

To Thors-
mark

Saturday, July 22nd. In camp at same place.

A BEAUTIFUL bright morning with the wind in the east and very little of it; a good sign, as on a fine day in Iceland the wind generally goes round with the sun. A man brings us a lot of clean-run brook trout for which we pay some infinitesimal price and have them fried for breakfast. Then Jón rides in, and after many admonitions to Faulkner about dinner, Magnússon, Evans and I set off with Jón for our expedition: riding down the steep path from Lithend we come on to pleasant level dry meadows between river and hillside: the Lithé itself gets steeper as we go along,¹ and many waterfalls come down it: one (Merkiár-foss) a very strange one: the water (a good deal of it too) pitches over the hill some fifty feet and is then hidden by a screen of thin rocks pierced with five round holes one below another: you can see it running behind four of these holes, and then it comes spouting out of the last one, and falls a long way down to the bottom of the hill, whence it runs, a beautiful clear stream, past our path into Thverá: just past this is Lithend-cot, where Jón lives: he goes home² to the stead to see about an extra horse, and invites us to come in: it is a very small room he inhabits with a bed in one corner, and a bookcase in the other: there are plenty of books in the case, Icelandic, German, Danish, and English: the latter language he is very anxious to master, and has learned Danish, which as a true-born Icelfander he hates of course, to help him to that knowledge: Shakespeare he has got, but says he finds him heavy: he puts two volumes of Chambers' Miscellany into his pocket, if by chance he may get a lesson out of Magnússon this day: then after a drink of milk we mount again and ride on up the valley: the hillsides still getting steeper, and crowned above the next farm (Eyvindarmúli) by bare basaltic pillars: after this the hills fall a little back from the flat of the valley, which is grassy still where

¹ Properly speaking *ends* I suppose, the slopes are so steep.

² An Icelfander always talks of going *home* to any stead on the road, whether he is living there or not.

we are riding: up in one cleft of the slopes I could see birch-scrub growing, the first I have seen yet; it looked very dark and rich to my eyes accustomed by now to the light green or grey of the thin grass: about here we passed by a handsome-looking farm called Borkstead, on the hillside, and are now (since Eyvindarmúli), quite in the shut-in valley, with Markfleet no great way on our right, his white waves showing sharp every now and then above the flat. So at last we are at Fleet-dale where the long hill called the Lithe is cut by a valley running at right-angles to it: we have ridden about a couple of hours from Lithend by now, and are to change horses here before we enter the stony wastes beyond; for here the steep hills draw close together, and there is nothing between them but the bed of Markfleet (some one and a half miles across?). The stead here was pitched prettily on a sort of terrace, with a cabbage-potato-angelica garden in front of it, and below it a green meadow with one of those little clear streams winding about almost flush with the grass that we saw so many of: so here we leave our spare horses and Eyvindr, who, by the way, has ridden with us, and has a kinsman at the stead. Then on we clatter over the loose stones till we come to the river-side and ride up it:¹ such an ugly looking water, quite turbid and yellowish-white, smelling strongly of sulphur, and running at a prodigious rate, all tossed up into waves by its rocky bottom: Jón rides along looking for a ford, but we don't cross till we come to where a sharp scarped cliff comes down to the river and cuts our path off: here we stop; Magnússon bids me take off my gloves so that I may have the firmer grip of the horse's mane in case of a slip; then he takes my reins, and Jón takes Evans', and down we go into the icy water, Jón and Magnússon riding above us to break the stream: this crossing was soon over, the stream being narrow though deep and strong; but we were fairly in the middle of a labyrinth of such streams and a few rods further on had to ford again a much wider arm: I was quite contented not to have my own reins

¹ *One* only of its many streams.

The fords and held on to the pommel of the saddle with both hands, and I certainly could not have guided my horse a bit: then came another after a few yards of shingle which was the worst yet, because Jón had to lead us a good way down stream where the water shallowed at the meeting of two arms of the river; and this going down stream was the worst to me; the water seemed coming in a great hill down on us, running so fast by us that I quite lost any sense of where I was going, and felt no doubt that the horses were backing: so much so that I made a shift to sing out to Magnússon and ask him why: if he said anything it was lost in the uproar of the stream, and presently we were at the shallow, and heading up stream: with a curious sensation of having suddenly in one stride gone many yards, and there we were again safe on dry—stone. This was the worst of the fords by a good way: the ponies were splendidly behaved, bold and cautious, and throwing themselves sideways to the stream; Magnússon's stumbled once though,¹ and I should have been afraid but I felt that I was not responsible, and thought only of my day's sight-seeing.

