

To the
Geysirs

Tuesday, July 25th. In camp at Geysir.

GOT up at eight very unwillingly, but we had a long day's ride before us: Sira Guðmundr was loth to part with us, and seemed to think the ride to Geysir overlong: however we were resolved: we had breakfast much the same as supper, and then Sira Guðmundr took out a little Icelandic-English reader, & got me to give him a lesson: he translated easily enough, but somewhat abroad in his pronunciation: then I got him with some difficulty to take a pretty Salust from me, and he bade us good-bye with many thanks: he sent his son with us to show the way to the ferry over Thurso-water, the train having been despatched about an hour before to the ford which is lower down. So off we rode on a calm soft morning but threatening rain: we soon rode off the pretty green home-mead and crossing a shallow river were among the lava again, which was pretty much like the last we had ridden through last night: we were soon on the bank of Thurso-water, a terrible looking stream here, about as wide as the Thames at Richmond, white and turbid and running at a prodigious rate, in great waves; just above us it ran through a gorge formed by low cliffs, but all about the ferry and lower the banks were low; we towed our horses across after the boat, from which as we crossed we could see our train just amidst the ford lower down: we met presently and the young Guðmundr went back home: this day's ride is the one most confused in my head of all we had, our guides lost their way a quarter of an hour after we left Thiórsárholt (the ford and ferry), and they were losing their way all day long as soon as the temporary guides left us; (I paid three dollars away in small change for this help). It began to rain furiously I remember about an hour's ride from Thiórsárholt as we were down in a ravine trying to get across a most hopeless looking bog: we were seldom on any visible road, and were for ever getting embogged and having to try back, passing through a country very ragged and sour with rock and swamp and otherwise with little character: but after crossing a bigish river, an affluent of Whitewater, called Big Laxá, the country altered, being all beset with ridges crested with bare

basalt columned rocks that made strange valleys and gorges, beyond which we could see far away the masses of the huge glaciers of Long- and Ball-Jokul. We came to Hruni about one o'clock: near it by the wayside is the first hot spring I have seen; it was confined in a little oblong artificial basin, and the water was hot enough to bear one's hand in comfortably. Hruni is an important place, a church-stead; but we didn't go home there not wishing to be delayed by hospitality, so we lay on the grass outside the home-mead, and eat our sausage and biscuit with the rain beginning again: past this we ride into a wide shallow valley through which runs Little Laxá whence we can see a mile or two to our left a great column of steam going up from a hot spring, (Hver, kettle, is the Icelandic). The weather got wild and stormy about here, and I don't remember much of the country till we came to a stead on a knoll on the side of the high bank of White-water: the name I didn't learn; it is marked but not named in the map and is a little above the ferry of Brœðratunga:¹ the little home-mead had just been cleared of its hay and a crowd of sea-swallows were hovering over it, after the worms I suppose, filling the air with their shrill cries. We got a guide across the ford here and the guides made some show of caution about the crossing. asking us to take fresh horses and the like, for White-water is one of the biggest rivers² in Iceland: it was quite a joke however after Mark-fleet, though its four or five streams running among the black waste of stones and sand looked formidable enough: a very bright gay red-purple flower with grey leaves and red stems grew in great masses amidst the river-bed: I don't know the name of it.³ We turned north up the river from the ford, and in a mile or two had to take another guide at a stead

Crossing
White-
water

¹ The name of the stead is Kópsvatn. E.M.

² We had crossed its estuary Olfusá on our second day's ride, and all these rivers in fact on our way to Bergthorsknoll. You mustn't confuse this White-water with the Burgfirth one which we come to afterwards.

³ The eyrarrós (shingle-rose) is a kind of willow-herb, *epilobium montanum* Linn. E.M.

Geysirs

that lay under a steepish ridge rising from the wide boggy plain: he was a fierce-looking man, so much so that I was fain to call him Wolf the Unwashed, but he turned out to be the mildest of dirty fellows: with him our strayings were over, for he guided us right to within sight of our camping ground: he leads us up through a pass in the ridge aforesaid into a little narrow valley that touched me strangely, and through that into an open down-like country, much grown over with very low birch-scrub: presently as we ride along Gisli points out to me through an opening of the hills on our left a low hill across a flat valley, all burnt red with earth-fires, and underneath it a whitish slope with a great cloud of steam drifting about it: this (a long way off still) is our journey's end to-day, and I feel ashamed rather that so it is; for this¹ is the place which has made Iceland famous to Mangnall's Questions and the rest, who have never heard the names of Sigurd and Brynhild, of Njal or Gunnar or Grettir or Gisli or Gudrun: Geysir the Icelanders call it, which being translated signifieth the Gusher. Well after a longish ride of these birch-clad hills we come into scanty meadows, and to a stead amidst them overlooking a river called Tungufliót, and beyond it the valley of Hawkdale in which the Geysirs lie: we rest a little on the hill side here and then go down and cross the river, one of whose three streams was deep and rough: angelica grows wild about its banks, and the guides throw themselves on it with great enthusiasm: the weather has got cold and cheerless now, and the low clouds drift all about the hills as we ride over a mile or two of rough caniculated ground: and 'tis with a grumbling feeling that I turn away from the neat-looking stead of Haukadálr with its smooth

