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DEDICATION

Madam,

You have graciously conveyed to me the intelligence that during the weary weeks spent far from his home — in alternate hope and fear, in suffering and mortal trial — a Prince whose memory all men must reverence, the Emperor Frederick, found pleasure in the reading of my stories: that "they interested and fascinated him."

While the world was watching daily at the bedside of your Majesty's Imperial husband, while many were endeavouring to learn courage in our supremest need from the spectacle of that heroic patience, a distant writer little knew that it had been his fortune to bring to such a sufferer an hour's forgetfulness of sorrow and pain.

This knowledge, to an author, is far dearer than any praise, and it is in gratitude that, with your Majesty's permission, I venture to dedicate to you the tale of Eric Brighteyes.

The late Emperor, at heart a lover of peace, though by duty a soldier of soldiers, might perhaps have cared to interest himself in a warrior of long ago, a hero of our Northern stock, whose days were spent in strife, and whose latest desire was Rest. But it may not be; like the Golden Eric of this Saga, and after a nobler

fashion, he has passed through the Hundred Gates into the Valhalla of Renown.

To you, then, Madam, I dedicate this book, a token, however slight and unworthy, of profound respect and sympathy.

I am, Madam,

Your Majesty's most obedient servant,

H. Rider Haggard.

November 17, 1889.

To H.I.M. Victoria, Empress Frederick of Germany.

INTRODUCTION

"Eric Brighteyes" is a romance founded on the Icelandic Sagas. "What is a saga?" "Is it a fable or a true story?" The answer is not altogether simple. For such sagas as those of Burnt Njal and Grettir the Strong partake both of truth and fiction: historians dispute as to the proportions. This was the manner of the saga's growth: In the early days of the Iceland community — that republic of aristocrats — say, between the dates 900 and 1100 of our era, a quarrel would arise between two great families. As in the case of the Njal Saga, its cause, probably, was the ill doings of some noble woman. This quarrel would lead to manslaughter. Then blood called for blood, and a vendetta was set on foot that ended only with the death by violence of a majority of the actors in the drama and of large numbers of their adherents. In the course of the feud, men of heroic strength and mould would come to the front and perform deeds worthy of the iron age which bore them. Women also would help to fashion the tale, for good or ill, according to their natural gifts and characters. At last the tragedy was covered up by death and time, leaving only a few dinted shields and haunted cairns to tell of those who had played its leading parts.

But its fame lived on in the minds of men. From generation to generation skalds wandered through the winter snows, much as Homer may have wandered in his day across the Grecian vales and mountains, to find a welcome at every stead, because of the old-time story they had to tell. Here, night after night, they would sit in the ingle and while away the weariness of the dayless dark with histories of the times when men carried their lives in their hands, and thought them well lost if there might be a song in the ears of folk to come. To alter the tale was one of the greatest of crimes: the skald must repeat it as it came to him; but by degrees undoubtedly the sagas did suffer alteration. The facts remained the same indeed, but around them gathered a mist of miraculous occurrences and legends. To take a single instance: the account of the burning of Bergthorsknoll in the Njal Saga is not only a piece of descriptive writing that for vivid, simple force and insight is scarcely to be matched out of Homer and the Bible, it is also obviously true. We feel as we read, that no man could have invented that story, though some great skald threw it into shape. That the tale is true, the writer of "Eric" can testify, for, saga in hand, he has followed every act of the drama on its very site. There he who digs beneath the surface of the lonely mound that looks across plain and sea to Westman Isles may still find traces of the burning, and see what appears to be the black sand with which the hands of Bergthora and her women strewed the earthen floor some nine hundred

years ago, and even the greasy and clotted remains of the whey that they threw upon the flame to quench it. He may discover the places where Fosi drew up his men, where Skarphedinn died, singing while his legs were burnt from off him, where Kari leapt from the flaming ruin, and the dell in which he laid down to rest — at every step, in short, the truth of the narrative becomes more obvious. And yet the tale has been added to, for, unless we may believe that some human beings are gifted with second sight, we cannot accept as true the prophetic vision that came to Runolf, Thorstein's son; or that of Njal who, on the evening of the onslaught, like Theoclymenus in the Odyssey, saw the whole board and the meats upon it "one gore of blood."

Thus, in the Norse romance now offered to the reader, the tale of Eric and his deeds would be true; but the dream of Asmund, the witchcraft of Swanhild, the incident of the speaking head, and the visions of Eric and Skallagrim, would owe their origin to the imagination of successive generations of skalds; and, finally, in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, the story would have been written down with all its supernatural additions.

