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Roald Amundsen Translated by A. G. Chater

Excerpt

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# THE SOUTH POLE

## CHAPTER X

### THE START FOR THE POLE

AT last we got away, on October 19. The weather for the past few days had not been altogether reliable; now windy, now calm—now snowing, now clear: regular spring weather, in other words. That day it continued unsettled; it was misty and thick in the morning, and did not promise well for the day, but by 9.30 there was a light breeze from the east, and at the same time it cleared.

There was no need for a prolonged inquiry into the sentiments of the party. “What do you think? Shall we start?”—“Yes, of course. Let’s be jogging on.” There was only one opinion about it. Our coursers were harnessed in a jiffy, and with a little nod—as much as to say, “See you to-morrow”—we were off. I don’t believe Lindström even came out of doors to see us start. “Such an everyday affair: what’s the use of making a fuss about it?”

There were five of us—Hanssen, Wisting, Hassel, Bjaaland, and myself. We had four sledges, with

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## 2 THE START FOR THE POLE

thirteen dogs to each. At the start our sledges were very light, as we were only taking supplies for the trip to 80° S., where all our cases were waiting for us; we could therefore sit on the sledges and flourish our whips with a jaunty air. I sat astride on Wisting's sledge, and anyone who had seen us would no doubt have thought a Polar journey looked very inviting.

Down on the sea-ice stood Prestrud with the cinematograph, turning the crank as fast as he could go as we went past. When we came up on to the Barrier on the other side, he was there again, turning incessantly. The last thing I saw, as we went over the top of the ridge and everything familiar disappeared, was a cinematograph; it was coming inland at full speed. I had been engaged in looking out ahead, and turned round suddenly to throw a last glance in the direction of the spot that to us stood for all that was beautiful on earth, when I caught sight of—what do you think? A cinematograph. “He can't be taking anything but air now, can he?”—“Hardly that.” The cinematograph vanished below the horizon.

The going was excellent, but the atmosphere became thicker as we went inland. For the first twelve miles from the edge of the Barrier I had been sitting with Hassel, but, seeing that Wisting's dogs could manage two on the sledge better than the others, I moved. Hanssen drove first; he had to steer by compass alone, as the weather had got thicker. After him came Bjaaland, then

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## CAMPING ARRANGEMENTS 3

Hassel, and, finally, Wisting and I. We had just gone up a little slope, when we saw that it dropped rather steeply on the other side; the descent could not be more than 20 yards long. I sat with my back to the dogs, looking aft, and was enjoying the brisk drive. Then suddenly the surface by the side of the sledge dropped perpendicularly, and showed a yawning black abyss, large enough to have swallowed us all, and a little more. A few inches more to one side, and we should have taken no part in the Polar journey. We guessed from this broken surface that we had come too far to the east, and altered our course more westerly. When we had reached safer ground, I took the opportunity of putting on my ski and driving so; in this way the weight was more distributed. Before very long it cleared a little, and we saw one of our mark-flags straight ahead. We went up to it; many memories clung to the spot—cold and slaughter of dogs. It was there we had killed the three puppies on the last trip.

We had then covered seventeen miles, and we camped, well pleased with the first day of our long journey. My belief that, with all in one tent, we should manage our camping and preparations much better than before was fully justified. The tent went up as though it arose out of the ground, and everything was done as though we had had long practice. We found we had ample room in the tent, and our arrangements worked splendidly the whole time. They were as follows: as soon as we

