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THE COLDEST PLACE ON EARTH

At the South Pole today there is a building called the Amundsen–Scott Station. Inside the building it is warm and people live and work there both in summer and in winter. Planes fly easily to and from the station, and the rest of the world is only a few hours away. But walk five hundred metres away from the station, and Antarctica is once again the coldest, emptiest place on earth.

In 1911 there were no planes and no buildings at the South Pole. There was nothing. Only snow and ice and wind. There was no British flag, and no Norwegian flag. But across the ice, men were moving slowly south. Scott's men had ponies, and Amundsen's men had dogs and skis. The temperatures were -30° Centigrade and worse. The men were tired, hungry, cold... Who was going to be the first man at the South Pole?

Inside the Amundsen–Scott Station today, there are some words written on the wall – words that Captain Scott wrote in his diary in 1912:

‘Great God! This is an awful place.’

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TIM VICARY

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Chapter 1
Two Ships

The race began in the summer of 1910.

On June 1st, in London, a black ship, the *Terra Nova*, went down the river Thames to the sea. Thousands of people stood by the river to watch it. They were all excited and happy.

On the *Terra Nova*, Captain Robert Falcon Scott smiled quietly. It was a very important day for him. He was a strong man, not very tall, in the blue clothes of a captain. He was forty-one years old, but he had a young face, like a boy. His eyes were dark and quiet.

One man on the ship, Titus Oates, smiled at Scott.

‘What an exciting day, Captain!’ he said. ‘Look at those people! I feel like an important man!’

Scott laughed. ‘You *are* important, Titus,’ he said. ‘And you’re going to be famous, too. We all are. Do you see this flag?’ He looked at the big British flag at the back of the ship, and smiled at Oates. ‘That flag is coming with us,’ he said. ‘In the Antarctic, I’m going to carry it under my clothes. We’re going to be the first men at the South Pole, and that flag is going to be first, too!’

* * * * *

Five days later, on June 6th, a man opened the door of his wooden house in Norway. He was a tall man, with a long face.

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Captain Robert Falcon Scott

He waited outside the house for a minute. Everything was very quiet. He could see no houses, only mountains, trees, and water. It was nearly dark. The sky was black over the mountains.

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The man smiled, and walked quickly away from the house, down to the sea. In the water, a big wooden ship waited for him. The man got onto the ship, and talked and laughed quietly with his friends.

The ship's name was *Fram*, and the man was Roald Amundsen. The *Fram* was the most beautiful ship on earth,



Roald Amundsen

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Amundsen thought. His friends were the best skiers on earth, too. One of them, Olav Bjaaland, smiled at him.

‘North Pole, here we come, Captain,’ he said.

‘Yes.’ Amundsen said. His friends could not see his face in the dark. ‘*Fram* is going to the Arctic.’

Everyone on the *Fram* was ready to go to the North Pole, to the Arctic. Amundsen wanted to go there, too. But first he wanted to go south. His friends didn’t know that.

At midnight on June 6th, the *Fram* moved quietly away from Amundsen’s house, out to sea.

Chapter 2

The Race

The *Fram* went to an island in the south of Norway. It was a very little island, with only one small wooden house, two trees – and nearly a hundred dogs.

‘Look at that!’ Bjaaland said. ‘It’s an island of dogs! There are dogs in the water, near the trees, on the house – dogs everywhere!’

Two men came out of the house. ‘Hassel! Lindstrøm!’ Amundsen said. ‘It’s good to see you! How many dogs do you have for me?’

‘Ninety-nine, Roald,’ said Hassel. ‘The best ninety-nine dogs from Greenland. And they’re very happy! They don’t work;

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they just eat and play all day! They're having a wonderful summer here!'

'Good, good.' Amundsen laughed. 'But that's finished now. Hey, Bjaaland! Stop laughing – come down here and help me. Let's get all these dogs onto the ship!'

It was not easy. The dogs were fat and strong, and they didn't want to go on the ship. But at last, after three hours' hard work, all ninety-nine were on the ship, and the *Fram* went out to sea again.

The men were not happy. The weather was bad, the dogs were dirty, and some of the men were ill. They began to ask questions.

'Why are we bringing dogs with us?' asked one man, Johansen. 'We're going thousands of kilometres south, past Cape Horn, and then north to Alaska. Why not wait, and get dogs in Alaska?'

'Don't ask me,' said his friend, Helmer Hanssen, 'I don't understand it.'

The men talked for a long time. Then, on September 9th, Amundsen called everyone to the back of the ship. He stood quietly and looked at them. Behind him was a big map. It was not a map of the Arctic. It was a map of Antarctica.

Bjaaland looked at Helmer Hanssen, and laughed. Then Amundsen began to speak.

'Boys,' he said. 'I know you are unhappy. You often ask me difficult questions, and I don't answer. Well, I'm going to answer all those questions now, today.'

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‘We began to work for this journey two years ago. Then, we wanted to be the first men at the North Pole. But last year, Peary, an American, found the North Pole. So America was first to the North Pole, not Norway. We’re going there, but we’re too late.’

‘I don’t understand this,’ Bjaaland thought. ‘Why is Amundsen talking about the North Pole, with a map of Antarctica behind him?’

Amundsen stopped for a minute, and looked at all the men slowly. No one said anything.

‘We have to go a long way south before we get to Alaska,’ he said. ‘Very near Antarctica, you know. And Captain Scott, the Englishman, is going to the South Pole this year. He wants to put his British flag there. An American flag at the North Pole, a British flag at the South Pole.’

Bjaaland began to understand. He started to smile and couldn’t stop. He was warm and excited.

‘Well, boys,’ Amundsen said slowly. ‘Do we want the British to put their flag at the South Pole first? How fast can we travel? We have a lot of dogs, and some of the most wonderful skiers on earth – Bjaaland here is the best in Norway! So I have an idea, boys. Let’s go to the South Pole, and put the Norwegian flag there before the British! What do you say?’

For a minute or two it was very quiet. Amundsen waited, and the men watched him and thought. Then Bjaaland laughed.

‘Yes!’ he said. ‘Why not? It’s a ski race, isn’t it, and the English can’t ski! It’s a wonderful idea, of course! Let’s go!’

YOU HAVE REACHED THE END OF THE SAMPLE.

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