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Dear Ævar and Una

The 2 chapters from the book I told you about. It is called "Home is a Tent", by Myrtle Simpson, and was published in 1964. It was given to me by a walking friend, Mary Lewis, who found it in a second hand bookshop in Swansea, and she thought it might interest me. Before that it was in a school library and before that in a public library. There are other chapters about their travels with their children in Spitsbergen and Surinam.

The Simpsons are from Scotland, and we think that they are slightly mad up there. Mary has also loaned me a very nice book of photos called "Island I Myndum", published in 1943. I asked Mary when she would like it back, and she said "sometime within the next 20 years". That was about 3 years ago, and by now she is probably about 78 years old. She is quite patient for her age.

When I saw you in the summer I meant to ask if you or Reimar had the phone number or email address for the man who has the farm at Drangar. When I passed through there the first time I stayed with you, in 2005, he was converting a small building into a simple place for walkers to stay. The information offices at Isafjordur and Holmavik did not know about it, but if I came again with a group (which might perhaps be next year) it would be helpful to know.

Goleufryn
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CHAPTER IX

Needless to say, we did not stay at home. Our week-ends away are our mode of life, and without them the days run into a boring stream. Stimulus goes, and so does incentive; life becomes dreary and ordinary, and Hugh has no fresh ideas to turn on to his research. So we mended the tent and went back to the hills.

Our third baby was a girl. We called her Rona because I love the Hebridean Island of that name. She was six weeks old when our summer holidays came round in 1962. Hugh wanted to drive to Persia, but I felt tired and overwrought. I just could not face a long and complicated journey.

"Let's go to Iceland, then," said Hugh with finality. "It's only three hours by plane, and we can catch the Airport bus from the end of the Underground-only three minutes away. We'll just take our usual week-ending things, plus an extrajersey or two, so you'll have no trouble packing."

"Who's going to carry the baby?" asked Robin with his practical two-year-old mind.

"We'll find a friend," answered Hugh.

We spread the Iceland map out on the floor, and the eyes of both of us were drawn to an isolated peninsula. It was the furthestmost and uttermost part of the island, just skimmed by the Arctic Circle.

An Icelandic friend told us that this area was now uninhabited, because the ice-cap at the root of the peninsula cut off all communication, and nowadays people were not prepared to exist as crofters in such an environment. They preferred the flesh-pots of Reykjavik.

Not us. By now my enthusiasm matched Hugh's. We contacted a fisherman in Isafjord, the nearest town, and arranged for him to take us across the twenty-five miles of fjord and land us on "our" peninsula. We chose a spot marked "Hesteyri" on the map. He would then return in five weeks to the same place to pick us up. Meanwhile we would walk right round the peninsula moving on each day and living entirely off the land. The area had supported a fair-sized community in the old days-surely we could find enough food to feed our small party now?

The challenge of this nomadic Robinson Crusoe life appealed to us. We could take no artificial standards of living with us to fight the environment. We should have to adapt and live with it.

We didn't have much trouble in persuading our friend Janet Slesser to come with us, although she was still muttering, "Are you sure you'll catch enough fish?" as we climbed into the plane at Renfrew Airport and set off into the northern summer night.

Iceland is a very casual country, and no one seemed to mind as Hugh and Janet pitched the tent outside the Air Terminal Building at Reykjavik Airport, while I made full use of the "facilities" provided for air travellers within. Some air hostesses looked slightly indignant when they saw me washing nappies in the "Ladies", but they were Danes !

Wild ponies nuzzling at our guy ropes early in the morning woke us up in time to catch the little plane flying north to Isafjord. It is a small town, the size of Mallaig, but bustling with importance in the Icelandic fishing community.

The other passengers were surprisingly smart and sophisticated, and their children particularly clean. They eyed us suspiciously, and I felt like saying loudly, "You should see what we'll look like when we come back !" The pilot drove the plane like a bus, steering round the grey hills of lava to save petrol, and it was odd to look out of the window and see sheep grazing higher up than us ! After a few hours we saw the sea again, and little houses sparkling in the sun below us. The landing-strip could only be used at low tide and we had to circle above, waiting for the sea to retreat and let us have our turn at the tiny stretch of level ground between the water's edge and the steep hills.

At last we were down. The Airport bus was conveniently owned by the son of the fisherman, Pieter Pieteron, who was going to abandon us on our peninsula. He was expecting us, and hoisted Robin and Bruce aboard his dilapidated bus-cum-lorry with a big open smile. He diverted the bus to his father's house where Robin soon broke down any barriers and we sat down to drink strong black coffee and a plateful of pancakes stuffed with whipped cream. Pieter looked as old fishermen do the world over, and Jaiiet aiid I quickly made great friends with his cheery wife as we tried our hand at cooking pancakes over her kitchen stove. We spoke not one word of each other's language, but that didn't seem to matter a bit:

We were off again at the next high tide, in Pieter's little fishing boat. It was to take six hours to cross the open fjord, and as we chugged across the choppy water we realised why the last family had left. The area was completely cut off from shops, hospitals, schools and electricity by the ice-cap, and the coast was lashed by rough seas, making communications by sea unreliable. Icebergs are grounded there in winter, and even in high summer patches of snow lie right down to sea-level. The people had lived in houses of turf, sunk into the ground to protect them from the endless wind, and they lived off the land. They had to be completely self supporting-there was no one else to rely on. They ate gulls' eggs, cormorants, fish, seal and berries. They stewed up the seaweed for puddings and made lichen soup, and they made a little money gathering down from the eiders' nests.

