

Tuesday, August 8th. In the same place.

**T**HIS day we were to ride (on hired horses) to Hwamm and Sælingsdale, and the weather has changed very happily, for it is soft and warm though not very sunny, and there is nothing but a light wind from the east, the warm quarter in Iceland.

So M. and C.J.F. and I rode away under the parson's guidance, but Evans, guiltless of all knowledge of Snorri or Gudrun or the Sturlungs, stayed behind to fish in Laxá. We go over the brow of the ridge at the back of the house, and have Hwammfirth lying before us: a shallow inlet quite boatless, and to-day without a wave breaking it, scarce a ripple: there is a flat space of sand and grass edging the water at this end; but across the firth the hills rise up high and steep, a few steads lying at the feet of their slopes. We cross a little stream

presently that the tide runs up: it is flowing now but the water is quite clear: a little past this is a small gorge leading down to the flat shore of the firth, which some people say is the place where the sons of Oswif hid Kiartan's sword, "the King's Gift," when they came back from the feast at Herdholt. We ride some half-hour over a broken heath till in half an hour's time we "turn a corner" and come on Liaskógar lying on a green bank overlooking the flats at the firth corner here: this was the house of Thorstein Kuggson, one of Grettir's friends and a protector of him in his outlawry: the old bonder-carle who lives here now welcomed us at the door, and being led out by the parson, was only too glad to tell us all he imagined about the ancient sites: he showed us in his tún the site of Kuggson's hall, and then of his church, and then of his bridge under which hung those "din-bells" <sup>1</sup> that could be heard far off out on the firth: but his faith carried him so much further as to show us a pile of smoke-blackened rafters, and suggest that perhaps they came out of the old chieftain's hall: I'm afraid Magnússon cut him up by the roots at this point.

As we stood at the door just before mounting I thought I saw surf breaking on the beach some furlong or two beyond us, and pointed it out to C. J. F. with some astonishment, as the firth had seemed so smooth hitherto; but as we rode on the surf resolved itself into swans, that glided away before us and hung about some little skerries out in the firth—such a fleet of them!

The hills on the other side of the surf show bold and full of character from here, with bare basalt rocks thrusting out here and there from the grey green slopes and shaly heaps: just opposite to us they give back into a narrow valley, guarded by three isolated knolls that are capped by basaltic pillars and stand out in the flat meads; and that valley is Sælingsdale. Skirting the firth-side we are soon under the knolls afore-said but pass by the entrance to Sælingsdale, and, riding round the end of its westernmost boundary-hill, come into

<sup>1</sup> Grettir the Strong, chapter LIII. Ed.

the next valley, Hwamm: this is also a famous place; its first settler is Auð the Deeply Wealthy; and it became afterwards the home of the Sturlungs, and Snorri the historian was born there [1173]. It is a beautiful place; a shallow valley open to Hwammfirth on the south, and on the north bounded by a curving wall of mountain, from which, as the valley opens seaward, great slopes of grass go down into the bottom. Auð's  
Thing-  
stead

We ride along the hillside here till we come to a quaint little house with many gables (nine I think) high up the slope and a little church below it: from here we can see the Broadfirth mountains right opposite the valley's mouth. We get off and go into the house, and are entertained by the parson<sup>2</sup> a youngish man, and the ex-parson<sup>2</sup> an old one who lives on still in the same house: sixty-nine years he told us he had lived in this valley. He seemed a very innocent kind old man: and has written a little book identifying the places about named in the Sagas, all which he is very anxious to talk to us about. C.J.F. bought two old silver spoons of him which our Herdholt host told us of; he put such a low price on them that Charley gave him more; but he didn't feel much interested in the whole transaction. Then we went out and he showed us above the house Auð's Thingstead and doom-ring, and close by the temple of those days; though Auð herself was a Christian, and would have herself buried on the foreshore between high and low watermark, that she might not lie wholly in a heathen land: they show you a big stone on the beach that they call her gravestone: but 'tis covered now by the tide. Then we go into the little church where there is an old fifteenth-century chalice, and a paten which is obviously English; a pretty old door-ring and some good embroidery. Then we take our leave of all but the old priest, who gets a-horseback: he is a very tall thin old gentleman in breeches and purple stockings and skin shoes; he is on a capital pony which turns out to be too much for him, so he changes with Magnússon, saying as he does so: "All comes to an end: who would have believed I should

<sup>2</sup>Stein Steinsson. E.M.    <sup>2</sup>Thorleifr Jonsson. E.M.

