

## CHAPTER IV. FROM THE GEYSIRS THROUGH THE PASS TO WATERDALE. The Pass

Saturday, July 29th. In camp at Brunnar.

**S**ET off in high spirits under Sigurd's guidance about half past ten on a bright morning, and, passing by the half-hid stream where I fished, crossed the little bright river, and went straight at the steep hill-side opposite; it is covered with a very good birch-wood, among which it is pleasant to see the thrushes (or redwings?) flitting about: we are some time mounting the hill which is very steep, and I and Evans tail off, but at last come up to the top on to a bit of rough grass full of crowberries<sup>1</sup> on which Magnússon, who has waited for us, is fairly browsing, face among the grass. Thence over sand, mostly, alongside a craggy ridge till we come on to a valley filled with moss-and-flower-grown lava, walled ahead of us by steep black cliffs which seem to run a long way on to the north but open to the south except for a chest-shaped mountain that partly blocks up the way: now descending a little we ride into a bight of this valley, where the black cliffs fell back into a semicircle, leaving a quite flat space, grass-grown right up to the feet of the perpendicular cliffs; it impresses itself on my memory as a peculiarly solemn place, and is the gate of the wilderness through which we shall be going now for some three days: we make for a part of the wall that is broken down into a ruin of black stones and begin to scale it in spite of its most impassable look, and somehow stumble up to the top of the pass (Hellisskarð) and there we are in the wilderness: a great plain of black and grey sand, grey rocks sticking up out of it; tufts of sea-pink, and bladder campion scattered about here and there, and a strange plant, a dwarf willow, that grows in these wastes only, a few sprays of long green leaves wreathing about as it were a tangle of bare roots, white and blanched like bones: that is the near detail of the waste, but further on, on all sides

<sup>1</sup> Crowberries are shiny black heath-berries growing on a resinous plant, and themselves resinous—the other heathberry, the blue berry, is the same as our bilberry, and is bloomed like a plum.

rise cliffs and mountains, whose local colour is dark grey or black (except now and then a red place burnt by old volcanic fires) and which show through the atmosphere of this cloudy and showery day various shades of inky purple.<sup>1</sup> As we ride on, we see ahead and to our left the wide spreading cone of Skialdbreið (Broad-shield) which is in fact just like a round shield with a boss; running south from its foot is a rent and jagged line of hills which shuts us out from the rest of the world on that side; on our right and closer to us than these, is an enormous wall-sided mountain with a regular roof like a house called Hlöðufell (Barn-fell). It stands quite isolated, is some four miles long I should think, and has never been scaled by any one: over its shoulder we can see now the waste of Long-Jokul, that looks as if it ended the world, green-white and gleaming in the doubtful sun; that and a faint tinge of green on the lava of Skialdbreið is the only thing in the distant landscape that isn't inky purple: it was a most memorable first sight of the wilderness to me.

After a while we come to a little meadow,<sup>2</sup> about half a mile across just under the side of Hlöðufell, and stop to bait there; and eat merrily enough though it begins to rain with a cold wind, and the day seems regularly closing in for wet: we can see Geitland's Jokul now over the north shoulder of Hlöðufell. So to horse again, when we are soon off the grass and on to a very rough piece of lava, over which in our excitement we ride somewhat recklessly, till the driving rain chills us, and the astounding nature of the road, heaven save the mark, makes anything but the slowest of walks impossible: for we are going now just where the edge of a lava-field tumbles over a series of slopes; imagine that we are going up and down hill, over a mass of stones from pieces as big as your fist to rocks twenty inches or so cube, quite loose, just a little sand sprinkled among them, and every one of them, large or small, with fine sharp edges, and the slopes steep enough, I can tell you. We got off and walked a good bit, but I for my

<sup>1</sup> On bright cloudless days the distance goes astonishingly blue.

<sup>2</sup> Called Hlöðuvellir (Barn meads) marked much too big in the map.

part had to keep steadying myself with my hand; I should think we made about two miles an hour over this pretty king's highway (for as I live by bread 'tis marked as a road in the map) and there was not one of the ponies that wasn't cut and bleeding more or less before the day was over. Thorisdale

Meanwhile we have put Hlöðufell behind us, but Skialdbreið is still unchanged on our left: on our right is a mass of jagged bare mountains, all beset with clouds, that, drifting away now and then show dreadful inaccessible ravines and closed up valleys with no trace of grass about them among the toothed peaks and rent walls; I think it was the most horrible sight of mountains I had the whole journey long. From these mountains a few long spurs ran down to join the lava plain we are going on; and in one place the tumbling peaks smooth themselves into a long straight wall with a pyramid in the midst; the sun shone through the rain hereabout, and showed over this wall a boundless waste of ice all gleaming, and looking as far away as those high close-packed gleaming white clouds one sees sometimes on fine evenings; just over this gap is the site of the fabulous or doubtful Thorisdale of the Grettis-Saga; and certainly the sight of it threw a new light on the way in which the story-teller meant his tale to be looked on.

So on we stumble; great lumps of lava sticking up here and there above the loose stones and sand, Skialdbreið never changing, and the hills we are making for looking as if they were going back from us. Certainly this is what I came out for to see, and highly satisfactory I find it, nor indeed to-day did it depress me at all. At last we turn the corner of a big black sand-hill, and are off the stones on to sand thickly besprinkled with flowers, then these presently disappear, and we ride under the sand-hills over smooth black sand, that stretches far into the distance, getting quite purple at last, till a low bank of sand along a stream side stops it: in which bank is suddenly a scarped place which is deep Indian red. Past the sand hills we get into lava again but of the solid manageable kind: the weather has cleared by now, and we

**Brunnar** are coming near our supper and bed, and at last can see a patch of green on a little slope side which is verily it. My pony was tired and I had been tailing for some time when I saw the sight; so now I push on at my best, and at last coming over the brow of a shaly slope see it lying before me, a little swampy river and over that a shallow valley, marshy at the bottom but with slopes of firmer grass.<sup>2</sup> I scuttle across the stream and the marsh, and up into the hollow on the slope side where the horses are halted, which is on the edge of a little gully of sand and loam which is handy to make our fire in; and so straightway Magnússon and I go to work with some birch-boughs we have brought from Hawkdale, which we eke out with the resinous crowberry branches, and soon have a fire, whereon we fry a joint (nondescript, Magnússon's butchering, but partaking of the nature of a leg) of lamb parboiled yesterday in the Sigher, then we make a great pot of cocoa, and are very happy in spite of the rain which again comes peppering on our tents: the guides creep under a very primitive tent that Sigurd of Hawkdale has brought with him, and so presently to sleep after a nine hours' ride over much the roughest road I met with in Iceland: Faulkner in good condition.