I huddled the children into the tiny cabin and hastily lay down on the only bunk. Luckily, the three of them immediately went to sleep, as I was in no fit state to look after them, and Janet, a far better sailor than I am, was beginning to feel sick too. Hugh was brazening it out on the deck, doused with spray and torn by a biting cold wind. Janet and I were just holding our own when Pieter descended the little ladder and proceeded to light the stove that occupied three-quarters of the space. Smoke poured out and I felt like death !

I was incredibly glad when Hugh looked down and shouted, "Nearly there," and the little boat rounded a headland and slowly stopped tossing like a cork.

Our excitement grew as we drew near the shore, and could see four or five shuttered houses nestling under the brow of a hill. This was Hesteyri, the main settlement of the old days.

A cold clear sun shone through crisp air into the houses, sitting amongst a lush English-type meadow. A strip of black sand bordered the icy sea, but the greys and blacks of Iceland were rolling back with the sun, to leave sparkling clear colours of blue, yellow and white, and even some red-from a rhubarb plant. It was delightful, and we jumped ashore full of enthusiasm.

The Icelanders don't waste words, and Pieter just handed out our luggage, turned and was off. Robin and Bruce were as thrilled as we were, and ran offalong the sand. They started the endless game of throwing stones into the water. People often ask us "why we take the children abroad when any bit of sand and sea at home will satisfy them?" I feel that as they don't mind which bit of sand and sea it is, why not go somewhere of interest to the parents? I should be bored stiff on the sort of beach that most people take their children to, and I expect most of them are too.

Janet and I rushed off to explore the houses. One had been the doctor's, and we found notebooks recording births and deaths and visits, and we wondered about the journeys he must have made by horse, sledge and rowing boat and on foot to his isolated families. I'd have loved to have been him!

Hugh, meanwhile, had assembled his fishing-rod and set off for the nearest stream. One tumbled down into the sea just past the houses, and he threw in his first cast. The rod bent, the line tore out, and then he landed a big silvery salmon-like fish-a 3-lb. Arctic char. Our first meal was safe !

We pitched two tents under the lea of the doctor's house. We built a windbreak with odds and ends, and gathered driftwood for an open fire. I lifted Rona out from her nest in the komse to

give her a feed while Janet went off to collect some of the rhubarb. The boys gazed fascinated as Hugh cleaned the fish. They thought that food came from shops, but were learning fast. We were all happy. The satisfaction of having a meal one has caught oneself, and the comfort of a sleeping-bag beside a driftwood fire, made us all feel on top of the world.

Our idea was to be nomadic, and with this in mind I had brought only what had seemed necessities. The next morning, however, when it came to packing the loads we were going to carry for 100 miles of rough going, over cols and across rivers, plus the children, our standards of what was necessary dropped considerably. We discarded books, toothbrushes, the chess set and a comb. Hugh's spare clothing was cut to a hat, mine to a pair of gloves, but Janet considered one dry pair of socks essential. We carried one small tent, one big double sleeping-bag, a frying-pan and billy, three plates, one cup, salt, sugar, tea, oats, dried milk and matches. Our faith was in Hugh's fishing-rod and a tin of Glasgow dug worms !

Hugh carried Robin, now a good two stone, with the tent slung underneath the carry-seat and a rucksack of camera equipment slung on top. In all, about 70 lb. Janet had Bruce with the odds and ends tied into his seat, plus a kitbag filled with cooking things. As I was feeding Rona, the new baby, I was let off lightly. She lay snug in the komse, resting on the sleeping-bag, which was wrapped in plastic and dangled against my seat.

Shouldering our loads, we set off for the first day's journey. First through the meadow, waist-high with buttercups, field gentians, orchids, water-avens and lush green grass. Meadow pipits made way for us. As we gained height snipe flew up under our feet and the heathers and junipers took over, with saxifrages, alpine bartsia, moonwort, and many, many more flowers pushing their heads through the shallow soil. Then onto scree slopes and the tundra proper, where yellow Arctic poppies bent in the wind, always growing on the most exposed and barren place. The view was opening up and we caught a glimpse of the ice-cap. The sky seemed enormous-great carpets of it over our heads and all round. I felt completely happy, and absolutely confident that we could catch enough fish. After all, the area had supported a large population in its day, and surely there was enough room for us now? Bruce was fast asleep on Janet's back; his bonnet had slipped over his face, and his head lolled against her shoulder. Robin, in a yellow Balaclava, was full of chat, and Rona so quiet that I kept asking Hugh to look into the komse and see if she had suffocated. We walked on until the next valley opened up below us. This was as exciting as a mountain top. We all immediately scanned it for a house, and, sure enough, there was a building down by the sea.

It took us four hours to get down, and this time we cursed the meadow. We had to fight through a jungle of buttercups, cow-parsley and rhubarb before we stood outside the hut. On the shuttered window was a notice, "International Shipwrecked Mariners' Refuge".

We had been told that there were a few huts such as this dotted along the coastline, as also in Greenland, and that we should be welcome to go in and make ourselves at home.

Hugh opened the shutters while Janet and I dug into the cupboards. There were kit-bags of socks, knitted by old ladies, goodness knows where. Some were long, some short, and not one matched. Hugh tried on a pair of "long Johns", and I temporarily swapped my boots for a pair of matelot's stockings. We bathed the children in a yellow plastic bucket and I wondered what the baby's shell-pink, petal-soft skin would look like by the time we got home.

We had steamed fish with nettle leaves and stewed rhubarb for supper, and it was all delicious.

