

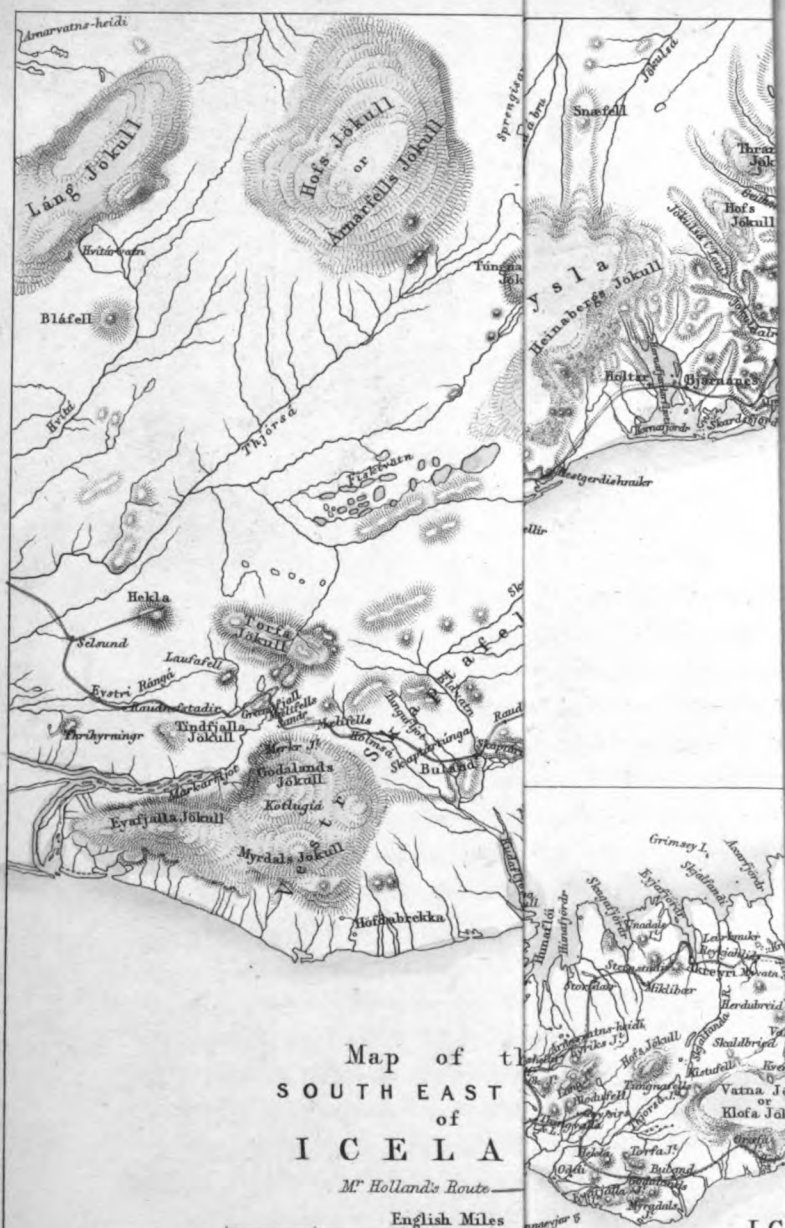
PEAKS, PASSES, AND GLACIERS.

SECOND SERIES.

CHAPTER I.

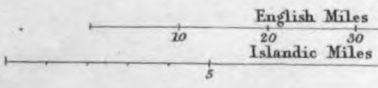
A TOUR IN ICELAND IN THE SUMMER OF 1861.

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Map of the
SOUTHEAST
 of
ICELAND

M^r Holland's Route



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CHAPTER I.

A TOUR IN ICELAND IN THE SUMMER OF 1861.

BY E. T. HOLLAND, B.A.