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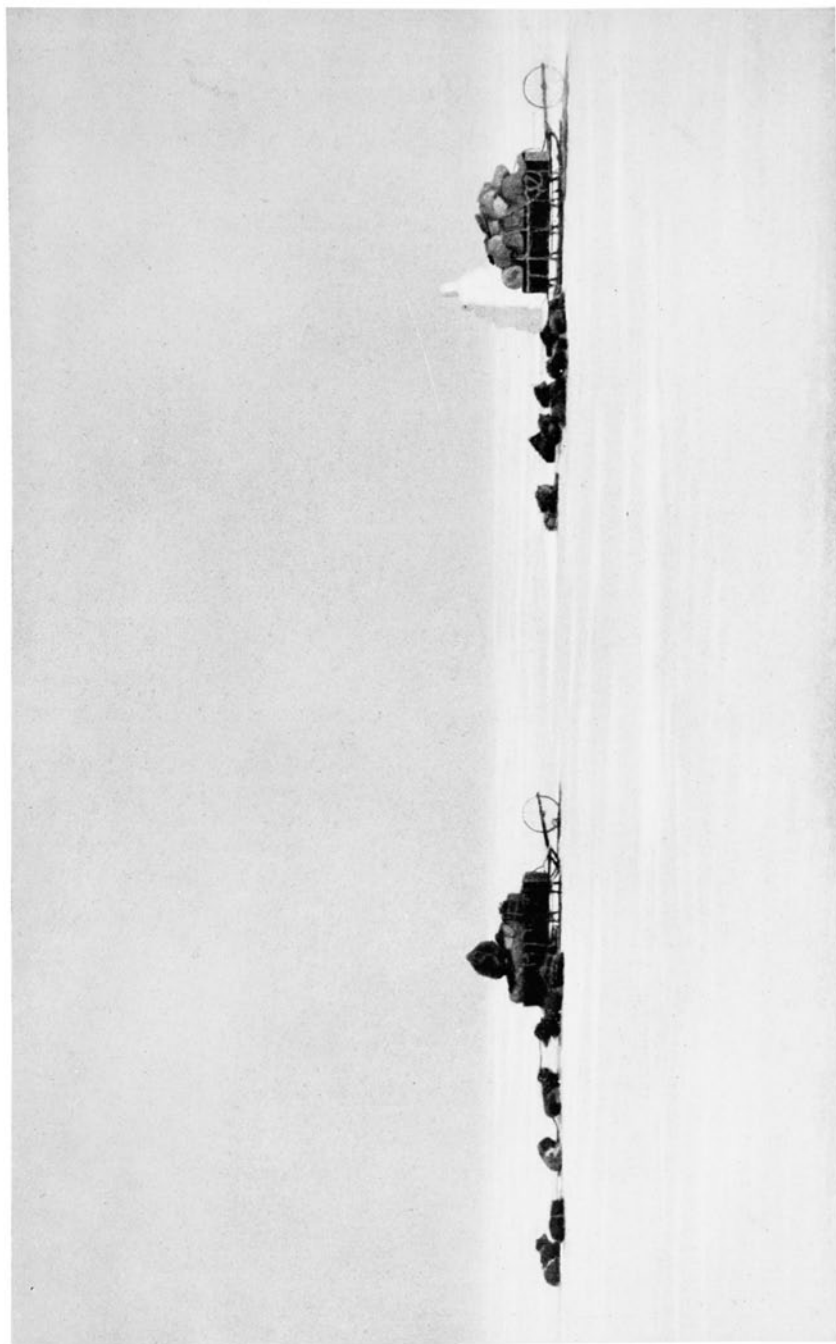
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#### 4 THE START FOR THE POLE

halted, all took a hand at the tent. The pegs in the valance of the tent were driven in, and Wisting crept inside and planted the pole, while the rest of us stretched the guy-ropes. When this was done, I went in, and all the things that were to go inside were handed in to me—sleeping-bags, kit-bags, cookers, provisions. Everything was put in its place, the Primus lighted, and the cooker filled with snow. Meanwhile the others fed their dogs and let them loose. Instead of the “guard,” we shovelled loose snow round the tent; this proved to be sufficient protection—the dogs respected it. The bindings were taken off all our ski, and either stowed with other loose articles in a provision-case, or hung up together with the harness on the top of the ski, which were lashed upright to the front of the sledge. The tent proved excellent in every way; the dark colour subdued the light, and made it agreeable.

Neptune, a fine dog, was let loose when we had come six miles over the plain; he was so fat that he could not keep up. We felt certain that he would follow us, but he did not appear. We then supposed that he had turned back and made for the flesh-pots, but, strangely enough, he did not do that either. He never arrived at the station; it is quite a mystery what became of him. Rotta, another fine animal, was also set free; she was not fit for the journey, and she afterwards arrived at home. Ulrik began by having a ride on the sledge; he picked up later. Björn went limping after the sledge.

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A SNOW BEACON ON THE BARRIER SURFACE.

To face page 4, Vol. II.

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## A BLIZZARD

5

Peary was incapacitated ; he was let loose and followed for a time, but then disappeared. When the eastern party afterwards visited the depot in 80° S., they found him there in good condition. He was shy at first, but by degrees let them come near him and put the harness on. He did very good service after that. Uranus and Fuchs were out of condition. This was pretty bad for the first day, but the others were all worth their weight in gold.

