

BARING-GOULD SABINE

# GRETTIR THE OUTLAW

Sabine Baring-Gould

**Grettir the Outlaw**

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## Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	11
CHAPTER IV	14
CHAPTER V	15
CHAPTER VI	17
CHAPTER VII	23
CHAPTER VIII	26
CHAPTER IX	29
CHAPTER X	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32

# **S. Baring-Gould**

## **Grettir the Outlaw / A Story of Iceland**

### **CHAPTER I**

### **WINTER TALES**

The Birthplace of Grettir – The Peopling of Iceland – A History of Quarrels  
– Stories Round the Hearth – Biarg – The Great Blue Bay – The Boy Grettir – The  
Saga of Onund Treefoot – The Northern Pirates – The Fight with King Harald –  
Onund's Wound – After the Battle

It was night – drawing on to midnight – in summer, that I who write this book arrived at the little lonely farm of Biarg, on the Middle River, in the north of Iceland. It was night, near on midnight, and yet I could hardly call it night, for the sky overhead was full of light of the clearest amethyst, and every stock and stone was distinctly visible. Across the valley rose a rugged moor, and above its shoulder a snow-clad mountain, turned to rosy gold by the night sun. As I stood there watching the mist form on the cold river in the vale below, all at once I heard a strange sound like horns blowing far away in the sky, and looking up, I saw a train of swans flying from west to east, bathed in sunlight, their wings of silver, and their feathers as gold.

I had come all the way from England to see Biarg, for there was born, about the year A.D. 997, a man called Grettir, whose history I had read, and which interested me so much that I was resolved to see his native home, and the principal scenes where his stormy life was passed.

The landscape was the same as that on which Grettir's childish eyes had looked more than eight hundred and fifty years ago. The same outline of dreary moor, the same snowy ridge of mountain standing above it, catching the midnight summer sun, the same mist forming over the river; but the house was altogether different. Now there stood only a poor heap of farm-buildings, erected of turf and wood, where had once been a noble hall of wood, with carved gable-ends, surrounded by many out-houses.

Before we begin on the story of Grettir, it will be well to say a few words about its claim to be history.

Iceland never was, and it is not now, a much-peopled island. The farmhouses are for the most part far apart, and the farms are of very considerable extent, because, owing to the severity of the climate, very little pasturage is obtained over a wide extent of country for the sheep and cattle. The population lives round the coast, on the fiords or creeks of the sea, or on the rivers that flow into these fiords. The centre of the island is occupied by a vast waste of ice-covered mountain, and desert black as ink strewn with volcanic ash and sand, or else with a region of erupted lava that is impassable, because in cooling it has exploded, and forms a country of bristling spikes and gulfs and sharp edges, very much like the wreck of a huge ginger-beer bottle factory.

What are now farmhouses were the halls and mansions of families of noble descent. Indeed, the original settlers in Iceland were the nobles of Norway who left their native land to avoid the tyranny of Harold Fairhair, who tried to crush their power so as to make himself a despotic king in the land.

These Norse nobles came in their boats to Iceland, bringing with them their wives, children, their thralls or slaves, and their cattle; and they settled all round the coast. The present Icelanders are descended from these first colonists.

Now, the history of Iceland for a few hundred years consists of nothing but the history of the quarrels of these great families. Iceland was without any political organization, but it had an elected lawman or judge, and every year the heads of the families rode to Thingvalla, a plain in the south-

west, where they brought their complaints, carried on their lawsuits, and had them settled by the judge. There was no army, no navy, no government in Iceland for a long time; also no foreign wars, and no internal revolutions.

These noble families settled in the valleys and upon the fiords thought a good deal of themselves, and they carefully preserved, at first orally then in writing, the record of their pedigrees, and also the tradition of the famous deeds of their great men.

In summer there is no night; in winter, no day. In winter there is little or nothing to be done but sit over the fire, sing songs, and tell yarns. Now, in winter the Icelanders told the tales of the brave men of old in their families, and so the tradition was handed on from father to son, the same stories told every winter, till all the particulars became well known. At the same time there can be no doubt that little embellishments were added, some exaggerations were indulged in, and here and there the grand deed of some other man was grafted into the story of the family hero. About two hundred or two hundred and fifty years after the death of Grettir, his history was committed to writing, and then it became fixed – nothing further was added to it, and we have his story after having travelled down over two hundred years as a tradition. That was plenty of time for additions and emendations, and the hobgoblin and ghost stories that come into his life are some of these embellishments. But the main facts of his life are true history. We are able to decide this by comparing his story with those of other families in the same part of the island, and to see whether they agree as to dates, and as to the circumstances narrated in them.

In the north-west of Iceland is an immense bay called the Huna-floi, which branches off into several creeks, the largest of which is called the Ramsfirth, and the next to that is the Middlefiord. Into this flows a river that has its rise in the central desert, in a perfect tangle of lakes. Three rivers issuing from these lakes unite just above Biarg, and pour their waters a short morning's ride lower through sands into the Middlefirth.

The valley is not cheerful, running from north to south. Biarg lies on the east side, and faces the western sun. The moor which lies behind it, and forms the hill on the other side of the river, is not broken and picturesque, and if it were not for the peak of Burfell, covered with snow a good part of the year, the view from Biarg would be as uninteresting as any to be found in the land. But then, when one rides down to the coast, or ascends the moor, what a splendid view bursts on the sight! The great Polar Sea is before one, intensely blue, not with the deep ultramarine of the Mediterranean, but with the blue of the nemophyla or forget-me-not, rolling in from the mysterious North; and across the mighty bay of the Huna-floi can be seen the snowy mountains of that extraordinary peninsula which runs out to the north-west of Iceland, and is only just not converted into an island because connected with Iceland by a narrow strip of land. That great projection is like a hand with fiords between the fingers of land, and glacier-mountains where are the knuckles; but the wrist is very narrow indeed, only about one English mile across, and there lies a trough along this junction, with a little stream and a lake in it. Now, at this wrist, as we may call it, lies the farm of Eyre, where, somewhat later, lived the sister of Grettir, who married a man that farmed there, named Glum.

Looking away across the great blue bay, the mountains of the hand may be seen rising out of the sea, and looking like icebergs.

Grettir the Strong was the son of a well-to-do bonder, or yeoman, who lived at Biarg, and was descended from some of the great nobles of Norway. His father's name was Asmund with the Grey-head, and his mother's name was Asdis.

He had a brother called Atli, a gentle, kindly young fellow, who never wittingly quarrelled with anyone, and was liked by all with whom he had to do. He had also two sisters – one was called Thordis, and she was married to Glum of Eyre – but neither come into the story; and he had another sister called Rannveig, who was married to Gamli of Melar, at the head of Ramsfirth. He had also a little brother called Illugi, of whom more hereafter. Grettir was not a good-looking boy; he had reddish

hair, a pale face full of freckles, and light blue eyes. He was broad-built, not tall as a boy, though in the end he grew to be a very big man.

He was not considered a good-tempered or sociable boy. He seemed lazy and sullen; he liked to sit by the fire without speaking to anyone, listening to what was said, and brooding over what he had heard.

If his father set him a task, he did it so unwillingly, and so badly that Asmund Greyhead regretted having set him to do anything.

Now, during the winter, as we have already seen, when there is but a very little daylight, and the nights are vastly long, when, moreover, the whole land is deep in snow, so that there is no farm-work that can be done, and no travelling about to visit neighbours, it was, and is still, usual in Iceland for those in the house to tell tales, or sagas, as they are called. Some of these sagas relate to the old gods of the Norsemen, some are fabulous stories of old heroes who never existed, or, if they did exist, have had all sorts of fantastic legends tacked on to their histories; but other sagas are the tales of the doings of ancestors of the family.

Now, among the sagas that Grettir used to hearken to with greatest delight was that of old Onund Treefoot, his great-grandfather, who first settled in Iceland. And this was the tale:

Onund, the son of Ufeigh Clubfoot, son of Ivar the Smiter, was a mighty Viking in Norway; that is, he went about every summer harrying the coasts of England, Ireland, and Scotland. He joined with three friends, and they had five ships together, and one summer they sailed to the Hebrides – which were then called the Sudereys, or southern isles. The Bishop of the Isle of Man is still called Bishop of Sodor and Man, because his diocese originally included the Sudereys. Then out against them came Kiarval, king of the Hebrides, with five ships, and they gave him battle, and there was a hard fray. But the men of Onund were the mightiest warriors. On each side many fell, but the end of the battle was that the king fled with only one ship. So Onund took the four vessels and great spoil, and he wrought great havoc on the coast, plundering and burning, and so in the fall of the year returned to Norway. In the history of England, and in that of Scotland and of Ireland, we read of the terrible annoyance given to the natives of Great Britain and Ireland by the northern pirates; and, indeed, they conquered Dublin, and established a kingdom there, and also took to themselves Orkney. Well, when Onund returned to Norway he did not find that matters were pleasant there; for King Harald the Unshorn had begun to establish himself sole king in Norway. Hitherto there had been many small kings and earls; but Harald had taken an oath that he would not cut or trim his hair till he had subdued all under his power, and made himself supreme throughout the land.