1. FROM SCOTLAND TO REYKJA-VIK, AND THENCE TO RAUDNEF-STADR.

THE screw steamer *Arcturus*, carrying the English and Danish mails, makes five or six voyages every year between Copenhagen and Reykja-vik, the capital of Iceland. On her way she touches at Grangemouth in the Firth of Forth; and at that place I, in company with my friends Messrs. Bond, Donaldson, and Shepherd, embarked on board of her on Thursday, the 18th July, 1861. The same evening she weighed anchor, and we started for Iceland.

On the morning of Sunday, the 21st, we reached Thorshaven, the chief town of Strom-œe, the largest of the Far-œes; and on the 22nd, the daylight of a northern midnight found us nearly out of sight of these islands, steering a N.W. course. On the morning of the 24th we sighted the white summit of the Orœfa Jökull, gleaming in the sun, and though some sixty miles away, looking not one half that distance from us. Then, as we steamed along, the round tops of the Myrdals, and Eya-fjalla Jökulls came into view. As we neared the coast, we came abreast of an extensive flat spit of volcanic sand, thrown out for several

miles into the sea by the Kotlu-gjá during its recent eruption in 1860. Beyond this we passed within a mile or two of the fine natural arch at Portland Head; and in the afternoon, the weather being very calm, steamed through the rocky group of Westmann Islands, and dropped the mails (consisting of two or three letters and a newspaper) into a boat, which put out for them from Heimä-ey, the largest of the group. Early the next morning we were off the low lava rocks of Cape Reykja-nes, battling with a heavy head-wind; and about 2 P. M. on that day we cast anchor in the Bay of Reykja-vik, under the lee of the Esja mountains. Not far from us two French men-of-war were lying at anchor. They had come to look after the French fishermen, who, every year, resort to the Icelandic fishing-grounds in great numbers.

We had plenty to do the next day in making the necessary preparations for our journey into the country. Guides had to be engaged, ponies to be bought and shod, and saddles to be procured, some on hire, and some by purchase, and when procured to be patched, and mended, and stuffed. Bridles, halters, girths, hobbles, had to be obtained; and not least, though last, Icelandic travelling-boxes. These are small, but awkward and weighty wooden chests, which are used by the people of Iceland for carrying their luggage when they are travelling, and which, when they are at home, ordinarily serve the double purpose of family wardrobes and seats. A baggage-horse carries a pair of these boxes, one slung on each side of him, suspended by nooses of rope, or iron rings, to two cumbersome wooden straddles, or bearers, that arch over his back; these straddles form the most important part of an Icelandic saddle. The rest of it consists merely of two large flat pads, which serve to protect the horse's flanks from being rubbed by the straddles or his load. In the

common saddles these pads are made of two or three thick layers of turf, kept in their proper place only by the grip of the straddles and the girths; in the better kinds they are made of leather, stuffed with either hair or grass. So long as these saddles are in use, the Icelandic boxes, cumbersome and inconvenient as they are, are the only contrivances that can withstand the wear and tear of an Icelandic journey.

Our preparations were not all completed until the afternoon of the next day (July 27th), but at 3 P.M. on that day we effected a start for Thing-vellir. We had with us two guides, and our cavalcade, which consisted of no less than seventeen horses, must have had rather an imposing appearance in the eyes of the small boys, who watched us as we rode out of the town.

The country between Reykja-*vik* and the Geysirs, and indeed the whole of that district which lies to the southwest of Hekla, has been so often described by travellers that I shall only take a passing glance at it, and refer those who wish to know more about it to the descriptions given by Henderson, Lord Dufferin, Captain Forbes, and others.

The first part of the road to Thing-vellir, after leaving the stony ground and turf bogs that surround Reykja-*vik* on the inland side, is pretty. On the north, you see the bold Esja mountains, looking blue in the distance — and the colouring of an Icelandic distance is remarkably soft and liquid — below them, and nearer to you, lie the bright island-spangled bays and coves of Faxa-fjodr, of which you get many a passing glimpse; while towards the south a broad stretch of moorland is bounded by the serrated ridge of hills, which extends from Hengil, near Thing-valla Vatn (the lake of Thing-valla), to the Krisu-*vik* district. As you leave these scenes behind, the road skirts the shores of one or two small lakes; near which are several scattered