From this stream we rode over the shingle, which sloped a little up to the cliffs, on to other shingle, which marked where the valley was free from water by being covered with bright yellow-green moss, thickly sprinkled with pink and red stone-crop of a very beautiful kind: the mountains on our right were both steep and high, and just before us ran up into a huge wall with inaccessible clefts in it projecting into the valley, and crowned by a glacier that came tumbling over it: but round the valley-ward tongue of this, lay fair grassy slopes, under a cliff red with burning,² where we rested presently gladly enough, for the day was very hot by now: this is called Goðaland, and a glacier above mentioned Goðalands-Jokul. Then on again, and past this the cliffs were much higher especially on this side, and most unimaginably strange: they overhung in some places much more than

¹ I rode the little chestnut I brought home.

² Volcanic burning: he constantly mentions this. Ed.

seemed possible; they had caves in them just like the hell-
mouths in 13th century illuminations; or great straight Thors-
pillars were rent from them with quite flat tops of grass and mark
a sheep or two feeding on it, however the devil they got there:
two or three tail-ends of glacier too dribbled over them here-
about, and we turned out of our way to go up to one: it seem-
ed to fill up a kind of cleft in the rock wall, which indeed I
suppose it had broken down; one could see its spiky white
waves against the blue sky as we came up to it: but ugh! what
a horrid sight it was when we were close, and on it; for we
dismounted and scrambled about it: its great blocks cleft into
dismal caves, half blocked up with the sand and dirt it had
ground up, and dribbling wretched white streams into the
plain below: a cold wind blew over it in the midst of the hot
day, and (apart from my having nearly broken my neck on it)
I was right glad to be in the saddle again. The great moun-
tain-wall which closes up the valley, with its jagged outlying
teeth, was right before us now, looking quite impassable,
though the map marks a pass, leading up into one of the main
roads north and east. The mountains were about at their high-
est by now: I noted a bit of them like a Robinson Crusoe hut
with an over-hanging roof to it; and, on the other side of the
river, a great spherical ball stuck somehow in a steep slope of
black rock: more often the wall would be cleft, and you would
see a horrible winding street with stupendous straight rocks
for houses on either side: the bottom of the cleft quite level,
but with a white glacier stream running out of it, and the
whole blocked up at the end by the straight line of the mas-
ter-mountain: about here we crossed three streams running
from these clefts, and then turned down to Markfleet again,
for we were getting near those outlying teeth of the wall now;
also on the other side we could see the cliffs sink into grassy
slopes and valleys here and there, grown about with birch-
scrub, and that was Thorsmark. Two more streams of Mark-
fleet we cross now, and come on a queer isolated rock or pike
sticking out of the plain; and then crossing another stream
are on the same side as the wood, for the easternmost slope

Thors-
mark

of which we make: nor indeed on this side can we ride any further, for Markfleet runs by the foot of the cliff, rough and unfordable, so we ride up into a little grassy valley, down into which comes the wood of low birches which clothes both slopes of the hill: this is the first Icelandic wood I have been in. Jón says that an old man told him the trees used to be much bigger than they are now, but they were pretty much all cut down in 1830 (I think). To-day they are good big bushes, rising from stocks, where sure enough the axe has been at work, the tallest of them may be about 10 feet high: they are very close set together and all tasselled with blossom and smell most deliciously in the hot day, and the grass in the little valley is deep and flowery: we unsaddled our horses here, and then struggled up the steep hill-side through the birch-boughs to look over the brow of the hill: the others outstripped me soon, so feeling tired and a little downhearted with the savagery of the place, I sat down as soon as I was clear of the wood on the bare shale of the steep slope that overlooked the valley, and turned to the mountain that rose over the bounding wall of rocks, the same scarped flat-topped mountain I have spoken of before: I could see its whole dismal length now, crowned with overhanging glaciers from which the water dripped in numberless falls that seemed to go nowhere; I suppose they were a long way off, but the air was so clear they seemed so close that one felt it strange that they should be noiseless: at right angles to this mountain was the still higher wall that closed the valley, which as aforesaid had never changed or opened out as such places generally do; below was the flat black plain space of the valley, and all about it every kind of distortion and disruption, and the labyrinth of the furious brimstone-laden Markfleet winding amidst it lay between us and anything like smoothness: surely it was what I "came out for to see," yet for the moment I felt cowed, and as if I should never get back again: yet with that came a feeling of exaltation too, and I seemed to understand how people under all disadvantages should find their imaginations kindle amid such scenes.

