

## ICELAND'S VISITATION

BY M. H. NICKERSON

**I**N THE SPRING of 1875 a serious disaster befell the people of Iceland, the little Norse colony, situated far away amid the solitary waste of the North Sea. There was an unusual eruption of the Geysir, that strange hot water fountain in a subarctic region, accompanied with the tremor of an earthquake shock, and the emission of lava from the boiling crater of the volcano, Askja, when fields in the vicinity were rendered unfit for pasture and the customary sowing of the soil for the simple crops suitable to that climate.

Destitution in some villages was imminent and commiseration was awakened abroad for the unfortunate islanders. The government of Nova Scotia came and offered to assist a certain number of the sufferers to emigrate to that province and found a settlement on the sea coast there. Thirty families were thus brought over and landed at Lockport, a thrifty fishing village on the southern shore. Ample provision, however, had not been made for the newcomers, attending to their needs, as strangers, and the settlement soon became short of rations. Nova Scotia had just become a province of the new Canadian Confederation, and the Federal Government at Ottawa was desirous of procuring immigrants to the territory of Manitoba, which was about to be taken into the Dominion. The Ottawa government paid \$5,000 for the removal of these people to Manitoba, where they have since flourished and grown influential, as might be expected of the Nordic character and temperament.

Some years ago, the government of Iceland celebrated the 1009th anniversary of their Althing, the first parliament, properly so-called in the known history of the world. Some of the descendants from that immigration of hardy stock are among the substantial citizens of Winnipeg. On the occasion of the said celebration, they mustered in force to attend that extraordinary event, and a party of one thousand, including some appreciative fellow-citizens, took passage on a Cunard Liner for Reykjavik and thoroughly enjoyed that paternal pilgrimage and the grand celebration.

Returning now to the date of the island calamity, the fisher

folk in my native seaside hamlet, Clark's Harbor, N. S., talked of that untoward event, thought of it many times a day and dreamed of it at night. It made such an impression on me, then an untutored youth and on a friend about two years my senior, that we yearned to express our sympathy in some visible shape. Both of us were poetically inclined, but he first found fitting voice in the rough sketch of a poem in the difficult Spenserian stanza, which I helped him to fix up in the form and manner following. He was justly accredited as the author, as only the sixth and the tenth stanza were of my composition. It may seem strange that the Leif Ericsson idea was then present in my mind for that event had not been much spoken of in Canada, nor yet the United States. It happened this way: On the wall of the living room in our cottage hung an old map of America, much the worse for time, showing an outline of North America, and telling the story of Columbus, while at the bottom of the sketch was a mere reference to Leif Ericsson's voyage, said to be more fiction than fact. Afterwards, when the Saga was admitted as historical, I remodeled the tenth stanza, having in the mean time learned to read the Saga understandingly in the original Icelandic, and to decipher the runic remains in Scandinavia and the British Isles.

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BY JEREMIAH ATKINSON

### I.

Begirt with northern seas an Island lies  
 By early spring and fertile soil unblest:  
 Its mammoth mountains to the clouds arise,  
 With stony, shrubless base and snowy crest,—  
 Untrodden now as when at heaven's behest,  
 The seething summits out of chaos sprung;  
 Lifeless, save where the seamew has a nest  
 To lay its eggs and hatch its downy young  
 Far from marauding bands the crevasses among.

### II.

Rarest of lands, wert thou a rocky range  
 Of some submerged and ice-bound continent?  
 Or wert thou lifted by some inward change  
 Till thy lone peak attained a high ascent,  
 And with the wintry skies its being blent?  
 Strangest of lands! Abode of fire and snow:

Thy bosom heaves with inward burning pent,  
Till, bursting wildly forth with lurid glow,  
The torrid lava streams flood all the vale below.

## III.

The Skalds recount thy fame in vivid lore,  
How the Viking Flokko first descried the land:  
How Ingolf did thy chartless seas explore  
To find a home upon some houseless strand  
Rather than dwell beneath a despot's hand  
He gladly chose a shore so bleak and gray,  
Then disembarked his faithful vassal band,  
Who loved their master's patriarchal sway:  
When Wisdom bears command, 'tis pleasure to obey.

## IV.

The peasant's florid children gather round  
On winter eves to hear those tales of yore—  
How valiant Vikings dreary Greenland found,  
Then steering southward from lone Labrador,  
Espied the woody marge of Markland's shore.  
They list with awe to hear how Hecla's womb  
Gave birth to terrors from its inmost store,  
With earthborn meteor glare and murky gloom,  
As dread as might prelude the final day of doom!

## V.

They hear and wonder how Leif's little bark  
Bore the bold leader and his dauntless crew  
Across the untraversed ocean. 'Twas their ark  
Of safety, whence their watchful lookout knew  
The proper course to shape. Their raven flew,  
When let loose from its perch, the gaff above,  
Toward the dry land, as yet beyond their view:  
Such a branch pilot was the Patriarch's dove,  
That brought the olive leaf, a sign of saving love.

## VI.

Such pilot served the brave Leif Ericsson  
Wide o'er the waste of waters till his prow  
This sheltering haven from their tumult won—  
This bounteous land, where we are living now;  
And we, their kindred, scarce should disallow  
The debts we owe that admiral and his crew:  
But welcome them and with good will endow  
The sturdy stock with all that is their due,  
Whose ancestry first led the Old World to the New.

## VII.

Alas the change! Well might the listener pale  
 To hear a bard such fearsome scenes portray;  
 Again the hissing streams pour down the vale,  
 And yawning chasms spout their sulphur spray;  
 Again black, stifling clouds blot out the day,  
 And swiftly spread before the poisonous gale.  
 The verdant fields are clothed in dark array,  
 And pasture lands are strewn with scoria hail,  
 And hungry herds in vain seek herbage in the vale.

## VIII.

Thus desolation broods where joy did dwell;  
 The garden plots are leafless now and sere.  
 The aged exile sighs, "Loved land, farewell,"  
 And looks his last upon his homestead dear;  
 And vigorous manhood's eye reveals the tear,  
 That shows his heart is in his Iceland home.  
 Faith buoys all souls: The Lord is ever near  
 To guide them safely through the billows' foam,  
 And make their way secure wherever they may roam.

## IX.

The sons and daughters of the Vikings bold,  
 With hearts as brave as those of olden days  
 The story of their sufferings shall be told  
 By future Skalds in yet more polished lays:  
 Your herds shall in Canadian pastures graze,  
 And great Columbia give you bounteous store,  
 And stately halls bestow the meed of praise  
 On scions of those who taught the Edda lore:  
 So may God solace all now left on Iceland's shore.

## X

Yet haply shall this folk behold in bronze  
 The semblance of that seaman proudly stand,  
 Who taught Columbus and those Castile Dons  
 The course to Mexico's defenceless strand:  
 And as Leif pointed with an unstained hand  
 Due westward on that blest, auspicious morn,  
 Where rose to view the new discovered land,  
 Which now, in sooth, his statue should adorn,  
 So may his story point to truths as yet unknown.

Clark's Harbor, Nova Scotia,  
 July 20, 1875.