Where should we spend the next night? We never got over the excitement of setting off each morning into the unknown, but we became extremely good at summing up the possibilities of a ruined house, finding the length of driftwood that would exactly fit to make a broken chair stand up, and turning old bits of iron into a good working stove. To anyone else it would probably look like a tinkers' camp, but to the children and us it was "home".

We had two magnificent weeks walking round the south of our peninsula, and at last reached a point right under the ice-cap. We couldn't see the ice, or in fact anything over 100 feet up. A thick mist was spilling over a col and sitting heavily above us. "Must be caused by a warm air current blowing on to the ice, said Hugh confidently. "We'll lose it as soon as we get over on to the other side."

We snuggled into a little hut at the water's edge for the night. Twenty-seven swans were sitting in the sea nearby. "Needs a sweep," said Janet, and Hugh made her a swan-feather broom, a tip he had learnt in the Falkland Islands.

Janet went off to look for wood and came back saying, "I've got three mushrooms." She fried them and handed out one each to the adults as a special treat. We fed the children and went to bed, with an icy cold wind whistling round our hut. I woke up a few hours later, feeling iller than I have ever felt before. I lay clutching my stomach in agony and then lurched for the door to be dreadfully sick. I sprawled on the ground in the icy wind-I couldn't have cared less about getting back to bed. I wanted to die.

Hugh came out in a fury to see why I had left the hut door open, and found me collapsed.

Then he grew worried. Had I got appendicitis? It would take him ages to make his way round the ice-cap to get a boat. And what about Rona's milk supply? He dragged me back into the hut and I lay shivering and groaning in the sleeping-bag. I couldn't be sick in our only billy-can, so I had to keep staggering out into the cold. I was sick again and again, and I couldn't have chosen a more unpleasant place to be ill. It was raining now, bleak and raw.

"Must be an acute appendicitis," said Hugh medically, fingering his blunt penknife.

"What about those mushrooms?" said Janet.

She must have been right, because I began to get better. I felt as weak as a rag in the morning, but I wasn't being sick. I couldn't bear the children jumping on me as I lay on the floor, so Hugh took them off for a walk. He came back triumphantly, carrying an amanita, one of the few really poisonous toadstools in northern Europe-and it looks very like a mushroom !

"There are lots about," he said, hurling it into the midst of the swans.

CHAPTER X

I was allowed one day to recuperate; and then we left the hut, knowing that the crux of the trip was before us. Could we make the north coast in a day? The nappies were not dry, so we strung them from the komse before hoisting it on my back. It was cold and drizzling as we set off towards the col that would lead us round the ice-cap and down again to the north coast.

We were following a path, and it led up between fantastically twisted rocks. These guarded a lost glen, secret and lonely, and I sank down on to a bank of unripe cornel berries to feed Rona. It was still cold, so I got out the sleeping-bag and huddled right inside before I lifted her out of the komse. She snuggled against me, as babies do the world over, and I noticed that her "whiter than white" orlon jersey made my hand look a dirty grey-which it was, of course! I caught the others up beside a calm lochan at the head of the glen, listening to the mournful "pleep" of a golden plover. It sounded broken-hearted with loneliness. "I want bread and jam", said Robin, "and honey and lots of butter and cornflakes," thinking of all that was best in his two-year-old world, so we pushed on. There was a long trudge over open moorland, using the compass for direction, as we were now in mist. Then an extra rise, the mist cleared, and we saw a glint of silver between two black cliffs-the sea.

Great rollers were surging up on the beach. This north coast was exposed and incredibly rugged. We made ourselves very comfortable in the loft of an old house, the only remaining house of the original Furufjordur hamlet. I found a carved whale-bone button, and wondered what sort of people had lived here, but was interrupted by Bruce dropping the compass into the water bucket!

Hugh set off as usual with his rod, but came back saying he had found an ancient fishing net.

"Let's net the river-it'll be much less trouble. We'll get dozens of fish in one go, but someone will need to help."

Janet was darning one red sock with wool from her yellow jersey, using a bent fish-hook as a needle, so I pulled on my anorak and went out into the rain.

Hugh gave me a length of rope and said, "Wade the river and tie this to something on the other side." The river was fast, knee to thigh deep, and very, very cold. I got out at the other side, wondering why the rope was so light-it wasn't tied on to the net. So I waded back to Hugh, who silently gave me the other end, and retraced my way through the river again. Hugh yelled and waved, and I thought it was to encourage me, but it was to say the rope wasn't long enough, so back I came again. Reequipped I plunged in again, so cold and wet that it didn't matter any more. This time the weight of the wet net dragging through the water was nearly too much for me, but I made the far bank and looked helplessly for something to tie the rope to. Of course there was nothing. The current got behind the net now and the pull was nearly breaking my arms. Desperately I threw the rope round a huge boulder. It started to move. I jumped on top and thought I'd done my bit, and waved cheerfully with both hands to Hugh. He thought I was in extremis, leapt into the water and forged across at the deepest place, abandoning his end completely. He reached me, and in a fury I stood up. My boulder rolled over and the rope tugged free. The net ballooned up in the water, and then slowly took off out to sea. Did we laugh or cry?

Soaked to the skin, we slushed back to the hut. "Never mind," said Hugh, "I've found a seal's flipper-it's a great delicacy." He produced a pitch-black, wizened object, the size of a human hand. "It's smoked."

