The Conquest of the Pole

HERRICK & COOK

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The Return Begun. Pack Drift Active—Never Changing Sameness. Friendliness of the Dogs.

[ELEVENTH ARTICLE]

DURING the first hour of April 22 backs were turned to the pole and to the sun. Our exploring ambition had been thoroughly satisfied. There were few glances backward.

The eagerness to solve the mystery had served its purpose, and the memory of the adventure for a time remained as a reminder of reckless daring. As we now moved along the feeling of elation slowly subsided with the realization of the prospective difficulties of the return. Though the mercury was still frozen and the sun's perpetual flush was lost in a frigid blue, the time was at hand in lower latitudes for the ice to break and drift southward.

With correct reasoning all former expeditions had planned to return to land and secure a line of retreat by May 1. We could not hope to do so until early in June. It seemed, therefore, probable that the ice along the outskirts of the polar sea would be much disrupted and that open water, small ice and rapid drifts would seriously interfere with our return to a sure footing on the shores of Nansen sound. All of this and many other possibilities were carefully considered before, but the conquest of the pole was not possible without risks.

Famine and Frost.

We started earlier than all other polar aspirants, and no time had been lost en route. If misfortune came to us it could not be because of wasted energies or unnecessary delay. In the last days of the onward rush, to success there was neither time nor opportunity to ponder over the bitters of subsequent remorse, but now, facing southern skies under which were home and all for which we lived, the back trail seemed indescribably long. In cold sober thought, freed of the intoxication of polar enthusiasm, the difficulties darkened in color. We now saw that the crucial stage of the campaign was not the taking of the pole. The test of our fitness as boreal conquerors was to be measured by the outcome of a final battle for life against famine and frost.

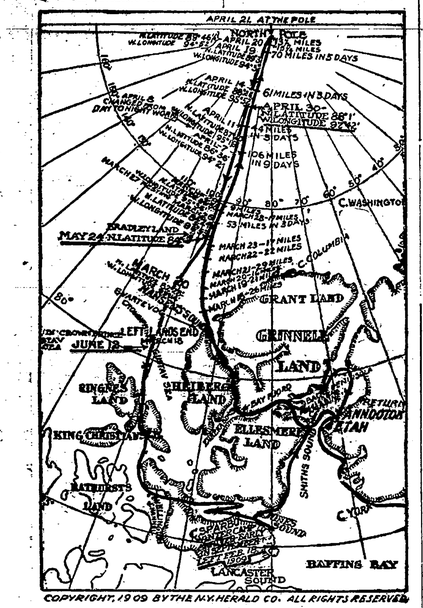
The first days, however, passed rapidly. With fair weather and favorable ice long marches were made.

We aimed to return along the one hundredth meridian. There were three important objects to be gained by a route somewhat west of the north ward march. The increasing easterly drift would thus be counterbalanced. We hoped to get near enough to the new lands to explore a part of the coast, and a wider left would be swept out of the unknown area.

The pack drift proved quite active, and we were quickly carried eastward [illegible] should have been at latitude [illegible] longitude 100. The nautical observations gave latitude 83.1, longitude 97.50. We were therefore drifting eastward with increasing speed, and to counterbalance this a still more westerly course was set.

At this time the never changing sameness of the daily routine was again felt. The novelty of success and the passion of the home run were no longer operative. The scenes of shivering blue wearied the eye, and there was no inspiration in the moving ice of ice to gladden the heart. The thermometer rose and fell between 30 and 40 below zero F., with a ceaseless wind. It was still very cold. The first of May was at hand, bringing to mind the blossoms and smiles of a kindly world, but here all nature was narrowed to lines of ice. The sun circled the skies in lines of glaring, but its heat was a sham and its light a torment.

With weary nerves and compass in hand my lonely march ahead of the sleds was continued. Progress was satisfactory. We had passed the eighty-ninth and eighty-eighth parallels. The eighty-seventh and the eighty-sixth would soon be under foot, and the sight of the new lands should compel action. These hard fought times were days long to be remembered, but only the marks of the pencil now remain to tell the story of a suppressed existence.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MARCH 30 LATITUDE 82°
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MAY 24 LATITUDE 84°
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