A great many bonders and all the little kings united against him, and there was a great battle fought at Hafrsfiord – the greatest battle that had as yet been fought in Norway. Onund was in the battle along with his friend, King Thorir Longchin, and he set his ship alongside of that of King Longchin. King Harald ran his ship up alongside of that of Longchin, grappled it, and boarded it. There was a furious fight, and Harald sent on board his Bearsarks, a set of half-mad ruffians, who wore not bear but wolf skins, and who were said to lead charmed lives, so that no weapon would wound them. Thorir Longchin and all his men were killed; and then King Harald cut away the ship and ran up against that of Onund. Onund was in the fore part, and he fought manfully. As the grappling-irons of Harald caught his ship, Onund made a sweep with his longsword at the man who threw the irons, and in so doing he put his leg over the bulwark. Then one on the king's ship threw a spear at Onund. He saw it flung, and leaned his head back to let it fly over him, and as he did so one on the king's ship smote at him with a battle-axe, and the axe fell on his leg below the knee and shore his leg off. Then Onund fell back on board his own vessel, and his men carried him across into that of a friend named Thrاند, who lay alongside of him on the other board. And Thrанд had a great cauldron there of pitch boiled, and Onund set his knee in the boiling pitch, and never blinked nor uttered a cry. That staunched the blood. If he had not done this he would have bled to death.

Now, Thrand saw that King Harald was gaining the mastery everywhere, so he fled away with his ship and sailed west.

Onund was healed of his wound, but ever after he walked with a wooden leg, and that is why he got the name of Onund Treefoot.

After the battle of Hafrsfjord, Onund could only return to Norway by stealth, and he could not recover his lands there, so he deemed it wisest for him to sail away and seek a home elsewhere. That is how he left Norway and settled in Iceland.

And when King Harald saw himself lord and master through all the land, then he had his hair trimmed and combed, and it was so long and so beautiful, that ever after he who had been called "The Unshorn" went by the name of "Fairhair," and in history he is known as King Harald Fairhair.



## CHAPTER II

### HOW GRETTIR PLAYED ON THE ICE

An Evil Boyhood – Golf on the Ice – Grettir Quarrels with Audun – A Threat of Vengeance

There are several tales told of Grettir when he was a boy, which show that he was a rough and unkindly lad. He was set by his father to keep geese on the moors, and this made him angry, so he threw stones at the geese and killed or wounded them all.

The old man suffered from lumbago, and in winter when unwell asked his wife and the boys to rub his back by the fire; but when Grettir was required to do this, he lost his temper, and on one occasion he snatched up a wool-carding comb and dug it into his old father's back.

Many other things he did which made those at home not like him, and there was not much love lost between him and his father. The fact was that Grettir was a headstrong, wilful fellow, and bitterly had he to pay in after life for this youthful wilfulness and obstinacy. It was these qualities, untamed in him, that wrecked his whole life, and it may be said brought ruin and extinction on his family. There were great and good qualities in Grettir's nature, but they did not show when he was young; only much suffering and cruel privations brought out in the end the higher and nobler elements that were in him.

It is so with all who have any good in them, if by early discipline it is not manifested, then it is brought out by the rough usage of misfortune in after life.

And now I will give one incident of Grettir's boyhood. It was a favourite amusement for young fellows at that time to play golf on the ice, and in winter, when the Middlefirth was frozen over, large parties assembled there for the sport.

One winter a party was arranged for a match on the ice, and a good many lads came to Middlefirth from Willowdale, a valley only separated from the Middlefirth by a long shoulder of ugly moor. The Willowdales-men had a much better sheet of water, a very large lake called Hop, into which their river flowed, before discharging itself into the sea; and the return match was to be played on Hop.

Among the young fellows who came from Willowdale was Audun, a fine, strapping fellow; frank, well-built, good-looking, and amiable.

When the parties were assembled at the place, there they were paired off according to age and strength; and on this occasion I am speaking of, Grettir, who was fourteen, was set to play with Audun, who was two years older than he, and a head taller.

Audun struck the ball and it flew over Grettir's head, and he missed it, and it went skimming away over the ice to a great distance, and Grettir had to run after it. Some of those who were looking on laughed. Then Grettir's anger was roused. He got the ball and came back carrying it, till he was within a few yards of Audun, and then, instead of dropping the ball, and striking it with his golfing-stick, he suddenly threw it with all his force against his adversary, and struck him between his eyes, so that it half-stunned him, and cut the skin. Audun whirled his golfing-bat round, and struck at Grettir, who dodged under and escaped the blow. Then Audun and Grettir grappled each other, and wrestled on the ice.

Every one thought that Audun would have the stumpy, thick-set boy down in a trice, but it was not so; Grettir held his ground; – they swung this way, that way; now one seemed about to be cast, and then the other, and although Audun was almost come to a man's strength, he could not for a long time throw Grettir. At last Grettir slipped on a piece of ice where some had been sliding, and went down. His blood was up, so was that of Audun; and the fight would have been continued with their sticks, had not Grettir's brother Atli thrown himself between the combatants and separated them. Atli held his brother back, and tried to patch up the quarrel.

"You need not hold me like a mad dog," said Grettir. "Thralls wreak their vengeance at once, cowards never."

Audun and Grettir were distant cousins. They were not allowed to play against each other any more, and the rest went on with their game.

## CHAPTER III

### OF THE RIDE TO THINGVALLA

Thorkel Mani's Find – Thorkel Krafla – The Halt at Biarg – A Bad Prospect  
– Among the Lakes – The Lost Meal-bags – Suspicion Confirmed – The Slaying of  
Skeggi – The Song of the Battle-ogress – Grettir Chooses to take his Trial

There lived in Waterdale, a day's journey from Biarg, an old bonder, named Thorkel Krafla. He was the first Iclander who became a Christian.

In heathen times, among the Northmen as among the Romans, it was allowable for parents to expose their children to death, if they did not want to have the trouble of rearing them. Now Thorkel had been so exposed, with a napkin over his face. It so happened that a great chief called Thorkel Mani was riding along one day, thinking about the gods that he had been taught to believe in, who drank and got drunk, and fought each other, and, being a grave, meditative man, he could not make out what these rollicking, fighting gods could have had to do with the world, – with the creation of sun, moon, and stars, and the earth with its yield. He thought to himself, "There must be some God above these tipsy, quarrelsome deities; and this higher God must love men, and be good and kind to men."

As he thought this, he heard a little whimpering noise from behind a stone; he got off his horse, and went to see what produced this noise, and found there a poor little baby, that with its tiny hands had rumpled up the kerchief which had been spread over its nose and mouth. Thorkel Mani took up the deserted babe in his arms, and looking up to heaven, to the sun, said, "If the good God, who is high over all, called this little being into life, gave it eyes and mouth and ears and hands and feet, He surely never intended His handiwork to be cast out as a thing of no value, to die. For the love of Him I will take this child."

Then Thorkel Mani rode home, carrying the baby in his arms; and he called it by his own name, Thorkel; but to distinguish it from himself, it was given the nickname Krafla, which means to rumple, because the babe had rumpled up the kerchief, so as to let its cries be heard. So the child grew up, and kept the name through life of Thorkel Rumble. This Thorkel became a very great man, and Godi, or magistrate, of the Waterdale; and, as I have said, he was the first man to become a Christian, when missionaries of the gospel came to Iceland.

Very soon after Grettir's birth Christianity became general, and in the year 1000 was sanctioned by law; but there were few Christian priests in the land, so that the knowledge of the truth had not spread much, and taken hold and transformed men's lives. Thorkel Rumble was now very old. He was the bosom friend of Asmund, and every year when in the spring he rode to the great assizes at Thingvalla, he always halted at least one night at Biarg. Not only were Asmund and he men of like minds, and friends, but they were also connected. In the spring of the year 1011, Thorkel arrived as usual at Biarg, attended by a great many men, and he was most warmly received by Asmund and his wife. He remained with them three nights, and he and they fell a-talking about the prospects of the two young men, Atli and Grettir. Asmund told his kinsman that Atli was a quiet, amiable fellow, now at man's estate, and likely to prove a good farmer; a man who would worthily succeed him at Biarg when he died, and keep the honour of the family untarnished, and would enlarge the estate.

"Ah! I see," said Thorkel. "A useful man, good and respectable, like yourself. But what about Grettir?"

Asmund hesitated a moment before answering; but presently he said, "I hardly know what to say of him. He is unruly, sullen, makes no friends, and he has been a constant cause of vexation to me."

Thorkel answered, "That is a bad prospect; however, let him come with me to Thingvalla, and I shall be able to see on the journey of what stuff he is made."

To this Asmund agreed; and right glad was Grettir to think he was to go to the great law-gathering.

Thorkel had sixty men with him, and he rode in some state; for, as already said, he was a great man. The way led over the great desolate waste, called the Two-days-ride; but as on this expanse there were few halting-places, the grass most scanty, and not sufficient to allow of a stay, the party rode across it down to the settled lands nearer the coast as quickly as they could, and reached Fleet-tongue in time to sleep; so they took the bridles off their horses, and let them graze with their saddles on. Their road had lain among the lakes, from which issued the rivers that united above Biarg. In each lake floated a pair of swans. Often they heard the loud hoarse cry of the great northern diver; but there was hardly any grass, for the moor lies high, is swept by the icy blasts from the glacier mountains to the south, and is made up of black sand. Before them all day had stood towering into the sky the Eyreksjokull, a mountain with perfectly precipitous sides of black basalt, domed over with glittering ice. It resembles an immense bridecake. At one place this mountain in former times had gaped, and poured forth a fiery stream of lava that ran to the lakes, and for a while converted them to steam. One can still see whence this great fiery river issued from the mountain. Little did Grettir think then as he passed under it, a boy of fourteen, that, for the three most lonely, wretched years of his life, that great glacier-crowned mountain was to be the one object on which his eye would rest.