Janet cut into the rubbery stuff and gave a bit to Bruce. He went wild. "More, Nanet, more, more," he shrieked, with fat drooling down his chin. I had to go out again, to collect more firewood. I pushed through the long grass to the edge of the beach. I could see a pile of wood washed up on the other side of a strip of sand. My feet sank a bit as I walked across, and slowly it dawned on me that there was an extraordinary smell of sulphur. I looked round and saw little puffs of smoke coming from my foot-prints. I suddenly realised the significance. Hot springs ! Quicksands ! Boiling mud ! The volcanic nature of Iceland lends itself to all these horrors. In a panic I tried to run, but I could not escape from the sand. The area I was standing on had already turned into a quagmire with my static weight, and the smell of sulphur was awful.

With a great "splurch" I at last got my feet free, and lurched towards the edge of the sand. I sank at each step, but did manage to keep moving, and at last threw myself down exhausted on the grass. I then made my way back to the house.

"Where's the wood?" asked Hugh accusingly. "Whatever have you been doing?"

The weather brightened up a bit the next day and we set off again, walking along the beach, as the sides of the valley were too steep to scale.

We were slogging along over rough shingle when Hugh shouted out "Look !" in a horrified voice. He was standing with one foot in the air, and when I came up to him I realised the trouble. The sole had come off his boot !

Now what were we going to do? Hugh limped up and down the high-tide mark in a helpless sort of way. Then, suddenly, he bent down and held something up triumphantly.

"It's a nylon cod line, with the fish-hook still attached ! The ideal thing to sew my boot together with."

Janet and I sat down beside him as he cobbled up his boot. We couldn't be bothered lifting Robin and Bruce out of their seats, as it was such a job getting them back into their enveloping layers of clothes.

At last Hugh finished the job and we helped each other on with our loads. The strip of beach was narrower now, and sometimes faded out completely, and we had to scramble along the

edge of the cliff. Then we rounded a headland and were into the next valley. It was difficult to see clearly what was in front of us, as mist was creeping down from the cliffs, enveloping everything in a dark shroud.

We walked on, peering about, but could see no sign of habitation. No one had lived here, and it wasn't difficult to realise why. It was the most God-forsaken valley we had been in. It started to drizzle.

"Have to camp," said Hugh.

We could not afford to get wet through, as the prospects of drying were bleak.

We found a level place among some sand dunes and put up the tent. It looked very small.

"Never mind," I thought. "It's only for one night." This tent was designed as a "2-man mountain tent". Now it had to cope with three adults plus three children at sea-level in drizzling rain.

We strung the komse from the roof and Robin and Bruce lay across the top of the tent. "Going to bed" meant taking off one jersey and getting as much of the sleeping-bag as possible before the other two got in. When I fed the baby everyone had to sit up.

We huddled together and chewed some cold fish, longing for some hot tea.

I fell asleep with the rain drumming on the canvas and woke up with a wet clamminess at my side. The sleeping-bag had been touching the side of the tent and was sopping wet.

"Do move over a bit," I heard Janet imploring Hugh.

"I can't take up any less room than I am," he answered crossly between snores. I looked round to see him spread out on his back, occupying more space than the rest of us put together !

It was still raining in the morning, and, peering out, we could 'barely see 3 yards from the tent. There was a thundering roar of the sea breaking on the stormy beach. The children had cold fish for breakfast, but there was nothing for us until the weather gave us a chance to light a fire. "Not a hope of catching a fish in that," said Hugh as he came back from looking at the flooded river.

Slowly the day wore on. The children clambered over us. We made slides with our knees and played at "hiding" in the sleeping-bag. We sang and told stories. We had nothing else to do, so we didn't mind. Our main worry was over the nappiesthere was one dry one left !

In the evening the rain eased off slightly. Hugh immediately started to shave off pieces of wood, thinner than spalls. Then he went out into the weather-still frightful by other standards - and dug a hole in the sand for his pile of chips. After about the twenty-fourth match it lit. Hastily he started to shave off more. In his enthusiasm the knife slipped and he put the fire out with dripping blood. Reluctantly I tore the last dry nappie into bandages. We started again with the fire and this time it went. Immediately we took on a new lease of life.

We took it in turns to stand in the smoke, choking and spluttering, and hold out a nappie towards the weak flame. Sure enough they dried. They were also scorched, but that didn't matter ! We cooked a large brew of porridge, and then systematically piled logs into the fire, trying to keep the rain out of the heart.

The smoke veered round slightly-a change in the wind? We were all optimistic about the weather for tomorrow. By now everything was damp in the tent, except the baby, warm and cosy in her komse. Another night of listening to the rain. Hugh went out periodically to build up the fire. Provided we could keep it going, we could weather any storm.

We lay in the bag, talking mostly about food, and comparing the merits of various Glasgow restaurants with Edinburgh ones. "Let's often meet for morning coffee in town," said Janet, and we argued about the place with the best cream cakes. Hugh talked about steaks.

According to him, only an Argentinian butcher knows how to cut one properly.

There was no change in the morning. Food-stocks were really low, and Hugh set off into the rain; armed with his rod. We needed more wood. I battled into the wind towards the shore.

The waves were fantastic-great walls of water suddenly collapsed on to the beach with a

deafening roar. I felt terribly alone. Our tent looked so small and insignificant, as if waiting to be swallowed up by the sea and rain. I shouldered a tree trunk and dragged another. I always tried to carry too much, and bruise my legs and hurt my arms. Janet was much better at it than me, and could carry far more.

I lugged my load back towards the tent. I could hear Robin and Bruce shrieking with delight, and when I came round our sand-dune I saw them having a great game. Janet had dismantled a barrel and was now carting the metal hoops that held it together to the top of the dunes. Then she set them off with a push, with the children running madly behind. The game went on and on, but I didn't join it. I kept peering for Hugh through the mist.

