

Exploration and Mountaineering in Northeast Greenland

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IT was merely the partial fulfilment of a longstanding desire to visit Greenland and especially its relatively inaccessible eastern side, that gave an unusual quality of joy to our departure last June from Aalesund in Norway. My wife and I had been invited to join Miss Louise Boyd's expedition to Northeast Greenland, with the objects of botany and geology, respectively, as our particular interests. In the *Veslekari* (= Wee Maiden) a sealing sloop of about 180 tons burthen, and fitted up in style and degree of comfort quite unusual for the Arctic, we made our way first of all to the remarkable Island of Jan Mayen, lying some 350 miles northeast of Iceland. This remote island of only about 32 miles in length is dominated by the great dormant volcanic cone of Beerenberg, rising to but little short of 8,000 ft. directly from the sea. Its flanks, once the channels of molten lava streams, are now the runways of great glaciers, and no more remarkable sight of such a character can be seen, where glacier competes with frozen lava over several thousand feet of descent, than on the western side of this beautifully symmetrical mountain. Mr. J. M. Wordie's Cambridge party of 1921 made the first ascent of this unusual peak, and though hampered by mist at the summit they reported a thrilling impression made by the scene from the crater rim, whence one looked abruptly into a glacier-filled bowl of vast proportions. Through a remarkable breach in the northern rim pours the Weyprecht glacier in a series of wonderful icefalls to the sea 7,500 ft. below. At least two of our party, with the mountain fever strong upon us after four days' imprisonment in a rolling sloop were anxious to see this sight, and the writer had designs on a collection of volcanic rocks from the upper parts of the mountain. From a mist-enveloped camp at about 2,600 ft., Walter Wood and the writer groped our way up the great glacier of the southwest side, and save for a sudden clearing at 6,000 ft. as we emerged from a complicated maze of crevasses, enabling us to take a fleeting glance at the route ahead, we saw nothing but our immediate surroundings of ice, snow, and occasional rock outcrop.

The much hoped-for view into the ice-filled crater was denied us and, amidst general obscurity, as we were about to retreat, owing to driving hail, a startlingly close lightning flash and simultaneous crash of thunder drove us off the exposed summit. It has fallen to my lot to descend mountains at various speeds on ski and on foot, but rarely so precipitately as on this occasion, for running and glissading by steep short cuts we reached our camp in two hours, a distance that had consumed seven hours on the ascent. We continued to the shore, and following a brief visit to the observation station of the Austrian Polar Year Party, where our ascent was duly and mutually proclaimed through the medium of most excellent Tyrolean cognac, we got aboard the *Veslekari* before midnight.

The great East Greenland pack-ice belt, which some seasons is eighty or more miles in width and difficult to penetrate, gave no trouble last summer, and we reached the historic headland Hold-with-Hope, in latitude 73°, by July 13th. But land-fast ice hugged the entrance to Franz Josef Fjord, which was to be our route to operations along the border of the continental ice-cap. However, by the 23rd the coastal ice had broken up sufficiently for the *Veslekari* to make her way up this great and spectacular fjord, which wends its course between mountain walls for one hundred miles inland to the foot of glaciers descending directly from the Inland Ice. A stop was made for some local investigations at a remarkable mountain named "Teufelschloss" (or the Devil's Castle), which rises abruptly in brightly banded tiers of cliff to a height of 4,300 ft. above the waters of the fjord. Two of us, Wood and myself, made a first ascent of this striking mountain, not merely for the benefit of what promised to be at the outset a first-class, if not impossible climb, but also to glean geological information. The difficulties were less than expected, the information gained of more importance, and the outlook from the top on to the ice-flecked, opalescent waters of the great fjord, pent in as far as the eye could see by multi-colored mountain walls, an unbelievable and enchanting sight.

On our return the *Veslekari* was all excitement to be off in answer to a wireless call for help from the Norwegian Government ship which was ashore in a fjord some one hundred miles to the southward. All that night we proceeded at about nine knots, which was well in excess of our normal full speed, only to hear

by the morning that the stranded vessel had meanwhile been refloated.

