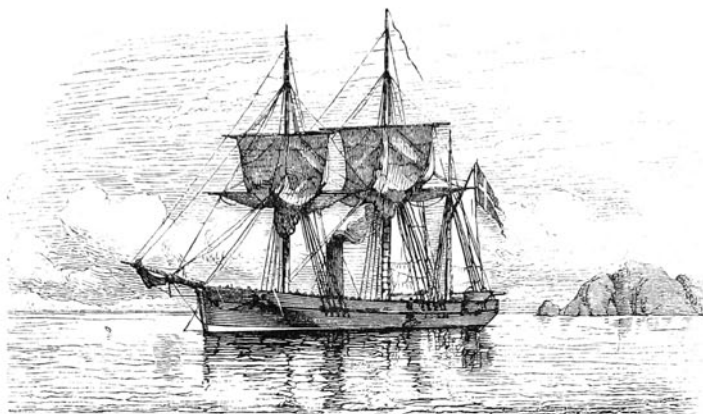


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Excerpt

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A SUMMER IN ICELAND.

CHAPTER I.

Voyage from Copenhagen to Iceland—Great Auk—Ice-mountains—Reykjavik—Description of Town—Icelandic Officials—Schools—Clergy—Newspapers—Mode of Travelling—An Icelandic House—A Dilemma—Style of Building—A Parsonage—Internal Arrangement of Houses—Strange Fuel—Stables—Agriculture—Mode of Salutation—Mount Esja—National Dress—Everyday Dress—Physical Appearance and the Darwinian Theory—Icelanders warm-blooded—Icelandic Shoemakers.



ICELAND is a country abounding with legends and myths, which tradition and the hand of nature have each done their part in recording. Her people, an offshoot of the Scandinavian family (who have maintained their ancient language and customs, though of course tempered by the influence of Christianity and the long lapse of time, and in whose breast the love of liberty still burns as brightly as of old), though few in number, occupy a place among the enlightened families of the world;

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while her Jökulls, or ice mountains, her warm springs, her volcanoes and streams of lava, her sandy plains and rapid rivers—the mighty works of Nature—afford an inexhaustible field for wonderment and for investigation. Iceland is truly a land of reminiscences, where well-nigh every spot has its history, written by the hand of man. But besides this it is an open book of Nature, a country where the formation and transformation of the earth's crust take place on so grand a scale, that the lapse of even a few years is often sufficient to make the effects of this transforming power evident to the attentive observer. And this circumstance is not without importance to the scientific investigator; for that language must needs be far easier to interpret where the same person is enabled to read both its alphabet and its written words, than where one century can only decipher the former, and has to leave it to a succeeding age to arrange the letters in an intelligible form. In the investigation of science, therefore, Iceland is a country of vast importance; while to the inhabitant of Northern Europe she is allied by family ties,—a sister country, with whom one fain would cultivate a more intimate acquaintance.

When I made up my mind to travel in Iceland, in the summer of 1865, my friends at home asked me, why I did not rather bend my steps towards Italy? I was free to choose, and I do not doubt that had I visited the land

“Where the flower of the orange blows,”

I should have returned from my trip with mingled feelings of admiration and regret; but my summer in Iceland afforded me so much enjoyment in the contemplation of its beautiful and instructive scenery, and in the intercourse I had there with so many amiable individuals, that I should have bitterly repented had I permitted the sirens of the south to tempt me, instead of

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THE ICELANDER AND THE ARAB.

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obeying that magnetic impulse that attracted my aspirations and longings towards the north. But still, in a certain respect, a trip to Iceland is an adventurous one; and it is essential to keep one's eyes open to the instructive lessons the rugged soil is capable of imparting, if one would not be wearied by the monotony of its desert tracts, the nakedness of its fjelds and *heiði* (moors or mountain roads), the multiplicity of its foaming rivers, and, not the least, by the difficulties that beset the traveller on his journey. Often and often, during the lonely hours that I have passed in riding over those barren tracts, where not even a blade of grass served to remind one of an animated nature, have I thought of the Arabs of the Desert, with whose mode of life, indeed, the Icelanders bears some resemblance; for, with both of these the horse is their trusty companion. The latter can scarce go a single step without his horse; and, should this fail him, his life is placed in peril. It must carry him over long and barren wastes, where hardly a handful of grass is to be seen wherewith to appease its hunger; and yet the Icelandic horse has one great advantage over its Arabian congener—it never lacks water!

In the following pages it shall be my aim to give the reader a true and faithful sketch of the scenery, the character of the people, their customs and manners, while I shall cursorily touch on the political and mercantile relations of the country.

I may as well mention in this place that my principal object in visiting Iceland was for scientific purposes; and more especially did I desire to cultivate my studies in mineralogy and geology—branches of science in which that country is so rich.

In the month of January, then, 1865, I left home for Copenhagen. This city is, unquestionably, the best resort for any one who purposes travelling in Iceland, and who desires to gain all the information he can previously to setting out on his

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journey. There he will find several Icelanders, who may be said to represent the intelligence of their country; there, too, he will be able to make the acquaintance of a gentleman who possesses a most intimate acquaintance with the country—I refer to Professor Steenstrup; and, lastly, he will find there a rich collection of natural objects in the University Museum, which will prove of the greatest possible service to him in the pursuance of his scientific researches.

