

# Glámr

By S. Baring-Gould

The following story is found in the *Gretla*, an Icelandic Saga, composed in the thirteenth century, or that comes to us in the form then given to it; but it is a redaction of a Saga of much earlier date. Most of it is thoroughly historical, and its statements are corroborated by other Sagas. The following incident was introduced to account for the fact that the outlaw Grettir would run any risk rather than spend the long winter nights alone in the dark.

At the beginning of the eleventh century there stood, a little way up the Valley of Shadows in the north of Iceland, a small farm, occupied by a worthy bonder, named Thorhall, and his wife. The farmer was not exactly a chieftain, but he was well enough connected to be considered respectable; to back up his gentility he possessed numerous flocks of sheep and a goodly drove of oxen. Thorhall would have been a happy man but for one circumstance—his sheepwalks were haunted.

Not a herdsman would remain with him; he bribed, he threatened, entreated, all to no purpose; one shepherd after another left his service, and things came to such a pass that he determined on asking advice at the next annual council. Thorhall saddled his horses, adjusted his packs, provided himself with hobbles, cracked his long Icelandic whip, and cantered along the road, and in due time reached Thingvellir.

Skapti Thorodd's son was lawgiver at that time, and as everyone considered him a man of the utmost prudence and able to give the best advice, our friend from the Vale of Shadows made straight for his booth.

"An awkward predicament, certainly—to have large droves of sheep and no one to look after them," said Skapti, nibbling the nail of his thumb, and shaking his wise head—a head as stuffed with law as a ptarmigan's crop is stuffed with blueberries. "Now I'll tell you what—as you have asked my advice, I will help you to a shepherd; a character in his way, a man of dull intellect, to be sure, but strong as a bull."

"I do not care about his wits so long as he can look after sheep," answered Thorhall.

"You may rely on his being able to do that," said Skapti. "He is a stout, plucky fellow; a Swede from Sylgsdale, if you know where that is."

Towards the break-up of the council—"Thing" they call it in Iceland—two greyish-white horses belonging to Thorhall slipped their hobbles and strayed; so the good man had to hunt after them himself which shows how short of servants he was. He crossed Sletha-asi, thence he bent his way to Armann's-fell, and just by the Priest's Wood he met a strange-looking man driving before him a horse laden with faggots. The fellow was tall and stalwart; his face involuntarily attracted Thorhall's attention, for the eyes, of an ashen grey, were large and staring, the powerful jaw was furnished with very white protruding teeth, and around the low forehead hung bunches of coarse wolf-grey hair.

"Pray, what is your name, my man?" asked the farmer, pulling up.

"Glámr, an please you," replied the wood-cutter.

Thorhall stared; then, with a preliminary cough, he asked how Glámr liked faggot-picking.

"Not much," was the answer; "I prefer shepherd life."

"Will you come with me?" asked Thorhall; "Skapti has handed you over to me, and I want a shepherd this winter uncommonly."

“If I serve you, it is on the understanding that I come or go as it pleases me. I tell you I am a bit truculent if things do not go just to my thinking.”

“I shall not object to this,” answered the bonder. “So I may count on your services?”

“Wait a moment! You have not told me whether there be any drawback.”

“I must acknowledge that there is one,” said Thorhall; “in fact, the sheepwalks have got a bad name for bogies.”

“Pshaw! I’m not the man to be scared at shadows,” laughed Glámr; “so here’s my hand to it; I’ll be with you at the beginning of the winter night.”

Well, after this they parted, and presently the farmer found his ponies. Having thanked Skapti for his advice and assistance, he got his horses together and trotted home.

Summer, and then autumn passed, but not a word about the new shepherd reached the Valley of Shadows. The winter storms began to bluster up the glen, driving the flying snow-flakes and massing the white drifts at every winding of the vale. Ice formed in the shallows of the river; and the streams, which in summer trickled down the ribbed scarps, were now transmuted into icicles.

