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978-1-108-06120-9 - Iceland: Its Volcanoes, Geysers, and Glaciers

Charles Stuart Forbes

Excerpt

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TRAVELS IN ICELAND.

CHAPTER I.

PREFATORY.

IT hath been considered a wholesome custom, time out of mind, by travellers modern and profane—though I doubt if the former be not the profaner of the two—to render to their readers the motives of their voyage.

I make this assertion on the authority of no less an individual than Dumas the elder, who, in the ‘Exposition’ with which he prefixes his ‘Voyage en Suisse,’ expresses his great respect for the said custom; but, instead of following it, offers us a certain cure for the cholera, and a proof of the infallibility of journalism; both very good things when found, but rather foreign to his trip, which he subsequently informs us was due to an indigestion, and, if traced to its source, would

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PREFATORY.

CHAP. I.

be most probably fathered on some improver of Philippe or the Provençal Brothers.

For myself, I believe that few readers ever look at a preface, and prefer to plunge at once into cause and effect,—for which see next chapter.

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CHAPTER II.

The "Leviathan" — Voyage commenced — Captain and passengers — First night on board — The Faroes — Stromoe — Thorshaven — Fort and garrison — Church — Outskirts — A boatman's home — Depredations of sailors — Skaapen Fiord.

FISH dinners often tend to quaint results, and sometimes, like the tide,—

"lead God knows where."

However, as in the present case the result arrived before the dinner, I trust no kind friend will be inclined to insinuate, after the fashion of Bon Gaultier,

"Bless your soul! it was the salmon; salmon always makes him so."

I had to assist at an entertainment at the Trafalgar one sunny evening last June, and, never having seen the "Leviathan," I concluded "to combine my information," and, driving down early, embarked amidst a phalanx of so-called jacks-in-the-water; but Father Thames being as usual in a rather clouded state, his children like himself seemed born of mud.

Streaming past the supposed Thule of our water-

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rats with a strong flood, we were soon under the bows of Brunel's monster, immoveably chained as she appeared to be about half a mile further up the river.

Having admired her splendid entrance and noble proportions, the latter somewhat marred by her ungainly stern,—wondered at the gullibility of the British shareholder, and in what direction Brunel's audacious genius would next develop itself,—my eye, wearying of this endless iron mass, was drawn to some dozen small craft lying on the mud abreast, none of them as large as the quarter-boats this monster is to carry, but amongst whom greater activity seemed to reign, and my waterman informed me that they were fitting for the Iceland fishery. To visit their destination had been with me a day-dream since the time I revelled in 'Robinson Crusoe;' for, like many others, I had conceived it to be a "terra incognita" save to stray whalers and venturesome Danes, until the genial author of 'High Latitudes' showed that English yachtsmen are often capable of greater deeds than an afternoon sail in the Solent.

One of these smacks, for such they proved to be, being a remarkably likely-looking craft, and, as it turned out, a noted Thames yacht of the previous season, I determined to brave in her the odour of salt fish and gratify my thirst for travel.

But, like many other things, it was not to be. On

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my return to town I met an old friend, who briefly told me that he was just off.

“Where?” I exclaimed.

“To Iceland.”

“When?”

“To-morrow.”

“How?”

“By steamer from Leith.”

“Then I’ll come with you; what shall I bring?”

“Your oldest clothes, water-proof suit, gun and fishing-rod, and anything you may want to eat and drink, for you’ll get nothing up there.”

“What flies?”

“Dark.”

“Very well,” I added; “what train do you leave by?”

“The limited mail to-morrow night.”

“Then I’ll meet you at the station.”

Here again I was doomed to disappointment. I could not obtain the requisite leave in time, and was condemned to see my friend start, and wait my chance in the following trip of the steamer, thereby losing one of the best months for a northern journey. However, knowing that if I put it off for another year I might lose the opportunity altogether—at any rate, of having a companion in those desolate regions—I eventually, on the morning of the 21st of July,

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found myself on board the Danish mail steamer "Arcturus" groping our way out of the Forth in a fog which would have done honour to November.

Our vessel, a three-masted screw of some 280 tons and 80 horse-power, belonged to Messrs. Henderson of Glasgow, who have contracted with the Danish Government to carry the mails for five years between Copenhagen and Reykjavik during the summer months, calling at Leith on their outward and homeward voyage, and making about four trips in the season. She is clean and fast, and the Danish cheer provided is ample and wholesome. You will also find your bitter beer and Harvey sauce; but no luxurious man should make the trip, even if he can bespeak fine weather.

Our captain is a dapper little Dane, who, singularly enough, bought the lorch "Arrow" of Canton notoriety after her seizure by the British Government, and for a time drove a thriving trade in her betwixt Hong Kong and Siam, but eventually lost her.