The men were all very tired after their long ride, and they slept till late next morning, lying about on the scant herbage, around a fire made of the roots of trailing willows that they had dug out of the sand.

When they awoke many of the horses had strayed, and some had rolled in the sand, burst their girths and shaken off their saddles. But they could not have gone any great distance, for they were all hobbled. In Iceland thick woollen ropes are put round the legs of the horses, below the hocks, and twisted together into a knot with a knuckle-bone. This serves as a secure hobble, and the wool being soft does not gall the skin.

It was customary in those days for every one to take his own provisions with him, and most of those who went to the great assize carried meal-bags athwart their saddles. Grettir found his horse at last, but not his meal-bag, which had come off, and was lost; for the saddle was turned under the belly of his cob.

The horses could not have strayed far, not only because they were hobbled, but also because the Tongue where they had been turned loose was a narrow strip of land between two rivers; but then the slope was considerable in places, and the meal-bag might have rolled down into the water.

As Grettir was running about hunting for his bag, he saw another man in the same predicament. What is more, he saw that the rest of the party, impatient to get on their way, would tarry no longer for them, and were defiling down the hill to cross the river.

Grettir was in great distress. Just then he saw the man run very directly in one course, and at the same moment Grettir saw something white lying under a mass of lava. It was towards this that the fellow was running. Grettir ran towards it also. It was a meal-sack. The man reached it first, and threw it over his shoulder.

"What have you got there?" asked Grettir, coming up panting.

"My meal-sack," answered the fellow.

"Let me look at it," said Grettir. "It may be mine, not yours. Let me look before you appropriate it."

This the man refused to do.

Grettir's suspicion was confirmed, and he made a catch at the sack, and tried to drag it away from the fellow.

"Oh, yes!" sneered the man – who was a servant at a farm called The Ridge, in Waterdale, and his name Skeggi, – "Oh, yes! you Middlefirthers think you will have everything your own way."

"That is not it," answered Grettir. "Let each man take his own. If the sack be yours, keep it; if mine, I will have it."

"It is a pity Audun is not here," scoffed the serving-man, "or he would trip up your heels and throttle you, as he did on the ice when golfing."

"But as he is not here," retorted Grettir, "you are not like to get the better of me."

Skeggi suddenly took his axe by the haft and hewed at Grettir's head. Grettir saw what he was at, and instantly put up his left hand and caught the handle below where Skeggi's hand held it; wrenched it out of his grasp, and struck him with it, so that his skull was cleft. The thing was done in a moment, and Grettir had done it in self-preservation and without premeditation. He was but a boy of fourteen, and this was a full-grown stout churl.

Grettir at once seized the meal-bag, saw it was his own, and threw it across his saddle. Then he rode after the company. Thorkel Krafla rode at the head of his party, and he had no misgiving that anything untoward had taken place.

But, when Grettir came riding up with his meal-bag, the men asked him if he had left Skeggi still in search of his. Grettir answered in song:

"A rock Troll did her burden throw  
Down on Skeggi's skull, I trow.  
O'er the battle-ogress saw I flow  
Ruby rivers all aglow.  
She her iron mouth a-gape  
Did the life of Skeggi take."

This sounds like nonsense; to understand it one must have a notion of what constituted poetry in the minds of Icelanders and Northmen. With them the charm of poetry consisted in never calling anything by its right name, but using instead of it some far-fetched similitude or periphrasis. Thus – the burden of the rock Troll is iron. The Troll is the spirit of the mountain, and the heaviest thing found in the mountain is iron. The battle-ogress is the axe which bites in battle. The verses that the Norse poets sang were a series of conundrums, and the hearers puzzled their brains to make out the sense. This time they soon understood what Grettir meant, and the men turned and went back to the Tongue, and there found Skeggi dead.

Grettir went on to Thorkel, and in few words, and to the point, told how things had fallen out. He was not the aggressor. He had merely defended himself.

Thorkel was much troubled, and he told Grettir that he might either come on to the assize or go home; that this act of man-slaughter would be investigated at the law-gathering, and judgment given upon it.

Grettir agreed to go on, and see how matters would turn out for him.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE DOOM-DAY

The Lava Plain – The Law of Man-slaughter – Grettir's Sentence – The Grettir Stone

That evening they arrived at Thingvalla.

The great plain of Thingvalla is entirely composed of lava. At some remote period before Iceland was colonized a beautiful snowy cone of mountain, called "The Broad Shield," poured forth a deluge of molten rock, which ran in a fiery river down a valley for some miles, half-choking it up, and then spread out over a wide plain where anciently there had been a great lake. Then all cooled, but after the cooling, or whilst it was in process, there came a great crack, crack. The great mass of lava must have been poured over some subterranean caverns; at any rate the whole plain snapped and sank down a good many feet, the lava becoming cracked and starred like glass. Nowadays, one cannot cross the plain because it is all traversed with these fearful cracks, chasms the bottom of which is filled with black water. Where the plain sank deepest there water settled and formed the beautiful Thingvalla Lake.

At the side of one of the cracks where the plain broke off and sank is a very curious pinnacle of black rock, and this was called the Hanging Rock, as criminals were hung from it over the chasm.

In one place two of the cracks unite, and there is a high mound of blistered lava covered with turf and flowers between them. That is called the Law Hill, because the judge and his assessors sat there, and no one could get to them, nor could the accused get away across the chasms.

Now it was the law at this time in Iceland that when any man had been killed his nearest relatives came to the assize, and the slayer appeared by proxy and offered blood-money – that is to say, to pay a fine to the relations, and so patch up the quarrel. But if they refused the money then they were at liberty to pursue and kill him. There were no police then. If the relations wanted to have the criminal punished they must punish him themselves.

Upon this occasion the case was discussed in the court on the finger of rock between the two chasms, the people standing on the further sides of these gulfs, listening, but unable to come a step nearer; and Thorkel appeared for Grettir and offered to pay the blood-money. The relations of the dead Skeggi, after a little fuss, agreed to accept a certain sum, and Thorkel at once paid it. But the court ordered that, as Grettir had acted with undue violence, and as there was no evidence except his word that Skeggi had made the first attack, he should be outlawed, and leave Iceland for three winters. If he set his foot in Iceland till three winters had passed, his life was forfeit. He was allowed a moderate and reasonable time for finding a ship that would take him out of the country.

When the assize was over all rode home, and the way that Thorkel and Grettir went was up the valley that had been half-choked with the lava that rolled down from Broad Shield. They came to a small grassy plain with a gently-sloping hill rising out of it, a place where games took place, the women sitting up the slope and watching the men below. Here Grettir is said to have heaved an enormous stone. The stone is still shown, and I have seen it. I also know that Grettir never lifted it; for it has clearly been brought there by a glacier. But this is an instance of the way in which stories get magnified in telling. No doubt that Grettir did "put" there some big stone, and as it happened that at this spot there was a great rock standing by itself balanced on one point, in after days folks concluded that this must have been the stone thrown by Grettir.

## CHAPTER V

### THE VOYAGE

Preparations for a Voyage – His Grandfather's Sword – A Bitter Jester – Vain Reproaches – Haflid's Stratagem – The Tables Turned – Shipwrecked

Grettir, then, was doomed by the court to leave his native land whilst only a boy, and remain in banishment for three years – that is to say, till he was eighteen. He was not over sorry for this, as he was tired of being at home, and he wanted to see the world.

There was a man called Haflid who had a ship in which he intended to sail that autumn to Norway, and Asmund sent to him to ask him to take Grettir out with him.

Haflid answered that he had not heard a good account of the boy, and did not particularly wish to have him in his boat; but he would stretch a point, because of the regard he had for old Asmund, and he would take him.

Grettir got ready to start; but Asmund would not give him much wherewith to trade when abroad, except some rolls of home-made wadmall, a coarse felty cloth, and a stock of victuals for his voyage. Grettir asked his father to give him some weapon; but the old man answered that he did not trust him with swords and axes, he might put them to a bad use, and it would be better he went without till he had learned to control his temper and keep a check on his hand.

So Grettir parted from his father without much love on either side; and it was noticed when he left home that, though there were plenty of folks ready to bid him farewell, hardly anyone said that he hoped to see him come home again – a certain token that he was not liked by those who had seen most of him. But indeed he had taken no pains to oblige anyone and obtain the regard and love of anyone.

His mother was an exception. She went along the road down the valley with him, wearing a long cloak; and when they were alone, at some distance from the house, she halted and drew out a sword from under her cloak, and handing it to Grettir, said: "This sword belonged to grandfather, and many a hard fight has it been in, and much good work has it done. I give it to you, and hope it may stand you in good stead."

Grettir was highly pleased, and told his mother that he would rather have the sword than anything else that could be given him.

Haflid received Grettir in a friendly manner, and he went at once on board; the ship's anchor was heaved, and forth they went to sea.

Now, directly Grettir got on board he looked about for a place where he could be comfortable, and chose to make a berth for himself under a boat that was slung on deck; then he put up his wadmall, making a sort of felt lining or wall round against the wind and spray, leaving open only the side inwards, and inside he piled his provisions and whatever he had; then he lay down there and did not stir from his snugery. Now, it was the custom in those days for every man who went in a ship to help in the navigation; but Grettir would not only do nothing, but from his den he shouted or sang lampoons – that is, spiteful songs, making fun of every man on board. They were not good-natured jokes, but bitter, stinging ones.