farms, with their grass green tûns (enclosures); but after a few hours' ride, you pass the last of these, and find yourself upon Mosfells-heidi,—a dreary stretch of moorland and stony waste,—which only affords enough grass to serve as a poor sheep-run for the neighbouring farms. The heidi (a word which is used, not so much to designate a heath, as an upland with scanty pasturage, or altogether barren,) rises for several miles in a gradual ascent towards the east. Then as you approach Thing-valla Vatn, it falls rather abruptly, until you reach a level field of lava, which extends along the shores of the lake. On the northern side of this lake a vast portion of the lava field has, in some former age, given way, and sunk bodily towards the lake, forming the celebrated Thing-vellir (Valley of Assembly). In this valley, for several hundred years before the first part of this century, the Icelandic Althing, or Parliament, used to meet in the open air, not only as a deliberative, but also an executive, assembly. For this reason greater historical interest attaches to Thing-vellir than to any other place in the island. Here it was, that the laws of the Icelanders, whilst yet a free people, were made and executed; here, that justice was administered, and punishments inflicted; and here too, centuries ago, it was enacted that Iceland should be no more a pagan, but a Christian, country. The valley is about five miles long by four or five miles broad: it is bounded on each side by a long deep rift or *gjá* in the lava, marking the line of separation, where in its subsidence the lower plain split away from the lava fields above it. The whole of the valley sank down *en masse*, and now lies at a level of more than a hundred feet lower than the surrounding plain. The reason of this sudden subsidence is, I believe, still a disputed question amongst geologists. Some attribute it to a fresh flow of lava over the surface of a more ancient and cavernous lava field, having by its

weight caused the first lava surface to sink from its original elevation. Others assert (with, as it seems to me, greater probability of truth) that there has been only one flow of lava, and that the subsidence was caused by the exposed crust having cooled and hardened before the depths below became solidified, and whilst the liquid stream beneath continued to flow on: the surface lava having thus lost its support, cracked and fell in, as we see ice do, when the water beneath has ceased to support it.

The track from Reykja-vik leads down into the most westerly and largest of these rifts, the Almanna-gjá (Allmans-rift), by a steep rocky defile which opens suddenly in the road. This we reached about 1.30 A.M., and descending it, rode for a few minutes along the flat grassy bottom of the Almanna-gjá, between high precipitous walls of lava, until we came to a breach in the wall on our right. Through this we passed, and riding down a green slope found ourselves at once on the banks of the river Oxerá, near to the north-west corner of Thing-valla Vatn. Here, after unloading our horses, and turning them loose to graze, we pitched our tent; and were soon in a happy state of unconsciousness of the chilling storm of wind and rain without, which for the last few hours had made our ride very uncomfortable.

August 28th.—We obtained supplies of butter and milk for breakfast from the priest, whose house stood near the Church, on the east bank of the river, opposite to our camp. At this place two of the three great highways to the north are united, and his reverence keeps a sort of hostelry, which must considerably add to his annual stipend. The clergymen of Iceland are seldom rich. They receive a small amount every year from tithes; but the chief part of their income is derived from the produce of the farms at-

tached to their livings, which in most cases brings them in a very poor pittance.

The Althing (Place of Assembly), the spot where the national assembly used to meet, is not more than a few hundred yards from the Church: it is merely a grassy peninsula of somewhat rising ground in the lava plain which surrounds it; from this plain it is cut off on every side, except the south, by deep chasms in the lava, of unknown depth, their bottoms full of clear still blue water.

On the south, the Althing is connected with the surrounding plain by a narrow causeway, which lies between two of these chasms. It was a noble meeting-place for the parliament of a free people: close at hand lay that once molten lava stream, gashed by those awful chasms, imparting a character of stern savageness to the scene, and calling forth all the severe and unyielding energies of the lawgivers; while the blue hills at the head of the valley and the island-studded lake at its foot, shed over it a calm and gentle softness, humanising the hearts and appealing to the pity of the assembled multitudes.

