

Saturday, August 26th. In the same place.

**W**E got up to a most beautiful morning, warm and soft like a fine day of latter May in England. We were most delighted with our camp and all about us: the flat of the meadow ends a few yards lakeward of us in grassy mounds that come close up to the water's edge: the little Axewater is spread out before us shallow and slow-running as it nears its end in the lake: between us and the stead-garth lies a queer little washing-tub of a boat to ferry one across; on the other side is a smooth space of grass gradually sloping up to the lower or broken-down wall of the rift, which is pretty steep too at this end, except where a gap nearly opposite the house leads one into the rift itself.

Breakfast over, I go with Magnússon to call on the priest, who leads us presently on to the Lögberg (Hill of Laws), the heart and centre of the old Icelandic Commonwealth. One passes by the church and through the church-yard which is on a higher part of the mound than the house: in the church-yard stands a stone called the Yardstone which is as old as the thirteenth century, and has the Bremen ell marked out on one side, and the English yard on the other. Thence we go down a little and come on to the side of a deep rift in the lava which splits into two arms, leaving a little island in the midst bridged by a narrow space on which two men could barely stand abreast: when you are in the island it widens and slopes upward higher and higher till at last where the two arms of the rift meet there is a considerable cliff above the dark dreadful-looking rift and its cold waters: a dozen yards from this is a little mound rising from the surface of the island, which, if the HILL of LAWS is the heart of Iceland, is the heart of the Hill of Laws, for here stood the Speaker at Law, and every year gave forth the law: the whole island is not a large church for the ceremony: it might hold some five hundred men close packed, but surely 'tis one of the most dramatic spots in Iceland, and Grim Goatshoe,<sup>1</sup> who picked it out for the seat of the Althing, must have been a man of poetic insight. It is a good deal raised above the

<sup>1</sup> He had a penny for his pains from every householder of Iceland.

level of the valley of Axewater; the rift all round it is deep and wide; I should say sixteen feet wide at the narrowest, where you can see many many feet below the rocks all blue and purple through the clearest water in the world; this is the place that they call Flosi's Leap, for tradition (not the Njáls Saga) says that Flosi the Burner leapt across it to join his men who were drawn up outside the Berg: and they say he was in all his arms when he leapt.

Thingvellir

The Hill of Laws is all covered with sweet deep grass and the heath berries grow all down the sides of its rift. As you stand here you look, as I said, across the grassy valley through which Axewater having tumbled over the sheer height of the upper wall of the Great Rift, and cleft the lower wall through, wanders serpentine, making little sandy or grassy islets as it goes, the most obvious of which, a mere patch of turf nearly level with the river, but in the very midst of the plain, is called the Battle-Holm, because there the judicial combats were held.

You must suppose that only the Lawman and some of the chiefs with the jurors of the courts had their place on the Hill of Laws, the main body of the people were on the other side of the water-filled rift, which in fact made the Hill of Laws a fortress easily defensible in those days so lacking in good shot-weapons.

Across the plain of Axewater, on the first slopes of the lower wall of the Great Rift were set up the booths of the different districts,<sup>1</sup> going all down the Rift-side right to the lake: just opposite where the stead now stands is a breach in this lower wall through which runs the Reykjavík road; and the slope on the lakeward side of this is known as the site of the booth of Snorri the Priest, whereby he stood with his men in this very gap in the Rift-wall at the Battle of the Althing, prepared to help the winners moderately, and make peace if he could do so to his own advantage.<sup>2</sup>



Just in the very midst of the Hill of Laws rises a low mound

<sup>1</sup> Consult the plan of the Althing in Dasent's *Burnt Njal*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Njála: The Battle at the Althing*.

regular in shape, and still having on it signs of the concentric rows of seats on which the jurors of the courts sat.

You must not forget when thinking of all this, that the huge wall of the Great Rift does verily bar the whole plain from the slopes of Armansfell to the lake, so that no ordinary man could scale it except in that one place by Snorri's Booth aforesaid; and the long line of it cuts clean against the sky with never a mountain rising over it till Armansfell thrusts up a broad shoulder at the further end.

So back to the stead, for we have a mind to catch fish for our dinner: the priest tells of the whereabouts of his boat, and we have a half-hour's stumble over intricate lava till we come to the side of a little creek of the lake where the boat lies: we launched it and got in and rowed out into the middle of the lake, a great sheet of water some twelve miles by eight with an island lying in the middle looking like a broken-down crater, but all grass-grown now. The day was most beautiful and sunny, but if all lakes are as I fancy melancholy, just think of an Icelandic one! the great spiky hills on two sides of it, the black rift and heavy grey Armansfell behind us, and on the other side the grey lava going up in one long slope to the boss of Skjaldbreið, bounded by that rocky screen aforesaid, and three separate hills thrusting up out of the lava-sea: the spiky hills were very dark in spite of the sunny day and the deep water (how deep it must be) green like a cold sea.

We had to sit (five of us) pretty close in our boat, Evans and I holding the rods, while Gisli and C.J.F. rowed, and Magnússon baled with a used-up tobacco tin, for the boat was both crank and leaky. We pulled across a wideish bay, toward some scarped rocks where in one corner was a beautiful little grassy slope: near by there where the water shallowed to some fourteen feet, and was so clear that one could see every smallest cranny in the rocks below, we caught two trouts and a char, and then landed on the grass slope aforesaid, and ate and lay about a while till the afternoon was worn somewhat, and then pulled back quietly, skirting the shores

of the bay: we saw as we pulled along a company riding along Thing-  
among the lava toward Thingvellir by the Geysir road. So vellir  
back to the creek from which we started, where by the priest's  
desire we drew his set nets for him, taking out of them seven  
great char and a trout. The Icelandic char by the way is a  
strange looking fish, purple-black on the back of him, get-  
ting lighter and greener down the sides, and speckled with  
grey spots, and then his belly orange-chrome as if laid on  
with a house-painter's brush: and the fins are dark grey bor-  
dered with white. Back we stumbled to camp, and as we came  
into the home-mead met the company aforesaid, dismounted  
now & wandering about: they are a parson, Frank Holland,  
son of the old carle Sir Henry, and two other quiet-looking  
people: but the parson looked a queer phenomenon out  
there. We asked news of England where nothing had hap-  
pened, and so went off to our own place to cook and eat din-  
ner. After dinner the Cambridge men invited us into the  
house, to have a glass of grog: we pricked up our ears at this,  
as our own grog had by this got so bitter from kicking about  
in imperfectly seasoned oak kegs, that it was better physic  
than grog: so we sat down in the little parlour, and hot water  
and sugar came out, and then a tin bottle of whiskey, which  
coming out of the tin bottle proved to be as black as a shoe;  
and the end of it was that I had to go back to our camp to  
fetch up a keg of our own bitter whiskey to treat ourselves  
and the rest of the company withal. So to bed somewhat late.