

MAWSON'S NARRATIVE.

THE TRAGIC JOURNEY.

Loss of His Companions.

Majesty of Love and Death.

In a simple matter-of-fact narrative, which to a large extent hid his own heroic achievements. Dr. Mawson on Friday night dealt with the deaths of Lieut. B. S. Ninnis, of the Royal Fusiliers, and Dr. X. Mertz, an expert Swiss ski runner. It was a thrilling but unostentatious explanation of the great tragedy of the expedition.

"Further details concerning the eastern party which I myself led are of more immediate concern on account of the loss of life involved," he began. "The weather conditions precluded extended sledging journeys until early in November, and it was not until November 16 that a point on the highlands 18 miles from winter quarters had been reached. From that time on the weather markedly improved, and rapid progress was made. My companions were Lieut. Ninnis and Dr. Mertz, and the party's object was a dash as far east as possible in order to ascertain the nature of the land in that direction. We were assisted by 16 dogs dragging a load of over 1,700 lb. On the morning of December 1 we found ourselves in lat. 68.53 S. and long. 151.35 E., having covered a distance of 311 miles. The track had lain across the highlands at no great distance from the coast over plateau heights and crevassed glacial depressions, three of which had been encountered aggregating 9,000 ft. of ascents and as much in descents. All the members of the party were in the highest of spirits, for though there had been anxieties enough occasioned by one or other of the sledges breaking through into small crevasses from time to time, all trouble seemed then at an end, for we had arrived on the unbroken plateau with a clear sweep of coast to the east, and it was intended to keep a track at a safe distance to the south of the crevassed coastal downfalls.

A Menacing Crevasse.

"We were in a position to make rapid progress, but as the Aurora was expected at winter quarters by the middle of January, only a few days more could be devoted to the outward march. December 14 was a beautiful day of brilliant sunshine, the best during the whole journey, and we were just revelling in it when the calamity overtook us. Mertz had gone ahead on ski as trail breaker, and was quite quarter of a mile in advance of myself and the first dog team. Close behind me came Ninnis with a select team of dogs dragging a sledge, on which were packed the more vital necessities. This arrangement had been adopted because it was thought that if any was to suffer by crevasses it would be the first sledge. Soon after noon, believing that we were outside the danger zone, I was greatly surprised to observe the outline of a crevasse crossing our track obliquely. It was only very faintly indicated by a slight depression in the neve surface, and Mertz had crossed it without regarding it as specially dangerous. My team was on top of it before being aware of the fact, but I do not remember being specially anxious, for we had already negotiated scores of crevasses. However, as was the case, I called back 'Crevasse' to put

Into a Yawning Abyss.

"Glancing behind I observed him swing the leaders so as to cross the crevasse at right angles to its length. Presently, whilst meditating on our plans, I observed that Mertz was casting back enquiring glances, which led me to think that Ninnis might be having trouble with his dogs. Looking behind, what was my astonishment when nothing met my eye but a great expanse of snow and ice. Where was Ninnis and his team? Then the possibilities of the crevasse dawned upon me, and, hastening back, I came to a great hole in the surface, leading into a yawning abyss of great depth. Presently Mertz arrived with the dog team. As our eyes became accustomed to the dark blue light from below, an injured dog was observed caught on a ledge, and he presently began to moan. Some other fragments were also observed at the same spot, but no trace of our comrade, who must have gone on down, to where we knew not, but certainly to an instantaneous death. We called for hours, answered only by the faint echo of our own voices. The dog ceased to moan, and an eerie stillness arose from the depths.

The Resource of Necessity.

"All the rope left me was of no avail to reach the ledge 50 ft. below, where the remains of one or more dogs and a few scraps might have been secured, any of which would have been of great value to us in the position in which Mertz and I were left. The sledge that remained had on it only one and a half weeks' man-food, and no food at all for the six dogs, who were already woefully emancipated, and could not be expected to help much. We would gladly have exchanged the scientific instruments and spare clothing for some of the food lost. Fortunately there was saved a spare tent cover, and a frame was improvised by using a pair of ski and the theodolite legs. Later on, a broken spade was picked up at an old camp.

Eating Dog.

"Deliberating on what was to be done, it was decided that a descent to the frozen sea would be dangerous on account of heavy crevassing in that direction, and would undoubtedly cause delay. Further, the nature of the surface of the sea ice along that coast was entirely unknown, and it was extremely likely that it would be breaking up. On the other hand, on sea ice there was a chance of obtaining seals for food. It seemed to us, however, that now we knew the nature of the country between us and winter quarters, a return journey over the plateau, avoiding most of the bad areas met with on the outward journey could be made in quick time, and by eating some of the dogs the food supply would last out. After fuel consideration the latter plan was adopted. Nine hours later I read the burial service. We then set our faces towards the hut.

Dr. Mertz's Illness.

"The food was apportioned on a mileage basis. Owing to delays by bad weather, the ration had to be reduced further than had been anticipated. The dogs gave out daily, so that soon there were none left. The little flesh that they provided contained a minimum of nutriment, and was difficult to digest. Nevertheless, early in the first week in January we arrived at a point 100 miles from the hut. For several days past Mertz had shown a derangement of the alimentary system, resulting from these short rations. I was affected likewise to a less extent. We were very weak from want of food, and the weather was abominable, day after day nothing but dense falling and drifting snow, and the cold struck home as it never does when one is in good condition. Our last few miles had been covered in short stages with great difficulty. On January 3 it became evident to me that my comrade's condition was worse than my own. Even the best food we had did not have the effect on Mertz expected. He was very cheerful, however, and we spent most of our time talking of distant restaurants and the meals we would have together on reaching civilization. A better companion I could not have wished for, and the same applied to Ninnis. They were both fine characters.

Alone Among the Snows.

The weather was a little clearer on January 6, but owing to a slippery surface, which we could not see on account of drift, falls were continuous. It was soon evident that Mertz could not proceed on foot, and with him on board the sledge, even with the help of the sail, progress was slow, and much toil resulted in two and a half miles only being recorded on the meter, which meant certainly a less distance towards the goal, for it was possible to steer only a very rough course in the drift. On the morning of January 7 Mertz's condition became much worse, and about midnight, January 7-8, he passed away to that bourne from which no traveller returns.

Close Fight with Starvation.

"My own condition was such as to hold out but little hope, but I determined to push on to the last, anticipating that at least a record might be left in a position likely to be passed over by search parties. Of the month that followed, engrossed on the one hand by a close fight with starvation, and on the other with a war on the miles that lay ahead, I do not wish to be reminded. What made it most difficult was the fact that it snowed and drifted almost every day. Crossing the badly crevassed ice of the Mertz Glacier under these conditions left me with only a chance of success. It was in a crevasse there where I came nearest to again meeting my comrades. Eventually, in a more miraculous way than my own powers could have accounted, I came across a cache of provisions left by a search party, and with the help of these I was enabled to gain the hut. As I descended the ice slopes to the hut the Aurora was visible on the horizon outward bound.