After having explored the classic ground of Thingvellir and the Oxerá, we proceeded in the afternoon to Laugar-dalr (Hot-spring-dale). Crossing the plain of Thingvellir, which is transected by numerous longitudinal crevasses in the lava, and covered in almost every part with low brushwood of birch and dwarf-willow, and plants of blá-berry and lyng-berry, we reached, after some four miles' ride, the Hrafna-gjá (Raven's-rift). This, like its sister-rift, the Almanna-gjá, forms a conspicuous object from every part of the plain, looking in the distance like a long dark line drawn across it. It is neither so deep nor so regular as the Almanna-gjá, but its higher side, although not a precipitous wall, was yet steep enough to oblige us to dismount and lead our horses up it. After

leaving Thing-vellir, our road lay for the rest of the day beneath a high range of tuff mountains that rose steeply on our left. The route, for the most part, was over a mere desert of scorix and blocks of tuff, until we came into sight of the lake of Laugar-dalr, lying in the middle of an extensive flat plain, which appears to be very fertile. From the surface of the lake, three or four columns of steam, indicating the presence of hot-springs, rose high and straight into the clear air.

July 29th. — We reached the Geysirs at 3.30 P.M., having left Laugar-dalr at 10 A.M. On our way we rode across several large flat plains, covered with an abundance of grass for the cattle and sheep of the neighbouring farms. At times the track across these plains was so deeply worn, that the surface of the ground on each side was level with our knees. These tracks are made by the horses always following one another in the same path, and are deepened by the winter rain and snow. I have seen them as deep as the top of a horse's shoulder.

About half-way between Thing-vellir and the Geysirs we crossed the Bruará (Bridge River). The bridge, which gives its name to the river, is of rather a remarkable kind, consisting merely of a few light boards, thrown midstream across a rocky chasm, down which flashes an impetuous cascade. To reach the bridge, you have to ford the stream to within a few yards of the fall across which it is thrown; from it, you have again to ford the river to its bank. The Geysirs (and there is quite a nest of them, large and small, together,) are situate at the foot of low clay hills on the north-west side of an extensive grassy plain. We pitched our tent on a grass-plot, which bore evident marks of being a favourite camping-place, close beneath the raised basin of the Great Geysir. We had scarcely done so, and put our pot of ptarmigan and plover to boil in a still hot-

spring a few yards off, when the Geysir began booming, with that sound, like a heavy cannonade heard at a distance, which always preludes an eruption. Of course we all rushed to the basin at once, thinking that an eruption was about to take place immediately; but the water only boiled up vehemently in the centre of the basin for a few minutes, and then became quiet again. So we left the Great Geysir to repose for a time; and while waiting for a repetition of his spasms we amused ourselves by giving Strokr (the Churn) an emetic in the shape of a few turf pills,—a treatment under which this fountain can generally be made to erupt. It was lucky that we had not, like a recent Icelandic traveller, trusted our dinner to its punctuality in throwing it up again; for the fountain was evidently sulky to-day, and though it boiled and churned the sods in its pipe, which was half full of water, it steadily refused to part with them.

The Great Geysir, however, kept us in a constant state of alarm by frequently boiling over: the ebullitions generally lasted from five to ten minutes and then subsided; but at length, about half-past 8 o'clock in the evening, as we were all standing on the very edge of his basin, came several reports louder than usual. Then the water in the centre of the basin immediately over the pipe suddenly rose to the height of three or four feet, and at once sank down again, but only to rise higher than before; and thus it continued rising and sinking alternately, as if thrown up by a succession of powerful jerks, until a thick column of water shot up about twenty feet, and then, rising higher and higher, separated itself into several distinct jets. These kept falling back into the basin, whence they were instantly thrown up again, thus producing a remarkably pretty effect. At length, having reached a height of eighty or eighty-five feet, as nearly as

I could estimate it, the water seemed to remain stationary at that height for about a minute, then it sank slowly, and not without several severe struggles, into its basin again. The eruption lasted altogether five or six minutes, and we were the whole time standing on the very edge of the basin. This we could do with impunity, as we were on the windward side, and the wind had sufficient force to carry the spray and steam away from us.