Naturally enough the other men were annoyed, and they were not slow to tell Grettir what they thought of him. He made no other reply than a lampoon.

After the ship had lost sight of land a heavy sea was encountered, and unfortunately the vessel was rather leaky and hardly seaworthy in dirty weather. The weather was squally and very cold, so that the men suffered much. Moreover, they had to bale out the water from the hold, and this was laborious work. They had not pumps in those days.

The gale increased, and the crew and passengers had been engaged for several days and nights in baling without intermission, but Grettir would not help. He lay coiled up in his wadmall under the

boat, peering out at the men and throwing irritating snatches of song at them. This exasperated them to such an extent that they determined to take him and throw him overboard. Haflid heard what they said, and he went to Grettir and reproached him, and told him what was menaced.

"Let them try to use force if they will," said Grettir. "All I can say is that I sha'n't go overboard alone as long as my sword will bite."

"How can you behave as you do?" said Haflid. "Keep silence at least, and do not madden the men with your mockery and sneers."

"I cannot hold my tongue from stabbing," said Grettir.

"Very well, then, stab on, but stab me."

"No; you have not hurt me."

"I say, stab me. Then, if the fellows hear you sing or say something spiteful of me, and I disregard it, they will not mind so much the ill-natured things you say of them."

Grettir considered a moment, and then, remembering that he had heard of something ridiculous that had once occurred to Haflid, he composed a verse about it and shouted it derisively at Haflid as he walked away.

"Just listen to him," said Haflid to the men. "Now he is slandering and insulting me. He is an ill-conditioned cur, so ill-conditioned that I will not stoop to take notice of his insolence. And if you take my advice you will disregard him as I do."

"Well," said the men, "if you shrug your shoulders and pay no regard to his bark, why should we?"

So Haflid, by his tact, smoothed over this difficulty, and averted a danger from Grettir's head.

The weather slowly began to mend, and the sun shone out between the clouds; but the wind was still strong, and the leak gained on the ship, for her bottom was rotten. Now that the sun shone, the poor women who had been aboard and under cover during the gale, crawled forth and came to the side where the boat was, and where was a little shelter, and there sat sewing; whilst Grettir still lay, like a dog in his hutch, within. Then the men began to laugh, and say that Grettir had found suitable company at last – he was not a man among men, but a milksop among women. This was turning the tables on him, and this roused him. Out he came crawling from his den, and ran aft to where the men were baling, and asked to be given the buckets. The way in which it was done was for one to go down into the hold into the water, and fill a tub or cask and hoist it over his head to another man, who carried it up on deck and poured it over the bulwarks. Grettir swung himself down into the hold, and filled and heaved so fast that there had to be two men set to carry up the baling casks, and then two more, four in all attending to him. At one time he even kept eight going, so vigorously did he work; – but then he was fresh, and they exhausted.

When the men saw what a strong, active fellow Grettir was, they praised him greatly, and Grettir, unaccustomed to praise, was delighted and worked on vigorously, and thenceforth was of the utmost assistance in the ship.

They still had bad weather, thick mist, in which they drifted and lost their bearings, and one night unawares they ran suddenly on a rock, and the rotten bottom of the ship was crushed in. They had the utmost difficulty in rescuing their goods and getting the boat ready; but fortunately they were able to put all the women and the loose goods into the boat, man her, and row off before the ship went to pieces. They came to a sandy island, ran the boat ashore, and disembarked in the cold and wet and darkness.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE RED ROVERS

Rescued from the Holm – The Sullen Guest – The Outlawed Rovers – Yuletide Gatherings – The Suspicious Craft – Grettir Guides the Rovers – The Worst Ruffians in Norway – Grettir Entertains the Band – A Crew of Revellers – When the Wine is in – Thorfin's Treasures – Prisoners and Unarmed – Mad with Drink and Fury – One Against Twelve – In Hot Pursuit – The Slaughter in the Boat-shed – The Last of the Band – Wearied with Slaying – Thorfin's Return – A Moment of Perplexity – Better than a Dozen Men – The Gift of the Sword

One morning, after a night of storm on the coast of Norway, the servants ran into the hall of a wealthy bonder, named Thorfin, to tell him that during the night a ship had been wrecked off the coast, and that the crew and passengers were crowded on a little sandy holm, and were signalling for help.

The bonder sprang up and ran down to the shore. He ordered out a great punt from his boat-house, and jumping in with his thralls, rowed to the holm to rescue those who were there.

These were, I need not tell you, the crew and passengers of Haflid's merchant vessel. Thorfin took the half-frozen wretches on board his boat and rowed them to his farm, after which he returned to the islet and brought away the wares. In the meantime his good housewife had been lighting fires, preparing beds, brewing hot ale with honey to sweeten it, and making every preparation she could think of for the sufferers.

Haflid and the rest of the merchants or chapmen who had sailed with him remained at the farm a week, whilst the women were recovering from the cold and exposure and their goods were being dried and sorted. Then they departed, with many thanks for the hospitality shown them, on their way to Drontheim.

Grettir, however, remained. Thorfin, the master of the house, did not much like him. He did not ask him to stay; but then he had not the lack of hospitality to bid him depart. In the farm Grettir never offered to lend a hand in any of the work; he never joined in conversation, he sat over the fire warming himself, and ate and drank heartily.

Thorfin was much abroad, hunting or seeing after the wood-cutting, and he often asked Grettir to come with him. But he was granted no other answer than a shake of the head and a growl. Now the bonder was a merry, kindly-hearted fellow, and he liked to have all about him cheerful. It is no wonder, then, that Grettir, morose and indolent, found no favour with him.

Yule drew near, and Thorfin busked him to depart, with a number of his attendants, to keep the festival at one of his farms distant a good day's journey. His wife was unable to accompany him, as his eldest daughter was ill and needed careful nursing. Grettir he did not invite, as his sullenness would have acted as a damper on the joviality of the banquet.

The farmer started for his house where he was going to spend Yule some days before. A large company of guests were invited to meet him, so he took thirty serving-men to attend on him and them.

Norway was at this time being brought into order by Earl Erik, who was putting down with a high hand the bands of rovers who had been the terror of the country. He had outlawed all these men, and that meant that whoever killed them could not be fined or punished in any way for the slaying. Now Thorfin, the farmer with whom Grettir was staying, had been very active against these rovers, and they bore him a grudge. Among the worst of them were two brothers, Thorir wi' the Paunch and Bad Ogmund. They had not yet been caught, and they defied the power of the Earl. They robbed wherever they went, burned farms over the heads of the sleeping inmates, and with the points of their spears drove the shrieking victims back into the flames when they attempted to escape.

Christmas Eve was bright and sunny, and the sick girl was sufficiently recovered to be brought out to take the air on the sunny side of the great hall, leaning on her mother's arm.

Grettir spent the whole day out of doors, not in the most amiable mood at being shut out from the merry-makings, and left to keep house with the women and eight dunderheaded churls. He fed his discontent by sitting on a headland watching the boats glide by, as parties went to convivial gatherings at the houses of their friends. The deep blue sea was speckled with sails, as though gulls were plunging in the waters. Now a stately dragon-ship rolled past, her fearful carved head glittering with golden scales, her sails spread like wings before the breeze, and her banks of oars dipping into the sea and flashing as they rose. Now a wherry was rowed by laden with cakes and ale, and the boatmen's song rang merrily through the crisp air.

The day began to decline, and Grettir was on the point of returning to the farm, when the strange proceedings of a craft at no great distance attracted his attention. He noticed that she stole along in the shadows of the islets, keeping out of sight as much as possible. Grettir could make out of her just this much, that she was floating low in the water, and was built for speed. As she stranded the rowers jumped on the beach. Grettir counted them, and found they were twelve, all armed men. They burst into Thorfin's boat-house, thrust out his punt, and in its place drew in their own vessel, and pulled her up on the rollers.

Mischief was a-brewing – that was clear. So Grettir went down the hill, and sauntered up to the strangers, with his hands in his pockets, kicking the pebbles before him.

"Who is your leader?" he asked curtly.

"I am. What do you want with me?" answered a stout coarse man – "Thorir, whom they nickname 'wi' the Paunch.' Here is my brother Ogmund. I reckon that Thorfin knows our names well enough. Don't you think so, brother? We have come here to settle a little outstanding reckoning. Is he at home?"

"You are lucky fellows," laughed Grettir, "coming here in the very nick of time. The bonder is away with all his able-bodied and fighting men, and won't be back for a couple of days. His wife and daughter are, however, at the farm. Now is your time if you have old scores to wipe off; for he has left all his things that he values unprotected, silver, clothing, ale, and food in abundance."

Thorir listened, then turning to Ogmund he said, "This is as I had expected. But what a chatterbox this fellow is, he lets out everything without being asked questions."

"Every man knows the use of his tongue," said Grettir. "Now, follow me, and I will do what I can for you."

The rovers at once followed. Then Grettir took fat Thorir by the hand and led him to the farm, talking all the way as hard as his tongue could wag. Now the housewife happened at the time to be in the hall, and hearing Grettir thus talking, she was filled with surprise, and called out to know whom he had with him.

"I have brought you guests for Yule," said Grettir. "We shall not keep it in as dull a fashion as we feared. Here come visitors uninvited, but merry, uncommon merry."

"Who are they?" asked the housewife.

"Thorir wi' the Paunch and Ogmund the Bad, and ten of their comrades."

Then she cried out: "What have you done? These are the worst ruffians in all Norway. Is this the way you repay the kindness Thorfin has shown you in housing and keeping you here, without it's costing you anything?"

