"'TWAS IN THE DAY'S WORK" SAYS AMUNDSEN "SO WE DID IT"

MAN WHO DISCOVERED THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE AND FIXED THE LOCATION OF THE MAGNETIC POLE TELLS WHAT THREE YEARS OF LIFE IN FROZEN STLLNESS WAS LIKE

By Hanna Astrup Larsen

"IT IS all in the day's work."

If there were any exact Norwegian equivalent of this English expression, it is what Roald Amundsen would say about his trip to the magnetic pole and through the Northwest Passage. It is this attitude toward himself and his work which makes him so satisfactory as a friend but so unsatisfactory as a victim for interviewing.

The dangers of the expedition were nothing to speak of. In fact, there were none. In a casual way it may slip out that the tiny sloop was often buffeted by wind and waves in the narrow strip of open water between the coast and the ice, uncertain which of the two was most to be avoided, and with the compass rendered absolutely useless by the nearness to the magnetic pole.

The cold was nothing. Why, bless you, it was only 79 degrees below zero, and that is not much when one is used to it.

Of other hardships there were none, for there was always enough to eat and shelter sufficient to keep from freezing. None of the members of the expedition froze their limbs, and as for their faces, that "didn't count." It is true that Captain Amundsen and Lieutenant Hansen lived for three years and a half in the little six by nine cabin of the Gjoa, but that was no hardship, because they were always good friends. It is true that there was sometimes frost in their bunks, but that was nothing to whine about.

The loneliness and monotony of life on the tiny vessel or among the ice-fields was not so bad, for there was always plenty to do and the time passed quickly—"even more quickly than in the days of feasting and jollification in San Francisco."

The patient, painstaking observations, extending over a period of nearly two years, were not at all trying, though the fact of not seeing any immediate results would have made them peculiarly trying to a more impatient temperament. "We knew it had to be done." That was all.

The walk overland from the vicinity of Herschel Island to Eagle City, a distance of 700 miles, through regions never before traversed by white people, was hard work, of course; but it was not so bad, after all, for there was always plenty of wood to build fires at night. And then it "had to be done." That is the keynote to it all.

"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might," would be the Biblical equivalent. The thing was there to be done, and he just did it as a matter of course.

Indeed, to listen to Captain Amundsen talk, one might think that nothing in the world could be easier than to do what he has done. It seems merely a case of taking one step at a time, doing your duty day by day, and not worrying about the outcome.

A certain history professor used to tell his students, "In order to study history you must have plenty of imagination, but don't imagine your facts." In order to realize just what the Gjoa trip meant it is necessary to get the plain facts and then to think about them until they become real to the imagination. It will not take long to convince most of us that for people of less resolute mold it will be best to keep away from the polar regions.

Amundsen's Two Feats.

To the popular mind Amundsen will probably always be known as the discoverer of the Northwest Passage, because that is something more readily comprehensible to the landlubber. It is characteristic of Amundsen, however, that his main object was not the feat of navigation, which, though brilliant, had no practical importance. His aim was to fix exactly the location of the magnetic pole and thereby render the seamen a practical service. The spectacular element of his undertaking was of no importance to him.