We stayed another day at the Geysirs, but were not lucky enough to see any further eruption of the Great Geysir, although he kept us in a state of constant expectation with a frequent cannonade. But by the united efforts of ourselves and a party of friends, Messrs. Dasent, Campbell, and Lennox (*compagnons de voyage* on the *Arcturus*), aided by the guides of both parties, we gave Strokr such a dose of sods and turf as set him to work to churn them and throw them up again for the greater part of the afternoon. The muddy state of the water, however, goes very far towards spoiling the effect of these continuous jets, which after a dose of turf always come up in a pea-soup coloured fountain. On the 31st July we left the Geysirs; and on the second day (the journey might be done in one day) reached Selsund, a small farm on the south-west side of Hekla, lying in an amphitheatre formed by the spurs and volcanic ridges of that mountain. In our journey thither we had to cross two large rivers,—one was the Hvitá (White River), a broad glacier stream, flowing between very high banks, to ford which is often a matter of difficulty, owing to the shifting nature of the light sands which form its bottom: the other, the Thjorsá, also a glacier river, with a deep and swift stream, across which we and our baggage were ferried in a very old and leaky boat: our horses had to swim over,—a piece of duty that they did not at all relish,

and it required the joint efforts of all our party to induce them to face the stream.

Sometimes when a river is very broad and swift, it is necessary to tie the horses all together, head to tail, in a long string, and to make them swim after a boat, the bridle of the first horse being held by a man who sits in the stern. But this plan is accompanied with some danger of overturning the boat, and is therefore seldom resorted to: the common way is to drive the horses into the river, and make them swim over loose. The hay-harvest is going on everywhere: at every boer (Icelandic farm) that we pass, the whole household are out in the tûn making hay. The women are tossing it about with their hands, or loading the horses with large bundles of it; the men are mowing, or rather shearing, with their straight-handled, short-knived scythes, the curious mounds of earth, which give to every tûn the appearance of an overcrowded, unkempt graveyard. These are caused, the Icelanders tell you, by the wind and wet of their winters; but whatever may be their cause, they exist, to a greater or less extent, over all the grass land in Iceland (except in ground that is always marshy), and are so universal that it is often difficult to find a spot free from them, where a tent may be pitched with any comfort.

The grass walls of the tûns and turf-tops of the houses, which produce the best grass, are everywhere already mown. The hay-making season begins in June, and is not over until the latter end of September. At the beginning of the season many of the fishermen who live upon the coast migrate inland, and, attaching themselves to the household of some farmer, live with him during the summer, returning home again when the hay-making is over. A corresponding migration of the inhabitants of

the inland districts to the sea-coast annually takes place at the beginning of the fishing-season.

August 2nd.—We ascended Hekla to-day, taking as our guide the farmer of Selsund. He cannot have had much sleep last night, for he was moving up to 1 A.M. in the morning, if not later.

We left the boer at 10.35 A.M. on horseback, and, riding up the valley of a small clear stream, soon came to the rising ground at the foot of the mountain. Our way thence lay over hills of volcanic sand and scorixæ, up which our poor horses had to toil with much labour, for in many places the ground was very steep. After a ride of about two hours and a half, we stopped and dismounted at the foot of a huge stream of rugged brown lava, which had flowed from the crater during the last eruption, in 1845. Here, on a barren tract of sand, we left our horses in the care of one of our Reykja-vik guides, and proceeded on foot with the farmer. We first climbed the steep sides of the lava stream, which had cooled down into the most fantastic forms imaginable. It is hardly possible to give any idea of the general appearance of this once molten mass. Here a great crag has toppled over into some deep crevasse,—there a huge mass has been upheaved above the fiery stream, which has seethed and boiled around its base. Here is every shape and figure that sculpture could design, or imagination picture, jumbled together in grotesque confusion, whilst everywhere myriads of horrid spikes, and sharp, shapeless irregularities bristle amidst them. From piece to piece of this molten ruin we had to scramble and jump; and although it took us only about a quarter of an hour to cross it, my boots were nearly cut to pieces. After leaving it, we came to a tract covered with scorixæ and volcanic slag, and soon afterwards toiled up a steep ascent of vol-

