

Notebook 2

empty-handed but for several cold fingers. His idea that the Minor Escarpment had mineral veins, perhaps even diamonds – there's a scientific theory, but it was two-thirds wishful thinking – was trounced. It's all entirely uninteresting and unvaried, he was moaning, between whingeing about his fingers; we're not going to find anything different from all the other expeditions, this is the most boring place in the universe. He's disappointed of course – I don't mean the diamonds, I mean as a geologist – though I thought he was a twit to get sidetracked in the first place.

Anyway, today we rested. Jorgensen's return means the Major Escarpment is brought forward. Plan as outlined, tomorrow being Day Zero (all preparations) – so appropriately we'll be setting off on the first of the new month. I disagreed with Scott's decision to carry full rations of food – what did we go to all the trouble laying down depots last season for? – but the Captain would not be argued with.

June 40th

Jorgensen's fingers were colder than I thought – two of them have come off. I'm scolding myself for my flippancy – I thought he was being a baby. We go tomorrow anyway, Martinelli replacing Jorgensen as geologist and Thwaites-Butterworth taking Stebbing's place as medic (on the grounds of J's proven need of his services). I'm pleased about the latter, TB's really nice and I get on well with him. He's only an advanced first aider really. His chums call him the horse doctor – back home he looks after the animals.

Starting a new notebook at least makes you take stock. I filled the other too quickly. Reading through it – what a load of twaddle really! I'm resolving to be more to the point and less longwinded from now on – as well as less flippant. It's not an adventure holiday, it's a scientific expedition. I meant to record geographical and scientific observations, along with a serious narrative of our mission that might provide context and corroboration for whatever we achieve or discover. Yet I'm with Jorgensen in some degree – the great vastnesses of this place are so utterly the same you lose hope of anything interesting turning up, and drift into daydreaming or bored irrelevances. But I'm turning over a new leaf – if the hopes I started out with of writing a useful account of scientific exploration are to be dashed by the sheer humdrumness of it all, I still don't want my notebooks to become a dear-diary affair, a chronicle of trivial introspections and petty witticisms.

July 1st

A day of extremely hard trekking. We're short of Depot One by a long way, but luckily carry enough supplies for a wonderful feast, which

Sak and TB cooked up for us. We'd certainly earned it. A bitterly cold wind came in, suddenly and not forecast, and although it wasn't in fact snowing – it never does of course – it was blowing crisp icy snow at us all day, as well as pushing us off-line – constant corrections had to be made. So as map-reader it's my fingers dropping off today, or feel as if they're about to. It'll help my resolution to write less. It's dropped now – the storm, not the finger – as suddenly as it started. So hopefully better and more comfortable headway tomorrow.

I made a self-imposed penance and apologised to Scott about the food. We should be in a bad way now if he'd listened to me and relied on Depot One. He just smiled, and changed the subject. In fact he asked my advice about ways up the Scarp – I've been there more often than either Scott or Germaine, and the official map's based on my survey. I drew them a sketch map of the best route and Germaine asked searching questions about the terrain – as an expert climber would. I felt quite flattered. We were close friends at one time but haven't struck it up again since the reshuffle and G's promotion ... I just realised I'm doing it again – the personal waffling. Go to bed!

July 2nd

Completely still today. The weather that is – not us, we fairly raced ahead once conditions let us. Making very good progress and keeping good course. Paused just slightly at Depot One for a tea-break and to replenish our supplies. Didn't attempt to catch up with Depot Two, but aren't more than two miles short of it. Wearing ourselves out would be the wind's victory – we camped early. Scott said Take it easy, enjoy the evening sunshine. No one argued – though of course there's never any sun through the permacloud, and it's well below freezing – but it's been a pleasant evening all the same.

July 3rd

Another day of good progress. We reached Depot Two mid-morning – though I made a slight error, it was five miles – it wasn't a misjudgement, it was a pure error, I simply wrote the wrong number at one point in my calculation. We didn't touch the supply dump – perhaps we'll be glad of them coming back. We're now almost at Depot Three – really, it's just two miles away, why does nobody believe me? – but haven't pushed ourselves into dusk to get there. Weather keeps fine and stable, as forecast. The wind the other day is a lesson in how suddenly things can change here, and how adversely. Obviously if we'd kept to the schedule instead of setting out early we'd have missed it – or it us. On reflection, I suspect the weather-man didn't recheck after the rescheduling.

