

Friday, August 25th. In camp in the home-mead at Thingvellir.

SET off quite early (about 8 a.m.) under the priest's guidance, the day being little, if any, better than before. The priest led us right up the dale, and we passed by a pretty stead, whose home-mead had been levelled altogether of the usual hummocks: this lay on a spur of the bounding hills, and when we rode away from it we were presently on waste ground of the roughest, and mounted speedily the south hill boundary of the dale, riding alongside a stream that had cut for itself a gorge that got deeper and deeper as we went on: from this also we soon turned, and were fairly on the open "heath," and had mounted so high that we could look into both White-water-side and Reykholt's-dale, and could even see the scar on the hill-side of the former that showed where Gilsbank lay. Thence away over a bad and doubtful road until we run into a real and trodden way called the "Way under Ok," which is one of the north roads and goes just on the west side of that mountain Ok on the east side whereof is the Kaldidal road that we took in going north. Ok has been on our left for some time now, but when we are once in the road we soon begin to leave it behind, and the outline of the mountains gets familiar to us, in especial the great boss of Skialdbreið that rises up straight before us.

Whether it was accident or not I don't know, but certainly as soon as we had passed Kaldidal going north the weather got much colder, and now as soon as we were past Ok it grew warmer again: for the wind dropped and a long strip of blue-green opened in the south-west and widened and turned bluer and let the sun out. Thingvellir

It is exciting to us to see the indigo coloured peaks whose shapes we know rising up one after another over the dull heath: and soon we note the ragged screen of rocks before Ball-Jokul, and that other range that runs south from Skialdbreið, and the whole tumbled sea of peaks that rise between us and the plain of Thingvellir.

The heath bettered as we rode on, and we got to riding into little valleys now, boggy or sandy at bottom (oftenest the latter) but with the banks about them grown over with heath berries, sweet grass and flowers, much as it was with our old encampment at Brunnar; at last these open out before us into a wider plain, and we can see Skialdbreið clear to his feet and the grey lava we journeyed over the other day,¹ and the aforesaid toothed screen of mountains ending in a gap through which show mountains a long way off, bright and intense blue under the now bright sunny sky; on the other side of this gap rises a lumpier range gradually drawing toward us, which is Armansfell: and through this gap lies our way to Thingvellir. We are now come to our old camping-stead of Brunnar, and there we bait, not at our encampment on the hillside but on the grass meadow about the pools: we rest about an hour and then set forward, I greatly excited by the warm day and the thought of the Thingmeads before us.

Then passing by our old camp we follow up a willowy stream that runs under bents edging a sandy plain somewhat willow-grown also, with Skialdbreið ever on our left, looking no otherwise than when we saw it weeks ago from the east side of it, for in short it is quite round. Then over a neck of shale and rock called Tröllahals (Trolls' Neck) into a great wide sandy valley, going utterly waste up to the feet of

¹ See pages 76, 77. Ed.

Through
the pass

Skjaldbreið, and with a small stream running through it. We are now turning round Skjaldbreið,¹ and can see on his south-west flank two small hills lying that are perfect pyramids to look at from here. We are drawing near to the spurs of Armansfell now, and the wide plain narrows as a hill on our left shuts out the view of Skjaldbreið, and then we are in a great round valley of dark brown sand as flat as a table and almost without a pebble on it: the shoulder of Armansfell, the haunt of the land-spirits, rises on the south-west of the valley, and in that corner is a small tarn, for in fact in the wetter times of the year the whole valley is a lake except these slopes on which we are riding now: the valley, open at the side we rode into it, is quite shut in everywhere else, but at the east corner the hills sink into a low neck, which we make for, and scaling it, are in a pass with shaly sides scantily grass-grown here and there. My heart beats, so please you, as we near the brow of the pass, and all the infinite wonder, which came upon me when I came up on the deck of the "Diana" to see Iceland for the first time, comes on me again now, for this is the heart of Iceland that we are going to see: nor was the reality of the sight unworthy; the pass showed long and winding from the brow, with jagged dark hills showing over the nearer banks of it as you went on, and betwixt them was an open space with a great unseen but imagined plain between you and the great lake that you saw glittering far away under huge peaked hills of bright blue with grey-green sky above them,² Hengill the highest of them, from the hot-spring on whose flank rose into the air a wavering column of snow-white steam.

Down through the pass now, which gets so steep that we have to dismount, and so narrow that its sides hide the distant view as we get lower, till where the pass, still narrow, widens into Jóruskörð, so called after a witch-wife of ancient times, we can see the great grey plain before us, though

¹ The note-book says they had now been round three sides of Skjaldbreið, "and he is just the same on every side." Ed.

² On the other side of which was our first encampment.

the nearer mountains now hide Hengill and those others beyond the lake: now as we get toward the mouth of the pass there rises on our left a little peaked hill, called the Maidens' Seat, because the other side of it looks into the meadows of Hofmannafloet (Chieftains' Flat), where the men returning from the Althing used to hold games, the women looking on from the hill aforesaid. The pass comes out presently on to grass and bush-grown banks above the meadow which lies perfectly flat and green under grey cliffs on the other side which fall away as they sweep round to us into grass-grown slopes. Westward it opens into the great plain, which is hidden from us again by the slopes on our right: it was a beautiful and historical-looking place.

