

Thursday, July 20th. In camp in the home-mead at Bergthorsknoll.

**A** GREY morning and raining a little: I walked about the stead after breakfast while the guides were packing, and had a good look at the knoll which rises at the back of the house, and which to my excited imagination looked like the fallen-in walls of the stead of the Sturlung period: it might well have been, for 'tis not likely that they would have built a house in the position of the present one with a knoll just above it, handy to burn it from: apropos, Oddi, which means a point in Icelandic, is the spit of land between the Western and Eastern Rang-rivers.

We started in very good spirits in despite of the rain under

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**thorsknoll** the guidance of the dean: who takes us carefully over the boggy land down to East Rang-river, which unlike the Western stream is a white (or *muddy*) river: then over bog and black sand to Thverá (Thwart-river), a dismal white stream running through a waste of black sand; this also we cross and ride along the side of it some miles, with the long line of the Lithe (like a down, say the downs by Brighton) on our left, running along till the great mountains swallow it: these mountains, glacier-topped at the further end, form an unbroken wall at the end of the Lithe: clouds hung about them, though the day was clearing now, and spite of the rain we saw the dust over there amid the dreadful wastes whirled up into red and grey columns that looked like lower clouds themselves: the pastures we were riding over were the deadest of dead flats till they reached the down country on the north or the mountain wall on the east. To me the whole scene was most impressive and exciting: as almost always was the case in Iceland, there was nothing mean or prosaic to jar upon one in spite of the grisly desolation: not however that we were riding over desolation either but over flowery grass enough, as long as we rode by the river-side: we were in great spirits, and, the ride being a short one to Bergthorsknoll, raced and tried our ponies' paces along the turf: so passing by a poor stead, we turn away from the river over the flat marsh-land to a stead on a round knoll called Hemla; there the Oddi-dean takes his leave, and we get a boy to guide us to Bergthorsknoll; there is little variety for a long way in the flat, which is mostly peaty dried-up-marsh-looking land: at last however we see three long mounds rising up from it, in a kind of chain, one covered with the buildings of a stead, and that is Bergthorsknoll; riding nearer to it we strike the richer pastures lying along the Affall, a turbid black-sanded river, one of the branches of the great glacier-drain, that comes from the waste mentioned above. So down along the river bank we ride till soon we are at the gate of the home-mead, which is both big and rich-looking: up the lane between the smooth turf walls to the house door, where the

bonder comes out to welcome us: he is very kind and busy to help; a black-haired bushy-bearded carle of about forty; not very clean, but very contented and smiling: he makes us welcome to pitch our tents anywhere we please in the home-mead, and we chose a corner under the wall and soon have them up: the hay is laying all about and there are a good many people making hay, who somehow don't seem so curious about us as they generally were on our journey: a little horse-play between Faulkner and me seemed quite to the good-man's taste however: the tents being pitched, I went off with my sketch-book intending to do something, and sat down in a place where one had the knolls and their garths against a corner of Eyjafell; but I soon found I was too lazy and stupid for it, and so gave it up, with the firm determination not to make myself miserable by trying it again: so I wandered about instead, and tried to get an impression of the place into me: the stead was a poor house built on the middle one of the three mounds: the bonder it seems, was only a tenant, holding I believe of the Dean of Oddi; though as I said the home-field was big and these desolate ploughed-up marshes are good pasture (for Iceland) in spite of their looks: the longest of the three mounds, which lay west from the house, rightly or wrongly, gave one strongly the impression of having been the site of Njal's house: it was about two hundred feet long and sloped steeply away into the flatter slope of the field: from its top one looked south across grey flats with a thin greyer line of sea and the Westman Isles rising out of it. Past the second mound on which the house stood, the home-mead was divided by a lane with a turf wall on either side going right down to the home-mead wall; then came the third mound, not many yards from the river bank, though the bonder told us that the river was encroaching, as most of these rivers do: I wandered about a while by myself, and then came back to camp, where I found Magnússon and Evans just come in with their guns, and then we all went up to the house for coffee at the bonder's invitation: this was the first bonder-house I had gone into, (the Dean of Oddi's be-

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ing exceptionally grand even for a priest's house) and my flesh quaked for fear of—the obnoxious animal—I being moved by silly travellers' tales: the house was of turf of course, with wooden gables facing south, all doors very low, and the passages very dark: the parlour we went into was a little square room panelled with pine: there was a table in it, one chair, and several chests, more or less painted and ornamented, round the walls: no bed, as was generally the case: from the open door we could see the ladder that led up to the common sleeping and living room called the *bað-stofa*,<sup>2</sup> but (in those early days) fear extinguished curiosity, and we sat where we were, drinking our coffee, which was very good: presently Magnússon in unloading his gun managed to pull the trigger, and off it went, sending the charge some six inches from the bonder's head through the beam above the door: Magnússon turned as white as a sheet, and I daresay I did too; but nobody was killed, and the bonder laughed uproariously, and so we made the best of it: then we went down to our camp, and set about fire-making, and cooking our dinner; a wild-duck to wit, which Evans shot yesterday: him we cut up and fried with bacon in spite of the rain, which now came on very fast: Magnússon was cook on this occasion, and we dined not ill: dinner over, there was nothing for it but to stop in our tent, but it was now about ten o'clock, so we got on all right: the bonder and his wife came for a talk presently, and we passed the rest of the evening merrily enough; and so to sleep; I in some trepidation as to how the tents would behave in this their first rain.