

MY LIFE AS AN EXPLORER

CHAPTER I

EARLY MEMORIES

HOW did I happen to become an explorer? It did not just happen, for my career has been a steady progress toward a definite goal since I was fifteen years of age. Whatever I have accomplished in exploration has been the result of lifelong planning, painstaking preparation, and the hardest kind of conscientious work.

I was born a few miles south of Oslo in Norway, and when I was three months of age my parents removed to the capital, where I was reared and educated. I passed without incident through the usual educational routine of Norway, which is divided into a primary school for the ages of six to nine, a “gymnasium” for the ages of nine to fifteen, and college from the age of fifteen to eighteen. My father died when I was fourteen, and my older brothers went out into the world to care for themselves. I was thus left at home alone with my mother, by whom I was directed toward a course to prepare me to practise medicine. This ambition, however—which originated with her

and for which I never shared her enthusiasm—was never to be realized. When I was fifteen years old, the works of Sir John Franklin, the great British explorer, fell into my hands. I read them with a fervid fascination which has shaped the whole course of my life. Of all the brave Britishers who for 400 years had given freely of their treasure, courage, and enterprise to dauntless but unsuccessful attempts to negotiate the Northwest Passage, none was braver than Sir John Franklin. His description of the return from one of his expeditions thrilled me as nothing I had ever read before. He told how for three weeks he and his little band had battled with the ice and storms, with no food to eat except a few bones found at a deserted Indian camp, and how before they finally returned to the outpost of civilization they were reduced to eating their own boot leather to keep themselves alive.

Strangely enough the thing in Sir John's narrative that appealed to me most strongly was the sufferings he and his men endured. A strange ambition burned within me to endure those same sufferings. Perhaps the idealism of youth, which often takes a turn toward martyrdom, found its crusade in me in the form of Arctic exploration. I, too, would suffer in a cause—not in the blazing desert on the way to Jerusalem, but in the frozen North on the way to new knowledge in the unpierced unknown.

In any event, Sir John's descriptions decided me

upon my career. Secretly—because I would never have dared to mention the idea to my mother, who I knew would be unsympathetic—I irretrievably decided to be an Arctic explorer.

More than that, I began at once to fit myself for this career. In Norway, in those days, there were no organized athletic sports as there are now everywhere. The only sports at all were football and skiing. Although I did not like football, I went in for it as part of the task of training my body to endure hardship. But to skiing I took with perfect naturalness and intense enthusiasm. At every opportunity of freedom from school, from November to April, I went out in the open, exploring the hills and mountains which rise in every direction around Oslo, increasing my skill in traversing ice and snow and hardening my muscles for the coming great adventure.

In those days, houses were kept tightly closed in winter, so I was regarded as an innovator and something of a freak because I insisted on sleeping with my bedroom windows wide open, even in the bitterest weather. My mother anxiously expostulated with me about this practice. To her I explained that I liked fresh air, but of course it was really a part of my conscientious hardening process.

At eighteen I graduated from the college, and, in pursuance of my mother's ambition for me, entered the university, taking up the medical course. Like all

fond mothers, mine believed that I was a paragon of industry, but the truth is that I was a worse than indifferent student. Her death two years later, in my twenty-first year, saved her from the sad discovery which she otherwise would have made, that my own ambitions lay in another direction and that I had made but poor progress in realizing hers. With enormous relief, I soon left the university, to throw myself whole-heartedly into the dream of my life.

Before I could realize it, however, I had to discharge the duty of all young men in Norway, of performing my tour of military service. This I was eager to do, both because I wanted to be a good citizen and because I felt that military training would be of great benefit to me as further preparation for life. I had, however, one serious disqualification for a military career, which was unsuspected by most of my companions. My eyesight was especially powerful, but I was troubled by near-sightedness, which, to this day, though gradually improved, is not wholly corrected. If this defect were discovered by the medical examiner, I would not be admitted to military training. Fortunately, I had refused to wear the glasses that had been prescribed for me.

When the day came for me to take my physical examination for the army, I was ushered into an office where the chief examiner sat behind a desk with two assistants. He was an elderly physician, and, as I

quickly discovered, to my extreme embarrassment, an enthusiastic student of the human body. I was, of course, stripped to the skin for the examination. The old doctor looked me over and at once burst into loud exclamations over my physical development. Evidently my eight years of conscientious exercise had not been without their effect. He said to me: “Young man, how in the world did you ever develop such a splendid set of muscles?” I explained that I had always been fond of exercise and had taken a great deal of it. So delighted was the old gentleman at his discovery, which he appeared to regard as extraordinary, that he called to a group of officers in the adjoining room to come in and view the novelty. Needless to say, I was embarrassed almost to extinction by this exhibition of my person in the altogether.

The incident, however, had its fortunate side. In his enthusiasm over the rest of my physical equipment, the good old doctor entirely forgot to examine my eyes. Consequently, I was passed with flying colours and got my training in the army.

Military service in Norway occupies only a few weeks of the year, so I had plenty of time to carry on my own course of special training for my future career of explorer. One incident of this training very nearly wrote “finis” to my life, and involved dangers and hardships fully as severe as any I was destined ever to encounter in the polar regions.