The rain came on heavily again, and Janet drove the children into the tent once more. Bruce took up his favourite game: "Say boo, Nanet." Janet did, and Bruce turned to me saying, "Nanet did a boo." "Oh," I said, and Bruce turned back to Janet. "Mummy did an oh to a boo." "Really?" answered Janet, and Bruce said to me, "Nanet did a really to an oh and a boo." And so it went on, till Janet and I felt like screaming.

Supposing Hugh didn't bring back any food? The streams were so swollen with rain that he would be very lucky to catch a fish in such a spate. The children were getting hungry. There was no let-up in the weather. Rona slept-she didn't mind.

"Daddy," said Bruce. Hugh was coming-I tried to make out if there was anything in the landing-net, and to convince myself that there wasn't. But there was. Hugh held it up as he came nearer and I ran out. It was a chicken ! It couldn't be ! "Seagull " said Hugh. He was absolutely saturated, and his teeth chattered as he huddled over the fire.

I held the fat little bird in the fire to singe the feathers, and then Janet put it into the billy-can to stew. Rounding a corner Hugh had come upon the bird, too full of fish to take off quickly. Without hesitation he swiped it with the landing-net. We cooked it for an hour, and then dished it out. The meat was pink and delicious. "More, more," came from Robin and Bruce as they lapped up theirs, and we gave them pieces from our helpings. The skin was fatty and a bit fishy, but we ate that too.

Another night of howling wind and torrential rain. Looking out at dawn, I saw a flock of birds busy at something in the hillside. I pulled on my anorak and clambered up the slope. Suddenly I realised what they were after. Blueberries ! In no time I had my pockets full and rushed excitedly back for the billy-can. They were absolutely delicious, and we ate knowing that we could get more and more. We looked awful with blue mouths and black teeth, but for once we weren't hungry. Hugh went off again, and Janet and I tried not to be cross with the children. This third day in the tent was really getting us down. Hugh came back with nothing. I tried not to cry in front of the others, but I felt very low. "It can't go on for ever; it never does," I tried to think. Without much hope, Hugh threw his rod into the local nappy washing stream. We saw him stiffen. "Landing-net," he yelled. Janet tore over the ground towards him. Excitedly I melted fat in the pan, and the sparkling silver sea-trout was on the fire nearly before it knew it was dead !

We went to bed absolutely confident that the weather was on the mend. It looked exactly the same, but during the fourth night the wind did change. It stopped raining. The silence woke me up. The mist was right down to sea-level, but we reckoned we could move on and leave "desperation" camp once and for all.

We took down the saturated tent and rolled up the damp sleeping-bag.

"We'll just have to find some sort of a house for tonight," I thought desperately. "Any rain will come straight through the tent if we have to put it up wet."

"I don't want to go away from this home," wailed Bruce, but Robin was only too ready to climb into his chair. "I need to take that with me," he announced, pointing to a large log of wood. "It's my best boat."

Hugh didn't listen to his protests, and heaved him up on to his back. Our loads were heavier than ever now, with everything dripping wet, but as we set off there was a glimmer in the sky. Colour was slowly creeping back into the sea, and the valley looked quite friendly.

Immediately we started to climb. We knew that we had to make 1000 feet before reaching the col that was the only way into the next valley. Very soon we were in mist. Hugh was well ahead, and I had to struggle on to keep him in sight. He was clutching the compass, but I kept remembering that this was Iceland—one of the few places in the world where the compass can make a mistake. The volcanic rocks are inclined to set up a magnetic pull that can swing the compass off its true course. The ground was so steep now that I had to use my hands to help me up. The blaeberry stalks made excellent handholds, but kept tempting me to stop and cram some berries into my mouth.

The vegetation grew sparser, and after an hour we were clambering up through rocks and boulders. Hugh kept disappearing, but I knew where he was by the trickle of little stones sent avalanching by his feet. There was silence. The mist held me like a blanket. I couldn't even believe that Janet and Hugh were in the same world as I was. I felt my shoulders would break with my load, but I knew it wasn't nearly as heavy as the others'. I kept looking at my watch. Two hours should take us to the col. Rona started to whimper. "Surely I haven't got to feed you here," I thought despairingly. Then I heard a shout coming from my right. I changed direction and suddenly came upon Hugh and Janet leaning against a cairn. We had made it ! The other side was easy and we practically ran down, with the sound of surf slashing against rocks getting louder all the time. Gradually the mist grew thinner, and then suddenly we burst through it and had a view.

A lush valley was at our feet, and our attention was all drawn to one spot. Our practised eyes detected signs of habitation. A turf house.

Hugh reached it first, and made enthusiastic signs to Janet and me. We hurried up, but were now fighting our way through a jungle of waist-high cow-parsley.

"Roof's intact," yelled Hugh as he reappeared at the entrance. We had to bend down to get in, and the house was no bigger than a garden shed. But after our four days in the tent it seemed palatial. It even had a shelf we didn't need to sleep on the floor !

Hugh rushed off to gather driftwood while we untied the children. Bruce, as usual on a journey, was fast asleep, with his red hat over his face, and Robin desperate to explore the possibility of this new home. Rona was hungry.

Hugh lit a fire at the door and Janet erected a cunning clothesdrier, wedging the aluminium tent-pole across the turf porch. "No fish in this glen," announced Hugh. "The only river ends in a 200 foot waterfall, straight into the sea."