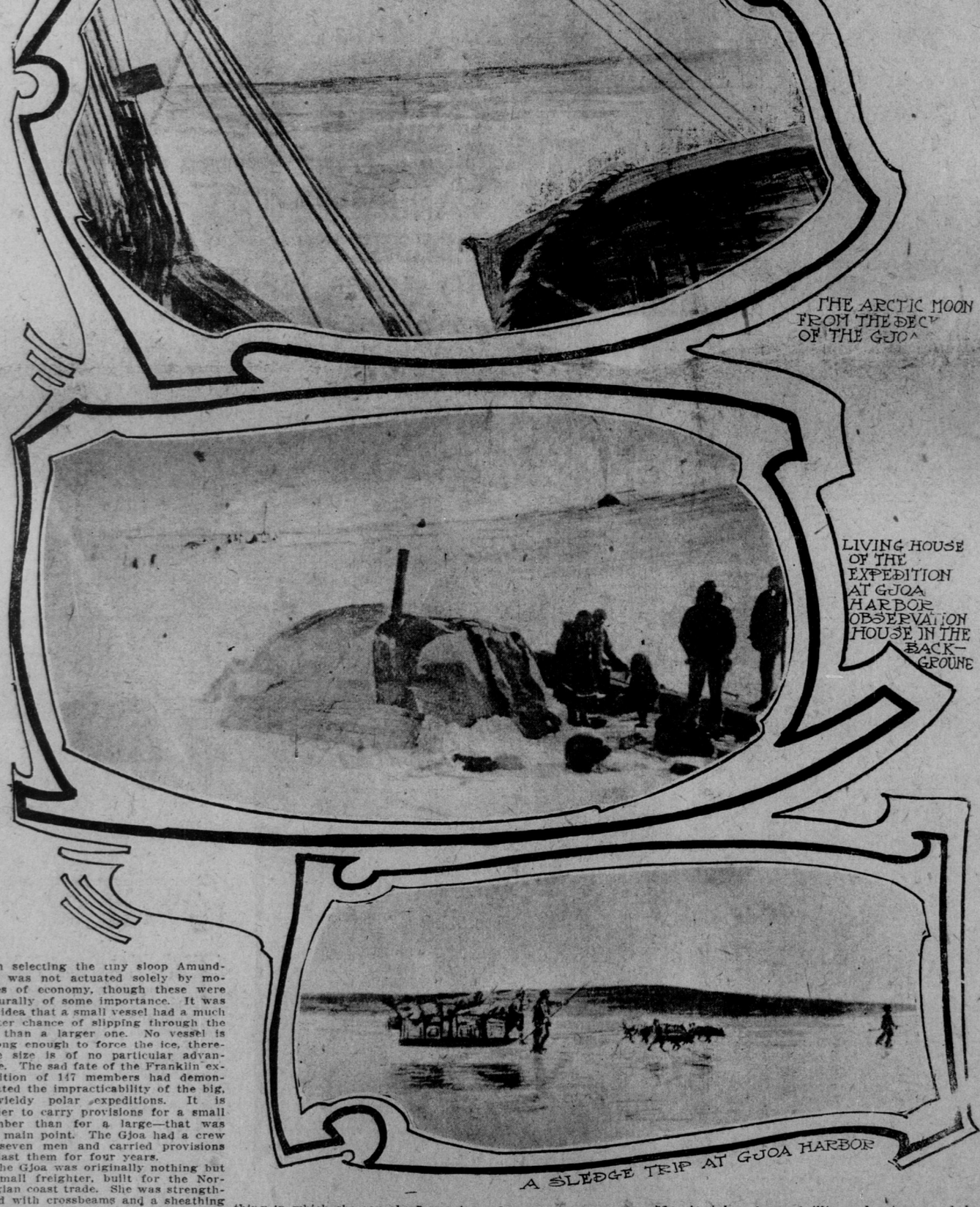
Amundsen says that he has always been deeply interested in the working of the magnetic needle. On his previous polar trips he has often felt the difficulty of navigating in the neighborhood of the pole, and the desire to do something to remedy this trouble grew on him. He studied the action of the magnetic instruments under Professor Neumayer of Germany and took his practical training mainly on the Antarctic expedition of the Belgica, where he went along as mate. He had already been to sea for some time, and had his papers as captain. He was offered a position with the Peary expedition, but his own plans were then already matured and he preferred to go his own way.

Roald Amundsen is the son of a sea captain of an adventurous disposition. He married a young lady who was considered to be a little bit above him in social position, for the lines are drawn closely in the small towns of Norway. The captain was engaged in the coolie trade in the East Indies. It happened once that there was a mutiny among the coolies and one of them was elected to kill the captain. This fellow had managed to sneak up on deck and came behind the captain, who turned, however, just in time to save his life, but not quickly enough to escape a frightful gash across his face. He fell in a pool of blood, but before he fainted he called out to the mate, "Hang him," and in a moment the coolie swung from the yardarm, while the young wife was busy sewing up her husband's face. She had a child in arms with her on the trip. It would be interesting if this had been the now famous Roald Amundsen, but it was one of his brothers, which spoils the story. Still it is significant as showing what kind of people he came from.

When Roald Amundsen had made up his mind to make a trip to the Arctic regions he bent all his energy to preparation. He was very fond of the hardy winter sports of his native land and was a very good skisman. He took an especial delight in long trips alone or with one or two companions, and on at least one occasion he came very near losing his life in a snowstorm crossing the mountains.

