

Friday, August 18th. In the priest's house at Hítardal.

**W**E got away at about half-past eleven, our day's ride not having to be a long one to-day, and were led away through the bog by our host, over another road than that we came by yesterday, to say the truth a very much worse one: C.J.F., who by the way was always the unlucky one in bogs, had his horse go through, and after he had floundered out and was riding on, he suddenly disappeared under the horse's belly by reason of a broken girth.

Once out of the bogs we ride under the face of huge cliffs looking as if they had been built in regular lines above, but with slips from them all grass-grown now: the sea, breaking

<sup>1</sup> "Overflowing with good-nature and laughing at everything," says the note-book. Ed.

**Fairwood-fell** on a flat strand, very sandy, was close to our right at first, and a wreck lay amongst the sand (a French vessel cast away some two years ago), making the sea view dismal. The great cliffs leave our road after a while, and turning at right angles to it get lower, and form one side of a wide valley half full of lava, which is stopped by a river (Haf-fiarðará) which runs through the midst of it: high up the valley are two little conical hills burnt red, and further east near by the sea is a crater-like rock amid the lava called Eld-borg (Fire-burg). The hills on the further side of the valley run up into great scarped mountains capped with many strange shapes, the hipped house-roof one predominating. Our hosts (father and son) take leave of us just as we drop down from the mountain-spurs into this valley, and we presently cross the river above-named into a wood growing amid the lava, where Evans shoots four ptarmigan; after this we make a pleasant halt by a flowery bank among the lava, where the blueberries grow very abundantly, and then turn up towards the mountains again. There is the mouth of another valley showing beyond the last-named mountain boundary, and the furthest wall of it is the range called Fairwood-fell (Fagra-skogar-fjall), the haunt of Grettir once. Riding over steepish slopes we cross the mouth of this valley, a narrow place where the mountains show like gate posts of a great pass, though the valley is closed up at the end; most desolate it is to look into: the mountains are very steep, and high up the valley a spur from the eastward mountains, running half way across, has been ruined once by who knows what, and lies there now a mass of black sand and ragged grey spikes and rocks, and the waste of it has been driven down the valley and over the slopes that lead to the plain, and torn up grass and bush and all, and left great rocks scattered all about. We pass this, and ride up the slopes of Fairwood-fell, and looking back thence can see our journey of the last two days all along the sea under the mountain-wall, Stapafell being the last headland, with Snæfell showing over the shoulder of it. Then on we ride, turning as the hills turn over slopes steep but green, except where they are

wasted by some slips from the mountains above, that are **Hítardal** crested by rock built up in regular terraces and ending in teeth-like pinnacles. We turn round the end of these mountains at last where they fall back from the sea by a long valley that lies down below us with a river (**Hítá**) running close under the mountains; this valley opens into the great plains of Burgfirth, and you can see the mountains on the other side of White-water (**Hvítá**) in the distance; the lava goes along the river for some way, looking dark grey and dreadful among the grey green pastures and yellow green marshes. We ride along the slopes still heading up the valley, and presently we see ahead of us a spur rushing at right angles out from the mountains, a great ruin spoiling the fair green slopes; it is a huge slip of black shale, very steep, and crested by thin jagged rocks, like palings set awry, in one of which is a distinct round hole through which the sky shows: under these palings on the top of the grey ruin was Grettir's-lair, and it was down this slip he rattled after the braggart Gisli. It was such a savage dreadful place,<sup>2</sup> that it gave quite a new turn in my mind to the whole story, and transfigured Grettir into an awful and monstrous being, like one of the early giants of the world.

When we got to the foot of the slip we turned down to the river which ran below us; it ran clear and shallow through a deep gorge with a wall of lava on the other side, and winded so that above us it seemed to be running through an impassable wall. Good store of birch-scrub grew in the crevices of the lava, and at the top of the wall we came into a regular wood of gnarled birch-bushes; they grew thinner after a while as we wound through the lava which was very old, so that we rode through a labyrinth of grey mossy rocks with soft flowery turf all between them, and birch-bushes here and there. So we rode awhile near the river, but presently had to turn across the river to the stead **Hítardal**, whose many gables and emerald green tún we could see lying on a mound under a spur of the opposite hill-sides: so turning away from the river we

<sup>2</sup> The Fairwood-fell (**Fagraskógarfall**) of Grettis saga. E.M.

Hítardal were soon amidst sand between the lava-rocks instead of grass; the wind blew strong and cold, and drove the sand fiercely into our faces, so that we were glad enough to come to our journey's end at the stead, a pretty row of sheds and standing prettily on its grassy mound looking as if it would be sheltered by the spur aforesaid—which it was not that afternoon at all events, for the wind howled about it in all imaginable eddies. In a bight below the mound and a few hundred yards from the house was an assemblage of fantastic rocks, which I fairly thought were ruins of some minster as I rode dreamily, half forgetting where I was, into the tún.

It was somewhat late by now, and the wind was so strong and cold, and Evans withal was still sick, so we gave up the plan of pitching our tents and asked for lodging in the house, which the priest,<sup>2</sup> a little shy kind-looking old man, very gladly gave us, two beds to wit and the parlour floor. Magnússon after a talk with the priest came to us with a long face, saying that there was bad news: to wit there was a fever at Reykjavík, and several people (eight I think) had died of it already, whom he knew. I confess I was coward enough to feel dashed by this, and as if I should never get away home again: please to allow something to a woeful grey day and this terrible though beautiful valley. However whatever forebodings and sentimental desires I may have, I have to indulge them over the kitchen fire and under its shiny black rafters, for the others are hungry, and Evans' ptarmigan are waiting a stroke of my art. So we dined and I got back some part at least of my spirits; but when I went outside afterwards in the dead of night, and looking up at the black mountains opposite, thought the moon lay on them brightly high up, and found presently that it was snow that had fallen since we came in, halfway up them, a sort of pang shot through me of how far away I was and shut in, which was not altogether a pain either, the adventure seemed so worthy. So to bed, I in a box-bed in a pleasant little room with books in a shelf of the bed over my head.

<sup>2</sup> He died last year. [His name was Thorstein E. Hjalmarsen. E.M.]