So he and Janet went off to collect berries. Luckily, we had a reserve of roe left over from last night's supper.

I sat down to feed Rona. The warmth and snugness of our house was marvellous.

"It's mokey," said Bruce plaintively, and I suddenly realised that it was !

Hugh's fire had lit the turfs of the house, which was slowly kippering us inside, as if in a peat oven.

Luckily, the others soon reappeared, and the only damage was some more holes in the scorched nappies and the foot singed out of Janet's spare sock.

Talking together that night, we came to the conclusion that this valley must be Smidjuvik, where a British trawler had been shipwrecked a few years before. The crew had made the shore, but all perished from exposure before they managed to reach the next valley, where there was a lighthouse.

We set off confidently the next morning, excited at the prospect of reaching the lighthouse. As usual these days, the mist was down to about 100 feet, but Hugh stalked ahead with the compass and Janet and I came along behind.

"One thing," I thought, "you can't possibly miss a lighthouse in a mist - it'll have beacons and bells and flashing lights."

We crossed the col and slithered down a steep cliff on the far side, "Perhaps we should be further over," "perhaps the other way," "higher," "lower"-all the possibilities that fill one's mind when lost in the mist and one feels more intelligent than the compass.

Then a breeze wafted the mist slightly, and the lighthouse loomed over us like the Castle of San Michele. We walked over and knocked at the door, then stood back self-consciously- whatever does one say when arriving at an unknown house, in a foreign country which thinks itself completely unvisitable, with three children, and very wet? I wished that we had brought the comb.

A youth with an Adam Faith haircut opened the door. He looked as if he had slunk out of the nearest coffee-bar, and, showing no emotion, he ushered us into the kitchen. Janet and I stood transfixed. The biggest cake I had ever seen was just going into the oven and fresh bread was steaming on the table. Our mouths drooled ! The lighthouse-keeper's wife spoke English. She led us into a room with beds and sheets. She turned on a bath and said, "The washing machine is in the basement and so is the clothesdrier. Here are some shirts and trousers. Don't feel you've got to come and be polite till you've had a wash and a rest."

Her husband then arrived with glasses and a bottle of Aquavit, and we soon got very merry. We weighed ourselves in the bathroom-Hugh had lost one and a half stones and Janet one stone, and I had gained two pounds !

The teenage boy called us for "afternoon tea", a meal of every sort of "open sandwich" ; fruit salad, which consisted of filling a bowl with whipped cream and then throwing in a little fruit; four different cakes, oozing cream and icing; and lots of coffee. The plates emptied mysteriously and we sat back to recover. The dissipated-looking teenage son slunk off saying, "I'll go off and get some guillemots," and we saw him shin up a sheer cliff and along a narrow ledge to get the supper.

"It just shows," I thought. "It's the age, not the environment, , that makes the 1962 teenager. '

The wife had nursed in London and spoke excellent English. She was thrilled to have us to talk to, and we were only too ready to listen. With difficulty we prised ourselves up from the table and moved into a very sophisticated sitting-room. Vivid paintings were splashed on the walls, and the furniture was teak. Crammed bookcases stood against the wall, and a hi-fi apparatus with a tape-deck stood in a corner, plus a pile of very classical records. The keeper told us that he came here to write a book "Been here three years and never got down to it," he said, and added, "I am a communist." "How easy to be one in complete isolation," I thought. The family were in radio contact with the trawler fleet, but expected visitors once a year, with their supply ship. They had an enormous deep-freeze, but otherwise lived off gulls' eggs, seal meat, berries and fish. The larder was like a grocer's shop-pounds of flour and rice, gallons of cooking oil and a mountain of tins.

How we slept that night ! Janet had a room of her own, and Robin and Bruce a whole bed each, one of which was bigger than the tent that had housed us all !

It was ditficult to get away. "One more game of chess," the keeper would say, grasping my arm, "I've made a cake specially for the children," his wife would add (although they much preferred bread), or, "Try this lichen soup thickened with cormorants' eggs." But at last, after three days, we really had to leave, as our rendezvous with Pieter Pieteron was only five days away and we still had a long way to go.

The keeper's wife tenderly lifted Robin and Bruce into their carry-seats. The son shouldered the komse and said he'd see us safely over the first col. Then the keeper came solemnly out of the house, bearing a pile of books; he handed two to each of us. They were volumes of the Icelandic sagas. They were beautifully bound and illustrated, and they weighed a ton ! We

glanced at each other helplessly. What could we do but try to forget the vital things that we had left behind as being "too heavy"? We tried to look pleased and grateful, and as I was the one with no load Janet and Hugh handed me their copies. We waved goodbye and set off into the mist once more. "We'll jolly well read them, every word," I said to myself as I shifted the weight from arm to arm.

The keeper's son strode on at a cracking pace, and we were soon lost in a world of greyness. Since there was no view to look at, my whole attention was taken up by the flowers at my feet. Delightful little alpines rested their cheeks on the bare stones. My eye would be caught by a flash of pink from a centaury or the incredibly clear blue of a mountain gentian.

Glistening white saxifrages shone up from the grey ground, and sometimes a patch of verdant green-an oasis of lush moss among the pebbles.

The sides of this valley were steeper than ever, and we all had to struggle to keep up with the boy. Then we started to go downhill -apparently we had crossed the col at last. Now the boy was leading us down through rocks. He moved to and fro between great black bands of cliff face, and we slithered and slipped behind him. The ground was getting steeper and steeper below our feet, and I shouted to Hugh to tell the boy that I would rather carry the komse myself, as I was frightened that he would slip. Of course I was more likely to slip, but I felt that no one could look after Rona better than I could. I never thought about Robin's safety - it never occurred to me that Hugh might fall-and I had complete confidence in Janet. There weren't many people I would trust my child with on such ground, but I was sure of her.