He had been one of the convivial spirits among the students of Christiania, and though never drinking to excess, he had taken a glass with the rest. After he had made up his mind to this expedition he reflected that the time might come when it would be desirable to be independent of all craving for the luxuries of life, and he decided that total abstinence was best for an Arctic explorer. So for twelve years he never tasted wine or liquor of any kind.

He invested all his small fortune in the sloop Gjoa, feeling that this was the best way of burning his bridges behind him. After that he was forced by necessity to go on. The rest of the funds were provided by private subscription. Nansen, the explorer, who has made a fortune out of his lectures and writings, was a generous contributor. King Oscar gave 10,000 crowns of his private fortune, but there was no official assistance tendered.



In selecting the tiny sloop Amundsen was not actuated solely by motives of economy, though these were naturally of some importance. It was his idea that a small vessel had a much better chance of slipping through the ice than a larger one. No vessel is strong enough to force the ice, therefore size is of no particular advantage. The sad fate of the Franklin expedition of 147 members had demonstrated the impracticability of the big, unwieldy polar expeditions. It is easier to carry provisions for a small number than for a large—that was the main point. The Gjoa had a crew of seven men and carried provisions to last them for four years.

The Gjoa was originally nothing but a small freighter, built for the Norwegian coast trade. She was strengthened with crossbeams and a sheathing of two-inch oak planks for protection against the ice, so that she was declared by Colin Archer, the builder of Nansen's ships, to be, after the Fram, the strongest-built vessel he had ever seen. She is seventy-three feet long and twenty feet wide and registers forty-six tons.

Her cabin was lined with cork and birch bark for greater warmth. It was heated only by an oil stove, and even Captain Amundsen admitted that the heat of an oil stove is hardly satisfactory at a temperature of seventy-nine below.

For heating purposes and for the small petroleum motor, which was installed as an auxiliary power, the Gjoa carried 8000 gallons of petroleum, of which 2000 gallons are left over. She depended in the main on her sail power.

Good Instruments and Food.

In the matter of providing good instruments no expense was spared to equip the expedition perfectly. The food supplies were so abundant that when the Gjoa met the American whalers last winter she needed nothing of what they offered her. The only thing in which she ran short was tea.

The name Gjoa had been given the sloop by the man who built her thirty years ago and named her after his sweetheart. It is a dialect corruption of Gyda, the name of the proud princess who incited Harold the Fairhaired to gather the whole of Norway under his scepter more than a thousand years ago. Amundsen did not change the name of the vessel when he took it. It is safe to say that Norway will see a revival of the old-fashioned name now that it has been made famous. It is so rare that even Norwegians did not know the origin of it, but guessed on everything from a goddess to a dog (from the Norwegian gjo, to bark), until the story came out about a plain man in the little town of Sandefjord, Norway, who meant to honor his bride and who builded better than he knew.

On the night between the 16th and 17th of June, which, of course, is as light as day in those latitudes, in the year 1903, the little expedition set sail from Christiania. Next in command under Captain Amundsen was Lieutenant Hansen of the Danish navy, a brilliant young man, who gladly left his military career and all the delights of gay Copenhagen in order to take the same training that Captain Amundsen himself had taken when second in command on the Belgica expedition. The other members of the expedition were Norwegians.

The trip to Godhaven, Greenland, was slow owing to the contrary winds. At this place a magnetic station was established and more dogs were shipped in addition to the six dogs of the Fram expedition previously taken from Christiania. At Dairymple Island, on the northwestern coast of Greenland, provisions that had been deposited for the Gjoa expedition by Scotch whalers were taken on board.

Observations taken at Beechy Island, which the Gjoa reached on the 22d of August, showed the pole to be in a southerly direction and sail was accordingly set on that course. Off Prescott Island, in Peel Sound, the refusal of the compass to render further service showed that the pole must be near. The Gjoa continued her course, navigating by the help of the stars, just as the Norsemen did when they discovered America a thousand years ago.

When I asked Captain Amundsen about thrilling adventures and hairbreadth escapes on this part of the journey, he said there were none. Yet to the listener it would seem that the whole trip, between masses of floating ice in a tiny nutshell of a vessel, while the fog put even the stars out of commission as far as navigation was concerned, must have been one continuous hairbreadth escape.