"Stay your woman's tongue!" growled Grettir. "Now bestir yourself and bring out dry clothes for the guests."

Then the housewife ran away crying, and her sick daughter, who saw the house invaded by ill-looking men all armed, hid herself.

"Well," said Grettir, "as the women are too scared to attend on you, I will do what is necessary; so give me your wet clothes, and let me wipe your weapons and set them by the fire lest they get rusted."

"You are a different fellow from all the rest in the house."

"I do not belong to the house. I am a stranger, an Icelandic."

"Then I don't mind taking you along with us when we go away."

"As you will," answered the young fellow; "only mind, I don't behave like this to every one."

Then the freebooters gave him their weapons, and he wiped the salt water from them, and laid them aside in a warm spot. Next he removed their wet garments, and brought them dry suits which he routed out of the clothes-chests belonging to Thorfin and his men.

By this time it was night. Grettir brought in logs and faggots of fir branches, and made a roaring fire that filled the great hall with ruddy light and warmth. In those days the halls were long buildings with a set of hearths running down the middle, and benches beside the fires.

"Now, then, my men," said Grettir, "come to the table and drink, for I doubt not you are thirsty with long rowing."

"We are ready," said they. "But where are the cellars?"

"Oh, if you please, I will bring you ale."

"Certainly, you shall attend on us," said Thorir.

Then Grettir went and fetched the best and strongest ale in Thorfin's cellars, and poured it out for the men. They were very tired and thirsty, and they drank eagerly. Grettir did not stint them in meat or drink, and at last he took his place by them, and recited many tales that made them laugh, he also sang them songs; but they were becoming fast too tipsy to rack their brains to find out the meaning in the poetry.

Not one of the house-churls showed his face in the hall that evening; they slunk about the farm, in the stables and sheds, frightened and trembling.

Then said Thorir: "I'll tell you what, my men. I like this young chap, and I doubt our finding another so handy and willing. What say you all to our taking him into our band?"

The pirates banged their drinking-horns on the table in token of approval. Then Grettir stood up and said:

"I thank you for the offer, and if you are in the same mind to-morrow morning when the ale is no longer in your heads, I will strike hands and go with you."

"Let us drink brotherhood at once," shouted the rovers.

"Not so," said Grettir calmly. "I will not have it said that I took advantage of you when you were not sober. It is said that when the wine is in the wit is out."

They all protested that they would be of the same mind next morning, but Grettir stuck to his decision. They were now becoming so tipsy that he proposed they should go to bed.

"But first of all," said he, "I think you will like to run your eyes over Thorfin's storehouse where he keeps all his treasures."

"That we shall!" roared Thorir, staggering to his feet.

Then Grettir took a blazing firebrand from the hearth, and led the way out of the hall into the night.

The storehouse was detached from the main buildings. It was very strongly built of massive logs, firmly mortised together. The door also was very solid, and the whole stood on a strong stone basement, and a flight of stone steps led up to the door. Adjoining the storehouse was a lean-to building divided off from it by a partition of planks.

The sharp frosty air of night striking on the faces of the revellers increased their intoxication, and they became very riotous, staggering against each other, uttering howls and attempting to sing.

Drawing back the bolt Grettir flung the door open, and showed the twelve rovers into the treasury; and he held the flaming torch above his head and showed the silver-mounted drinking-

horns, the embroidered garments, the rich fur mantles, gold bracelets, and bags filled with silver coins obtained from England. The drunken men dashed upon the spoil, knocking each other over and quarrelling for the goods they wanted.

In the midst of this noise and tumult Grettir quietly extinguished the torch, stepped outside and ran the bolt into its place; he had shut them all – all twelve, into the strong-room, and not one of them had his weapons about him.

Then Grettir ran to the farm door and shouted for the housewife. But she would not answer, as she mistrusted him; and no wonder, for he had seemed to be hand and glove with the pirates.

"Come, come!" shouted Grettir, "I have caught all twelve, and all I need now are weapons. Call up the thralls and arm them. Quick! not a moment must be lost."

"There are plenty of weapons here," answered the poor woman, emerging from her place of concealment. "But, Grettir, I mistrust you."

"Trust or no trust," said Grettir, "I must have weapons. Where are the serving-men? Here, Kolbein! Swein! Gamli! Rolf! Confound the rascals, where are they skulking?"

"Over Thorfin's bed hangs a great barbed spear," said the housewife. "You will also find a sword and helmet and cuirass. No lack of weapons, only pluck to wield them is needed."

Grettir seized the casque and spear, girded on the sword and dashed into the yard, begging the woman to send the churls after him. She called the eight men, and they came up timidly – that is to say, four appeared and took the weapons, but the other four, after showing their faces, ran and hid themselves again, they were afraid to measure swords with the terrible rovers.

In the meantime the pirates had been trying the door, but it was too massive for them to break through, so they tore down the partitions of boards between the store and the lean-to room at the side. They were mad with drink and fury. They broke down the door of the side-room easily enough, and came out on the platform at the head of the stone steps just as Grettir reached the bottom.

Thorir and Ogmund were together. In the fitful gleams of the moon they seemed like demons as they scrambled out, armed with splinters of deal they had broken from the planks and turned into weapons. The brothers plunged down the narrow stairs with a howl that rang through the snow-clad forest for miles. Grettir planted the boar-spear in the ground and caught Thorir on its point. The sharp double-edged blade, three feet in length, sliced into him and came out between his shoulders, then tore into Ogmund's breast a span deep. The yew shaft bent like a bow, and flipped from the ground the stone against which the butt-end had been planted. The wretched men crashed over the stair, tried to rise, staggered, and fell again. Grettir trod on Thorir, wrenched the spear out of him, and then running up the steps cut down another rover as he came through the door. Then the rest came out stumbling over each other, some armed with bits of broken stick, others unarmed, and as they came forth Grettir hewed at them with the sword, or thrust at them with the spear.

In the meantime the churls had come up, armed indeed, but not knowing how to use the weapons, and in a condition of too great terror to use them to any purpose. The pirates saw that they were being worsted, and their danger sobered them. They went back into the room and ripped the planks till they had obtained serviceable pieces, and then came two together down the stair, warding off Grettir's blows with their sticks, and not attempting to strike. Then they forced him back and allowed space and time for those behind to leap down to the ground. If then they had combined they might have recovered the mastery, but they did not believe that they were assailed by a single enemy, they thought that there must have been many; consequently those who had leaped from the platform, instead of attacking Grettir from behind, ran away across the farmyard, and those who were warding off his blows, finding themselves unsupported, lost heart, and leaped down as well and attempted to escape. The yard was full of flying frightened wretches, too blinded by their fear to find the gate, and in the wildness of their terror they climbed or leaped over the yard wall and ran towards the boat-house. Grettir went after them. They plunged into the dark boat-shed, and possessed themselves of the oars, whilst some tried to run their boat down into the water. Grettir followed them in the gloom,

smiting to right and left. The bewildered wretches in the darkness hit each other, stumbled and fell in the boat, and some wounded went into the water.

The thralls, content that the pirates had cleared out of the yard, did not trouble themselves to pursue them, but went into the farmhouse. The good woman in vain urged them to go after and succour Grettir. They thought they had done quite enough. It is true, they had neither killed nor wounded anyone, but they had seen some men killed. So Grettir got no help from them. He was still in the boat-house, and he had this advantage: the boat-house was open to the air on the side that faced the sea, whilst the further side was closed with a door, consequently Grettir was himself in shadow. But the moon shone on the water, and he could see the black figures of the rovers cut sharply against this silver background. So he could see where to strike, whilst he himself was unseen.

One stroke from an oar reached him on the shoulder, and for the moment numbed his arm; but he speedily recovered sensation, and killed two more of the ruffians; then the remaining four made a dash together, past him, through the door, and separating into pairs, fled in opposite directions. Grettir went after one of the couples and tracked them to a neighbouring farm, where they dashed into a granary and hid among the straw. Unfortunately for them most of the wheat had been thrashed out, so that only a few bundles remained. Grettir shut and bolted the door behind him, then chased the poor wretches like rats from corner to corner, till he had cut them both down. Then he opened the door, and cast the corpses outside.

In the meanwhile the weather was changing, the sky had become overcast with a thick snow fog that rolled up from the sea, so that Grettir, on coming out, saw that he must abandon the pursuit of the remaining two. Moreover, his arm pained him, his strength was failing him, and a sense of overpowering fatigue stole over him.

The housewife had placed a lamp in a window of a loft as a guide to Grettir in the fog; the stupid house-thralls could not be induced by her to go out in search of him, and she was becoming uneasy at his protracted absence. The fog turned into small snow, thick and blinding, and Grettir struggled through it with difficulty, as the weariness he felt became almost overpowering. At last he reached the farm and staggered in through the door. He could hardly speak. He went to the table, took a horn of mead, drank some, and then threw himself down among the rushes on the floor by the fire, full armed grasping the sword, and in a moment was asleep.

He did not wake for twelve hours; but the cautious and prudent housewife had sent out the carles in search of the pirates. The dead bodies were found, some in the yard, some in the boat-house; then Grettir woke and came to them and pointed out in what direction the only remaining two had run. The snow had fallen so thick that their traces could not be followed, but before nightfall they were discovered, dead, under a rock where they had taken refuge; they had died of cold and loss of blood. All the bodies were collected and a great cairn of stones was piled over them.