I don't mean Norris, who's the expedition meteorologist – Norris is one of our top scientists, but absolutely practical and reliable too. Forecasting for green-light is always the resident meteorologists' responsibility. I was rather in awe of him at first – Norris that is – but he seems easy enough to get on with.

July 4th

We've put down Base Camp a little short of the Scarp. Scott says there's no point in pitching night camp and doing such a short hop tomorrow, merely to conform to intended base – at the actual foot of the slope. It just means that Depot Four – Base Camp Depot – that we put down last season will have to be fetched here. But that's something the base crew can do any time they like once we've gone off – I've been base crew often enough to know they'll welcome something energetic and useful to do.

The Major Escarpment came into view all of a sudden about the middle of the afternoon. A distant haze that had hung around all day seemed to evaporate in an instant and there it was, like a stage set – the most gigantic precipice on the planet. At least it looks like a precipice from here, though it's the sudden dramatic height of it over the vast flatness – and also its bareness, the shock of something in the white-out landscape that's dark and solid. Eighteen thousand feet, blocking our path from horizon to horizon. It *is* steep, of course, and gets hairy near the top – but by my route it should be just about walkable. As we got closer the light seemed to pick out all kinds of shapes and colours from the bare rock, even greens and golds, it seemed. There are a few yellowy rocks, we brought samples back last time, Jorgensen was thrilled – though I don't know if he ever put a name to them. Anything different here is rare and exciting – and usually an optical illusion – most of the Scarp is the same undifferentiated brown granite-like stuff that the entire place seems to be made of. This time though we're not meaning to take much notice of the Scarp – we studied it in fair detail before – our job is to get up it. To get to the top and look over. That's what nobody's ever done, nobody's been to the very top. We'll be the first to see whatever's to see.

July 5th

We reached Scarp One today – a small final supply dump we put down last year – surprisingly good progress. Obviously we were meant to reach it, but in fact we had the additional hour or so to the foot of the Scarp because of re-siting Base Camp. In the event we got here well before dusk. Uphill is slower and more tiring, but the snowless surface is a welcome change to the leg muscles, it's good to grip, a bit stoney but without being crumbly – good mountain walking. Those of us who're keen hill-walkers relished it – self and Nellie, but especially Germaine, who absolutely streaked ahead. She leaps up even the most difficult stretches as if weightless, in spite of all the clobber. G's the most skilled and athletic freehand mountaineer I've ever seen – amazing that she still is, it's five or six years since I used to climb with her.

It's pretty steep – about one-in-three – but not as sheer as it looks from a distance. Largely the boring brown rock, but Nellie's had a close look at a few patches of the yellowy stuff. From Scarp One we

can see Base Camp very clearly, the haze that's always lurking round the horizon and sometimes descends over the escarpment is hardly in evidence this evening – crisp and still. Noticeably colder as you climb of course – once you stop and cool down. We take temperature and barometer readings regularly, I help Norris with this so that he doesn't have to halt for too long. I also do the magnetic readings, which are always the same. Nellie's geiger-counter goes up and down, but the trend is up as we rise – it's just the mass of the exposed rock, and doesn't approach human danger level. Peculiarly – it may seem – we're carrying a couple of radios, for that's a sort of measurement too. Since radio doesn't work here, for reasons the scientists don't yet understand – whatever you do you just get unfocused crackle – we're to try them every so often in case it changes up here, or in case the crackle sounds different.

July 6th

Two-thirds up the face of the Major Escarpment after a day's uphill trudging. We're into the steepening part now, so although we started energetically it's made the last couple of hours arduous and exhausting, and progress has slowed. The point we're at is technically Scarp Two but last year's depot dumping stopped at Scarp One – so Two consists of the remains of Final Camp from our previous expedition, two years ago. A fair quantity of the supplies we left are still in good condition, so that's useful. We went higher of course, two years ago, but resisted the temptation to push to the top. Instead we did lots of very good mapping and experiments all around the upper Scarp here – so it's a well documented area. We've followed the route I suggested, by the way, and it's just as I described. Scott chats to me about the lie of the land (as he old-fashionedly calls it), and seems impressed how much I know about it. These maps of yours are brilliant! he exclaimed once. He briefs Germaine, who's led all the way, and – Scott assures me – has my map clipped to her sleeve and values my input. I suppose she's just too important these days to hobnob directly with us back-markers.

