

Sunday, August 6th, In camp in the home-mead of Herd-holt.

UP about eight: two or three people look in here on their way to church, and all the household is up and dressed in their best, so I fry the bacon and we breakfast even more in public than we dined last evening. We ask the people if they have anything ancient or handsome for sale here; whereat the two bonders (for this stead is held by two families) say that they know of nothing there older or prettier than "these two old carles." The grinning over about this joke, after we have really bought two horn spoons, we get the bonder to put us on our way toward Laxdale, and get to horse, climbing the hill-side away from the firth at once.

Our way over the neck was wearily boggy, and we made way slowly enough: the horses were marvellously clever among the bogs, but a pack-horse at last put his foot on what seemed a piece of sound green turf, and down he went into a positive hole, and hung on by his forefeet and the boxes; so that we had to unpack him, and haul him out with ropes.

The day was windy and cold, but the sun came out and shone brightly while we were yet on the neck: from the highest point of it we could see on our south the heads of big mountains dark blue and snow-streaked, looking as if they belonged to another world than the ragged waste we were on: through a gap in the hills we have just climbed we can see the water of Ramfirth, and further off the Vatnsdale hills. We struggle on till we begin to get clear of the bogs, and are

Herdholt on very stony ground and going down hill, till we see a long way off Solheimar, the first stead of Laxdale: we go down very speedily hence, and are soon in the dale: long hills stretch seaward on either side of it, but the dale between them is somewhat choked up with knolls and smaller hills, Laxá running small and shallow among them: at the very head of the dale the river running under high cliffs bounds a smooth sunny green meadow on one side, and its other three sides are nearly girded in by high green banks: but after this, which was very beautiful and characteristic, the valley loses itself in a litter of broken knolls for awhile: but getting through these we come into a quite flat plain, where we stop to bait horse and man for an hour. The wind was terribly strong and cold in spite of the bright sun; but we were merry enough, however, for an hour and a half, when we set on again: we went by a good road, crossing and recrossing the river many times. The valley between its long unbroken hill-banks is never clear of a litter of lower hills: many of these however are smooth and green, and have steads lying at their feet: it is Sunday too and at all the steads we see the horses of visitors standing. One [stead] I remember particularly lying among a nest of grassy knolls, and quite a party going on among them: we didn't go in as the day was wearing fast, but Magnússon and Faulkner and I rested just beyond the stead, and then made up for lost time as well as we could; but sooth to say, the horses don't go so well as they used; Mouse is getting thin, and they will be all the better for to-morrow's rest.

Now as we rode, we could see showing over the valley's other end, the blue peaked mountains lying about Broadfirth; it was exciting to see them, for it was visibly coming to fresh country, all the northern dales we have seen being regular trenches with great unbroken lines of hill on either side. So on till at the mouth of the dale the littery knolls grow together into a spur that narrows the valley as it draws toward Hvammfirth, and high up on the side of it we can see the houses of Herdholt: Magnússon, Faulkner and I press

on before the train; Magnússon has been here before and Herdholt thinks he knows a short cut up to the stead; but it turns out to be nothing but a most evil bog in which C.J.F.'s horse sinks up to the girths at once and we have to dismount and lead our horses carefully from tussock to tussock before we get on to the firm ground of the tún.

The little house that stands over so many stories of the old days is rather new and trim but picturesque enough, three long gabled aisles, the turf sides of which are laid herring-bone fashion, and there are elaborate dog-vanes on the gables. From the door of it one looks down on to the flats about the river, rising gradually into the slopes of the great bounding hill, where among long straight lines of the grey stone-banks that old ice-waves have striped the hill-sides with, parallel to the main lines of the valley, and sad dull yellow-green bogs, lie two emerald green patches, the túns of two steads; one of them Hauskuldstead, the parent-house of Herdholt. The hill above all this gradually slopes down to Hwammfirth, and above its lower end show two strange-shaped mountains like a church-roof with a turret at the end of it: the spurs of these again run down into the firth, leaving a space of low hills and boggy plain by the water-side: but beyond and bounding all to the south-west lies that sea of peaked mountains that are all about Holyfell. The actual waters of Hwammfirth are hidden from sight here because of the shoulder of the spur on which we are, the higher part of which also hides the mountains to the north. The dean (an acquaintance of Magnússon's) was out when we came to the stead; so C.J.F. and I went and sat down in the parlour while Magnússon went to fetch him from the next stead; he was some time gone, and we went out again and watched the train coming leisurely in now, Evans among them: they had taken the road on the other side the river, and had crossed the bog by a handsome causeway. While we helped in the unloading and careful stowing away of our goods, Magnússon came back with the parson and his wife,



Herdholt who welcomed us kindly and offered to kill a sheep for us: then came the necessary coffee, and then Evans and C.J.F. went off to pitch the tent, while I spent my time alone in trying to regain my spirits which had suddenly fallen very low almost ever since we came into Laxdale.

Just think, though, what a mournful place this is—Iceland I mean—setting aside the pleasure of one's animal life there: the fresh air, the riding and rough life, and feeling of adventure—how every place and name marks the death of its short-lived eagerness and glory; and withal so little is the life changed in some ways: Olaf Peacock went about summer and winter after his live-stock, and saw to his hay-making and fishing just as this little peak-nosed parson does; setting aside the coffee and brandy, his victuals under his hall, "marked with famous stories," were just the same as the little parson in his ten-foot square parlour eats: I don't doubt the house stands on the old ground. But Lord! what littleness and helplessness has taken the place of the old passion and violence that had place here once—and all is forgotten; so that one has no power to pass it by unnoticed: yet that must be something of a reward for the old life of the land, and I don't think their life now is more unworthy than most people's elsewhere, and they are happy enough by seeming. Yet it is an awful place: set aside the hope that the unseen sea gives you here, and the strange threatening change of the blue spiky mountains beyond the firth, and the rest seems emptiness and nothing else: a piece of turf under your feet, and the sky overhead, that's all; whatever solace your life is to have here must come out of yourself or these old stories, not over hopeful themselves. Something of all this I thought; and besides our heads were now fairly turned homeward, and now and again a few times I felt homesick—I hope I may be forgiven. Also there was that ceaseless wind all day: but now towards night it was grown calmer, and was still very bright, and the day ended with a beautiful and strange sunset; not violent red in the west, but the whole sky suffused with it over light green and grey,

with a few bars of bright white clouds dragging over it, and some big dusky rain-clouds low down among the Broadfirth mountains. I stood and watched it changing, till that and rest from the wind I suppose made me contented again, and then we were called in to supper, and even some two hours afterwards when we went out to our tents again to bed, the sky had not lost all its colour—so to bed happy enough.

Herdholt