Gingerly we stepped across wet slabs, and I wished we had brought a climbing rope. Without the children we would have come romping down, as the boy ahead now was, but with them we were slow and canny. "For heaven's sake look out," I kept saying as I picked my way down. The sound of the sea was getting louder all the time and we were losing height fast. Now we were in scree and the going was easier. At last the moment came when we burst through the wall of mist and saw a large sandy bay spread out at our feet. It was easier to run now than to hold one's weight back, and we were all moving fast. Suddenly the boy slipped and landed heavily on his back. I ran up to him and wrenched back the cover of the komse. Rona was quite unmoved -fast asleep !

On again till we reached a point where the hillside swept gently down to the valley floor. The keeper's boy laid the komse down on a bank of yellow moss and solemnly shook hands. He pointed to the nice-looking bay below and shook his head warningly. He made sinking movements with his hands and clutched his legs. We got the message-quicksands !

We turned and watched him retracing his way up the cliff. Looking back, it seemed incredible that we had just come down it at all.

"We should never have found a route ourselves through those bluffs," said Hugh, "not even if we had known there was one." We watched until he was swallowed up by the mist : we were on our own again. We walked down to the edge of the bay. Directly opposite us there was a house. Dare we walk across the sand and reach it in half an hour, or must we make our way inland crossing various streams and plodding through boggy areas, a distance of a good few miles?

We didn't have a leader on this expedition, and with one democratic move we stepped on to the sand. It seemed solid ! Anyone watching would have been astonished by our speed as we skedaddled across the bay. We kept to the dark-looking sand, and never let a foot transmit any weight for more than an instant. Here and there tufts of sea-grasses grew, giving us a sense of security-probably false !

The house that we were heading for was getting bigger, and sure enough we reached a steep little bank at last and scrambled up on to a lush meadow of kingcups and water-avens. We pushed our way through the vegetation and came to a little flight of steps leading up to the door of the rather ramshackle wooden house. The first room was bare and inhospitable, but

we saw that the inner room could be cosy and warm. We set to work: Janet cleared the floor of clutter and Hugh resurrected the old stove. A collapsed turf house outside supplied ample fuel, and soon we were "at home", with Robin and Bruce playing happily at boats in an old box on the floor. Rona rested against me, full up to the brim, with milk seeping out of her tiny, rosebud mouth.

Hugh set about organising his fishing tackle. He gave a cry of alarm, and Janet and I looked up to see what was wrong.

"My worms," groaned Hugh. "They're all dead. Must have been the central heating of the lighthouse. This is a disaster." "We'll just have to find some more," said Janet, getting up, and reluctantly we pulled on our wet boots again and started to grovel about outside. I thought that the turf house looked hopeful, and dug around under the decaying damp wood.

I found one ! Triumphant I pulled it out and bore it outside tenderly in the palm of my hand. Never before had a worm played such an important role ! For us-no worms, no food.

After an hour we mustered four worms between us and Hugh, set off up the bank of the stream clutching his precious tin, his rod and his landing net. Janet nobly went off to look for berries. I set about bringing some water, stacking up more fuel and cleaning" three small squares of driftwood for our plates, "How much free time I must have at home," I thought, "with taps to turn, electric fires, and food to buy in the shops."

Janet was back in about an hour, but several had passed before we heard Hugh's steps on the ladder. His eyes were shining. "Look" he said. His landing net was full to the brim with silvery fish. He had cleaned them already, and I picked out the smallest to poach for Bruce. Robin liked his fried, like us, with the skin frizzed up and the pink flesh soft and moist inside. Enough oil seeped out of each fish to cook the next, and when it accumulated we threw in the roes. They spluttered and spat, but we braved this, licking our lips, as they were absolutely delicious. Unfortunately, we all liked the crispy bits left at the bottom of the pan, so they had to be shared. At the end we tossed our greasy plates into the fire.

A gyrfalcon watched us pack up in the morning, quite unmoved by our presence. We shouldered our loads, full of enthusiasm to see what was round the corner, and set off again. It took us three days to get round that north coast, but at last we crossed a col and looked down to a flower-studded meadow. We had seen it before; it was Hesteyri.

I rested the weight of the komse against a large boulder and let the others get ahead. We didn't have to keep together now and could go at our own pace. The sun was shining and the mist rolling back up the hills. I breathed a sigh of relief. We had made it! We must have walked well over 100 miles, and here we were safely back at the beginning again. I could see Hugh romping ahead, leaping down the slope, with Robin bouncing about in his seat, squealing with delight at the speed. Janet was sauntering with her hands clasped behind her back, taking the weight of her load off her shoulders. Bruce, as usual, was asleep, lolling drunkenly from side to side when Janet jolted his seat. My load had increased in weight by several pounds; we could practically see Rona growing and her cheeks looked about to burst. Several of her buttons had parted already !

I remembered the luxuries that were waiting for us at Hesteyri. My toothbrush, scissors, unscorched nappies for Rona, and unlimited dried milk and sugar. I hurried on. The sparse flowers of the high tundra were slowly inundated by the luxuriant ones of the lower altitudes, till I walked again through field orchids and grass of parnassus, fleabane and meadow saxifrage. I was longing to look at the pocket flower-book that I had left behind at Hesteyri, to identify the many flowers we had found that were completely new to Janet and me.