July 7th

It makes a lot of difference, being that little bit steeper – and of course the atmosphere's thinner. We haven't managed the final third in a day, we all felt so much slower, and we did have to get the ropes out for a couple of tricky sections. I didn't see anything of G, except when Scott whistled her down to anchor the ropes. But she'd slowed down relatively too, and wasn't objecting to the Captain's suggestion – after consulting me – that we make night camp on this ledge, about two (slow) hours below the visible summit. The ledge is the highest detailed feature on my official map – Ricky's Landing, Scott's calling it – as if I'd known it was going to prove useful to us. Its height came out at exactly 17,000 feet above Base Datum – too exact to be true, I know, zero-point-zero equals error alert, but all my readings produce

the same mean, including today's – I can't work out what I'm doing wrong. This was as far as I got last time – so I've just lost my one claim to fame, to have been the highest human being on the planet, as G's come down from a little higher. I was going to mention it – congratulations Sandy, you've taken my record, well deserved, and hold out my hand – I'd rehearsed it over in my mind. I'd so like to thaw the ice between us and be friends again. Anyway, when the opportunity came I didn't – or rather I took so long to steel myself that the moment passed, as they do, and she was into her nosh and conflabbing with the Captain. I know – remember my resolution ...

Norris and I have been taking our readings more frequently, every quarter-hour, now that we're approaching unexplored territory. They vary only slightly as you'd expect. The terrain's pretty boring, but for it's steepness – the same brown rock (no yellow this far up) and hardly any features, my ledge is one of the few significant topographical variations. I'm surprised my map's been so accurate actually, there being little enough to triangulate upon – I've checked it as we've gone along but made only the slightest little adjustments. There's a buzz of excitement in camp this evening, in spite of everyone's tiredness – for tomorrow, within a couple of hours of striking off, we'll be where no one has ever been before – we'll reach the summit and look out upon what no one has ever seen.

July 8th

We've pitched camp a little over the visible summit of the Scarp, in a hollow full of rocks, some of which we've cleared aside. Scott's not sure whether to establish Summit Camp, so it's a glorified night camp at the moment. The thing is – disappointing, but it wasn't entirely unexpected – the top of the steep part isn't the final summit. Instead of reaching it and looking out over a fascinating new landscape, unseen by human eyes, we reached it and looked out over this miserable hollow and another but milder slope beyond it – to another summit, perhaps thirty miles off. It's perfectly logical but you can't help hating every inch of it! Still, it's only a day's walk to the new horizon, and much less steep.

Nellie was the only one excited by our newly-discovered land – at first. This was because it's main characteristic is that it's comprehensively covered with stones and broken rock, all shapes and sizes, from boulders to dust. Makes it hard to walk on, but Nellie was excused camp-laying fatigues to play about in it. If there isn't some geological variety here, there never will be. He sloped back later looking glum. Not only are the stones all the same, geologically, but the wealth of broken surfaces – which does the work of the geologist's hammer – also offered nothing – no stratification, no streaks of feldspar or whatever you might hope to find streaks of, no fossils, no colour variations (and definitely no diamonds). He can't find anything but the same-old dense brown granitey stuff. So the Lesser Scarp or Interim Scarp – mine and Scott's names for it, neck-and-neck so far – lost its one admirer.

The rest of us hated it instantly, what with the disappointment of our imaginative expectations – a spectacular view, a great frozen sea, a lost-world type jungle, an endless mountain range – whatever; while even the small amount of moving we've done brings home how difficult the terrain is to get over – walking even a few yards is awkward and hazardous. And clearing a path amounts to digging a trench, for in most places the rubble is many stones deep. One thing Nellie did – and so did TB, for a different set of experiments – was gather a kind of dusty soil that's beneath and between the stones, for analysis. That's a new phenomenon here, and soil is where you would find all manner of tell-tale trace elements, tiny debris, even – it's still possible, in spite of the fairly certain ruling-out of larger lifeforms – micro-organisms. That's if it *is* soil. Norris – and Nellie too, in truth, he just feels duty-bound to do the tests – thinks it'll prove one-hundred-per-cent smashed up dust from the brown rocks.

July 9th

A mist came down in the night, so dense you can see nothing, you literally can't see further than your outstretched hand. Norris thinks it may be localised – we didn't think of the hollow as a possible mist trap. Misty haze advances and recedes here all the time, and is especially prone to visit at night; at such a vastly higher altitude we'll naturally get more of it. But it's still taken us by surprise, as the several days – and nights – since we left Base Camp have been entirely clear. Some of us wanted to set off through it, but in fact Scott's right to keep us here. Nellie – the only one who's walked about much in the hollow – was unusually emphatic in support of the Captain. Walking across unknown terrain blind is stupid, that's why we absolutely never move at night, he said – on terrain consisting entirely of loose stones it would be madness.

