large beard, and, moreover, was very skilled in matters of law. He loved money much, and was feared of all. Still, he had many friends, for as he aged he grew more kindly. He had in marriage Gudruda, the daughter of Bjorn, who was very sweet and kindly of nature, so that they called her Gudruda the Gentle. Of this marriage there were two children, Bjorn and Gudruda the Fair; but Bjorn grew up like his father in youth, strong and hard, and greedy of gain, while, except for her wonderful beauty Gudruda was her mother's child alone.

The mother of Swanbild the Fatherless was Groa the Witch. She was a Finn, and it is told of her that the ship on which she sailed, trying to run under the lee of the Westman Isles in a great gale from the northeast, was dashed to pieces on a rock, and all those on board of her were caught in the net of Ran and drowned, except Groa herself, who was saved by her magic art. This at the least is true, that Asmund the Priest rode down by the seashore on the morning after the gale, seeking for some strayed horses, he found a beautiful woman, who wore a purple cloak and a great girdle of gold, seated on a rock, combing her black hair and singing the while; and, at her feet, wasing to and fro in a pool, was a dead man. He asked whence she came, and she answered: "Out of the Swan's Bath."

Next he asked her where were her kin. But, pointing to the dead man, she said that this alone was left of them.

"Who was the man, then?" said Asmund the Priest.

She laughed again and sang this song: "Groa sails up from the Swan's Bath. Death Gods grip the Dead Man's hand. Look where lies her luckless husband. Bolder sea-king never swung sword! Asmund, keep the kirtle wearer. For last night the Norns were crying. And Groa thought they told of thee: 'Yes, told of thee, and babe unborn.'"

"How knowest thou my name?" asked Asmund.

"The sea-mews cried it as the ship sank, thine and others—and they shall be heard in story."

"Then that is the best of luck," quoth Asmund; "but I think that thou art fey."

"Ay," she answered, "fey and fair."

"True enough thou art fair. What shall we do with this dead man?"

"Leave him in the arms of Ran. So may all husbands lie."

They spoke no more with her at that time, seeing that she was a witchwoman. But Asmund took her up to Middalhof, and gave her a farm, and she lived there alone, and he profited much by her wisdom.

Now it chanced that Gudruda the Gentle was with child, and when her time came she gave a daughter birth—a very fair girl, with dark eyes. On the same day, Groa

the witchwoman brought forth a girl-child and men wondered who was its father, for Groa was no man's wife. It was women's talk that Asmund the Priest was the father of this child also; but when he heard it he was angry, and said that no witchwoman should bear a bairn of his, howsoever fair she was. Nevertheless, it was still said that the child was his, and it is certain that he loved it as a man loves his own; but of all things this is the hardest to know. When Groa was questioned she laughed darkly, as was her fashion, and said that she knew nothing of it, never having seen the face of the child's father, who rose out of the sea at night. And for this cause some thought him to have been a wizard or the wraith of her dead husband; but others said that Groa lied, as many women have done on such matters. But of all this talk the child alone remained and she was named Swanbild.

Now, but an hour before the child of Gudruda the Gentle was born, Asmund went up from his house to the Temple, to tend the holy fire that burned night and day upon the altar. When he had tended the fire he sat down upon the cross-benches before the shrine, and, gazing on the image of the Goddess Freya, he fell asleep and dreamed a very evil dream.

He dreamed that Gudruda the Gentle bore a dove most beautiful to see, for all its feathers were of silver; but that Groa the Witch bore a golden snake. And the snake and the dove dwelt together, and ever the snake sought to slay the dove. At length there came a great white swan flying over Coldback Fell, and its tongue was a sharp sword. Now the swan saw the dove and loved it, and the dove loved the swan; but the snake reared itself, and hissed, and sought to kill the dove. But the swan covered her with his wings, and beat the snake away. Then he, Asmund, came out and drove away the swan, as the swan had driven the snake, and it wheeled high into the air and flew south, and the snake swam away also through the sea. But the dove drooped and now it was blind. Then an eagle came from the north and would have taken the dove, but it fled round and round, crying, and always the eagle flew nearer to it. At length, from the south the swan came back, flying heavily, and about its neck was twined the golden snake, and with it came a raven. And it saw the eagle and loud it trumpeted, and shook the snake from it so that it fell like a gleam of gold into the sea. Then the eagle and the swan met in battle, and the swan drove the eagle down and broke it with his wings, and, flying to the dove, comforted it. But those in the house ran out and shot at the swan with bows and drove it away; but now he, Asmund, was not with them. And once more the dove drooped. Again the swan came back, and with it the raven, and a great host gathered against them, and among them, all Asmund's kith and kin, and the men of his quarter and some of his priesthood, and many whom he did not know by face. And the swan flew at Bjorn his son, and shot out the sword of its tongue and slew him, and many a man it slew thus. And the raven, with a beak and claws of steel, slew also many a man, so that Asmund's kindred fled and the swan slept by the dove. But as it slept the golden snake crawled out of the sea, and hissed in the ears of men, and they rose up to follow it. It came to the swan and twined itself about its neck. It struck at the dove and slew it. Then the swan awoke and the raven awoke, and they did battle till all who remained of Asmund's kindred and people were dead. But still the snake clung about the swan's neck, and presently snake and swan fell into the sea, and far out on the sea there burned a flame of fire. And Asmund awoke trembling and left the Temple.

Now as he went, a woman came running, and weeping as she ran.

"Haste, haste!" she cried; "a daughter is born to thee, and Gudruda thy wife is dying!"

