

Wednesday, August 23rd. In the priest's house at Reykholt.

UP on a windy cold morning with drizzle and gleams of sun succeeding one another, and as we are getting ready for going, one of those flat segmental rainbows comes out over the Jokuls on the north. The priest takes us to the edge of the ragged gill and shows us the traditional place of burial of Hermund the brother of Gunnlaug, in which he himself doesn't believe, because Hermund was a Christian and would have been buried in a church.

The whole side and part of the gable and roof of the house here was covered with ox-eye daisies in full blossom.

The view down into the valley is but gloomy: the birch-grown lava indeed looks grey-green, and not unhopeful, but it only lasts a little way toward the Jokuls, and then comes a second wave of lava upon it, new comparatively, and naked, a great leaden sea that stretches up through the narrowing valley between its low boundary hills till the higher land at the end with the Jokuls above it ends all.

We sent Gisli on with our lessened train, and then the priest and his son (a Reykjavik student this latter) led us away down the hill, and into the lava at its feet: it was that newer lava we went on, just at its edge where a clear stream ran at the bottom of the last cliff of it, and beyond the stream the birches grew thick on the earlier wave: indeed now we were on it we found the naked lava not wholly bare, there being a good deal of the heather and other herbaceous plants growing in its crannies, especially one beautiful plant with olive-shaped leaves and bright red berries. We followed up

Reykholt the course of the stream toward White-water, and about the highest of the lava-cliff above it the priest said:

“Come see where I take my trout in autumn.”

So we got off our horses and leaning over, saw a bubbling spring that came out of the lava and made a big pool before it fairly joined the swift-running stream aforesaid; it was very deep, some thirty feet the priest said, but you could see every point of rock at the bottom all bright blue on this sunny day (for so it was gotten to be now). The priest said it never freezes, this hole: the trout gather in it before they go up the underground streams of the lava.

Now we saw where the clear stream fell into White-water, splitting round a little islet at its mouth; this islet, and all the flat banks along the stream under the cliffs were very bright and green, and tall birch-bushes, quite the biggest I had seen in Iceland, were scattered over them; they grew fair and ungnarled too in bunches of straight staves: the whole place seemed very beautiful to me. We were now close on the bank of White-water itself, which runs deep and swift between steep ledges of basalt rock, on the top of which the lava lies on our side; the river is not so turbid as other white waters we have seen, being rather greenish white: it looks most terrible here. A little further on and a turn of the river shows us a most strange sight: White-water gathered up between narrow rocks some ten feet wide at its narrowest is a mass of foam there, and below this where it widens into a still furious torrent the bank on our side is basalt rock cut into steps like the steps of a bath, over which pours into White-water a small river that runs from out of the hidden caves of the lava, and is quite clear.

We left our horses just by the mouth of the afore-mentioned stream, and now stumble on, on foot, round a swell of the lava just by the gates of the gorge that hides the river from us for a few minutes, and so come right on the Barnafóss (Bairns' Force) which is what the priest has been taking us to see. It is a wild place enough; a mile below Gilsbank White-water is about as wide as the Thames at Reading, two

small rivers come into it between this and that, and here is all the rest of it shut in between straight walls of black rock nowhere more than twenty feet across; far up the gorge we can see the mountains towering up, and the white dome of the great Jokul beyond everything: about the narrowest of it, where it is certainly not ten feet across, the rocks stretch out to meet each other, overhanging the stream like the springings of some natural arch; which indeed the story of the place says was once complete, but that a certain witch once lured two children of her enemy to cross the place, and then raised a wild storm which swept away them and the keystone of the bridge: wherefore is the fall called the Bairns' Force. We lay a little while on a grassy, berry-grown bank near the water watching this marvel, and then turned back to where we had left our horses. I came up panting, and threw myself down on the grass, and when the priest made an astonished face at me, explained that I was heavily clad and booted: he nodded his head, and then tapped me on the belly, and said very gravely: "Besides you know you are so fat."

The
Bairns'
Force

He led us away back up the first clear stream, which we crossed just above the deep hole afore-mentioned into the older birch-grown lava, and so into a most beautiful little nook of it; a grass-grown space quite smooth and flat, with a clear streamlet running level with the grass at the end of it we came in by, and all round it otherwhere a steep green bank crested with thick-growing birches smelling most sweet in the sun: he got off his horse here, and said he had brought us to this place because it was good to take leave in a pretty place: so we said good-bye to him and he went back home leaving his son to bring us further on the way: a bright-looking youth whom I had overheard this morning telling C. J. F. the story of the Froða-wonders in dog-latin.

So we wound on through the wood, and found many pretty places of a like kind to the first in it; and the whole place had a softness about it that saddened one amidst all the grisliness surrounding it, more than the grimmest desert I

Reykholt had seen. We came out of the wood into wide flat meadows bounded on our left by the stony side of White-water, and on our right by the grey bush-grown cliff of the lava washed by a clear stream, all of which was still sweet and soft, so that it was with a shudder that we gained our road of yesterday leading us down the grim valley of White-water. We rode on till we came to a stead on the slopes called Hawkgil where dwelt an acquaintance of Magnússon's who had his name and calling (saddle-making) written on a board over his house, which looked queer in such a lonely place: we went in here and were treated to coffee and most excellent cakes of rye sweetened; and when we rode out again the priest's son turned back home, and the bonder rode on with us to the next stead, Sámstaðir, and got us a guide for the fording of White-water, and down the slope we went, and into the deepest ford we had come across, though not the most dangerous. Magnússon had to lead me again, for though my head didn't swim, and I was not at all nervous, I could not tell as we went through the swift-running water whether we were going up stream or down. We turned round on the other bank and watched our guide recrossing, and I was surprised to see that he went very nearly in a straight line, for as we were in the water I seemed to be making quite a long bow upward. I thought White-water-side looked grand and solemn from here with its long unbroken hillside running toward the Jokuls. We turned from it to Reykholt's-dale over a waste sandy neck, topping one of whose knolls we came among most evil bogs, and the road dying out among them, as commonly happens, we fairly lost our way and wandered about till we met a carle on the queerest of queer horses: white, so please you, but had dipped his head into a tub of red ochre, and had his tail nailed on by a patch of the same colour: that's what he seemed like.

Horse and rider led us a little way over a bad road into a valley shorter than White-water-side, its hills more crested with bare rock, and over the shut-in end of it the top of Jokul Ok showing. There were many steads on either side of it, and

at this western end of the dale jets of steam going up from the hot-springs scattered all about: just below us was a stead and church well placed on the hillside, and a little behind the stead went up a column of steam wavering about, that showed the whereabouts of a great kettle (Hver). This stead is a famous place indeed and worthy to be remembered, for Snorri the historian lived and was slain here, and has left marks of himself here, of which more presently. We rode down to the stead and found Gisli and Eyvindr and Evans at the door; there was another fellow-passenger of ours here too, Dapples to wit, "the Italian man," as they call him here. The day has got to be cold and rainy now, and we were glad enough of shelter in the priest's parlour, where we soon had a fine dinner of roast mutton, and so presently bed: one bed for Magnússon and floor for the rest. Snorri's Bath