canic sand and cinders, where the loose nature of the ground made the walking very laborious. Half-way up this, we reached a steep slope of old snow, dirty and black, with the dust blown over it by many a summer storm,—sloppy and soft enough too, at this hour of the day; but anything was better than the ever-yielding sand. After traversing the snow, we toiled up slope after slope of sand, until we came to a ridge only two or three feet wide, precipitous on our left, and steeply sloping on our right. Along the top of this we passed, still gradually ascending, in the face of a strong wind, which had swept a cold clammy mist over the mountain-top, and hid all the landscape from us. We could not even see what was at the bottom of the precipice on our left.

As we ascended higher we found ourselves in a storm of snow and sleet, and, unfortunately, as we approached the top, the weather grew worse: it was so bad when we reached the summit (4.5 P.M.) that it was impossible for us to descend into the crater and explore it. We could only gaze over its precipitous sides at the ice which filled its bottom. After staying about ten minutes at the top, we again descended, following the tracks of our ascent; but it was not until we were half-way down that we emerged from the snow and mist. Here was the only spot from which we obtained a good prospect of the country beneath us. The view was neither grand nor beautiful, but it was strange and curious. At the foot of the mountain, lie long ridges of flat-topped hills, with sides, here steep and precipitous, there in rounded slopes, but all perfectly bare, though not wanting in contrast of colour. On the left rose a hill, red as one of the Grampians when the heather is in fullest bloom; whilst, on our right, a mountain-ridge of ashy brown ran out into the grassy flats below, and on the green plain stood warm coloured streams

of umber-tinted lava, here ending abruptly, as if suddenly cooled in their molten course,—there fading into a distant purple as they extended towards the sea. Flat plains of volcanic sand, relieved by patches of green marshes, farms, and homesteads, extended to the south, beyond which again the ocean bounded the view.

Our descent was easy and rapid: we reached our horses again at 5.20 P.M., and Selsund at 7.30 P.M., quite ready for the pot of ptarmigan, shot during our journey on the previous day.

We stayed at Selsund three days, and left it on the 5th August. On leaving it our party was divided: Bond and Donaldson returned to Reykja-vik to catch the Arcturus on her homeward voyage, whilst Shepherd and I turned our steps eastward. Before parting with our friends we divided with them our horses and the rest of our travelling stock-in-trade, which had up to this time been the joint property of the whole party. Shepherd and I took nine out of the seventeen horses as our share, and of the two guides we chose Olaver Stingrimson, who, although he was not of quite so bright an intellect as we might have wished, was a good fellow, of a most willing nature and excellent temper. Guide, however, he could scarcely be called, for of the country to the east of the Geysirs he knew as little as ourselves. But in this respect he was only like the greater number of Reykja-vik guides. There were four guides at the Geysirs when we were there, and only one of them had ever been thence to Hekla, and he only once, twenty-six years previously, when he had accompanied M. Gaimard.

The Icelandic traveller who goes out of the beaten track of travel has always to engage a fylgdar-madr or local guide to show his guide the way. But Olaver, although he was of little use as a guide, proved of great use in looking

after our horses, seeing that they were properly hobbled at night, and so on; and indeed he was almost indispensable to us in another way. Neither Shepherd nor I could speak a word of Icelandic when we set out from Reykja-vik; and although Olaver did not know half a dozen words of English when we started, yet a lingo of broken Icelandic and English was soon established between us, which after a short time he came to understand well enough; he was thus able to act as our interpreter. Danish, I may remark, is of little use to the traveller out of the principal towns. In these, which are mostly Danish settlements, it is almost universally understood. Some of the priests in the country, too, can speak it; but the people generally do not understand it.

