

THE COMPLETE NARRATIVE

BRAVE MEN GO TO THEIR DEATHS

CHARTING THE UNKNOWN LANDS.

Dr. Mawson last night relates, in fuller detail the story of the deaths of Lieutenant B. S. Ninnis (of the Royal Fusiliers) and Dr. X. Mertz, an expert Swiss ski runner. "Further details," he says, "concerning the eastern party which I myself led, are of more immediate concern on account of the loss of life involved. The weather conditions precluded extended sledging journeys until early in November, and it was not until November 16 that a point of the highlands 18 miles from winter quarters, had been reached. From that time on the weather remarkably improved, and rapid progress was made. My companions were Lieutenant 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 1700 lb. On the morning of December 14 we found ourselves in latitude 68.53 south and longitude 151.35 east, 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 9000 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.

How Ninnis Died.

"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 a 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 surface, and Mertz had crossed 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 custom, I called back "Crevasse" to put Ninnis on his guard. Glancing behind I observed him swing the leaders so as to cross the crevasse at right angles to its length. Presently while 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 comrades, 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.

Loss of Food Supply.

"All the rope left was of no avail to reach the ledge 150 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 week's man food and no food at all for the six dogs, who were already woefully emaciated 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 spair of ski and the theodolite legs. Later on a broken spade was picked up at an old camp.

Formulating Plans.

"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 seal 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 full consideration the latter plan was adopted. Nine hours later I read the burial service over the spot where Ninnis had disappeared. We then set our faces towards the hut.

Mertz Takes Ill.

"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 there was 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.

Death of Dr. Mertz.

"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 civilisation. A better companion I could not have wished for, and the same applied to Ninnis. They were both fine characters. The surface 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' condition became much worse, and about midnight, January 7-8, he passed away to that bourne whence no traveller returns.

Mawson Pushes On.

"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, engaged 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 those conditions left me with only a chance of success. It was in a crevasse there that 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 was descending the ice slopes to the hut the Aurora was visible on the horizon outward bound.

Messages by Wireless.

"The party left by Captain Davis at the base to carry on the scientific observations for another year and make a search for the missing party were glad when I decided to recall the ship by wireless. The Aurora was fitted with a

receiving set, but had not necessary apparatus for sending messages. It was a beautifully calm afternoon and evening, and we expected to be away early in the morning. As the ship came in sight again, however, the wind rose, and there was no knowing, of course, how long it would continue, for, after all, the calm periods are few and far between except at the height of summer. I had learned from those remaining that great anxiety had been expressed by Captain Davis as to the safety of the western party in charge of Wild, should they not be relieved that year. In the absence of exact information as to the circumstances under which that party were wintering, possible difficulties in relieving them depending on the weather conditions in that locality, the special features of the pack ice thereabouts from the point of navigation, and finally the absence of any information as to the condition of the ship, her coal supply, health of crew, &c., I could do no other than leave the decision as to further delay at the main base to Captain Davis, who was acquainted with all these details. Accordingly, I sent a wireless message to the ship to the effect that I hoped the position would allow of the Aurora remaining a day or two longer in the hope of the weather calming, leaving the actual decision to Captain Davis himself. Although this was sent repeatedly, it does not appear to have been picked up. As evening came on the barometer fell and we saw no more of the vessel.

Dull Times.

The year passed ever so slowly as compared with the preceding one, and the weather proved even less suitable for sleighing excursions. No undertakings at a distance from the hut were entered into in the late summer, partly on account of my condition, and partly because of a faint chance that the Aurora might return after relieving the western base, there having been some suggestion of this sort before the ship's departure. A wind velocity of 116 miles per hour was recorded for the average for one hour in July.

The Aurora's Return.

"Early in the following summer Madigan and Hodgeman accompanied me in a short sledging journey. It was on the return, when descending the ice slopes leading to the hut at 11 o'clock on the evening of December 13, that we descried a thin trail of smoke on the north-west horizon acquainting us with the approach of relief.

Scientific Research.

"Some days were spent in Commonwealth Bay previous to final departure, which event took place hurriedly under circumstances typical of the place, the Aurora being bundled out neck and crop by a violent hurricane. The air was filled with snow, obscuring surrounding objects, and it was due to the skill and experience of Captain Davis that we got out with no further damage than the loss of the motor launch. Dredgings were taken along the continental shelf off Adele Land, and a course was then set to the west, where we investigated the pack ice, took soundings, serial temperatures, and carried out tow-netting at various depths and dredgings. It was a disappointment to find the ice conditions worse than on either of the previous cruises, but we were able to add much detail to the former work. Very striking ice formations were met, of which Hurley obtained splendid photograph and cinematograph records.

Operations of the Expedition.

"Regarding the operations of the expedition, our plans, it will be remembered, were to investigate the remaining unknown portions of the Australian quadrant of Antarctica, together with subsidiary work in the intervening regions, the whole to supply a deeply needed want in the knowledge of the regions to the south of Australia, at the threshold of which we live, and of which almost nothing is known. Of course, I do not include the eastern extremity of the Australian quadrant—the Ross Sea