¹The Geysirs are not mentioned in any Icelandic writing before the 18th century: of course ordinary hot springs are often spoken of, and name many steads. [The annals of "the men of Oddi" mention hot springs coming up and older ones disappearing in the neighbourhood of Hawkdale 1294. Geysir is not specially mentioned till the 17th century. E.M.]

bright green home-mead to the red Melr¹ (as Gisli called it) Geysirs aforesaid, and the ugly seared white slope, all drifted across by the reek of the hot-springs. We can see the low crater of the big Geysir now quite clearly; some way back on the other side of Tungufliót I had taken it for a big tent, and had bewailed it for the possible Englishman whom I thought we should find there: however go we must, and presently after crossing a small bright river, come right on the beastly place, under the crater of the big Geysir, and ride off the turf on to the sulphurous accretion formed by the overflow, which is even now trickling over it, warm enough to make our horses snort and plunge in terror: so on to a piece of turf about twenty yards from the lip of the crater: a nasty, lumpy thin piece of turf, all scored with trenches cut by former tourists round their tents: here Eyvindr calls a halt, and Evans dismounts, but I am not in such a hurry: the evening is wretched and rainy now; a south wind is drifting the stinking steam of the southward-lying hot springs full in our faces: the turf is the only nasty bit of camping-ground we have had yet, all bestrewn too with feathers and wings of birds, polished mutton-bones, and above all pieces of paper: and—must I say it—the place seemed all too near to that possible column of scalding water I had heard so much of: understand I was quite ready to break my neck in my quality of pilgrim to the holy places of Iceland: to be drowned in Markfleet, or squelched in climbing up Drangey seemed to come quite in the day's work; but to wake up boiled while one was acting the part of accomplice to Mangnall's Questions was too disgusting. So there I sat on my horse, while the guides began to bestir themselves about the unloading, feeling a very unheroic disgust gaining on me: Evans seeing that a storm was brewing sang out genially to come help pitch the tents. "Let's go home to Haukadal," quoth I, "we can't camp in this beastly place."

¹ Common enough in English compounds, e.g. Melbourne, Melrose.

In camp

“What is he saying,” said Eyvindr to Gisli:

“Why, I’m not going to camp here,” said I:

“You must,” said Eyvindr, “all Englishmen do.”

“Blast all Englishmen!” said I in the Icelandic tongue.

“Well,” said Evans (who behaved like a lamb on this occasion) “couldn’t we pitch our tent on the end of the slope there?” For at the back of the scalded ground were nice green slopes leading up to the scarped red cliffs of the low hill aforesaid.

“Can’t,” said Eyvindr, “that’s the Hawkdale men’s mowing grass.” He was rather more than half grinning at me all the time, don’t you see.

“Damn the Hawkdale men,” said Evans, when I told him what Eyvindr had said, “come and see whether we shall roll off it in the night or not.” So off we went, but there was clearly a fair chance of our rolling off, so back I had to come, and dismount under Eyvindr’s grins, still very sulky.

However I set to hard at the tent-pitching, not a cheerful operation in itself on a wet night; and by dint of our spade we made a tolerably comfortable lair; spread the blankets and crept in: nothing lothe to rest, for we had made a thirteen hours ride of it, and though I was not tired, I was hungry enough. My spirits rose considerably with the warmth and dryness of the tent, and the opening of the beef-tin, and brewing of chocolate; but we had scarcely taken three mouthfuls before there came a noise like muffled thunder, and a feeling as though some one had struck the hollow earth underneath us some half dozen times; we run out, and hear the boiling water running over the sides of the great Kettle, and see the steam rising up from the hot stream, but that was all: and these attempts at eruptions go on hourly or oftener, all day, but the big Geysir does not fairly spout out oftener in general than about once in five or six days: I confess I went back to my dinner with my heart beating rather; for indeed my imagination must have been sluggish if it couldn’t suggest a new Geysir bursting out just under our

tent in honour of my arrival: however nothing but a sufficiency of beef, which was very good, by the way, spoiled my appetite that night. In camp

Dinner over, Gisli brings us a pail of cold water from the stream above the flow from Geysir, and takes me a little way up the scalded slope to a small pool, still and deep, with a sort of bridge across it, and a little stream of overflow from it; the water of it is boiling an inch or two below the surface, and so clear that in the twilight I couldn't see that there was any water there, as it was pretty much flush with the lip of it; as dim as the light is, I can see, looking through the steam, its horrible blue and green depths and the white sulphur sides of it sticking out: it is called Blesi or the Sigher. Gisli follows Eyvindr herewith down to the stead at Hawkdale where they are to sleep, and I heat a pot of water for our grog in Blesi, its own water being extremely foul of taste, and go back to the tent rather glad I am not quite alone in that strange place. So to bed at last and sound asleep enough, bating an occasional waking from the thump, rumble and steam of the big Gusher.