During the night it blew a gale from the east, but it moderated in the morning, so that we got away at 10 a.m. The weather did not hold for long ; the wind came again with renewed force from the same quarter, with thick driving snow. However, we went along well, and passed flag after flag. After going nineteen and a quarter miles, we came to a snow beacon that had been erected at the beginning of April, and had stood for seven months ; it was still quite good and solid. This gave us a good deal to think about : so we could depend upon these beacons ; they would not fall down. From the experience thus gained, we afterwards erected the whole of our extensive system of beacons on the way south. The wind went to the south-east during the day ; it blew, but luckily it had stopped snowing. The temperature was  $-11.5^{\circ}$  F., and bitter enough against the wind. When we stopped in the evening and set our tent, we had just found our tracks from the last trip ; they were sharp and clear, though six weeks old. We were glad to find them, as we had seen no flag for some

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[More information](#)

## 6 THE START FOR THE POLE

time, and were beginning to get near the ugly trap, forty-six and a half miles from the house, that had been found on the last depot journey, so we had to be careful.

The next day, the 21st, brought very thick weather : a strong breeze from the south-east, with thick driving snow. It would not have been a day for crossing the trap if we had not found our old tracks. It was true that we could not see them far, but we could still see the direction they took. So as to be quite safe, I now set our course north-east by east—two points east was the original course. And compared with our old tracks, this looked right, as the new course was considerably more easterly than the direction of the tracks. One last glance over the camping-ground to see whether anything was forgotten, and then into the blizzard. It was really vile weather, snowing from above and drifting from below, so that one was quite blinded. We could not see far ; very often we on the last sledge had difficulty in seeing the first. Bjaaland was next in front of us. For a long time we had been going markedly downhill, and this was not in accordance with our reckoning ; but in that weather one could not make much of a reckoning. We had several times passed over crevasses, but none of any size. Suddenly we saw Bjaaland's sledge sink over. He jumped off and seized the trace. The sledge lay on its side for a few seconds, then began to sink more and more, and finally disappeared altogether. Bjaaland had got a good purchase in the snow, and the



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## IN A CREVASSE

7

dogs lay down and dug their claws in. The sledge sank more and more—all this happened in a few moments. “Now I can’t hold it any longer.” We—Wisting and I—had just come up. He was holding on convulsively, and resisting with all his force, but it was no use—inch by inch the sledge sank deeper. The dogs, too, seemed to understand the gravity of the situation; stretched out in the snow, they dug their claws in, and resisted with all their strength. But still, inch by inch, slowly and surely, it went down into the abyss. Bjaaland was right enough when he said he couldn’t hold on any longer. A few seconds more, and his sledge and thirteen dogs would never have seen the light of day again. Help came at the last moment. Hanssen and Hassel, who were a little in advance when it happened, had snatched an Alpine rope from a sledge and came to his assistance. They made the rope fast to the trace, and two of us—Bjaaland and I—were now able, by getting a good purchase, to hold the sledge suspended. First the dogs were taken out; then Hassel’s sledge was drawn back and placed across the narrowest part of the crevasse, where we could see that the edges were solid. Then by our combined efforts the sledge, which was dangling far below, was hoisted up as far as we could get it, and made fast to Hassel’s sledge by the dogs’ traces. Now we could slack off and let go: one sledge hung securely enough by the other. We could breathe a little more freely.

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## 8 THE START FOR THE POLE

The next thing to be done was to get the sledge right up, and before we could manage that it had to be unloaded. A man would have to go down on the rope, cast off the lashings of the cases, and attach them again for drawing up. They all wanted this job, but Wisting had it; he fastened the Alpine rope round his body and went down. Bjaaland and I took up our former positions, and acted as anchors; meanwhile Wisting reported what he saw down below. The case with the cooker was hanging by its last thread; it was secured, and again saw the light of day. Hassel and Hanssen attended to the hauling up of the cases, as Wisting had them ready. These two fellows moved about on the brink of the chasm with a coolness that I regarded at first with approving eyes. I admire courage and contempt for danger. But the length to which they carried it at last was too much of a good thing; they were simply playing hide-and-seek with Fate. Wisting's information from below—that the cornice they were standing on was only a few inches thick—did not seem to have the slightest effect on them; on the contrary, they seemed to stand all the more securely.

“We've been lucky,” said Wisting; “this is the only place where the crevasse is narrow enough to put a sledge across. If we had gone a little more to the left”—Hanssen looked eagerly in that direction—“none of us would have escaped. There is no surface there; only a crust as thin as paper. It doesn't look