

Saturday, August 5th. In camp by the stead of Fiarðarhorn, Ramfirth.

GOT up pretty early and walked about the stead and into the little turf-walled church that stands on a grassy knoll running into the flat meads: our host followed us in, to show us what there was to see: it was all deal inside with a rather elaborate screen, a pretty brass chandelier and two old (17th century?) pictures, an altar triptych and painted rood: there were a good many books in it; among them a Gúðbrandr Bible; a rather valuable MS. of ecclesiastical annals and a handsomely written book of Sagas; Hrolf Kraki to wit, Volsunga, and Ragnar Loðbrók, written out in the 17th century, I suppose. Breakfast after this, and then to horse and away on a cold grey morning with a little drizzle on, our host going with us to guide us over the bogs between his house and Midfirth Neck.

Just as we turn out of the valley on to the neck, we come on a knoll, the site of Swala-stead, where Vali of the Bandamanna [Saga] was murdered: Viðalin told us of it that many stories were current of it and of Swala's witchcraft, and repeated a rhyme that says how the day will come when the big house of Swala-stead shall be lower than the cot of Viðidale-tongue.

Our way is rough and boggy enough, as usual over the

¹A porringer, made of wood originally of ash. Cleasby and Vigf., dict., s.v. Ed.

Midfirth
valley

neck, and was a characterless tumbling waste till it smoothed itself out into a hollow lying on the neck's top, with a high hill sweeping up from it on our right: from the flank of this juts out at right angles a bare cliff high over the valley, which is called [Thoreyarnúpr = Thorey's-crag], the place where Grettir stood to challenge Slaying-Bardi as he came back from the Heath-slayings: and low down by the hill's foot is a little lake, once bigger, they say, called Midfirth Water, where the ball-play in Grettla went on. So we ride a goodish way over bog and stones, Magnússon riding by Viðalin and talking busily all the way, riding at a foot's pace in consequence: hence a temper, for Evans got very cross at our going so slowly, and worried me till I sung out with rage to Magnússon to get on faster, being cross at being worried, not with Magnússon. I hope Viðalin understood what it all meant.

At last the ground rises up to a crest, and climbing that, we can look down into Midfirth valley, the birth-place of Grettir. The day is at its worst now, and the long narrow vale, cleft by an *untidy* river and bounded by a long down-like hill, looks empty and dead and hopeless; nor could we see the narrow strip that runs up from the northern sea and names the place. So we go down into it, and after a due piece of bog come on a stead hanging on the hill-side called Torfa-stead: Torfa was a poetess much told of in the tales of this countryside as Skald-Torfa; Viðalin shows us a great flat grey stone that lies in the tún as the grave of her.

Thence we are soon down into the flat of the valley, which turns out much better than it looked from farther off, and has a great deal of character: there are flat, well-grassed meadows all along the river, which runs in a well-defined bed, sometimes bounded by steep dark-grey banks, that break off sometimes and leave it bare amidst the meadows: the valley is very narrow, and looking toward its landward end one can see the grey banks aforesaid rising high and pinching the river very close, and winding round beyond till they get blue in the distance and seem to stop it.

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A facsimile page of the first Journal of Travel in Iceland.

On the "ere" of the river on the other side, under one of Biarg the grey banks, lies Stáðarbakki, a church and parsonage, not an historical place: we cross the river to it and go in to see the priest and his wife; they are friends of Magnússon's, and, we heard afterwards, were sorely disappointed that we hadn't stopped there, as indeed we meant to do. However, after coffee the priest gets to horse to go with us to Biarg, and Víðalin takes leave of us. The priest leads us through a fine tún of his (which, by the way is being hay-made now, so much later they are in these north firths), down on to the river side, which we cross presently a little below the gorge aforesaid, and then, after a short gallop over the smooth turf on the other side, take to the hill again, and after riding some furlong from the river, turn and go south along the hill-side: looking back we can see the narrow grey firth now and the hills winding about it. The day is grown better, and there are gleams of sun, which have been rare since we came north of Kaldidal. Presently we come on some huge flat-topped, straight-sided masses of rock, sticking out of the hill-side, looking like a broken castle: and turning the flank of these, we find the hill-side scooped into three or four little valleys, which join all together on the river-ward side into a long slope that goes down into the main valley: on two of the knolls that make these little hollows are sheep-houses, but the longest and highest of them, facing the rocks, and running at right-angles to the main hill, is flat-topped & smooth, and under it, looking seaward, lie the three heaps of turf and boarded gables of a poor house, which is Biarg,¹ where Grettir was born; the whole little valley is bright with newly-mown grass, whereon there are still a few hay-cocks lying: the grey ridges of the barren hill, strewn about with great boulders, rise above it to the north-east, and above that again one can see the dark slopes of the mountains over Víðidal or Vatnsdal striped with new-fallen snow. We get off at the house-door where come two children and a woman, looking rather miserable and dirty: it is not such a bad farm, the priest says,

¹ Same as Burg, a castle.