"Is it so?" said Asmund; "after ill dreams ill tidings."

Now in the bed-chamber off the great hall of Middalhof lay Gudruda the Gentle, and she was dying.

"Art thou there, husband?" she said.

"Even so, wife."

"Thou comest in an evil hour, for it is my last. Now hearken. Take thou the new-born babe within thine arms and kiss it, and pour water over it, and name it with my name."

This Asmund did.

"Hearken, my husband. I have been a good wife to thee, though thou hast not been all good to me. But this child thou alone: thou shalt swear that, though she is a girl, thou wilt not cast this bairn forth to perish, but wilt cherish and nurture her."

"I swear it," he said.

"And thou shalt swear that thou wilt not take the witchwoman Groa to wife, nor have anything to do with her, and this for thine own sake; for, if thou dost, she will be thy death. Dost thou swear?"

"I swear it," he said.

"It is well; but, husband, if thou dost break thine oath, either in the words or in the spirit of the words, evil shall overtake thee and all thy house. Now bid me farewell, for I die."

He bent over her and kissed her, and it is said that Asmund wept in that hour, for after his fashion he loved his wife.

"Give me the babe," she said, "that I may lie once upon my breast."

They gave her the babe and she looked upon its dark eyes and said:

"Fairest of women shalt thou be, Gudruda—fair as no woman in Iceland ever was before thee; and thou shalt love with a mighty love—and thou shalt lose—and, losing, thou shalt find again."

Now, it is said that, as she spoke these words, her face grew bright as a spirit's, and, having spoken them, she fell back dead. And they laid her in earth, but Asmund mourned her much.

But, when all was over and done, the dream that he had dreamed lay heavy on him. Now of all diviners of dreams Groa was the most skilled, and when Gudruda had been in earth seven full days, Asmund went to Groa, though doubtfully, because of his oath.

He came to the house and entered. On a couch in the chamber lay Groa, and her babe was on her breast and she was very fair to see.

"Greeting, lord!" she said. "What wouldst thou here?"

"I have dreamed a dream, and thou alone canst read it."

"That is as it may be," she answered. "It is true that I have some skill in dreams. At the least I will hear it."

Then he unfolded it to her every word.

"What wilt thou give me if I read thy dream?" she said.

"What dost thou ask? Methinks I have given thee much."

"Yes, lord," and she looked at the babe upon her breast. "I ask but a little thing; that thou shalt take this bairn in thy arms, pour water over it and name it."

"Men will talk if I do this, for it is the father's part."

"It is a little thing what men say: talk goes by as the wind. Moreover, thou shalt give them the lie in the child's name for it shall be Swanbild the Fatherless. Nevertheless that is my price. Pay it if thou wilt."

"Read me the dream and I will name the child."

"Nay, first name thou the babe: for then no harm shall come to her at thy hands."

So Asmund took the child, poured water over her, and named her.

Then Groa spoke: "This, lord, is the reading of thy dream, else my wisdom is at fault: The silver dove is thy daughter Gudruda, the golden snake, is my daughter Swanbild, and these two shall hate one the other and strive against each other. But the swan is a mighty man whom both shall love, and, if he love not both, yet he shall belong to both. And thou shalt send him away; but he shall return and bring bad luck to thee and thy house, and thy daughter shall be blind with love of him. And in the end he shall slay the eagle, a great lord from the north who shall seek to wed thy daughter, and many another shall he slay, by the help of that raven with the bill of steel who shall be with him. But Swanbild shall triumph over thy daughter Gudruda, and this man, and the two of them, shall die at her hands, and, for the rest, who can say? But this is true—that the mighty man shall bring all thy race to an end. See now, I have read thy rede."

Then Asmund was very wroth. "Thou wast wise to beguile me to name thy bastard bairn," he said; "else had I been its death within this hour."

"This thou canst not do, lord, seeing that thou hast held it in thy arms," Groa answered, laughing. "Go rather and lay out Gudruda the Fair on Coldback Hill; so shalt thou make an end of the evil, for Gudruda shall be its very root. Learn this, moreover: that thy dream does not tell all, seeing that thou thyself must play a part in the fate. Go, send forth the babe Gudruda, and be at rest."

"That cannot be, for I have sworn to cherish it, and with an oath that may not be broken."

"It is well," laughed Groa. "Things will befall as they are fated; let them befall in their season. There is space for chance on Coldback and the sea can shroud its dead!"

And Asmund went thence, angered at heart.

CHAPTER II.

HOW ERIC TOLD HIS LOVE TO GUDRUDA IN
THE SNOW ON COLDBACK.

Now, it must be told that, five years before the day of the death of Gudruda the Gentle, Saevuna, the wife of Thorgrimur Iron-Toe, gave birth to a son, at Coldback in the Marsh, on Ran River, and when his father came to look upon the child he called out aloud:

"Here we have a wondrous bairn, for his hair is yellow like gold and his eyes shine bright as stars." And Thorgrimur named him Eric Brighteyes.

Now, Coldback is but an hour's ride from Middalhof, and it chanced, in after years, that Thorgrimur went up to Middalhof, to keep the Yule feast and worship in the Temple, for he was in the priesthood of Asmund Asmundson, bringing the boy Eric with him. There also was Groa with Swanbild, for now she dwelt at Middalhof; and the three fair children were set together in the hall to play, and men thought it great sport to see them. Now, Gudruda had a horse of wood and would ride it while Eric pushed the horse along. But Swanbild smote her from the horse and called to Eric to make it move; but he comforted Gudruda and would not, and at that Swanbild was angry and hisped out:

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