Our next objective was Ice Fjord, whose narrow winding cañon is notoriously inaccessible on account of blockage by icebergs, which are calved from two immense glaciers that drain into its head from the Inland Ice-cap. Last summer conditions were so favorable that we could sail to the very head, and thence two of us made a reconnaissance in the course of two or three hard days into the portion of the complicated mountain country which lies along the border of the ice-cap. From a high snow summit we could see Petermann Peak, the highest point in this part of Greenland, many miles to the southward. But what was included in this view, as a thing of far greater interest, were two distant lakes lying in ice-free country between us and Petermann Peak. These could be none other than the "Mystery Lakes," seen by Wordie's Cambridge party of 1929, during the first and only ascent of Petermann Peak.

Our immediate interest now lay in the further unexplored country in the vicinity of these lakes, which had originally been set down as one of the main objectives of the expedition. The direct route from the head of Ice Fjord was barred by the difficulty and danger of effecting a landing on the great ice-cliffs of the Jätte glacier, which periodically discharged masses of ice weighing thousands of tons into the waters of the fjord, so active and aggressive are these swollen ice-streams which descend direct from the Inland Ice-cap. Access, therefore, seemed to be more promising from the head of the main Franz Josef Fjord, and August 5th saw us making our way round by what must be one of the most impressively spectacular waterways in the world. At one point the great cliffs of Attestupan fall 5,900 ft. sheer into the fjord, and glaciers plunge down to the water's edge from nearly similar elevations. Into the head of the Franz Josef Fjord flows the great Nordenskiöld glacier, whose wont it is to disgorge such a mass of bergs and ice-débris that some seasons no ship can approach within four or five miles of its front. In this respect conditions last summer were more favorable, for we were able to make a landing on the north side within two miles of the Nordenskiöld glacier front. Our guess that the narrow valley running inland thence might lead us to the neighborhood of the Mystery Lakes proved correct, and an exciting reconnaissance revealed a

remarkable approach through a cañon-like and desert valley, strewn at intervals with the antlers of reindeer, which disappeared from Northeast Greenland some sixty years ago. The only inhabitants were the Arctic hare and an occasional fox, but the spoor of wolves were also seen, though these animals also are supposed to have vacated the country. Glaciers at intervals plunged down the steep walls of the valley, and in its upper wider reaches a modicum of grass and flowers were to be found, but the dwarf Arctic willow predominated, and near one of our camps even blueberries supplied a surprising dish of dessert. The lakes themselves, if not mysterious, turned out to be of considerable interest. An upper one drained into a lower, which was pent up by the wall of the Jätte glacier at a point many miles above its outflow into Ice Fjord. It was evident that this latter lake had had a somewhat varied life history, and that once it had stood at a much higher level. When that was the case, probably within the last two years, huge masses of ice, broken off the Jätte glacier, had floated out on its waters and become stranded on the hillsides two hundred feet above the present water level; one of these was the size of a house and about sixty feet high. Movements of the Jätte glacier must periodically allow a certain proportion of the water to drain away, while at other times a much greater volume is dammed up.

From a camp in the vicinity the mountains and glaciers north of Petermann Peak were explored and a photographic and geological survey carried out. Several fine summits were ascended, and one which rose 8,700 ft. and occupied a prominent position overlooking the Inland Ice, afforded my wife and myself an excellent rock climb of over 2,000 ft. in its upper parts and an unbelievably impressive panorama from its isolated and chilly summit. This peak is of some local significance and interest perhaps, since it seems to be identifiable with that seen from afar by the Cambridge reconnaissance party of 1926 and named Gog, its companion Magog standing close by.

Another expedition of great variety and interest was the ascent of Nathorst Peak, 7,800 ft., by Walter Wood and myself, and the nineteen hours involved in its accomplishment, together with geological collecting and other observations, was as strenuous a day as the writer can recall.

The region is without doubt one of singular if austere charm, with scenery of the most spectacular character, and a summer expedition in a good ice season on the coasts, such as last year, need have few troubles and little anxiety, provided the skipper knows his job and moves warily in these uncharted waters. One brief lapse and disaster may follow, as might have befallen the *Veslekari* when she ran aground on a delta at the head of Geolog Fjord at high spring tide. The position was retrieved, however, after failure with kedge anchors, by making fast to a handy ice-floe and towing ourselves off with our own winch. If this pretty operation had failed, we might have had to spend a dark and hungry winter in the Arctic, since other ships had long since left the coast.