One gusty night a violent blow at the door startled all in the farm. In another moment Glámr, tall as a troll, stood in the hall glowering out of his wild eyes, his grey hair matted with frost, his teeth rattling and snapping with cold, his face blood-red in the glare of the fire which smouldered in the centre of the hall. Thorhall jumped up and greeted him warmly, but the housewife was too frightened to be very cordial.

Weeks passed, and the new shepherd was daily on the moors with his flock; his loud and deep-toned voice was often borne down on the blast as he shouted to the sheep driving them into fold. His presence in the house always produced gloom, and if he spoke it sent a thrill through the women, who openly proclaimed their aversion for him.

There was a church near the byre, but Glámr never crossed the threshold; he hated psalmody; apparently he was an indifferent Christian. On the vigil of the Nativity Glámr rose early and shouted for meat.

“Meat!” exclaimed the housewife; “no man calling himself a Christian touches flesh to-day. To-morrow is the holy Christmas Day, and this is a fast.”

“All superstition!” roared Glámr. “As far as I can see, men are no better now than they were in the bonny heathen time. Bring me meat, and make no more ado about it.”

“You may be quite certain,” protested the good wife, “if Church rule be not kept, ill-luck will follow.”

Glámr ground his teeth and clenched his hands. “Meat! I will have meat, or—” In fear and trembling the poor woman obeyed.

The day was raw and windy; masses of grey vapour rolled up from the Arctic Ocean, and hung in piles about the mountain-tops. Now and then a scud of frozen fog, composed of minute particles of ice, swept along the glen, covering bar and beam with feathery hoar-frost. As the day declined, snow began to fall in large flakes like the down of the eider-duck. One moment there was a lull in the wind, and then the deep-toned shout of Glámr, high up the moor slopes, was heard distinctly by the congregation assembling for the first vespers of Christmas Day. Darkness came on, deep as that in the rayless abysses of the caverns under the lava, and still the snow fell thicker. The lights from the church windows sent a yellow haze far out into the night, and every flake burned golden as it swept within the ray. The bell in the lych-gate clanged for evensong, and the wind puffed the sound far up the glen; perhaps it reached the herdsman’s ear. Hark! Someone caught a distant sound or shriek, which it was he could not tell, for the wind muttered and mumbled about the church eaves, and then with a fierce whistle scudded over the graveyard

fence. Glámr had not returned when the service was over. Thorhall suggested a search, but no man would accompany him; and no wonder! it was not a night for a dog to be out in; besides, the tracks were a foot deep in snow. The family sat up all night, waiting, listening, trembling; but no Glámr came home. Dawn broke at last, wan and bleak in the south. The clouds hung down like great sheets, full of snow, almost to bursting.

A party was soon formed to search for the missing man. A sharp scramble brought them to high land, and the ridge between the two rivers which join in Vatnsdalr was thoroughly examined. Here and there were found the scattered sheep, shuddering under an icicled rock, or half buried in a snow-drift. No trace yet of the keeper. A dead ewe lay at the bottom of a crag; it had staggered over in the gloom, and had been dashed to pieces.

Presently the whole party were called together about a trampled spot in the heath, where evidently a death-struggle had taken place, for earth and stone were tossed about, and the snow was blotched with large splashes of blood. A gory track led up the mountain, and the farm-servants were following it, when a cry, almost of agony, from one of the lads, made them turn. In looking behind a rock, the boy had come upon the corpse of the shepherd; it was livid and swollen to the size of a bullock. It lay on its back with the arms extended. The snow had been scabbled up by the puffed hands in the death-agony, and the staring glassy eyes gazed out of the ashen-grey, upturned face into the vaporous canopy overhead. From the purple lips lolled the tongue, which in the last throes had been bitten through by the white fangs, and a discoloured stream which had flowed from it was now an icicle.

With trouble the dead man was raised on a litter, and carried to a gill-edge, but beyond this he could not be borne; his weight waxed more and more, the bearers toiled beneath their burden, their foreheads became beaded with sweat; though strong men they were crushed to the ground. Consequently, the corpse was left at the ravine-head, and the men returned to the farm. Next day their efforts to lift Glámr's bloated carcass, and remove it to consecrated ground, were unavailing. On the third day a priest accompanied them, but the body was nowhere to be found. Another expedition without the priest was made, and on this occasion the corpse was discovered; so a cairn was raised over the spot.