When they had been buried, then the housewife made Grettir take the high seat in the hall, and she treated him with the utmost respect, as he deserved.

Time passed, and Thorfin prepared to return home; he dismissed his guests, and he and his men got into their boat to return home. No tidings had reached him of the events that had happened whilst he had been away. The first thing he saw as he came rowing to his harbour was his punt lying stranded. This surprised and alarmed him, and he bade his men row harder. They ran to the boat-house, and then saw it occupied by a vessel, on the rollers, which there was no mistaking; he knew it well, it belonged to those redoubted pirates Thorir and Ogmund. For a moment he was silent with the terror and grief that came on him. "The Red Rovers!" he said, when he recovered the stunning sense of alarm. "The Red Rovers are here – they are on my farm. God grant they have not hurt my wife and daughter!"

Then he considered what was to be done, whether it was best to go at once to the farm, or to make a secret approach to it from different quarters, and surprise the enemy.

Grettir was to blame. He ought not to have allowed Thorfin to be thus thrown into uncertainty and distress. He had seen the master's boat round the headland and enter the bay, but he would neither go himself to meet him on the strand, nor suffer anyone else to go.

"I do not care even if the bonder be a bit disturbed at what he sees," said the young man.

"Then let me go," urged the wife.

"You are mistress, do as you like," said Grettir bluntly.

So the housewife and her daughter went down towards the boat-house, and when Thorfin saw them he ran to meet them, greatly relieved but much perplexed, and he clasped his wife to his heart and said, "God be praised that you and my child are safe! But tell me how matters have stood whilst I have been away, for I cannot understand the boat being where I found it."

"We have been in grievous peril," answered his wife. "But the shipwrecked boy whom you sheltered has been our protector, better than a dozen men."

Then he said, "Sit down on this rock by me and tell me all."

They took each other by the hand and sat on a stone; and the attendants gathered round, and the housewife told them the whole story from beginning to end. When she spoke of the way in which the young Iclander had led the tipsy rovers into the storehouse and fastened them in, without their swords, the men burst into a shout of joy; and when her tale was concluded, their exultant cries rang so loud that Grettir heard them in the farmhouse.

Thorfin said nothing to interrupt the thread of his wife's story; and after she had done he remained silent, rapt in thought. No one ventured to disturb him. Presently he looked up, and said quietly, "That is a good proverb which says, 'Never despair of anyone.' Now I must speak a word with Grettir."

Thorfin walked with his wife to the farm, and when he saw Grettir he held out both his hands to him, and thanked him.

"This I say to you," said Thorfin, "which few would say to their best of friends – that I hope some day you may need my help, and then I will prove to you how thankful I am for what you have done. I can say no more."

Grettir thanked him, and spent the rest of the winter at his house. The story of what he had done spread through all the country, and was much praised, especially by such as had suffered from the violence of the Ked Rovers. But Thorfin made to Grettir a present, in acknowledgment of what he had done; and that present was the sword that had hung above his bed, with which Grettir had killed so many of the rovers. Now, concerning this sword a tale has to be told.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE STORY OF THE SWORD

The Light on the Cliff – The Grave of Karr the Old – The Visit to the Ness –  
The Chamber of the Dead – The Shape on the Throne – In the Dead Man's Arms  
– A Fearful Wrestle – The Dead Vanquished – The Dragon's Treasure – The Tale  
of the Sword – The Two Swords of Grettir

Some little while before the slaying of the Red Rovers, a strange event had taken place.

Grettir had made the acquaintance of a man called Audun, who lived at a little farm at some distance from the house of Thorfin, and he walked over there occasionally to sit and talk with his friend. As he returned late at night he noticed that a strange light used to dance at the end of a cliff that overhung the sea, at the end of a headland; a lonely desolate headland it was, without house or stall near it. Grettir had never been there, and as it was so bare, he knew that no one lived on that headland, so he could not account for the light. One day he said to Audun that he had seen this strange light, which was not steady but flickered; and he asked him what it meant.

Audun at once became very grave, and after a moment's hesitation said, "You are right. No one lives on that ness, but there is a great mound there, under which is buried Karr the Old, the forefather of your host Thorfin; and it is said that much treasure was buried with him. That is why the ghostly light burns above the mound, for – you must know that flames dance over hidden treasure."

"If treasure be hidden there, I will dig it up," said Grettir.

"Attempt nothing of the kind," said Audun, "or Thorfin will be angry. Besides, Karr the Old is a dangerous fellow to have to deal with. He walks at night, and haunts all that headland and has scared away the dwellers in the nearest farms. No one dare live there because of him. That is why the Ness is all desolate without houses."

"I will stay the night here," said Grettir, "and to-morrow we will go together to the Ness, and take spade and pick and a rope, and I will see what can be found."

Audun did not relish the proposal, but he did not like to seem behindhand with Grettir, and he reluctantly agreed to go with him.

So next day the two went out on the Ness together. They passed two ruined farmhouses, the buildings rotting, the roofs fallen in. Those who had lived in them had been driven away by the dweller in the old burial mound, or barrow. The Norse name for these sepulchral mounds is *Haug*, pronounced almost like How; and where in England we have places with the names ending in *hoe*, there undoubtedly in former times were such mounds. Thus, in Essex are Langenhoe and Fingringhoe, that is to say the Long Barrow and Fingar's How. Also, the Hoe, the great walk at Plymouth above the sea, derives its name from some old burial mound now long ago destroyed.

The Ness was a finger of land running out into the sea, and on it grew no trees, only a little coarse grass; at the end rose a great circular bell-shaped mound, with a ring of stones set round it, to mark its circumference. Grettir began to dig at the summit, and he worked hard. The day was short, and the sun was touching the sea as his pickaxe went through an oak plank, into a hollow space beneath, and he knew at once that he had struck into the chamber of the dead. He worked with redoubled energy, and tore away the planks, leaving a black hole beneath of unknown depth, but which to his thinking could not be more than seven feet beneath him. Then he called to Audun for the rope. The end he fastened round his waist, and bade his friend secure the other end to a pole thrown across the pit mouth. When this was done, Audun cautiously let Grettir down into the chamber of the dead.

Now, you must know that in heathen times what was often done with old warriors was to draw up a boat on the shore, and to seat the dead man in the cabin, with his horse slain beside him, sometimes some of his slaves or thralls were also killed and put in with him, and his choicest treasures were

heaped about him. This men did because they thought that the dead man would want his weapons, his raiment, his ornaments, his horse and his servants in the spirit world. Of late years such a mound has been opened in Norway, and a great ship found in it, well preserved, with the old dead chief's bones in it. When a ship was not buried, then a chamber of strong planks was built, and he was put in that, and the earth heaped over him. Into such a chamber had Grettir now dug.

He soon reached the bottom, and was in darkness, only a little light came in from above, through the hole he had broken in the roof of the cabin or chamber. His feet were among bones, and these he was quite sure were horse bones. Then he groped about.

As his eyes became more accustomed to the darkness, he discerned a figure seated in a throne. It was the long-dead Karr the Old. He was in full harness, with a helmet on his head with bull's horns sticking out, one on each side; his hands were on his knees, and his feet on a great chest. Round his neck was a gold torque or necklet, made of bars of twisted gold, hooked together behind the head. Grettir in the dark could only just make out the glimmer of the gold, but it seemed to him that a phosphorescent light played about the face of the dead chief.

So little light was left, that Grettir hastened to collect what he could. There stood a brazen vessel near the chair, in which were various articles, probably of worth, but it was too dark for Grettir to see what they were. He brought the vessel to the rope and fastened the end of the cord to its handle. Then he went back to the old dead man and drew away a short sword that lay on his lap, and this he placed in the brass vessel. Next he began to unhook the gold torque from his neck, and as he did this the phosphorescent flame glared strangely about the dead man's face.

Then, all at once, as both his hands were engaged undoing the hook behind Karr's neck, he was clipped. The dead man's arms had clutched him, and with a roar like a bull Karr the Old stood up, holding him fast, and now all the light that had played over his features gathered into and glared out of his eyes.

When Audun heard the roar, he was so frightened that he ran from the barrow, and did not stay his feet till he reached home, feeling convinced that the ghost or whatever it was that lived in the tomb had torn Grettir to pieces.

Then began in the chamber of the dead a fearful wrestle. Grettir was at times nigh on smothered by the gray beard of the dead chief, that had been growing, growing, in the vault, ever since he had been buried.

How long that terrible struggle continued no one can tell. Grettir had to use his utmost force to stand against Karr the Old. The two wrestled up and down in the chamber, kicking the horse bones about from side to side, stumbling over the coffer, and the brass vessel, and the horse's skull, striking against the sides, and when they did this then masses of earth and portions of broken plank fell in from above.

At last Karr's feet gave way under him and he fell, and Grettir fell over him. Then instantly he laid hold of his sword, and smote off Old Karr's head and laid it beside his thigh.

This, according to Norse belief, was the only way in which to prevent a dead man from walking, who had haunted the neighbourhood of his tomb, and in the Icelandic sagas we hear of other cases where the same proceeding was gone through. The Norsemen held to something more dreadful than ghosts walking; they thought that some evil spirit entered into the bodies of the dead, that when this happened the dead no longer decayed, but walked, and ate, and drank, and fought, very much like living ruffians, but with redoubled strength. Then, when this happened, nothing was of any avail save the digging up of the dead man, cutting off his head and laying it at his thigh.