**Bathstead** ever have to ride a dull beast like this instead of a brisk horse."

Well, we ride out of the valley again, and he shows us a dyke that marks the old wall of the tún, he says, as it was in the Sturlung time, of course a long way beyond the present one [thirteenth century]. Thence we ride over the rough tongue between the two valleys, and passing to the left of those rock-crowned knolls aforesaid, enter the dale, riding high up to avoid the bogs: a many-gabled stead on the opposite hill-side has the classic name of Asgarð. When we first turn into the dale we can see the stead of Sælingsdale-tongue, where Gudrun lived with Bolli, but we presently fall among a knot of little knolls (made I suppose by the slips from the hills above), which choke up the valley, and hide it from us: the hillsides here are much like [those] in Hwamm, but rockier and barer, much scarred by recent slips, and the crest of them often running up into wall-like rocks; we pass a little stead among the knolls, and presently work our way out of them, and can see on the other side of the valley Sælingsdale-tongue lying rather high up the slopes: just inward of it, a strange mass of pillared rock nearly joins the hillside standing at right-angles to it, and on our side the hill pushes out a spur to meet this, narrowing the valley here into a gate through which a river runs, and through which you may see the further valley all closed up by a sweeping wall of hillside: the valley below us is flat and marshy: on our side, halfway between where we are and the gate aforesaid lies on this slope a little stead in a green tún, for the valley bottom is yellow with the bog-grass and the hill-slopes are grey and colourless, and this stead is Bathstead ("Laugar").

They are making hay down in the marshes, and the goodman of Bathstead seeing us, comes up to meet us, and kisses the old priest, and then takes us up the hill above the house, where amidst a shaly slip is the "Bath" that names the stead: it is some three feet square now, and about knee-deep, nearly boiling of course: the priest told us that he remembered it much bigger, and deep enough to take him up to the waist;

but that twenty years ago, a slip from the hill covered it up till it burst out again as we see, a queer little boiling driblet coming without warning from amid the bare stones, a few yards above the aforesaid bath. A little higher up the hill we come to another hot-spring coming out of a rock and running in an orderly bed afterwards; there are plenty of wild heartseases about it. We sit down and eat our lunch on the grass hard by and then go down to our horses and ride off past the stead, a very poor one with a little potatoe-cabbage garden round it. The day has gone grey now, though a few gleams of sunlight are scattered about among the hills on the other side. It is a very sad place: the sand hills we passed through shut out from this side all view of the water of Hwamm and the distant mountains; so sad it is that my heart sickened somewhat as when I first came to Laxdale the other day.

But the old priest takes us through those gates into the other half of the valley which we see now all closed in by high craggy cliffs jutting out into great buttresses here and there: he points out to us on our right the mouth of a valley coming into this one, the only opening from it, and names it Swinedale where Kiartan was beset and killed; and we ride on thence over a great waste of stones brought down by the stream over which the poor old man has a tumble right over his horse's head, but no harm done; thence on smooth grass we ride quite near the head of the dale, a dreadful lonely place, quite flat amid its bounding cliffs which are rent here and there into those dreadful *streets*<sup>2</sup> I told you of first in Thorsmark: hereabouts almost under the shadow of those cliffs the priest brings us to a low mound showing marks of old turf walls, and this he says is the site of the "setr"<sup>3</sup> or mountain-dairy where Bolli Thorleikson was killed by Kiartan's brothers. Then we turn back again, taking the other side of the valley, and go on the other side of that pillared gate-post rock aforesaid: it is called Tungu-stapi (Tongue-

<sup>2</sup> "Flat-floored, straight-sided," the note-book calls them. Ed.

<sup>3</sup> The Icelandic is 'sel;' the author has used the Norwegian word. Ed.

**Herdholt** staff-rock) and is called elf-haunted:<sup>2</sup> there is a tale about it translated in the first volume of that book of Magnússon's.

Up the slopes a little past this we come on a poor stead which is the Sælingsdale-tongue of to-day, where Gudrun lived with Bolli, and which she afterwards changed for Holyfell with Snorri the Priest: here I sat down on the site of the church Snorri built, with Bathstead just opposite me, the dreadful upper valley on my right, where the clouds were beginning to roll down on the enclosing mountains, and on my left Hwammfirth, and the peaked mountains beyond, inky purple, with cold gleams of sunshine tangled among them, though all was grey above our heads—ah me, what a desolate place! Yet when I went in to coffee to a very dark little dirty parlour, there was the bonder, a good-looking fellow, and his wife, making much of the old priest, and as merry a man as might be seen.

Coffee done, it is seven o'clock, and we shall scarcely get home by nine when Evans expects us; so we mount and ride off, the old priest taking affectionate leave of us at the mouth of the dale. We rode all we might back home to Herdholt, where I, coming to our tents, find three fine salmon-trout and a headless mallard laid out as the results of Evans's sport: the mallard he got in a queer way; he saw a falcon strike it, cutting its head clean off; then the falcon pounced on it but Evans drove him off and stole the duck.

Supper and bed was all that happened else that day, which I counted one of the best and most memorable days we had.