Two nights after this one of the thralls who had gone after the cows burst into the hall with a face blank and scared; he staggered to a seat and fainted. On recovering his senses, in a broken voice he assured all who crowded about him that he had seen Glámr walking past him as he left the door of the stable. On the following evening a houseboy was found in a fit under the farmyard wall, and he remained an idiot to his dying day. Some of the women next saw a face which, though blown out and discoloured, they recognised as that of Glámr, looking in upon them through a window of the dairy. In the twilight, Thorhall himself met the dead man, who stood and glowered at him, but made no attempt to injure his master. The haunting did not end there. Nightly a heavy tread was heard around the house, and a hand feeling along the walls, sometimes thrust in at the windows, at others clutching the woodwork, and breaking it to splinters. However, when the spring came round the disturbances lessened, and as the sun obtained full power, ceased altogether.

That summer a vessel from Norway dropped anchor in the nearest bay. Thorhall visited it, and found on board a man named Thorgaut, who was in search of work.

"What do you say to being my shepherd?" asked the bondr.

"I should very much like the office," answered Thorgaut. "I am as strong as two ordinary men, and a handy fellow to boot."

“I will not engage you without forewarning you of the terrible things you may have to encounter during the winter night.”

“Pray, what may they be?”

“Ghosts and hobgoblins,” answered the farmer; “a fine dance they lead me, I can promise you.”

“I fear them not,” answered Thorgaut; “I shall be with you at cattle-slaughtering time.”

At the appointed season the man came, and soon established himself as a favourite in the house; he romped with the children, chucked the maidens under the chin, helped his fellow-servants, gratified the housewife by admiring her curd, and was just as much liked as his predecessor had been detested. He was a devil-may-care fellow, too, and made no bones of his contempt for the ghost, expressing hopes of meeting him face to face, which made his master look grave, and his mistress shudderingly cross herself. As the winter came on, strange sights and sounds began to alarm the folk, but these never frightened Thorgaut; he slept too soundly at night to hear the tread of feet about the door, and was too short-sighted to catch glimpses of a grizzly monster striding up and down, in the twilight, before its cairn.

At last Christmas Eve came round, and Thorgaut went out as usual with his sheep.

“Have a care, man,” urged the bonder; “go not near to the gill-head, where Glámr lies.”

“Tut, tut! fear not for me. I shall be back by vespers.”

“God grant it,” sighed the housewife; “but ‘tis not a day for risks, to be sure.”

Twilight came on: a feeble light hung over the south, one white streak above the heath land to the south. Far off in southern lands it was still day, but here the darkness gathered in apace, and men came from Vatnsdalr for evensong, to herald in the night when Christ was born. Christmas Eve! How different in Saxon England! There the great ashen faggot is rolled along the hall with torch and taper; the mummers dance with their merry jingling bells; the boar’s head, with gilded tusks, “bedecked with holly and rosemary,” is brought in by the steward to a flourish of trumpets.

How different, too, where the Varanger cluster round the imperial throne in the mighty church of the Eternal Wisdom at this very hour. Outside, the air is soft from breathing over the Bosphorus, which flashes tremulously beneath the stars. The orange and laurel leaves in the palace gardens are still exhaling fragrance in the hush of the Christmas night.

But it is different here. The wind is piercing as a two-edged sword; blocks of ice crash and grind along the coast, and the lake waters are congealed to stone. Aloft, the Aurora flames crimson, flinging long streamers to the zenith, and then suddenly dissolving into a sea of pale green light. The natives are waiting round the churchdoor, but no Thorgaut has returned.