So on we rode till we were fairly in the plain: I had hung back a little to pick up one of the horses, who had gone wandering after the sweet grass on the banks of the Chieftains' Flat, and when I galloped down after the others I found them all halted in the first of the plain laughing preposterously, on these grounds: you must know that the Icelandic ponies don't jump much, rather running down and up a ditch or up and down a wall: well, as they galloped down into the plain there lay before C.J.F.'s horse a deepish rift, unseen by C.J.F., whose little dun ambler saved him from losing all chance of laughing again by suddenly making up his mind to a good jump, so that there they were safe on the other side, and we all looking at it as the best of good jokes.

We were now fairly in the plain of the Thingmeads; the great round masses of Armansfell scooped here and there into shallow dales (dal-verpi, dale-warps), with a bunch of snow lying on them in places, is the north boundary of it, and opposite to that on the other side of the now unseen lake is the noble Hengill, and its flanking mountains: these two change no more for us, but on the south-east we have at first a ragged toothed wall of clinker running down from the flank of Skialdbreið, which fails after a while, into a gap through which pours the great sea of lava down the slowly sloping side of Skialdbreið. As we ride along (over the lava now) we come

Thing-
vellir

opposite to a flat-topped hill some way down the lava-stream, and just below it opens a huge black chasm, that runs straight away south toward the lake, a great double-walled dyke, but with its walls tumbled and ruined a good deal in places: the hill is the Raven-burg, and the chasm the Raven-rift.¹ But as we turn west we can see, a long way off across the grey plain, a straight black line running from the foot of Armansfell right into the lake, which we can again see hence, and some way up from the lake a white line cuts the black one across. The black and the white line are the Great Rift (Almanna-Gjá) and Axewater (Öxará) tumbling over it. Once again that thin thread of insight and imagination, which comes so seldom to us, and is such a joy when it comes, did not fail me at this first sight of the greatest marvel and most storied place of Iceland.

When we first came into the plain, it was on the edge of the lava, sandy but grown over with willow and grass; we are on pure lava now which is also far from barren, being much grown about with grass and willow, but chiefly birch; everywhere, however, the bare molten rock shows in places, never tossed up in waves but always curdled like the cooling fire-stream it once was, and often the strands or curdles are twisted regularly like a rope.



Over this lava-plain we rode to a little stead called Hrauntún, that lay on a low mound of soft grass, with a few great boulders scattered about it, rising like an island from the much riven lava-sea; there we struck the regular road from the south-east to Thingvellir, and hastened along it at about eight o'clock on the loveliest and clearest of evenings. On our way we crossed by a narrow bridge-like rock over a terrible chasm, deep, straight-sided, and with water at the bottom, into a little sunken plain nearly round, all grass-grown and smooth and flat, round which the lava has run without breaking into it: a small stream follows the inside of the lava wave

¹ Hrafna-björg, Hrafna-gjá.

nearly all round this strange place, and through its opening we ride into the lava again; over a wave-top and into the trough of it, as it seems, and then on to another wave—and lo, there we are on the lower side of the Great Rift, a grass-grown, shrub-grown slope, with a huge wall of grey rock rising on the other side of the chasm, as perpendicularly as though a plummet had ruled it. It was getting dusk when we got there, and we had hit the Rift rather high up, so we rode straight down toward the lake along the Rift-side, the great wall with a fantastic coping of clinker ever on our right till we saw at the end of a bight of the lake, an undulating bright green tún with a church and stead on their little mounds, and between us and them a flat green plain with Axewater winding about it most sweetly, till, straightening itself on the Riftward side of the stead, it ran straight for the lake widening as it went. So we rode down into the flat and galloped over turf and stream till we were in the lane of the stead, and presently came to a halt before the door of the priest's house, having made a thirteen hours' ride of it from Reykholt. We found here two set of travellers who had come over with us: one a hair-brained queer chap named Watts, who had a great turn for climbing everything, and who had possession of the church with his photographic gear; the others who were housed in the stead were two Cambridge men who had had a queer journey from Reykjavik to Stykkisholm by smack first, and afterwards to Skagafjörður & Drangey, and so back, nearly without a guide. As for us, we got leave to encamp in the tún down by the side of Axewater, and soon had our tents up on a beautiful piece of mossy turf close to the water's edge, almost under the shadow of the Great Rift, whose wonderful cliff rose into the moonlit sky a few rods on the other side the river, and was all populous with ravens that kept crying out and croaking long after we were settled there. There, Evans compelling me, I lighted a fire and did my cook's office, sore against my will; for partly I was somewhat tired, and partly I was lazy and dreamy: bed came shortly after that, and then sleep with happy dreams enough, as almost always in Iceland.

Thing-
vellir