

Friday, July 21st. In camp in the home-mead of Lithend.

THE carline wakes me after a long night's sleep with coffee about half past seven. We get up presently, and find the morning fine, though the clouds hang about still, and look like rain to my inexperienced eyes. After breakfast the bonder comes and offers to show us the traditional places about the stead; so going round the knolls, he takes us

¹There was an inner enclosure round the house, a little potato and cabbage garden: all the turf walls were smooth and green.

first to a hollow close by the river side, and a few yards from the easternmost mound which they call Flosi's Hollow; the place where he and the other Burners tethered their horses, and lay in ambush before they set on the house: it is not big enough to hide a dozen men now (the Burners were a hundred) but they say the river has eaten up a big piece of it even in the memory of man: then going to the other extremity of the home-mead, he shows us the water that Kári leaped into to slake his burning clothes when "Life-luller was blue on either edge."¹ There is no stream there now, but a rushy boggy piece of land marks what has been a pond, and there are traces of a brook that once flowed from it; a few hundred yards further on they show us a little mossy hollow under a grass bank which they say is the hollow Kári lay down to rest in after the stream: a little stead close by it is called Kári's Garth: furthermore (as noting how much the present Icelanders realise the old stories) the bonder told us that when they were digging the foundations of a new parlour they came deep down on a bed of ashes.

So back again to camp, which was broken up by now: we paid for our entertainment and got to horse and away: riding back along pastures for a while thick with a bright blue gentian and other flowers (principally white clover) more familiar to me: I turned back once or twice to fix the place in my memory; and here I will recapitulate and tell what Bergthorsknoll looks like to-day, so as to have the matter off my conscience:

Three mounds something the shape of limpets rising from a bright green home-mead with a smooth turf wall all round it, but divided by a lane river-ward of the stead which is pitched on the middle mound; a wide shallow "white" river with black sand sweeping in a curve by the last of the mounds with a strip of smooth and flowery turf running along its banks: marshy land all round about, for the rest, all channelled with innumerable ruts, getting greyer and greyer in the distance, till on the south side it meets the sea from which rise the castle-like rocks of the Westman Isles, and on the

¹"And one edge of it was blue with fire. . . ." The Story of Burnt Njal, II, 182. Ed.

Lithend

north is stopped by the long line of the Lithe, above which the mass of Three-corner shows: westward the great plain seems limitless, but eastward it is soon stopped by the great wall which is the outwork of Eyjafell, dark grey rocks rising without intermediate slopes straight out of the plain, and with the ice-mountains at last rising above them.

The morning was bright and warm by then we started for Lithend: we turned from Affall presently and struck out over the flats for Thverá, going not far from our track of yesterday: after an hour or two's ride we come into smooth green meadows on this side of Thverá, and are close under the Lithe, which is the greenest place I have seen yet, and has many steads along it: we stopped for a rest in these green flat meadows, and sat on the garth wall of a little stead called Ere-sel: they were making hay there, and man and maid ran to have a stare at us, and I assay talk with the bonder: thence we get on to the black waste of sand above Thverá: cross the river and make one or two bad shots at getting into the road to Lithend, which we can see plain enough now lying on the hill-side: at last we mount up from the river and ride along through slopes of deep grass full of clover, but with marshy streams here and there cutting through them, till at last we strike the due road leading up to Lithend which takes us in a rather rugged and swampy way up the hill-side and so to a little stead in the midst of a steep slope, but with the ground levelled in front and on both sides of it, and that is the Lithend of to-day: unlike Bergthorsknoll, the home-mead is very small, but to make up for this the out-meadows are very rich and grassy; the hay is lying about in the home-mead as at Bergthorsknoll, but the out-meadows are not begun cutting yet: the bonder is smiling and kind and tells us we may pitch our tents where we please, so we choose a smooth mossy bit of turf to the west of the house, and about level with the tops of its roof: outside the turf wall of this the hillside slopes up steeply, and to the west of it a little stream has cut a deep ravine marshy at the bottom: looking west still one sees a long stretch of the green fertile Lithe, and