They find him next morning, lying across Glámr’s cairn, with his spine, his leg, and arm-bones shattered. He is conveyed to the churchyard, and a cross is set up at his head. He sleeps peacefully. Not so Glámr; he becomes more furious than ever. No one will remain with Thorhall now, except an old cowherd who has always served the family, and who had long ago dandled his present master on his knee.

“All the cattle will be lost if I leave,” said the carle; “it shall never be told of me that I deserted Thorhall from fear of a spectre.”

Matters grew rapidly worse. Outbuildings were broken into of a night, and their woodwork was rent and shattered; the house door was violently shaken, and great pieces of it were torn away; the gables of the house were also pulled furiously to and fro.

One morning before dawn, the old man went to the stable. An hour later, his mistress arose, and taking her milking pails, followed him. As she reached the door of the stable, a terrible

sound from within—the bellowing of the cattle, mingled with the deep notes of an unearthly voice—sent her back shrieking to the house. Thorhall leaped out of bed, caught up a weapon, and hastened to the cow-house. On opening the door, he found the cattle goring each other. Slung across the stone that separated the stalls was something. Thorhall stepped up to it, felt it, looked close; it was the cowherd, perfectly dead, his feet on one side of the slab, his head on the other, and his spine snapped in twain. The bonder now moved with his family to Tunga, another farm owned by him lower down the valley; it was too venturesome living during the midwinter night at the haunted farm; and it was not till the sun had returned as a bridegroom out of his chamber, and had dispelled night with its phantoms, that he went back to the Vale of Shadows. In the meantime, his little girl's health had given way under the repeated alarms of the winter; she became paler every day; with the autumn flowers she faded, and was laid beneath the mould of the churchyard in time for the first snows to spread a virgin pall over her small grave.

At this time Grettir—a hero of great fame, and a native of the north of the island—was in Iceland, and as the hauntings of this vale were matters of gossip throughout the district, he inquired about them, and resolved on visiting the scene. So Grettir busked himself for a cold ride, mounted his horse, and in due course of time drew rein at the door of Thorhall's farm with the request that he might be accommodated there for the night.

“Ahem!” coughed the bonder; “perhaps you are not aware—”

“I am perfectly aware of all. I want to catch sight of the troll.”

“But your horse is sure to be killed.”

“I will risk it. Glámr I must meet, so there's an end of it.”

“I am delighted to see you,” spoke the bonder; “at the same time, should mischief befall you, don't lay the blame at my door.”

“Never fear, man.”

So they shook hands; the horse was put into the strongest stable, Thorhall made Grettir as good cheer as he was able, and then, as the visitor was sleepy, all retired to rest.

The night passed quietly, and no sounds indicated the presence of a restless spirit. The horse, moreover, was found next morning in good condition, enjoying his hay.

“This is unexpected!” exclaimed the bonder, gleefully. “Now, where's the saddle? We'll clap it on, and then good-bye, and a merry journey to you.”

“Good-bye!” echoed Grettir; “I am going to stay here another night.”

“You had best be advised,” urged Thorhall; “if misfortune should overtake you, I know that all your kinsmen would visit it on my head.”

“I have made up my mind to stay,” said Grettir, and he looked so dogged that Thorhall opposed him no more.

All was quiet next night; not a sound roused Grettir from his slumber. Next morning he went with the farmer to the stable. The strong wooden door was shivered and driven in. They stepped across it; Grettir called to his horse, but there was no responsive whinny.

“I am afraid—” began Thorhall. Grettir leaped in, and found the poor brute dead, and with its neck broken.

“Now,” said Thorhall quickly, “I've got a capital horse—a skewbald—down by Tunga, I shall not be many hours in fetching it; your saddle is here, I think, and then you will just have time to reach—”

“I stay here another night,” interrupted Grettir.

“I implore you to depart,” said Thorhall.

“My horse is slain!”

“But I will provide you with another.”

“Friend,” answered Grettir, turning so sharply round that the farmer jumped back, half frightened, “no man ever did me an injury without rueing it. Now, your demon herdsman has been the death of my horse. He must be taught a lesson.”

“Would that he were!” groaned Thorhall; “but mortal must not face him. Go in peace and receive compensation from me for what has happened.”