Our cabin passengers are an intelligent Lothian farmer, who has an apt quotation from Burns for any idea that anybody may start; an American professor and an American physician,—the former, although a martyr to sea-sickness, has come all the way from the States to examine the Geysers, and returns immediately, by way of Germany, for the purpose of

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CHAP. II. A DANE ON A LOVE "PIGEON." 7

comparing notes with Bunsen the great chemist. A Danish Artillery officer, three of my countrymen, and myself; and we are all told. Forward, there are a few Icelanders returning to their native land, which they love like islanders, a common saying amongst them being "Island er hinn besta land sem solinn skinnar uppá"—"Iceland is the best land on which the sun shines."

Abaft, all with the exception of myself say they are bent on doing the Geysers during the week's stay of the vessel in Iceland, and returning; but from a subsequent regardless display of white kids and varnished boots on the part of the Dane, he was evidently bound to the far north on a love "pigeon," and eventually was betrothed and returned without his bride, proving the existence of "stern parients" even in Reykjavik.

As we rattle by Peterhead on a clear, calm July evening, and thread our way through hundreds of herring-boats, whose nets we with difficulty avoid, the stereotyped British iciness begins to thaw in spite of our ever-increasing latitude; and the absurdity of buttoning oneself up in a species of Pall Mall inanition gradually yields to the genial influences of tobacco and travel, and engenders good talk. Solferino and rifle corps, the backwoods and Japan, help us on towards the small hours, and under

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the rays of a waning moon one becomes well-nigh romantic, did not the return ticket supplied by the supercargo in the morning, and still in the breast-pocket of my shooting-coat, destroy the illusion, and remind one most forcibly that you must go a long way for romance in these days of steam. When you take your return ticket to Pompeii, enter Athens in a 'bus, and cannot even approach Jerusalem without some greasy Arab thrusting a hotel card in your face and touting his establishment with,—“Come to my hotel, sair; no bugs have got it,”—Byronism, as Thackeray justly tells us, is an anachronism and a sham, and Firdousi becomes the mere garnisher of three-volumed novelists.

Therefore, oh steward! some Geneva cold without, likewise my grego; and, coiled up on the cabin skylight, I with great content commence the first night of my Icelandic journey.

“I go across the ocean-foam,
Swift skating to my Iceland home
Upon the ocean-skates,* fast driven
By gales by Thurse's witch-wife given.”

Saga of King Harald Greyskin.—LAIING.

July 23rd.—The weather is most propitious, and our trip is so far prosperous; the Faroe Islands, for which we shaped our course on leaving Shetland yesterday morning, are in sight, though still some-

* An expression for ships.

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what distant, for the day is calm and cloudless, and their mountains and cliffs are lofty. It is noon ere we reach Nalsole, one of the group, behind which Thorshaven, our destination, is ensconced. We have met no single sail since we passed the rickety hull of a huge American liner: she had just been hove off the rocks of South Shetland, and, with only two lower masts standing and patched-up sides, an energetic little tug was endeavouring to drag her down to Glasgow for repair. But for all this our voyage has not been lonely. Up to last night, when I went to bed, we were escorted by a troop of ravenous gulls, which had followed us from Shetland. They, however, have been relieved by a more varied, and, if possible, audacious crew, who, not content with hanging in our wake, seem ready to do battle for permanent quarters, and their numbers are momentarily increasing.

Their home lies ahead, and we are fast approaching it: a triangular group of lofty table-shaped rocks, cropping out of the Atlantic, about a third of the way between the Shetlands and Iceland, and composed entirely of old volcanic formations, which have been superimposed beneath the depths of the ocean, and by subsequent igneous convulsion driven up to, and far beyond, the surface of the water. The twenty-five islands of which this group consists

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are so intimately related in formation and appearance, that they evidently were once a compact mass, in which upheaval has caused the rents, or rather fiords, by which they are now divided. In general these fiords are very deep, and vary from one to two miles in width, and are parallel to each other. Here the lay of the trap-beds and alternating strata may be distinctly traced from island to island in the face of the abrupt cliffs which in most parts bound their shores. And as we pass within a few hundred yards of the southern extremity of Nalsole, the screaming of our feathery friends is relieved by the low moaning of the Atlantic swell in the numerous caves and fissures which it has hollowed out in the softer portions of the trap. One of these caverns pierces the island from side to side, and forms a natural arch with nearly 1000 feet of superimposed rock, offering a passage for small craft in fine weather. Immediately above the cliffs, nearly all of which are perpendicular, and averaging about 800 feet in height, stripes and patches of a vivid green form a pleasant relief to the eye, and pasture to a few sheep during the summer. These grassy holms are again capped with grey lichen-clothed terraces of the same trap formation.

Such, with little variation, save in altitude and extent, is the aspect of Sandoe and Stromoe. We