This adventure happened in my twenty-second year. It was in an effort to achieve a sort of Arctic passage not many miles from Oslo itself. To the west of the capital there rises a line of steep mountain sides surmounted by a plateau of about six thousand feet elevation. This plateau extends westward nearly to the coast of Norway, in the neighbourhood of Bergen, and is marked on that side by an even more abrupt descent—so difficult, in fact, that only two safe trails down its side exist. In summer the plateau was frequented only by Lapp herdsmen pasturing their nomadic herds of reindeer. No farmers lived there, so the only building of any sort in many miles was a hut erected by these herdsmen for shelter from cold rainstorms in the fall of the year. In the winter, the Lapps descended to the valleys, and the plateau was deserted. There was no record of any person having ever crossed the plateau in winter, from the mountain farm called Mogen on the east to the farm called Garen on the west coast. I determined to make this crossing.

Choosing a single companion, I proposed that we make the venture together. He agreed, and we left Oslo during the Christmas holidays. We made our way rapidly over the snow on our skis to the little farm called Mogen. Here we stopped at the last farmhouse that we expected to see on the whole trip. It was a tiny affair of only one room in which were crowded an old man and his wife and their two

married sons—six people in all. They were, of course, of the simplest peasant type. There were no tourists in those days in any season of the year, so that our descent upon them would have been a surprise at any time. Coming as we did in the dead of winter, they were doubly astonished. We had no difficulty in persuading them to allow us to stay overnight with them. They were hospitable folk and made room for us on the floor near the fireplace, where we rolled ourselves up in our reindeer sleeping bags and slept very comfortably.

On the morrow, however, it was snowing, and this storm turned out to be a regular blizzard. It lasted for eight days, and we spent the whole of this time in the farmhouse.

Of course, our hosts were curious to know what errand could have brought us to their remote home. When we told them our plan to ascend to the plateau and cross it to the coast, they were first incredulous and then greatly alarmed for our safety. All three of the men were familiar with the plateau and joined in earnestly warning us not to attempt to cross it in winter. It had never been done, and they were sure it could not be done. Nevertheless, we were determined to push on and attempt it, so on the ninth day they accompanied us to the foot of the plateau at the head of their valley and showed us the best way to ascend. They bade us good-bye sadly, and we under-

stood that they feared they would never see us again.

Of course, we were light-hearted about the enterprise. To us it seemed simple enough. The plateau was only about seventy-two English miles wide, and with our skill on skis and any decent luck with the weather, we counted at most on two days to make the crossing. Our equipment for the venture was based upon this theory, and accordingly was of the sketchiest character. Besides our skis and ski sticks, we each had a reindeer sleeping bag that we carried on our backs. We took no tent. Each of us had a small bag containing our provisions and a small alcohol lamp. This bag was rolled inside the sleeping bag. Our provisions consisted of a few crackers, some bars of chocolate, and a little butter—at the best scant rations for perhaps eight days. We had a pocket compass and a map of the region printed on paper.

We had no difficulty in ascending to the plateau. It was not a perfectly level plain that we found, but, for the practical purpose of travel, it might as well have been, for it offered no distinguishing landmarks to guide our course. There was nothing to be seen but an endless succession of small and indistinct hills.

We set our course by the compass. Our destination for our first day's travel was the herder's hut which was about in the middle of the plateau. At that time of the year in Norway, the daylight is little better than twilight, but with our compass we had no diffi-

culty in getting along, and early in the evening we found the hut.

Our elation at this discovery was rather short-lived, for we found that the door and window of the hut had been nailed up and the top of the chimney covered over with heavy boards. We were pretty well tired with our day's exertions, the wind had started to blow again, and the thermometer was about ten degrees Fahrenheit below zero. With these handicaps, it was the hardest kind of work to get into the hut and later to clamber on to the roof and clear the top of the chimney so that we could start a fire. Both of us got our fingers badly frostbitten, and my companion, for some weeks after, was in grave danger of losing one of his.

We had the good fortune to find firewood stacked up in the hut. It took us some time, however, to make it of any use to us—if you have ever tried to build an open fire under a cold chimney with the thermometer below zero, you will understand the difficulty we had in getting a draught going. The cold air settles down on your fire like a blanket, and you have to get a pretty brisk blaze going before the heat displaces the column of cold air in the flue. Meanwhile, of course, in our efforts to do this, we had filled the little hut with smoke that got into our eyes and throats and caused us much discomfort.

We felt pretty good after we had the fire blazing

and had eaten a supper. At length, we rolled up in our sleeping bags in the bunks on the opposite wall and slept very comfortably.

In the morning, we found that our troubles had only begun. The wind of the night before was still blowing, and it was now snowing heavily. The storm was so severe that it would obviously be folly to venture out in it. We therefore settled down to sit the storm out before the fireplace. Further exploration of the hut revealed another bit of good luck—it disclosed a small sack of rye flour that had been left behind by some herdsman. As we now realized that our own provisions must be husbanded, we made a thin porridge of this flour, which we cooked in an iron kettle over the open fire. We spent two days in the hut, and the only food we took in that time was this weak porridge. At best, it was not very nourishing, and neither was it palatable.

On the third day, the storm had somewhat abated, and we decided to resume our march westward toward Garen. We now had to set our course very carefully, as there were only two places on the west coast at which a descent from the plateau was at all possible, and as these places were several miles apart, we had now definitely to choose one of them and reject the other. Having made this choice we set forward.

We had not gone far before it started snowing again and the weather grew milder. We had frequently to