“I must revenge my horse.”

“An obstinate man will have his own way! But if you run your head against a stone wall, don’t be angry because you get a broken pate.”

Night came on; Grettir ate a hearty supper and was right jovial; not so Thorhall, who had his misgivings. At bedtime the latter crept into his crib, which, in the manner of old Icelandic beds, opened out of the hail, as berths do out of a cabin. Grettir, however, determined on remaining up; so he flung himself on a bench with his feet against the posts of the high seat, and his back against Thorhall’s crib; then he wrapped one lappet of his fur coat round his feet, the other about his head, keeping the neck-opening in front of his face, so that he could look through into the hall.

There was a fire burning on the hearth, a smouldering heap of red embers; every now and then a twig flared up and crackled, giving Grettir glimpses of the rafters, as he lay with his eyes wandering among the mysteries of the smoke-blackened roof. The wind whistled softly overhead. The clerestory windows, covered with the amnion of sheep, admitted now and then a sickly yellow glare from the full moon, which, however, shot a beam of pure silver through the smoke-hole in the roof. A dog without began to howl; the cat, which had long been sitting demurely watching the fire, stood up with raised back and bristling tail, then darted behind some chests in a corner. The hall door was in a sad plight. It had been so riven by the spectre that it was made firm by wattles only, and the moon glinted athwart the crevices. Soothingly the river, not yet frozen over, prattled over its shingly bed as it swept round the knoll on which stood the farm. Grettir heard the breathing of the sleeping women in the adjoining chamber, and the sigh of the housewife as she turned in her bed.

Click! click!—It is only the frozen turf on the roof cracking with the cold. The wind lulls completely. The night is very still without. Hark! a heavy tread, beneath which the snow yields. Every footfall goes straight to Grettir’s heart. A crash on the turf overhead! By all the saints in paradise! The monster is treading on the roof. For one moment the chimney-gap is completely darkened: Glámr is looking down it; the flash of the red ash is reflected in the two lustreless eyes. Then the moon glances sweetly in once more, and the heavy tramp of Glámr is audibly moving towards the farther end of the hall. A thud—he has leaped down. Grettir feels the board at his back quivering, for Thorhall is awake and is trembling in his bed. The steps pass round to the back of the house, and then the snapping of the wood shows that the creature is destroying some of the outhouse doors. He tires of this apparently, for his footfall comes clear towards the main entrance to the hail. The moon is veiled behind a watery cloud, and by the uncertain glimmer Grettir fancies that he sees two dark hands thrust in above the door. His apprehensions are verified, for, with a loud snap, a long strip of panel breaks, and light is admitted. Snap—snap! another portion gives way, and the gap becomes larger. Then the wattles slip from their places, and a dark arm rips them out in bunches, and flings them away. There is a cross-beam to the door, holding a bolt which slides into a stone groove. Against the grey light, Grettir sees a huge black figure heaving itself over the bar. Crack! that has given way, and the rest of the door falls in shivers to the earth.

“Oh, heavens above!” exclaims the bonder.

Stealthily the dead man creeps on, feeling at the beams as he comes; then he stands in the hall, with the firelight on him. A fearful sight; the tall figure distended with the corruption of the grave, the nose fallen off, the wandering, vacant eyes, with the glaze of death on them, the sallow flesh patched with green masses of decay; the wolf-grey hair and beard have grown in the tomb, and hang matted about the shoulders and breast; the nails, too, they have grown. It is a sickening sight—a thing to shudder at, not to see.

Motionless, with no nerve quivering now, Thorhall and Grettir held their breath.