Biarg

but is owned by two men together: one of them comes presently, and we walk about with him; and down in the hollowest of the valleys we come on a well with a turf roof over it, and beside that is a smooth mound, bigger and taller than the ordinary tussocks of the home-mead, and this they call Grettir's "head-mound," i.e. the place where his head was buried. After this we go up the hill that looks down on all this, where is a big stone (some twenty tons C.J.F. guessed it) on another, which they call a Grettir's Heave:¹ we lie down there awhile, and look down on the place in the bright sunshine, for the day has quite cleared now, and can see between the rocks of the Burg, the firth right down to its end, and the mountains of Hrutfirth beyond them, and other mountains further away into the northern sea, and as blue as blue can be. All about us the scant grass was full of flowers, gentian and milk-wort mostly. So down to the house again, over the mound at the back of it, which shows signs of old building on it. We buy a silver spoon and a piece of queer embroidery of the bonder, and then mount and ride off slowly down the hill under his guidance, and going over a bog that lies on the slope-side, come on to the smooth river-side meadows again. They are very narrow here from hill-side to hill-side: and we can see here that what I called a gorge above, and took for the end of the valley, was only a mound cleft through by the river: for we are on flat meadows above it now, and the real narrowing of the valley is above us some quarter of a mile: so these two places are like two gates, the tumbling blue mountain-country to be seen through the upper one, the slopes of the valley and even a gleam of the firth to be seen through the lower. The sun is fairly out now, and the meadows are flowery, so we have no very savage impression left us of Midfirth as we turn toward its south-west slopes to leave it. At the hill's foot is a quite round pond, and a little way up the hill by our roadside, another round pit, but not

¹ See "Grettir the Strong," p. 32. *Grettis-tak*, "the lift of Grettir the Strong," a name for those boulders which would require Herculean strength to lift them. Icel. Dictionary. Ed.

filled with water: they are both about, say, a hundred and fifty yards across, and the waterless one may be thirty feet deep and is all grown with rich grass and flowers; the priest says he has picked ripe strawberries down there; a rarity, as you may well imagine, in Iceland. Ramfirth

So up on to the bare "neck" and over a bog or two, till we come on our train halted here in a grassy patch for us: the priest, Sveinn Skúlason leaves us here after sharing with us what lunch we have to give him. A little higher than this and we can see the mountains of Hrutafirth rising before us; but still looking back can note Biarg on the hill-side by its castle-like rocks. We still go up the neck till, crossing a ridge and hollow we are on the tongue of land that divides the two waters, Midfirth and Hrutafirth, and can look into both of them, with the day gone grey again, though a few gleams of sun yet cling about it, brightening the long lines of inky-purple hills here and there. Still on over the heath, a few mountains thrusting themselves up above the face of it toward the south, but not of any character; more behind us on the north, the great ridges over Vatnsdale, dark ashen coloured, and striped low down with Tuesday's snow, are clear enough.

Now we have clomb to the top of the neck, a very bare stony spot, and drop down over the ridge till Midfirth and the rest north are lost and Hrutafirth (Ramfirth of Gretla) lies all open before us: a long narrow firth running itself into nothing up into the land, fenced on the other side by a long unbroken dark ridge that seems to come right down to the water's edge: there is no keel visible on the water now, but opposite to our steep road on the south-west side is a flat spit of land pushing out into the firth, on which stand the "houses" of a trading station, Bórðeyri, the chief port of these parts in the time of Grettir: the road winding down to the firth gets steeper now till at last we can see the lip of the grass land by the water on our side, and washed by the water, a great tún of bright green, a regular circle within its green turf walls, and in the midst of it the stead-buildings neat and

new, but picturesque enough: this is Thorodd-stead the dwelling-place and death-place of Thorbiorn Oxmain, who slew Atli Grettir's brother, and was slain by Grettir in his turn. I'm sorry we didn't stop here; and Magnússon thought we were going to, and when we got on to the level ground rode straight up to the house to ask for quarters; but when he came back, he found us all meaning to go on as this made a very short day's ride, and would make our next day into Laxdale a long one, and we all thought that Fiárðarhorn had been intended for our stopping place to-day: Magnússon finding us in this frame of mind rode off back to the stead to countermand our request or order, rather huffed as was but natural; though for my own single part I was quite ready to stop so as not to hurt his feelings; but if I had known it was a historical place I would have stopped in any case. Well, off we rode again somewhat uncomfortable at first after our—discussion—but soon got easier again. It was a pleasant ride too up the firth all along its very beach of black sand and shingle bestrewn with big mussel-shells: there were steepish broken but low slopes above us, and we guessed the water at about three miles wide here: as we went on we saw big pieces of drift-wood scattered about; and now and again I saw queer-looking things something of the shape and size of the screw of a small steamer lying about; I couldn't make these out, till in a little grassy break in the steeper slopes lay a boat, and beside [it] a skeleton of a good-sized whale lacking some of its vertebræ, which were those queer things; two other such breaks grassy and pleasant we passed, and there were boats in each of them, but the steads lay a little back and we didn't see them. It was good riding here; Falki was running loose, and Mouse I found go lame at Thorodstead from having cast a shoe, so I rode one of C.J.F's usual horses, a smooth-skinned shiny piebald, that we and the guides between us had christened the Goodly Pig because of his queer looks and obstinacy.