So when I had looked my fill I went down through the fragrant birch-boughs on to the grass and lay down there till my fellows joined me, when I took out the glove full of biscuits and sausage that Faulkner had given me and the whiskey flask, and we lunched and smoked, while Jón took out his Chamber's Miscellany and had an English lesson from Magnússon; and so at last to saddle, and back again; Jón talking busily, this wild place being a sort of pet enthusiasm of his; he told us how he had gone down this valley in the winter with the snow covering either hillside, and the moon at its brightest: of sheep-gatherings he had been at, where every individual sheep has to be carried on horse-back over the fords, of expeditions he had made for the fun of the thing up into the pathless wastes about here, & finally as we crossed one of the streams that run into Markfleet he told us the timely and cheerful story of how riding in the autumn tide with a party down this valley, they coming to this stream concluded it to be fordless, but nevertheless one of the rashest cried out that he would not be stopped, dashed into the water, where his horse was immediately swept off his legs down stream, and the last they saw of the man was him clutching with both arms round the horse's neck, in which position the bodies of both horse and man were found driven ashore lower down.

Past Goðalands, as we rode over the moss-covered stones, for the first (and only) time in my journey the poney fell on his nose, and I over it, without any sort of damage to either however. It seemed to be rather a ticklish job crossing some of the fords on the way back, as the river had risen with the bright hot day; at that worst place I spoke of before, Jón made two or three assays before he durst take us across: it looked really like an adventure to see him sitting gravely on his horse in the middle of the river peering about and shading his eyes against the low westering sun that was now pouring into the valley: however we all came across safely though Evans at starting sank up to the girths in a quicksand; and for my part, though as before I could not tell the least which

way I was going, yet I felt getting used to it all: the last stream we were obliged to cross much lower down than we did this morning, and a rough crossing it was; Magnússon's horse stumbled perilously in the middle of the stream, and I certainly felt as if I had had a present of a new lease of life made me when we were once again on the black shingle, and galloping towards the green pastures of Fleetsdale.

Biorn the boaster of the Njala lived in one of three steads called the Mark on the south side of this grim valley, Kettle of that ilk on another: and a little way north of it is Thorolfsfell where Kari lived after marrying Njal's daughter.

We changed horses again at Fleetsdale, and went into the house for a talk with the bonder and his wife, who seemed very pleased to see us and gave us coffee and brandy: their house was neat and new-built, and had a prosperous air about it: Eyvindr showed us a horse the bonder had for sale; a very ugly one, dark dun of colour: we bought him afterwards and he turned out the best of our pack horses.

On from thence to Borkstead afore mentioned, where again we turned in; the house was better still, better than Fleetsdale; the bonder an old man with seven tall sons, most of them really handsome fine men, tall, thin, with long straight light hair and light grey eyes: of course we had more coffee here: they were very busy bringing home hay from the outmeads: it was the first time I had seen the poneys with their big loads of hay, and queer enough they looked: I note by the way that an unsavoury idiot greeted us at the porch door asking each of us his name; he followed us into the parlour, and took up each man's glass after he had drunk and squeezed it, laughing approvingly at his cunning the while: the explanation of him was that in Iceland where there are no workhouses or lunatic asylums, the paupers or lunatics are distributed among the bonders to be taken care of.

It is getting late as we ride away, about half past seven I think: the evening was lovely, quite warm still and the air full of the scent of the hay they were getting in everywhere: Evans rode hard away from us towards Faulkner and dinner,

while I rather loitered with Magnússon and Jón: we went into yet another stead, Eyvindarmúli, where it seems the bonder, who was very deep in old lore, was flatteringly anxious to see me. He was a grave black-bearded intelligent-looking carle of about fifty, and soon he got discussing with Magnússon and Jón minute probabilities of time and place in the Njala, pretty much as if the thing had happened twenty years ago: from that he got to lamenting the wasteful cutting of the woods in that country-side: as we departed I made a bad shot at the saddle trying to mount *more Islandico* on the wrong side, and measured my length on the turf. The bonder without the ghost of a smile on his face hoped I wasn't hurt, and only expressed his feelings by saying to Magnússon, "The skald is not quite used to riding then."

I remember thinking the little stead looked very pretty under the high slopes crested with basaltic pillars as I turned in the saddle riding through the gap in the home-mead. Conscience smote us as we left Eyvindarmúli as to how Faulkner was faring with the dinner, as we had promised seven for the hour, and it was now past eight, so we rode on our best now, and presently rode off the steep path to Lithend into our camp, where we found Faulkner standing over the frying-pan with that cold air of a man "who hasn't been," and not in a very good temper about the dinner: Evans who had been in nearly an hour took his side of course, and we had to take our scolding quietly: as Jón was dining with us I wish the dinner had been better; it principally consisted of birds the Icelanders call tjaldr¹ (they are black and white with an orange bill) and we oyster-catchers. They are waders and are very common over Iceland: Faulkner had shot them at a venture: tough they were and fishy, and—to say the truth, Faulkner has no genius for cookery. However, we were comfortable enough by then we came to the grog, and after a long talk we went to bed in a cloudless night, the wind rather cold and north as usual after a fine day; and I slept like a stone all night.

¹The meaning of tjaldr is quite uncertain. The scientific name is *hæmatopus ostralegus*. Linn. E.M.