Glámr’s lifeless glance strayed round the chamber; it rested on the shaggy bundle by the high seat. Cautiously he stepped towards it. Grettir felt him groping about the lower lappet and pulling at it. The cloak did not give way. Another jerk; Grettir kept his feet firmly pressed against the posts, so that the rug was not pulled off. The vampire seemed puzzled, he plucked at the upper flap and tugged. Grettir held to the bench and bed-board, so that he was not moved, but the cloak was rent in twain, and the corpse staggered back, holding half in its hands, and gazing wonderingly at it. Before it had done examining the shred, Grettir started to his feet, bowed his body, flung his arms about the carcass, and, driving his head into the chest, strove to bend it backward and snap the spine. A vain attempt! The cold hands came down on Grettir’s arms with diabolical force, riving them from their hold. Grettir clasped them about the body again; then the arms closed round him, and began dragging him along. The brave man clung by his feet to benches and posts, but the strength of the vampire was the greater; posts gave way, benches were heaved from their places, and the wrestlers at each moment neared the door. Sharply writhing loose, Grettir flung his hands round a roof-beam. He was dragged from his feet; the numbing arms clenched him round the waist, and tore at him; every tendon in his breast was strained; the strain under his shoulders became excruciating, the muscles stood out in knots. Still he held on; his fingers were bloodless; the pulses of his temples throbbed in jerks; the breath came in a whistle through his rigid nostrils. All the while, too, the long nails of the dead man cut into his side, and Grettir could feel them piercing like knives between his ribs. Then at once his hands gave way, and the monster bore him reeling towards the porch, crashing over the broken fragments of the door. Hard as the battle had gone with him indoors, Grettir knew that it would go worse outside, so he gathered up all his remaining strength for one final desperate struggle. The door had been shut with a swivel into a groove; this groove was in a stone, which formed the jamb on one side, and there was a similar block on the other, into which the hinges had been driven. As the wrestlers neared the opening, Grettir planted both his feet against the stone posts, holding Glámr by the middle. He had the advantage now. The dead man writhed in his arms, drove his talons into Grettir’s back, and tore up great ribbons of flesh, but the stone jambs held firm.

“Now,” thought Grettir, “I can break his back,” and thrusting his head under the chin, so that the grizzly beard covered his eyes, he forced the face from him, and the back was bent as a hazel-rod.

“If I can but hold on,” thought Grettir, and he tried to shout for Thorhall, but his voice was muffled in the hair of the corpse.

Suddenly one or both of the door-posts gave way. Down crashed the gable trees, ripping beams and rafters from their beds; frozen clods of earth rattled from the roof and thumped into the snow, Glámr fell on his back, and Grettir staggered down on top of him. The moon was at her full; large white clouds chased each other across the sky, and as they swept before her disk she looked through them with a brown halo round her. The snow-cap of Jorundarfell, however,

glowed like a planet, then the white mountain ridge was kindled, the light ran down the hillside, the bright disk stared out of the veil and flashed at this moment full on the vampire's face. Grettir's strength was failing him, his hands quivered in the snow, and he knew that he could not support himself from dropping flat on the dead man's face, eye to eye, lip to lip. The eyes of the corpse were fixed on him, lit with the cold glare of the moon. His head swam as his heart sent a hot stream to his brain. Then a voice from the grey lips said—

“Thou hast acted madly in seeking to match thyself with me. Now learn that henceforth ill-luck shall constantly attend thee; that thy strength shall never exceed what it now is, and that by night these eyes of mine shall stare at thee through the darkness till thy dying day, so that for very horror thou shalt not endure to be alone.”

Grettir at this moment noticed that his dirk had slipped from its sheath during the fall, and that it now lay conveniently near his hand. The giddiness which had oppressed him passed away, he clutched at the sword-haft, and with a blow severed the vampire's throat. Then, kneeling on the breast, he hacked till the head came off.

Thorhall appeared now, his face blanched with terror, but when he saw how the fray had terminated he assisted Grettir gleefully to roll the corpse on the top of a pile of faggots, which had been collected for winter fuel. Fire was applied, and soon far down the valley the flames of the pyre startled people, and made them wonder what new horror was being enacted in the upper portion of the Vale of Shadows.

Next day the charred bones were conveyed to a spot remote from the habitations of men, and were there buried.

What Glámr had predicted came to pass. Never after did Grettir dare to be alone in the dark.