The favorable weather conditions made it possible to complete in one summer what Amundsen had expected to do in two, and so the Gjoa anchored in September of the same year in the snug little harbor on King Williams Land which bears her name. This is the spot where the main work of the expedition was done. Magnetic observations, taken immediately upon their arrival, showed that the place was as near the magnetic pole as it was possible to get, and here the work of taking observations was continued for nineteen months.

The only expedition ever sent out with the express purpose of locating the magnetic pole was that sent out by the Norwegian Government in 1829 under Professor Hansteen, who hoped to find the pole in Siberia. It is needless to state that he failed to find it—failed because it was not there to find. The pole had been located by the Ross expedition (1829-1833) in the neighborhood of the place where the Gjoa was anchored, but no accurate observations were taken at the time.

The Camp at Gjoa Harbor.

The tiny harbor, not much wider than the boats soon froze over, and it became possible to pile the snow high around the Gjoa, which was now made ready for winter quarters. Sails were spread over her, double windows put in, and a system of ventilation was arranged, a highly necessary precaution, it would seem, when it is remembered that the only way of heating the six by nine cabin was the petroleum stove. It contains four bunks of the shallowest and narrowest variety that could possibly hold men of the size of an Arctic explorer. Two of them were occupied during the whole of the voyage by the captain and lieutenant, for it was considered necessary that some one should stay on board the vessel.

Buildings were erected on shore for the crew and for housing the instruments. The chief building material was packing cases of wood nailed together with copper nails, so that they should not influence the magnetic observations. The boxes were filled with sand and placed in position. All provisions were brought on land.

Then began the real work of the expedition. Every man had his allotted task, and there were certain hours set. No chance to feel bored. Captain Amundsen himself conducted the magnetic observations with the faithful assistance of the man Wiik, who later died at Herschel Island. Lieutenant Hansen was the photographer of the expedition and conducted the astronomical and geological observations. Ristvedt had to do with the meteorological observations, and Lund and Selmer Hansen took care of the ship.

The cook, Lindstrom, deserves special mention. I first met him on the deck of the Gjoa, where some one introduced him to me with the remark that he had been with Nansen and Sverdrup on their expeditions. "Ah, you must have a lot to tell." The words slipped out before I thought. I ought to have remembered that the subordinate members of such an expedition are not supposed to talk before the captain has given them leave. Linstrom's face settled into such hardness as is possible to such a round and jovial moon. "We don't talk," he said. Evidently he had been there before and knew a newspaper scribe when he saw one, for he dodged me constantly, throwing me tantalizing glances and lifting his glass to "skaal" with me when I was safely in my place at the banquet table, but running away when he was invited to tell about his trip. It was not until I had him cornered and had plied him with the strongest coffee the club Nord could produce that I learned the true cause for the success of the Amundsen expedition. The cause is Lindstrom. He says so himself, and if he does not know who should?

Lindstrom admires Nansen, he adores Sverdrup, but he loves Amundsen. Nevertheless he is willing to admit that they all need looking after.

"You see," he says confidentially, "they need a practical man. When the captain was looking for men to go with him, Nansen told him, 'You must have Lindstrom, for you must have a man who will cook whatever you want and be always good-natured.' You see, when people are off on a trip like this they get so they don't know what they want. One day it is coffee, another day it is cocoa, then it is tea. The captain was not a bit better than the rest. But I always cook what they want and make no fuss about it. Yes, we always had plenty to eat, and the officers and men shared alike. On many expeditions the officers get all the good things and the men get nothing, but Captain Amundsen is not that kind of a man.

"You see, they need a man like me who is always in a good humor. The married men are always worrying about their people at home and wondering whether they will ever get through. I cheer them up. They are all married on our ship except me and the captain and the lieutenant." The order is characteristic.

Captain Amundsen laughed heartily at the revelations of his cook, especially about his capricious appetite, and indeed it would seem a pity if men living three years in the near neighborhood of the pole could not at least enliven the monotony of their life by changing from coffee to cocoa and from cocoa back to coffee again. He declared that, in spite of his tendency to put a high value on himself, Lindstrom did splendid service. From having shipped as Jack of all trades, he was promoted to the dignity of Jack of all sciences for his activity in preserving specimens of all kinds, particularly birds.

Indeed, Captain Amundsen has nothing but praise for all his "comrades," as he always calls them.