The harbour of Copenhagen had been so blocked up with ice in the spring of this year, that the steamer which ought to have sailed on the 1st of March, and which usually runs six times during the season, to and fro, between Iceland and the Danish capital, could not set out till the beginning of April. It had not, however, been my intention to go by her, as her destination was Reykjavik, on the south-west of the island, for I had purposed taking a passage in a merchant vessel bound for the eastern coast; and my reason was, that this part of the island is the most interesting in a mineralogical point of view, while, as regards its geology, it has been less explored than any other portion of the country. But a few days before this ship was to sail I learnt that a Danish vessel of war was on the point of leaving for Iceland, and I therefore sought and obtained permission to avail myself of this more comfortable and agreeable mode of travelling. The name of the vessel was the *Fylla*, a screw schooner, mounting three guns, and with a crew of seventy men.

We left Copenhagen on the 4th of May, and I fully expected that we should reach our destination in ten or twelve days, as the mail-boat *Arcturus*, though touching at Scotland and the Færoe Islands, usually takes a fortnight on her passage; but fate willed it otherwise, and for three long weeks we were tossed about on the North Sea before setting foot once more

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LIFE ON BOARD.

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upon land. For though the *Fylla* was a screw steamer of 150-horse power, yet her supply of coals was limited, and we therefore had to sail the greater portion of the way, and, as the wind was generally against us, we had to remain longer on the sea than was altogether in accordance with my wishes at least. We encountered our first storm off the Norwegian coast, and many a pale face on board bore witness to the disagreeable feelings of the inner man, caused by the rough usage of the boisterous Skager-rack. Storm number two met us as we were passing a narrow sound between Fair Hill and the Shetlands, and drove us half-way back across the sea towards Norway; and, lastly, after encountering a great deal of rough weather, storm number three—the most violent of all—assailed us on the last day of our passage. I say the last, for I had calculated upon eating my dinner that same evening in Reykjavik. It drove us far to the south; I do not know to what point in the Atlantic. The sea was so heavy that we often went under it as well as over it. I lay in my hammock in a little cabin, which—that is to say the hammock—kept banging up against the sides, and of course dispersed my pleasant dreams about land *à tout prix*; while to add to my comfort, the salt water poured down through the skylight and drenched me as I lay, and wetted all my clothes through and through. It was, indeed, a most uncomfortable night!

I need not say much about life on board ship. It is pretty much the same everywhere, I suppose. Of course the usual degree of excitement was got up when a whale passed close by us, blowing and puffing like a steam-engine; or when one of the hens flew overboard and was fished up again; or when a vessel came in sight, which, I may state, is rather an exceptional occurrence between the Shetlands and Iceland. Certainly a good many vessels, schooners and smacks, go to Iceland every

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year from Copenhagen, Bornholm, Norway, and England, but they sail mostly at different times, and are bound to different ports. There are about twenty ports and mercantile establishments of different degrees of importance in Iceland; in some of them, especially in Reykjavik and Akureyri, there are a good many resident merchants. Vessels, therefore, have different places of destination, so that although there are annually a good many craft bound to the island—in 1863 there were 148 vessels of 6,850 tons burden—yet, when the large extent of sea they have to traverse, and the different periods at which they sail, are taken into consideration, it will be understood that it is rather a rarity to sight a strange sail.

It was about the eighteenth day of our passage, after we had been driven far to the south, and were again heading our way towards the north, that we first got Iceland in sight. It was one of the lofty rocky islands in Fuglasker, south-west of Reykjanes, the most south-westerly point of Iceland, that our eyes first fell upon. In consequence of this our course was somewhat altered, and we sailed or steamed towards the mainland, which, however, was enveloped by an impervious fog. When it cleared off we were so near land that we could plainly see the surf breaking against the barren rocks which surround the coast. Again, therefore, we had to change our course towards the sound between Eldey, the most northerly of the Fuglasker islands, and Reykjanes; and in the course of the evening our eyes were gladdened by the sight of the looming fjelds and mountain-tops of the peninsula, which juts out in the form of a boot from this corner of Iceland, and thus compels vessels coming from the south to describe three parts of the circumference of a circle, if they wish to reach Reykjavik, which is situated at its northern extremity. This peninsula is remarkable for its numerous lava streams and volcanic

THE GREAT AUK.

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craters. The very name—Eldey, or fire island—is an indication that volcanic influence has extended beneath the surface of the sea to this group of islands; in fact, several volcanic eruptions have taken place here, the last of which occurred in 1783, when the surface of the sea was covered so thickly with pumicestone that ships were hindered in their course. In the same year a volcanic crater appeared above the surface of the sea, but the loose slag of which it was composed was speedily washed away by the constant action of the waves, and the newly-formed island disappeared in the course of the same year.