As I drew near the doctor's house I could see that Hugh had prised open the shutters. Then I noticed smoke coming from the chimney. "Why has he moved in there?" I thought. "I'm just longing to camp on the foreshore as we did before, near the bank of wild thyme."

Robin came to the door as I drew up. His arms were white to the elbows and his face was too.

"Daddy and me's very busy," he announced.

"Shut that door," yelled Hugh. "How d'you expect the dough to rise with that draught?" Janet came up dragging a rusty-looking basin. "Hugh sent me to find something to bake bread in," she explained breathlessly, "I got this over there at the post office-wait till he sees it ! It's a real bread-crock !"

I left them to it and excitedly went round the house to our dump. The others had already erected the two tents.

"I'm in Nanet's house," said Bruce from the green one, while I had laid Rona out on the sleeping-bag carpeting ours.

I wanted to heat water to wash her in, but I couldn't find any of the billy-cans or even the empty paint tins we had accumulated at this camp before.

"Hugh's making bread in them all," explained Janet.

The smell in the doctor's house was sublime. Yeast in the oven ! The stove was the most Heath-Robinson-looking contraption, part of it was glowing red, the oven was patched up with bits and pieces of old iron that Hugh had gleaned from round and about, and the chimney was connected to the outside by a precarious pile of our dried-milk tins.

"Nearly ready," said Hugh with pride, replacing his foot which held up the oven door.

I had an idea. "I'll make some chocolate spread." I rushed back to the camp to collect some cocoa, sugar and dried milk. I mixed these together in an old tin and boiled it up with some water for a few minutes. Then I took it outside and sat it in the stream to cool.

It was just coagulating nicely as Hugh bore his bake over to the camp. There was nothing wrong with his bread ! The loaves were all shapes and sizes, but we didn't mind that, and could hardly wait to begin.

Robin had picked some buttercups and put them in a red mug "for the table". Hugh drew up three whales' vertebrae for us to sit on, and Robin and Bruce knelt on an old sledge. We ate our way through loaf after loaf and drank more and more tea. "That was a super trip," said Hugh, full and content, as we sat round the fire. I agreed. Already I was forgetting our "harrow camp" and the rain, the time we had been hurrying or the effort of carrying the loads. I remembered the flowers, the glimpses of Arctic foxes, the gyr falcon and the sound of the sea.

We listened for the chug-chug of Pieter's boat and watched for him coming round the point that hid our view to the open fjord. We were helping Hugh with another batch of bread when he did actually arrive, and, no one saw him till he had nearly beached the tiny dinghy that he used as a ferry from the anchored fishing boat. His son stalked up the beach behind him. True to Icelandic form,- they asked us no questions. Completely self-sufficient themselves, it obviously did not occur to them that we might have run into trouble on our trip. We gave them tea and fresh bread and some of that morning's catch of fish. The rest we slithered into a plastic bag packed up with the rest of our loads.

A strong wind, blowing from Greenland, tore across the fjord, throwing up jagged waves that tossed the boat from side to side, forwards and back. Pieter stood at the wheel quite unmoved, obviously completely confident that his little boat would get us safely home.

It did. I surfaced when I felt the boat in still water. Robin and Bruce were jumping up and down with excitement. "Cars" ! cried Robin. "Just look at those cars ! Quick, quick, Daddy. Let's jump into one." We chugged past the harbour and headed for Pieter's house further up the bay. We dropped anchor a few yards out and once more gingerly squatted in the bottom of Pieter's fragile little dinghy to cover the last stretch of water. His wife rushed forward as we grounded on the shingle and swept the komse out of my arms. I followed her up to the house while she crooned and chortled to Rona. Luckily for me, the old lady was satisfied with her increased girth ! We pitched our tent in their back green, but we had not finished erecting it before we were called in for pancakes and cream, thick, syrupy coffee and fish.

An incredible old man was in the house-Pieter's father-in-law. He was hard at work making a fishing net, and hardly stopped for his tea. Enormous bales of hemp were stacked up in the room, and his gnarled, bent fingers worked to and fro knotting the rope with a crochet movement. The job looked interminable, but the old man obviously enjoyed being useful. His ancient face cracked with a smile for Bruce, but who he thought we were I could not imagine. He was stone deaf and no one bothered to explain to him. We left the house late at night to go across to the tents, and I was soon deep in contented sleep.

"It's morning time," bellowed Robin in my ear a few minutes ' later. Sure enough, it was brilliantly light. I poked my head through the tent door. Sheets of light were being dragged across the sky, vividly bright, then, imperceptibly, they were pale pink, then steely green. The Northern Lights. It was autumn. Time we left for home.

"I must get on with my work and finish the thesis," said Hugh as we sat in the plane.

"Good," I thought. "We'll have a quiet, peaceful year. We won't go anywhere, and I'll sew and knit and have coffee mornings and be interested in the weekly magazines for housewives, and we can go down the Clyde coast for our holidays."

I glanced out of the window and gasped. The Outer Isles were strewn below. Blue sea, silver sand and green green land."Here and there a splash of white-a little house. We seemed to be stationary in the plane, and the movement came from the land', that unrolled beneath. Now a stretch of blue and the continuous line of the mainland. Mountains appeared and I identified them I excitedly-Mam Sodhail, the bulk of Nevis, the Buchaille, Ben More and Stobinian, then a stretch of water-Loch Lomond and then the Clyde, with the plane sweeping down to land.

"There's nothing so good as coming home to the west of Scotland," I thought as I made our supper of trout from the Hesteyri burn, still fresh in the plastic bag.