The tendency of the human mind — and more especially of the Norse mind — is to supply uncommon and extraordinary reasons for actions and facts that are to be amply accounted for by the working of natural forces. Swanhild would have needed no "familiar" to instruct her in her evil schemes; Eric would have wanted

no love-draught to bring about his overthrow. Our common experience of mankind as it is, in opposition to mankind as we fable it to be, is sufficient to teach us that the passion of one and the human weakness of the other would suffice to these ends. The natural magic, the beauty and inherent power of such a woman as Swanhild, are things more forceful than any spell magicians have invented, or any demon they are supposed to have summoned to their aid. But no saga would be complete without the intervention of such extraneous forces: the need of them was always felt, in order to throw up the acts of heroes and heroines, and to invest their persons with an added importance. Even Homer felt this need, and did not scruple to introduce not only second sight, but gods and goddesses, and to bring their supernatural agency to bear directly on the personages of his chant, and that far more freely than any Norse sagaman. A word may be added in explanation of the appearances of "familiars" in the shapes of animals, an instance of which will be found in this story. It was believed in Iceland, as now by the Finns and Eskimo, that the passions and desires of sorcerers took visible form in such creatures as wolves or rats. These were called "sendings," and there are many allusions to them in the Sagas.

Another peculiarity that may be briefly alluded to as eminently characteristic of the Sagas is their fatefulness. As we read we seem to hear the voice of Doom speaking continually. "*Things will happen as they*

are fated": that is the keynote of them all. The Norse mind had little belief in free will, less even than we have to-day. Men and women were born with certain characters and tendencies, given to them in order that their lives should run in appointed channels, and their acts bring about an appointed end. They do not these things of their own desire, though their desires prompt them to the deeds: they do them because they must. The Norns, as they name Fate, have mapped out their path long and long ago; their feet are set therein, and they must tread it to the end. Such was the conclusion of our Scandinavian ancestors — a belief forced upon them by their intense realisation of the futility of human hopes and schemings, of the terror and the tragedy of life, the vanity of its desires, and the untravelled gloom or sleep, dreamless or dreamfull, which lies beyond its end.

Though the Sagas are entrancing, both as examples of literature of which there is but little in the world and because of their living interest, they are scarcely known to the English-speaking public. This is easy to account for: it is hard to persuade the nineteenth century world to interest itself in people who lived and events that happened a thousand years ago. Moreover, the Sagas are undoubtedly difficult reading. The archaic nature of the work, even in a translation; the multitude of its actors; the Norse sagaman's habit of interweaving endless side-plots, and the persistence with which he introduces the genealogy and adventures of the

ancestors of every unimportant character, are none of them to the taste of the modern reader.

"Eric Brighteyes" therefore, is clipped of these peculiarities, and, to some extent, is cast in the form of the romance of our own day, archaisms being avoided as much as possible. The author will be gratified should he succeed in exciting interest in the troubled lives of our Norse forefathers, and still more so if his difficult experiment brings readers to the Sagas — to the prose epics of our own race. Too ample, too prolix, too crowded with detail, they cannot indeed vie in art with the epics of Greece; but in their pictures of life, simple and heroic, they fall beneath no literature in the world, save the Iliad and the Odyssey alone.

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 Swanhild, 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 Swanhild the Fatherless, there is a tale to tell.

These 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,[1]

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[1] The Baresarks were men on whom a passing fury of battle came; they were usually outlawed.

who fell upon him as he came up from sowing his wheat, his foot was hewn from him, so that afterwards he went upon a wooden leg shod with iron. Still, he slew the Baresark, standing on one leg and leaning against a rock, and for that deed people honoured 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 Björn, who was very sweet and kindly of nature, so that they called her Gudruda the Gentle. Of this marriage there were two children,

Björn and Gudruda the Fair; but Björn 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 Swanhild 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 north-east, was dashed to pieces on a rock, and all those on board of her were caught in the net of Ran[2] and drowned, except Groa herself, who was saved by her magic art. This at the least is true, that, as Asmund the Priest rode down by the sea-shore 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, washing 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.

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[2] The Norse goddess of the sea.

Look where lies her luckless husband,
Bolder sea-king ne'er swung sword!
Asmund, keep the kirtle-wearer,
For last night the Norns were crying,
And Groa thought they told of thee:
Yea, told of thee and babes 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."[3]

"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

[3] I. e. subject to supernatural presentiments, generally connected with approaching doom.

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 Swanhild.

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 drew 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 were gathered against them, and, among them, all of 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 Björn 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-closet 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 thus shalt thou atone: 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 it 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 wouldest 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."

"Yea, 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 Swanhild 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 Swanhild, 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 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 Swanhild 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 brat," 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 cairns on Coldback and the sea can shroud its dead!"

And Asmund went thence, angered at heart.