Another member of the expedition who should have special mention is the Eskimo dog, Silla, so called because he was lean as a herring (Norwegian dialect Silla, the herring). Silla was the Sverdup on his trip, and also did yeoman's service on the Amundsen expedition. The brave animal is now the property of G. Lomen of Nome, to whom the captain presented it.

In talking to Captain Amundsen and his men about their trip, I could not help again and again getting back to that aspect of it which impressed me most, the dreariness and loneliness of it. Dangers are faced by all seamen. Hardships are a matter of course, but the unspeakable monotony always seemed to me more impossible to bear than anything else. The answer was always "we were too busy to think about it."

Besides the regular work in connection with the observations, the collections made of botanical and zoological specimens, as well as the looking after the comfort of the expedition and the preservation of its property, there were several trips made in the neighborhood of the harbor for the exploration of unknown territory and the taking of magnetic observations. There was plenty of work in preparing for these expeditions and also for those who were left in charge of the vessel and the instruments.

For the leisure hours which must be passed somehow, there was a well-stocked library containing not only a complete collection of books on Arctic expeditions, but also a number of books of general interest. Cards sometimes helped to pass the time.

Christmas Was Celebrated.

Christmas was never allowed to pass without such festivities as the circumstances would permit. Punch was made of the strong liquors with which the expedition was sparingly provided, and which were kept for state occasions. As it is manifestly impossible for a good Norwegian to pass Christmas Eve without a Christmas tree, a sorry substitute was made and hung with gifts. There were packages brought from home and labeled "Christmas 1903," "Christmas 1904," and so on. These contained the little things with which unappreciative men are showered by their sisters and their cousins and their aunts at Christmas. Only, these men were not unappreciative. They had reached the point where even that special abomination of mankind, a penwiper, if made by loving hands at home, could touch the chords that vibrate with a mingled joy and pain too keen for expression.

As the camp was not located farther north than 68 degrees 37 minutes there was only six weeks of darkness in the winter, with six weeks of light in the summer. The surrounding country is very flat, and it seemed to me that the level stretch of land and water, unbroken by human habitation, must have a peculiar beauty of its own, whether seen under the rays of the midnight sun or under the northern light in winter. The captain, however, confessed to finding the landscape tiresome, and even the sunsets lost their charm in the absence of the jagged peaks and deep fjords which spell beauty to a Norwegian. The northern light was not nearly so brilliant as it often is in Norway, and was generally of a sickly green color.

Camp life was enlivened by the visits of hordes of friendly Eskimos. They came to get wood and iron, and they liked the white people so well that they built their houses around the ship and lived there. The gift of petroleum cases and tin cans meant riches to them, and the men on the Gjoa in their turn coveted the comfortable clothes of their visitors. Clothes of gray "vadmel," the Norwegian homespun, made for the occasion of such extra strength and thickness that it was almost as impenetrable by the wind as a board, had been brought from Norway, but this was only for summer wear on the sea, where fur garments would be out of place. For winter a double set of garments made of the skins of reindeer were in order. These were warm and light and allowed the air to circulate freely around the body.

In the spring of 1905 the expedition broke the camp which had been its home for almost two years. When the low hills showed streaks of black, when the sun beamed, the birds began to sing and the flies to buzz, when all nature was awakening to the brief but intense summer of the Arctics, then the Gjoa set sail from the harbor that had sheltered her so long. There came another summer of wriggling through the drifting ice floes. It was no easy matter for seven men to manage the boat in the difficult passages. They had mapped out their work in such a way that each should have six hours' sleep out of every twenty-four, but **often** they got no sleep at all.

On August 26 the Gjoa sighted the whaler Charles Hansen, Captain McKenna. It was a delight to meet people from the outside world, but time was precious, and Captain Amundsen decided to continue his voyage after a brief visit on board the Charles Hansen. Farther on he encountered other San Francisco whalers, which were fast in the ice. The Gjoa spent the winter with them near Herschel Island, where a comfortable cabin was built of driftwood from the Mackenzie River.

With her entrance into waters that are regularly visited by whalers from San Francisco the Gjoa had practically completed her voyage of exploration, though Captain Amundsen's trip overland to Eagle City and Lieutenant Hansen's trip from Nome to San Francisco were perhaps the most difficult part of the whole undertaking.