These Fuglasker, or Geirfuglasker, as their southern part is termed, are remarkable as having been the home of the now extinct great auk (*Alca impennis*), a kind of penguin, whose



The Great Auk,

wings are merely swimming flaps. From the fact of there being other Geirfuglasker in several places round the Icelandic coast, there is reason to suppose that this bird was once common there. But the species is supposed to be now quite extinct,

owing partly to the persecutions they have undergone at the hands of man or from birds of prey, joined to the little tenacity of life evinced by them. They form thus one of the most valuable ornithological specimens of which a museum can boast.*

On the evening of May 21, when the weather was calm, we passed by Reykjanes, and were struck with the graceful flight of a bird named "Sula" (the gannet), somewhat smaller in size than a goose, and of a beautiful yellowish white colour. They were flying in long rows over the sea. The following day, as we sailed into Faxafjörður, we passed close by several of them. With their heads under their wings, they were slumbering peacefully on the water, and did not notice our approach till we startled them by clapping our hands.

Faxafjörður composes one of those broad bays with which the west coast of Iceland is furnished. To the south it is bounded by a peninsula of volcanic formation, and on the north it is separated from Breidifjörður by a similar tongue of land, which juts out into the sea, and which is crowned by the Snæfell-Jökull, a volcano, 4,577 feet high, whose snow-clad cleft summit, when viewed from Reykjavik, rises up from the sea like a pyramid.

The entrance into Faxafjörður is very imposing. The chain of mountains that traverse either peninsula to the north and south is continued in the background by a belt of lofty fjelds, of which the majestic Esja, to the north-east of Reykjavik, especially attracted our attention. The mountains, moreover, were rendered more prominent by having their summits and a great part of their sides covered with large masses of snow, which the summer sun had not yet melted; while dark perpen-

* The last known specimen of this species that is known to have existed was killed at Vardö, a Norwegian fortress on the Russian frontier, in 1848.—Tr.

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MOUNTAINS AND TABLE-LAND.

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dicular walls of rock, and peaked crags on which the snow could find no resting-place, stood out in bold relief, and presented a most picturesque scene to the eye.

Iceland, as is well known, is a mountainous country, and resembles in this respect the northerly parts of Norway and Sweden.

Some of the loftiest mountains have an altitude varying from 2,000 to 4,000 feet above the sea; while some few volcanic mountains attain to a greater height, such as the above-named Snæfell-Jökull, Herðubreið and Snæfell in the eastern part of the island, of which the first is 5,290 feet, and the other 5,808 feet high. Then there is Hecla, which is 4,961 feet high; Eyafjalla Jökull, 5,432 feet, on the south coast; and last and highest of all, Öraefa-Jökull, 6,241 feet. The summits of the mountains appear as sharp ridges, and as table-land. The sharp-ridged mountains which are to be found along the coast serve as gigantic partition walls between the numberless fjords that everywhere intersect it; while the table-lands are to be found more in the interior of the country. The volcanoes frequently form solitary and barren crests, rising up from the plains, without any connection with a mountain ridge or plateau; sometimes they spring up from a ridge or plateau, and sometimes the volcanic eruption takes place on the lower table-lands without any apparent connection with the mountains themselves. This lower table-land—which, together with extensive plateaux, constitutes the entire interior of the country—is estimated to reach a height of 1,500 to 2,000 feet above the sea, and it is necessary to cross over it in passing through the island from one shore to the other. The lowlands—which are, in fact, the only habitable portions of the island—consist only of narrow strips, running parallel with the coast, or lying at the bottom of deep valleys. Sometimes, however, though this is exceptional,

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they appear in the form of a plain or wide valley, which in such cases runs for some distance into the country.

After this trip, let us return once more on board the *Fylla*, and see that she comes safe and sound into port, while we occupy ourselves with some considerations of wider extent. We will only add, that seen from a distance in the fjord, the land which we were approaching seemed to consist only of cold, snow-clad mountains, as the lowlands as a rule are so narrow in extent, that at a distance of even a few miles they are scarcely discernible.

The port of Reykjavik is formed by a little bay on the land side, and is bounded towards the sea by some islands and holms—favourite breeding-places for eider ducks, which may almost be considered a kind of domesticated bird in Iceland. After cruising about for some hours outside these holms, our pilot at length came on board; and then, with all sails set and at full speed, we steered our course into the long-wished-for harbour, and cast anchor on Monday afternoon, the 22nd of May, alongside a French frigate, which, in company with a number of small merchant vessels belonging to different countries, had arrived there before us.

This, then, was Reykjavik that lay before us: a small town with small houses, rather dusky-looking in appearance from seaward, owing, perhaps, to a number of tarred warehouses that shut out from view, in their rear, some painted dwelling-houses; and possibly too because a great many of the neighbouring dwellings were besmeared with the same pitchy covering. This, then, was the far-famed Iceland, on whose soil I purposed to travel many a mile during the course of the summer. The first natives we saw were the pilot and his companions, dressed in a complete suit of dark *wadmél* (home-spun cloth), with round hats furnished with long lappets, and possessed of good-natured