about a furlong from us in a biggish waterfall a stream goes to meet Thverá: looking south is the great plain we have been in yesterday and to-day, with the sea and Westman Isles beyond all: Bergthorsknoll just dimly visible on the verge of it: below our feet are flat green meadows between the Lithe and the mountain-wall over which we can see Gisli driving our horses to pasture, he and they looking like mice for the distance: in the middle of this plain rises a strange-shaped hill called Dímun, a name common to such-like lumpy hills, and, Magnússon says, a Celtic word: these meadows were Gunnar's great wealth in the old days, but they are now sadly wasted and diminished by the ruin of black sand and stones the always shifting streams of Markfleet (that splits into several branches here, Thverá, Affall, etc.) have brought down on it: the outworks of Eyjafell that have been running at right angles to the Lithe till just about opposite Lithend, turn now, and run nearly parallel with it for a space; then curving round form a huge wall at the bottom of the valley Markfleet flows from, and are joined there by the Tindafell range, of which this part of the Lithe is a spur: so that turning east here, you look into a deep valley entirely closed up at the end by a wall of glacier-topped mountains, exceedingly steep (those at the furthest end looking quite perpendicular), and nowhere broken into peaks; except that over this western corner of the wall you can see the summit of Eyjafell, and somewhat in advance of the east wall is a row of jagged and toothed black hills of strange and unaccountable shapes. The valley between these mountains is quite flat, and as we see it from here is all grassy except for the black stones and sand about the turbid white streams of Markfleet.

When we are comfortable in the tents, and have got our trench dug for cooking, the bonder comes and invites us to coffee, so we go in, and through the usual dark passages to the parlour, which is just such another as at Bergthorsknoll;¹ close by the door of it I saw the loom with a half-finished web

¹ But the floor was not boarded: hard earth only.

Lithend on it: in the entrance-hall stood a great Gothic chest of carved wood, 14th century of date and North German of place: the bonder said it came from Skálholt, the bishop's seat, which is not far from here.

Coffee over, we go back to our cooking: and if I may mention such subjects at Lithend, *I* was cook, as I may say for the first time; I dealt summarily with all attempts at interference, I was patient, I was bold, and the results were surprising even to me who suspected my own hidden talents in the matter: a stew was this trial piece; a stew, four plovers or curlews, a piece of lean bacon and a tin of carrots: I must say for my companions that they were not captious: the pot was scraped, and I tasted the sweets of enthusiastic praise.

After dinner came a man named Jón, from a farm a little farther east, on the Lithe, called Lithend-cot: he was not a bonder, a working man, a saddler only who lodged there: Magnússon introduced him to us as a connection of his wife's, though he told me afterwards he was a bastard, and a man deep in old lore: he was very shy but seemed a very good fellow: he talked a little English, and offered to guide us the next day to a place called Thorsmark, a wood up in that terrible valley east of the Lithe that I have spoken of so often: we were all excitedly pleased at the idea, except Faulkner, who had suffered considerably from the riding, and found it prudent to stay and rest for a day about the camp: after this we went about the stead with the bonder, and he showed us the traditional site of Gunnar's hall, a little to the east of the present house, on a space flattened out of the hillside: below it in a hollow is a little mound called by tradition the tomb of Sámr, the dog whose dying howl warned Gunnar of the approach of his enemies. Then he leads us up the hillside into a hollow that runs at the back of the houses, which meets another little valley at an obtuse angle going up which we come at last on a big mound rising up from the hollow, and that is Gunnar's Howe: it is most dramatically situated to remind one of the beautiful passage in the Njala where

Gunnar sings in his tomb:¹ the sweet grassy flowery valley **Lithend**
with a few big grey stones about it has a steep bank above,
which hides the higher hilltop; but down the hill the slope is
shallow, and about midways of it is the howe; from the top
of which you can see looking to right and left all along the
Lithe, and up into the valley of Thorsmark; and before you,
you look down on to the roofs of Lithend, and beyond it the
green pastures of the plain about Dímun, Eyjafell and its
outwork, and then the vast grey plains and the sea beyond
them, Bergthorsknoll rising up between land and sea.

We lay about the howe for some time, and then toiled up
the hill above the little valley till we got above the grassy
slopes, and could see clearer into the Thorsmark valley, and
had a sight of the spikes and glaciers of Tindafell lying north
of it, which the hill's brow had hidden before: also looking
north-west a little, saw over strange desolate sandy plains all
raked by the wind, one of the flanks of Three-corner, which
always *looks* three-cornered from every point of view. Then
we came down and went slowly back home: it must have
been about eleven at night as we passed the howe again: the
moon was in the western sky, a little thin crescent, not shin-
ing at all as yet, though the days are visibly drawing in, and
the little valley was in a sort of twilight now: so to camp and
into our tents away from the heavy dew: the wind north-west
and sky quite cloudless.

¹“Skarphedin and Hogni were abroad one evening by Gunnar's
howe, on the south side thereof: the moonshine was bright but
whiles the clouds drew over: them seemed the howe opened and
Gunnar had turned in the howe, and lay meeting the moon; and
they thought they saw four lights burning in the howe, and no shadow
cast from any: they saw that Gunnar was merry, and exceeding glad
of countenance: and he sang a song so high that they had heard it
even had they been farther off.” *Njála*, chap. 79.