After bidding our friends adieu, Shepherd and I started from Selsund at 10.45 A.M. We soon left the meadow surrounding the farm, and entered a rugged desert which lies on the south side of Hekla. This desert is a sandy tract, full of blocks of tuff and lava, and everywhere bearing the traces of the eruptions which have devastated it. As we rode on, the country became still more sandy. We were traversing a desolate wilderness, in which nothing grew but thin plots of mélr grass (*Elymus arenarius*). This plant is a sort of wild corn, which is often to be met with in the sandy deserts of Iceland. It seems especially to love the little hills of sand which have been blown up by the wind. The desert through which we were riding was full of these hills, and on many of them were straggling patches of mélr grass; but these scarcely relieved the feelings of desolation called forth by the scene around us.

As we proceeded we from time to time caught glimpses of the Thri-hyrningr, (the Triangle,) a fine bold mountain ridge, with three dark points of rock at its top, which serve as a landmark to the plains lying to the south and west.

Beyond the Thri-hyrningr we saw the snowy summits of the mountainous Tind-fjalla and Eya-fjalla Jökulls.

A "Jökull" is any spot that is covered with perennial ice. Henderson says that the word is derived from the Icelandic "Jaki," a lump of ice, and that it signifies an ice-mountain. This is generally true, although not always so. Any one who imagined the vast districts laid down in the maps of Iceland as Jökulls to be altogether ice-mountains would be very much mistaken. The Jökulls are often merely immense fields of ice, which in their highest parts do not rise to an elevation of more than a few hundred feet above the level of the sea. Many of them are remarkably flat, extending for miles at nearly the same level. A great — probably the greater — part of the vast Vatna Jökull, which is "supposed to fill a space of not less than three thousand square miles," consists of these icy plains; and most of the high mountains in the island have extensive low Jökulls, or ice-plains, around their bases. These low Jökulls are not glaciers, though the word is often so translated. The number of *true* glaciers in Iceland is comparatively small.

The general character of the ice even of the low Jökulls is that of *névé*, rather than that of glacier ice, — a circumstance which is probably due to the low elevation of the snow-line, and to a much less amount of pressure being exerted upon the Jökulls than upon the glaciers. The absence of such pressure arises, I think, partly from the small elevation of the mountains, and partly from the beds of the ice-fields being unconfined by the sides of hills. Where their beds are so confined, and the ice flows down a narrow valley or a mountain gorge, there we find true glaciers formed. I observed glaciers descending from many of the high mountains, *e. g.* the Tind-fjalla, Eya-fjalla, Orœfa, Eyriks, and Báld Jökulls. Most of

them came down through narrow ravines, and fell very precipitously into the plains.

About 2.15 P.M. we reached the banks of Eystri Rangá, a small rocky stream: beyond it lay before us a fine undulating country, covered with grass. Near the ford was a farm, at which we obtained a bowl of milk,—a most refreshing draught after the quantity of sand that we had swallowed in crossing the desert. Milk can be obtained at almost every farm, and no payment is ever expected for it.

After crossing the river, and riding three or four miles along its eastern bank, we reached Raudnef-stadr, our resting-place for the night.

We pitched our tent in the tún close by the house. When we had made our canvas home snug for the night, Olaver brought us from the farm a kettle of boiling water to make tea with, and we sat down to supper, using one of our travelling-boxes as a table. Our fare, though simple, was as good and substantial as we could wish. It consisted of cold mutton, skon-rock, which is a sort of rusk, and unlimited supplies of milk and butter. These last we obtained at the farm close at hand. The mutton was the remains of a sheep which we had bought at Selsund. We had paid for it four dollars (nine shillings), which, although it sounds cheap enough, is by no means a moderate price for an Icelandic sheep.

2. FROM RAUDNEF-STADR ACROSS THE LESS FREQUENTED DISTRICTS ON THE W. OF THE SKAPTÁR JÖKULL TO MARIU-BAKKI.

August 6th.—The farmer at this place is a well-to-do man, owning several hundred sheep and seventy or eighty horses. We were in want of two saddle-horses in addition