When Grettir had done this, he despoiled Karr the Old of his helm, his breast-plate, his torque, and he took the box on which the feet had rested. He fastened all together to the rope, and called to Audun to haul up. He received no answer, so he swarmed up himself, and finding that his friend had run away he pulled up what he had tied together, and carried the whole lot in his arms to the house of Thorfin. Thorfin and his party were at supper; and when Grettir came in, the bonder looked up, and



asked why he did not keep regular hours, and be at the table when the meal began. Grettir made no other answer than to throw all he carried down on the supper-table before the master. Thorfin raised his eyebrows when he saw so much treasure.

"Where did you get all this?" he asked.

Then Grettir answered in one of his enigmatical songs:

"Thou who dost the wave-shine shorten,  
My attempt has been to find  
In the barrow what was hidden,  
Deep in darkness black and blind.  
Nothing of the dragon's treasure  
With the dead is left behind."

By the wave-shine shortener he meant Thorfin; the dragon's treasure meant gold, because dragons were thought to line their lairs with that metal.

Thorfin saw that Grettir's eye looked longingly at the short sword that had lain on the knees of Karr. He said: "It was a heathen custom in old times to bury very much that was precious along with the dead. I do not blame you for what you have done; but this I will say, that there is no one else about this place who would have ventured to attempt what you have done. As for that sword on which you cast your eyes so longingly, it has ever been in our family, and I cannot part with it till you have shown that you are worthy to wear it."

Then that sword was hung up over Thorfin's bed. You have heard how Grettir did show that he was worthy to wear it, and also how Thorfin gave it him.

Now, this tale about the sword will very well illustrate what was said at the beginning, that the history of Grettir contains, in the main, truth; but that this substance of truth has been embroidered over by fancy. What is true is, that during the winter in which he was with Thorfin he did dig into the mound in which Karr was buried, and did take thence his treasures and his sword. But all the story of his fight with the dead man was added. The same story occurs in a good many other sagas, as in that of Hromund Greip's son, who also got a sword by digging into a barrow for it. When the history of Grettir was told, and this adventure of his was related, those who told the story imported into it the legend of the fight of Hromund in the grave with the dead man, so as to make the history of Grettir more amusing. As you will see by the tale, no one else was present when it happened, for Audun had run away, and it was not like Grettir to boast of what he had done. This was an embellishment added by the story-teller, and from the storyteller the incident passed into the volume of the story-writer.

Grettir had now two good swords; one long, which he called Jokull's Gift, that he had received from his mother, and this short one that he wore at his girdle, which he had taken out of the grave of Karr the Old, and which he had won fairly by his bravery in the defence of the house and family of Thorfin.

## CHAPTER VIII OF THE BEAR

Grettir goes North – Biorn the Braggart – The Bear's Den – Biorn's Feat – A Hunting Party – The Lost Cloak – Grettir Seeks the Bear Alone – Grettir's Hardest Tussle – The Fall Over the Cliff – Thorgils Acts as Peacemaker – Grettir Restrains Himself

When spring came, then Grettir left his friend Thorfin, and went north along the Norwegian coast, and was everywhere well received, because the story of how he had killed twelve rovers, he being as yet but a boy, was noised through all the country, and every one who had anything to lose felt safer because that wicked gang was broken up. Nothing of consequence is told about him during that summer. For the winter he did not return to Thorfin as asked, but accepted the invitation of another bonder, named Thorgils.

Thorgils was a merry, pleasant man, and he had a great company in his house that winter. Among his visitors was a certain Biorn, a distant cousin, a man whom Thorgils did not like, as he was a slanderous-tongued fellow, and moreover he was a braggart. He was one of those persons we meet with not infrequently who cannot endure to hear another praised; who, the moment a good word is spoken of someone, immediately puts in a nasty, spiteful word, and tells an unkind story, so as to drag that person down in the general opinion. At the same time, concerning himself he had only praiseworthy and wonderful feats to relate about his wit, his wisdom, his craft, his knowledge of the world, about his strength and courage.

Thorgils knew how much, or rather how little, to believe of what Biorn said, and he did not pay much regard to his talk. But now Grettir had an opportunity of seeing and of feeling how mistaken had been his conduct on board the ship upon which he had come to Norway, when he made lampoons on the sailors and chapmen, and stung them with sharp words. He saw how disagreeable a fellow Biorn was, how much he was disliked, and by some despised; and he kept very greatly to himself and out of Biorn's way. He did not wish to quarrel with him, because he was the relative of his host, and he was afraid that his anger would get the better of him if he did come to words with the braggart.

Grettir had grown a great deal since he left Iceland, and he was now a strapping fellow, broad built but not short. He was not handsome, but his face was intelligent.

It fell out that a bear gave much trouble that winter to Thorgils and the neighbouring farmers. It was so strong and so daring that no folds were secure against it, and Thorgils and the other farmers endured severe losses through the depredations of Bruin.

Before Yule, a party was formed to go in search of and kill the bear, but all that was done was to find the lair.

The bear had taken up his abode in the face of a tremendous cliff that overhung the sea. There was but one path up to the cave, and that was so narrow that only one man could creep along it at a time. Moreover, if his foot slipped he would be flung over the edge upon the rocks or skerries below against which the waves dashed.

"When the den of the bear had been discovered," Biorn said, "That is the main thing. Now I know where the rogue lies, I'll settle with him, trust me. I've been the death of scores of bears. My only dread is lest he be afraid of me, and will not come on."

And, actually, Biorn went out on several moonlit nights to watch for the bear. He saw that the only way to deal with him would be to stop the track from the den, and fight him as he attempted to come away. He took his short sword and great shield with him covered with ox-hide, and one night he laid himself down on the path of the bear, and put his shield over him. He thought that Bruin would come smelling at the great hide-covered shield, and then all at once he (Biorn) would spring up and

drive his sword into the heart of the bear. That was his plan – and not a bad plan – only, unfortunately for Biorn, the bear did not come out for a long time. He had got an inkling that a man was watching for him, so he was shy, and whilst he waited before venturing forth, Biorn, who had been drinking pretty freely that evening, went to sleep.

Presently the bear came out, crept cautiously down the narrow track, snuffing about, and when he came to Biorn, he plucked with his claws at the shield, and with one wrench had it off and tumbled it down the cliff.

Biorn woke with a start, rose to his knees, saw the huge bear before him, and in a moment turned tail, and ran as hard as he could run to Thorgils' house, and was too scared to be able to boast that he had killed or wounded the bear.

Next morning his shield was found where the bear had thrown it, and much fun did this adventure of the braggart occasion. This made him very irritable and more spiteful than ever.

Thorgils now said that really something must be done to rid the neighbourhood of the bear, so a party of eight set out well armed with spears; of this party were Biorn and Grettir. They reached the point where the track to the den ran up the cliff to the lair, and one man after another tried it. But there was no getting at the bear; for as soon as a man came near the beast put his great forepaws forth and caught and snapped the spear-heads or beat them down. As already said, only one could crawl up at a time.

Grettir had gone out that day in a fur coat that his friend Thorfin had given him, and which he greatly valued. When the onslaught against the bear began, he took off his fur coat, and folded it, and put it on a stone. Biorn saw this, and, when none observed, he took the fur coat and threw it into the cave of the bear. Grettir did not see what had been done till the party, disappointed with their want of success, made ready to depart, when he missed it, and then some suspicion entered his head as to what had been done with it, and by whom, but he said nothing.

As they walked home, Biorn began to taunt Grettir with having done nothing all day. He could kill robbers who were unarmed and were drunk, perhaps asleep, but a bear was too serious an adversary for him.

Grettir said nothing, but as his gaiter thong became broken, he stopped and stooped to mend it. Thorgils asked if they should wait for him. Grettir declined.

"Oh," said Biorn, "it is all nonsense. It is a pretence. He means to have all the glory of fighting the bear alone when we have gone on."

He said the truth, but he had no idea when he spoke that it was the truth.

Grettir tarried till the party had crossed a hill and was out of sight, then he turned and went back to the bear's den. He slipped his hand through the loop at the end of the handle of his short sword that he had taken from the grave of Karr the Old, and let it hang on his wrist, but he held the long sword, Jokull's gift, by the pommel. His plan was to use the long sword if needed, but if the bear came to close quarters he would throw it down and grasp the short one without having to put his hand to his girdle for it. Very cautiously he crept along the path. Bruin saw him, and was now angry and hungry, and came down to meet him. The bear was somewhat above him; Grettir halted, and the bear stood up growling on his hind-legs.

At once the long sword was whirled and fell on the right wrist above the paw, and cut it off. The bear immediately fell down on all-fours; but the amputated paw was on the side away from the wall of rock, and when he went down on the stump he was overbalanced, and came down with his whole weight on Grettir.

Grettir let fall his long sword at once, and with both hands grasped the brute's ears, and held his head off lest he should get a bite at him. Grettir, in after years, was wont to say that this was the hardest tussle he had in his life – it was even worse than anything he had to do with the rovers. For if the beast had but been able to nip him on the breast, or shoulder, or face with his great fangs, all would have been up with him. Moreover, the ears were so smooth that he had to do his utmost not

to let them slip. Grettir had the wit to drag back the brute's head to the rock, and by so doing the bear could not use his only uninjured fore-leg, armed with terrible claws, which would have ripped Grettir's clothes and flesh.

In the struggle the two went over the edge, and for a moment Grettir thought, as they spun in the air, that he was lost. But the bear was heavier than the lad, consequently he fell crash on the rocks at the bottom first, and Grettir on him, breaking Grettir's fall by his great body. The bear's back was broken.

