

A JOURNAL OF TRAVEL IN ICELAND

1871

CHAPTER I. LONDON TO REYKJAVIK

Thursday, July 6th, 1871.

AFTER a fidgety afternoon C.J.F. and I started from Queen Square in two cabs to meet Magnússon there,¹ Evans having gone on before by steam-boat from London Bridge. Of course I felt as if I had left everything behind, yea, as if I myself should be left behind. We found Brown² waiting to see us off, but no Magnússon as yet, so we took our tickets (third class) and C.J.F. bribed the guard to keep other people out of the carriage, telling him we should be five in number, for Magnússon's womankind were expected to come with him.

He was so late that I began to get very fidgety, for though that morning my heart had failed me and I felt as if I should have been glad of any accident that had kept me at home, yet now it would have seemed unbearable to sleep in London another night.

Thursday, July 6th, Newcastle.

At last just a minute before the train was due to start he came in a cab, without his womankind, who could not get off till the next day: he fidgeted me still more by having a quarrel with his cabman, but at last we got him into the carriage, where the guard came to look at us, and pulled a face at first at our being only three; but at last he brightened up on consideration of what he obviously deemed the depth of Faulkner's cunning, and there we were off for Iceland: a third-class railway journey by night (we started at a quarter past nine) is neither eventful nor pleasant; we droned away as usual in such cases, though I for my part was too excited to sleep, though we made ourselves comfortable with two of the huge blankets that were to be our bedding in camp. Day dawned,

¹At King's Cross Station. Ed. ²Ford Madox-Brown. Ed.

Newcastle dull and undramatic as we left York, over about the dullest country in England, striking neither for build of earth, nor for beauty of detail: as we passed between the forges of Darlington the sun fairly rose and got confused strangely with some of the fires of the ugly sheds there: it was one of those landscapes in the sky, the sunrise was, with light clouds floating far in advance of the gleaming white undersky, and a clear green space down low in the horizon. North of Darlington the country gets hilly, and is soon full of character, with sharp valleys cleft by streams everywhere; but it is most haplessly blotched by coal, which gets worse and worse as you get towards Newcastle, so wretched and dispiriting that one wants to get out and back again: Newcastle itself has been a fine old town and very beautifully situated, but is now simply horrible: there is a huge waste of station there, quite worthy of it.

Thursday, July 6th, Berwick.

Leaving Newcastle the country gets cleaner, but is dull enough till we strike the sea at Warkworth with a glimpse of a very beautiful old castle there; thence we go pretty much by the seaside past the poetical-looking bay in which lies Holy Island: a long horn runs far out into the sea there, and near the end of it, all up the hill, is a little town that looks very interesting from a distance: the country is all full of sudden unexpected knolls and dales, but is nowise mountainous; it has plenty of character: so on still along the sea till we come to Berwick: there the Tweed runs into a little harbour, nearly land-locked, and on the north of this lies a picturesque old town on the hillside with long bridge of many pointed arches uniting it to the south bank, the said bridge having its arches increasing in size as they get nearer the north bank instead of in the middle as usual: I suppose because the scour of the water on that side made the water deeper, and therefore bigger arches were wanted for the bigger craft that could pass under them. We are all very tired by now, none of us having slept anything to speak of: Faulkner indeed did get to sleep a little before Berwick, but I woke him up to

see it; for which rash act I was rewarded with an instinctive Berwick clout on the head.

So there we were in Scotland, I for the first time: north of the Tweed the country soon got very rich-looking with fair hills and valleys plentifully wooded. I thought it very beautiful: we had left the sea now; but every now and then we would pass little valleys leading down to it that had a most wonderfully poetical character about them; not a bit like one's idea of Scotland, but rather like one's imagination of what the backgrounds to the border ballads ought to be: to compensate, the weather was exceedingly like my idea of Scotland, a cold grey half-mist half-cloud hanging over the earth.