

CHAPTER V. FROM WATER-DALE TO BIARG AND RAMFIRTH.

Friday, August 4th. In Mr Jón Víðalin's house at Víðidals-tunga.

UP rather late to a somewhat better morning, but not very bright. After a long and good breakfast the Doctor brought in his daughter dressed in gala clothes which included a really fine belt of silver-smith's work, I should think not later than 1530 in date, for there was a St Barbara engraved on the smooth side of the tag in regular Hans Burgmair style: the open-work of the belt was very beautiful, the traditional northern Byzantinesque work all mixed up with the crisp sixteenth century leafage. The doctor's surgery was a queer place: such big and dirty bottles of (I suppose) very strong physic; skins of birds, whips, and odds and ends; a small library of old books (Latin me-

Willow-
dale

dical) and, kicking about, a fine copy of the Guðbrandr Bible in its original binding brass-bound and very good. The train having been started some hours, we set off at last after rather more than enough drinking of stirrup-cups. We had given up all idea of trying to get further north now lest we should be too close run in the Broadfirth and Snæfell country; and so our heads were turned south again. The doctor rode with us very well mounted: he has exceedingly good horses, and has a custom that a little before they get too old for work he lets them have a few quiet years of grazing in a good pasture before the bullet ends them. Our road takes us by the head of the lake before-mentioned through a queer tumbling waste of sand knolls (with grass in the hollows however) and thence west into wide flats which are the shore of a nearly land-locked inlet of the northern sea, which takes the Viðidal waters, and is called the Hope (*Hóp islandicé*); the north wind blows fresh and strong across it, and the shore is all strewn with swan-feathers. We are come in Viðidal now, and behind us to the north-east can see the hills of Longdale, the main scene of the Bandamanna Saga: before us is a slope crowned with a stead called Borg, the place of the Saga of Finnbogi the Strong; in its present condition rather a poor characterless story; but with one touching part in it where the wife of Finnbogi dies of grief for the slaying of her favourite son by a scoundrel. They show you a grassy knoll hereby for her tomb.

We go into the stead and are kindly received by the bonder (coffee and brandy of course), who has been in Scotland and talks English, and is an intelligent man enough: not much to his benefit, I am afraid, for he seems discontented with Iceland in consequence. However he knows the sagas well, and tells me that at his stead they always read over his stock of them every winter. After a talk and wandering about his stead a bit we all go off together to the Borgarvirki, a strange piece of nature hereby: it is an old crater (I suppose) crowning a sloping hill some furlong from the stead, and has from time immemorial formed a regular

round tower with sheer perpendicular sides rising from steep slopes of rocky debris; there is only one breach in the natural wall, which is flat at the top like a rampart almost all round, with room for about four men to stand abreast on it: we clamber painfully up to the said breach, which is made good by man's handiwork with huge rough stones piled up into a fair wall, but broken down a bit now: this breach may be about twenty feet wide: once in, the floor of the tower is smooth sweet grass, and I guess it some fifty paces diameter; with walls of about twenty-five feet (on the inside): on one side is a rectangular well of bright water, and by it marks of the turf walls of old houses, though how old I don't know. Slaying-Bardi the hero of the Heath-Slayings Saga is the name connected with it: the story tells how he held this stronghold with a few men against the Westlanders, who, finding that nothing was to be made of storming it, sat down before it and starved the garrison down to one sausage, which they pitched over the wall in scorn to the besiegers, who, thinking them well victualled since they could afford such waste, demitted in despair: a story certainly not confined to Iceland. We enjoyed ourselves very much here, especially as the sun came out for a bit, the first time that we had seen him since Kalmanstunga and Surtshellir last Monday. We lay about on the grass-grown rampart, and could see the northern sea now over the bar of the Hope, and the cold, snow-besprinkled mountains of Longdale, and at our feet the first of Viðidal (Willowdale) boggy and melancholy with ragged ill-arranged hillsides. There we talked and drank to each other from our own whiskey (getting rather bitter now from washing about in the oak-kegs), till at last we went our ways up the dale, when the day had got grey again, the bonder of Borg swelling our train. We rode on the worst side of the river by a dismal way enough till we came to a stead not marked in my map and whose name I have forgotten, though it is named in Gretla.¹ Here also we

¹ The homestead was Lœkiamót, of old the home of Thorarinn the Wise. E.M.

Viðidalstunga

were bound to go in: at the door stood a man with whom I held a struggling conversation in Icelandic till I found he could talk English as well as myself: he turned out to be Baring Gould's guide, and I thought him an unpleasant, boastful, vulgar sort of a fellow: he was travelling about the country for the Scotch horse-dealers. After staying here rather longer than I liked we got to saddle again, and took leave of the hospitable doctor, but the bonder of Borg went on with us.

We had got through the worst of the valley now, both sides of the river were smoother and grassier, and the other side (the lower) looked pleasant enough, with grass-grown spurs and knolls: on one of the best of such on our side stands Asgeirsá, the house of Asgeir Madpate, father of Hrefna and uncle of Grettir's father: As (The Ridge) where Hrefna died¹ is waste now, I imagine, and was not pointed out to us: Auðunnarstaðir² is just opposite to it on the other side and is well placed and imposing looking. At last the vale gets narrower and we come right on Viðidalstunga standing on pretty green slopes thrust out into the valley. We were bent on getting to Stáðarbakki in Midfirth to-day, but our late leaving of Hnausar, and our stopping at Borg and the other stead have brought twilight on us here, and there is nothing for it but to stop. We are soon welcomed in the stead by the bonder Viðalin, somewhat of a magnate, a man who can trace his direct descent to a "landnámsman," I forget whom: he is a friend of Magnússon's too, and they fall to talking busily about politics and scraps of antiquarianism, till supper comes: said supper Evans grumbled at horribly for slenderness, and disappeared to make himself happier over our own biscuit and cheese: as for me I sat hour after hour in the little room trying to catch a sentence here and there, and I am afraid feeling highly bored at first, which was very unfair considering all things, till I got into a dreamy

¹ No stead of the name of As has ever existed in Willowdale. Hrefna went after the death of Kiartan "north," i.e. to the North-country, and obviously to her father's house at Asgeirsá. E.M.

² Where Grettir wrestled with Auðunn Asgeirsson. E.M.

state at last which was comfortable enough. Then the host showed us his antiquities; an old pewter "askr" or porridge pot, which he said had belonged to bishop Gúðbrand (†1627) and was at all events of his date; several good cups and spoons of silver, and a fine piece of embroidery with scripture subjects worked in circles, and an inscription, which Magnússon with some trouble made out: it looked like thirteenth century work: but, I suppose was eighteenth. So to bed, very comfortably lodged, the whole house being turned upside down for that end. Viðidals-
tunga