Then Grettir got up, shook himself, left the bear, went up the path and found his fur coat torn to tatters, and he put it about him, recovered also his long sword, and took the cut-off paw of the bear.

He now went back to Thorgils' house, and when he came into the hall where the fires were blazing, every one laughed to see him in his tattered coat; but when he gave the paw of the bear to Thorgils the general merriment exchanged to surprise. Biorn, however, could not contain himself for vexation, and launched forth some coarse jest that made Grettir's blood tingle in his veins.

"Do not listen to him," said Thorgils. "You are a brave fellow, and there are not many your like." Then turning to Biorn, he said, "Kinsman, I advise and warn you to keep a civil tongue in your head, or you will come to rue it, and have to be taught better manners."

"Oh, if I am to learn manners from Grettir, that is sending me to a cub indeed!"

"I want to know," said Grettir, "whether you threw my fur coat into the den?"

"I am not afraid of saying that I did."

"Will you give me another in its place?"

"I have not the smallest intention of doing charity to beggars."

The braggart knew that Grettir was restraining himself because he did not wish to quarrel with his host's kinsman, and he took advantage of his knowledge. But Thorgils was greatly distressed and ashamed, and he said to Grettir:

"Pay no attention to his words. He has insulted you, and I will pay you a fine in compensation for his insult, that it may be buried and forgotten."

That was customary then. When one had hurt another in body or in honour by blow or foul word, he was bound to pay a sum of money; if he did not then the man injured was required by the laws of honour to revenge the injury.

But when Biorn heard this proposal, he shouted out that he would not suffer the matter to be so compromised; he was not ashamed of his words. Thorgils drew Grettir aside, and said to him that his kinsman was a badly-behaved, brutal fellow, but that he hoped Grettir would not take up the quarrel in his house; and Grettir promised him solemnly that he would not attempt to take revenge for the rudeness of Biorn so long as they were both inmates of his house.

"As for what may happen between you later," said Thorgils, "I wash my hands of responsibility. If Biorn is offensive to those who have never hurt him, he must take the consequences."

So matters remained; only that Biorn, presuming on his position, became daily more arrogant, intolerable, and abusive, so that Grettir had to exercise daily self-restraint to keep his hands off him. And glad he was when spring came, that he might get away to another part of Norway.

As for Biorn, he went in the summer to England in a ship that belonged to Thorgils, trading there for Thorgils and for himself. Consequently, all that summer he and Grettir did not meet.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE SLAYING OF BIORN

The Meeting on the Island – Biorn's Death – Thorfin Comes to Grettir's Aid  
– Grettir's Life in Danger – Hiarandi's Revenge – A Doomed Man

Grettir left Thorgils very good friends, and he went with some merchants to the north, but when the summer was over he came back south, and arrived at a little island in the entrance of the Drontheim firth. His intention was to see Earl Sweyn, and perhaps take service under him; but if so, things fell out other than he had reckoned. For, as he was in this island, there came in a large merchant vessel from England, and Grettir and those with him at once went to see the shipmen, and among them was Biorn. The ship was, in fact, that of Thorgils, and it was laden with commodities bought in England, or obtained by exchange for the wool, and furs, and women's embroidery sent out in the spring by Thorgils.

Directly Biorn saw Grettir he turned red, and pretended not to recognize him; but Grettir went to him at once and said:

"Now has come the time when we two can settle our differences."

"Oh," said Biorn, "that is soon done. I don't object to paying a trifle."

"The time for paying is over," said Grettir. "Thorgils offered an indemnity for your insolence, and you refused to consent to it."

Then Biorn saw that there was no help for him but that he must fight. So he girded him for the conflict, and he and Grettir went down on the sand, and they fought.

The fight did not last long. Grettir's sword cut him that he fell and died.

When the news reached Thorgils, he got ready, and came by boat as fast as he could to see the earl at Drontheim. He found the earl very angry, but he said to him:

"I am a kinsman of the fallen man, and I know that he treated Grettir with intolerable insolence, and that he refused every compromise. Then remember what a benefit has been done to the country by Grettir, who ridded it of the Red Rovers, Thorir wi' the Paunch and Ogmund the Bad."

Thorfin also came to Drontheim when he heard of the straits into which Grettir had come through killing Biorn. The earl called a council on the matter, and said he would not come to a decision till he had heard what Biorn's brother Hiarandi had to say on the matter. Hiarandi was a violent man, and he was very wroth. He would hear of no patching up of the matter, and he vowed he would not, as he expressed it, "bring his brother into his purse." As already said, it was customary when a man had been killed to offer a sum of money to the next of kin, and if he accepted the money the quarrel was at an end. When we now speak of "pocketing an injury," reference is made to this same ancient usage, by which every offence was estimated at so much money, and if the wronged man took money for the offence committed against him, he was said *to pocket it*. When the earl went into the matter, and heard how Grettir had been wronged and outraged by Biorn, he gave his decision that Grettir had not acted contrary to law, and that Biorn had justly forfeited his life. Thorfin offered the sum of money which the earl considered was sufficient to atone to the relations for the death of Biorn, but Hiarandi refused absolutely to touch it.

Then Thorfin knew that Grettir's life was in danger, for Hiarandi would certainly try to take it; so he begged his kinsman Arinbiorn to go about with Grettir, and keep on the look-out against the mischief that threatened.

Now it fell out one day that Grettir and Arinbiorn were walking down a street in Drontheim when their way led before a narrow lane opening into it. They did not see any danger in the way, and were unaware of this lane. But just as they had passed it a man jumped out from behind, in the shadow, swinging an axe, and he struck at Grettir between the shoulder-blades. Fortunately, Arinbiorn

had looked round at the lane, and he saw the man leap out, so he suddenly dragged Grettir forward with such a jerk that Grettir fell on his knee. This saved his life, for the axe came on his shoulder-blade, made a gash that cut to his armpit, and then the axe buried itself in the roadway. Instantly Grettir started to his feet, turned round, and with his short sword smote in the very nick of time as the man, who was Hiarandi, was pulling up his axe to cut at Grettir again. Grettir's sword fell on his upper arm near the shoulder, and cut it off. Then out rushed some servants of Hiarandi on Arinbiorn and Grettir, who set their backs against a house-wall and defended themselves with such valour that they killed or put to flight all who had assailed them.

Now, this had been a base and cowardly attempt on the life of Grettir, and Hiarandi richly deserved his fate. But the earl was exceedingly angry when he heard the news, and he called a council together. Thorfin and Grettir attended, and the earl angrily charged Grettir with having committed great violence, and being the cause of the death of Hiarandi and some of his servants.

Grettir acknowledged this; but showed his wound, and stated how he had been attacked from behind; how his life had been saved by the promptitude of Arinbiorn, and how he had but defended himself against enemies who sought his life.

"I wish you had been killed," said the earl, "and then there would have been an end to these disorders."

"You would not have a man not raise his hands to save his head?" said Grettir.

"I see one thing," exclaimed the earl. "Ill luck attends you, and you are doomed to commit violences wherever you are."

The end of it was that Earl Sweyn said he would not have Grettir to live in Norway any longer, lest he should be the cause of fresh troubles. But he remained over the third winter, and next spring sailed for Iceland, the time of his outlawing being ended.

## CHAPTER X

### OF GRETTIR'S RETURN

Iceland Once More – Life's Bitter Lessons – Grettir Pays Audun a Visit –  
Some Icelandic Terms – Byres and Sels – A Chief's Hall – The Return of Audun –  
Grettir's Second Wrestle with Audun – Bard Interposes – The Cousins Reconciled

When Grettir came back to Biarg, he found his father so old and infirm as to be no more able to stir abroad, and Atli managed the farm for him along with Illugi, Grettir's youngest brother, now grown up to be a big boy. Grettir was now aged eighteen, but he looked and was a man. Illugi was about fifteen, a gentle, pleasant boy. He and the kindly, careful Atli were as unlike Grettir as well could be; they avoided quarrels, they had a civil word for every one, and took pains to make themselves agreeable, whether to guests in their house, or when staying anywhere, to their hosts. Grettir never troubled himself to be courteous or to be obliging to anyone. Now that he was back from Norway he was rather disposed to think much of himself as a man more brave and audacious than his fellows, for, had he not killed twelve rovers, broken into a barrow, slain a bear, and been the death of one man in a duel, and another who had attempted to assassinate him? Atli did not much like his manner, and cautioned him not to be overbearing whilst at home, lest he should involve himself in fresh troubles. But words were wasted on Grettir. He was not the fellow to listen to advice, but one of those men who must learn the bitter lessons of life by personal experience. It is so with men always. Some, who are thoughtful, see what God's law is which is impressed on all society, and listen to what others have found out as the lessons taught them by their lives, so they are able to go out equipped against the trials and difficulties of life. But others will neither look nor listen, and such have to go through every sort of adversity, till they have learned the great truths of social life, and perhaps they only acquire them when it is too late to put them in practice.

It is with laws and courtesies of life as with the three R's. A man will fare badly who cannot read, write, and cipher. If he learns these accomplishments as a child, he does well; he is furnished for the struggle of life, and starts on the same footing as other men; but if as a child he is morose and indifferent, and refuses to learn, then all through his life he is met with difficulties, owing to his ignorance, and he finds that he must learn to read, write, and do sums; and he has to acquire these in after years with much less ease than he might have learnt as a child, and after he has lost many chances of getting on which might have been seized, had he known these things before.

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