The firth narrows as we ride on, and we could see a man on a white horse riding along the other side of the firth at a

gallop: the water in shore by us was all covered with eider ducks, great brown birds almost as big as a goose; they had many young broods with them, and it was pretty to see the old ducks carrying a duckling or two on their backs as they pitched over the low waves like heavy craft. Ramfirth

So we come to the very end of the firth, where the river runs into it in many streams, and there was flat green space between the sea-water and the encircling hills, in the midst of which one could see the church and stead of Stad: Fiárðarhorn (Firth-corner) is visible on the other side just where the sea water comes to an end. As we turn toward the river to seek for a ford, the man on the white horse, who has outridden us, turns to it from his side and splashes through the shallow water, and so rides away toward Stad: so we can follow his track in the sand without troubling much to feel for a ford: and a few minutes after are thronging the tún of Fiárðarhorn; a pretty field sloping down to the water-side: it is half-past nine now, and getting dusk, and all men are asleep in the houses of the poor little stead: out they swarm however in a minute or two, like bees out of a hive, and two smart boys help us to pitch our tents handily enough and laughing with joy all the time. We have the stithy handed over to us for our kitchen, as the fire is out in the kitchen proper: thither Magnússon and I take our tools, and smithy soup and stew, while a grey-head big carle, not very right in his wits, a sort of Barnaby Rudge, blows the bellows for us; we talk to him, I taking some share in the conversation, till apropos of something or other Magnússon says:

“This man (meaning me) can talk Icelandic, you see.”

“Does he,” says the carle, “I have heard him talk a great deal, and I don’t know what he has been saying.”

“Don’t you understand this?” say I.

“Yes,” says he.

“Isn’t it Icelandic then?”

“Well, I don’t know,” says he; “in all tongues there must be some words like other tongues, and perhaps these are some of those.”

Now was dinner served up, and we sat down to it with a close ring of men all round the tent's mouth watching us, stooping down with their hands on their knees, and now and then dropping a sentence one to the other, such as "Now he's supping the broth:" "What flesh is that?" and so on. They were queer outlandish people, but quite good-tempered and kind, and most willing to do anything we told them.

Magnússon turned in early after dinner, and was soon snoring; but C.J.F. and I lay on our blankets and smoked: while we were at this the tent-flap was drawn aside, and a big carle, surely Wolf the Unwashed again, put in his head and said:

"I am told off to watch your horses" (which were sent down to the out-meadows to graze). I thought this was a hint for liquor, and so handed him a nip of whiskey; he shook hands with me with effusion, and then I found out that he was drunk already. However he took himself off and we thought him gone: but presently back he comes and says as if he were another person:

"I'm told off to watch the horses."

Therewith he holds out a little bottle, empty now of all but dirt, but labelled (in English) "Essential oil of Almonds." I was weak enough to put some whiskey in it, and again he shook my hand and again went away, but not so far but that C.J.F. could see him holding his little bottle up against the bright moon to see how much he had got. Then he really seemed to go, but got no further than the roof of an out-building on which he sat astride (like Glám) and presently began to howl out a dismal song; I recognised the tune as the same that Eyvindr sings when he is rather more than doubtful of the way, or when he has to do something he doesn't like: it is a "ríma" or ballad in four-line stanza with a burden at each stanza's end, and every stanza ends with a queer long note, which with our friend on the roof is a dismal bellow: it was now one o'clock and though we laughed at first, it began to be rather a wearisome addition to the due noises, of the wind piping about the hill, the flapping of the

tent, and the quacking of the eider ducks, and—Magnússon's steady snore hard by. So I began to think I should have to wake the latter to help get rid of the singer, when all of a sudden he left off, and I thought him gone; but lo the tent pulled open again, and there he is, asking us, as if he were yet a new person, if he shall sing a little song to us: this time I was curt and peremptory, so after shaking hands again in his new character, he does really go at last away into the darkness, and sleep descends on us. Ramfirth