The various analyses of the so-called soil – which TB and Nellie, and even Norris, have turned into a veritable chemistry course to entertain themselves in their enforced stay – all point to the predicted conclusion that it has one ingredient and one only, the rocks themselves (the composition of which – essentially highly compressed clay – has been well studied). Nothing different shows at all. Norris has also done tests on the mist, and declares it the usual mist-haze in unusually dense concentration – that's science for you.

July 10th

The mist thinned or receded enough for us to up camp – we all hated the hollow sufficiently for there to be no question of treating it as Summit Camp – and set off eagerly, though not until about midday. Half a day's walk, predictably, hasn't got us to the new horizon. The terrain of loose rock is just terrible to walk on, not only the slowness and the danger, but the ache in your muscles after even a short time of laboriously picking your way over it.

Norris and Nellie have been scratching their heads over a couple of weird features. One is that many of the stones are broken by what they call impact fractures – meaning they haven't naturally worn or fragmented, or been shattered by frost, they've been broken up by violent impacts. And around some of them are features like parts of miniature craters. Where there's least concentration of rubble or where the dusty stuff is thickest, they've found – once they were looking for them – several quite convincing impact craters. Convincing, that is, of the implication – that some of these stones have fallen from the sky. We had several long stops while Norris, Nellie, and Germaine – who first spotted this crater effect – examined and discussed it. At least the awful place has come up with something interesting. Are any of the stones meteorites? Scott asked, not unreasonably. Norris and Nellie shook their heads in unison. It's all the same brown granite that the entire planet seems to be made of, absolutely all of it.

We've camped what I guess is about four (slow) hours from the visible summit, which *was* visible briefly as we made our difficult progress towards it, though it had gone behind the haze again by the time we gave up for the day. Coming back from latrine Germaine stumbled on a stone but professed to be OK, even though she was limping – typically wouldn't have any fuss made of her – TB was very disappointed, he's keen to break his duck as medic.

July 11th

Well we've learned one thing about the Major Escarpment – it's prone to mist. We were back in the deep of it by dawn. And even though again we strongly suspect it's localised, and we know exactly which direction and roughly how far our goal is, the terrain's just too bad to tackle through a pea-souper. We've sat around all day, marking time, run out even of experiments to do. Except suddenly I remembered about the radios – we tried them, and it was the usual crackle. Highlight of the day!

Scott's writing longer and longer in his journal. I think I've more or less kept my promise of being briefer and to the point-er – helped by the fact that nothing worth writing about has happened. Norris keeps up his meteorological readings, though they're varying within only slight parameters, as you'd expect. I don't really need to help him, stationary, though I've lent a hand a couple of times – that's how bored I am! Sak, who does most of the cooking – no, not for that reason, she likes it, and is in charge of all our supplies anyway – makes extra drinks every few hours, telling Scott it's OK she's got plenty surplus from the Scarp Two leftovers (I don't know if it's true). Germaine says her leg's fine now, but I notice she hardly moves from her seat. She looks ill to me. Perhaps it's this misty half-light. It seems odd writing my diary during the day instead of by torchlight – though torchlight's brighter. I tried chatting with her while helping Sak hand out the tea – Sandy I mean – but I wasn't very persistent. I believe I still have an instinct for how she's feeling, or anyway an attunement to her body language. I'm quite worried about her, I'm sure she's not well.

I was thinking of the occasion we shared a sleeping bag – well it was an emergency! – I wonder if she remembers it as fondly as I do. And gratefully, she may well have saved my life that night. Shortly afterwards she got her promotion and was posted as an instructor, so we drifted apart. I was thrilled when I knew she was joining the expedition – but she's avoided being friends again. Perhaps she feels awkward about what happened, perhaps that's the problem, perhaps she regrets it ... I'd tell the story of the sleeping bag if it weren't for my resolution not to fill my notebooks with personal piffle.

July 12th

Second full day not moving. Mist slightly thicker. Scott came to me to mull over what to do – I sometimes disagree with his decisions, as he knows, but he often consults me of late. He always has a favourite, it's only lately it's me – it won't last. I didn't have an alternative strategy for him – we just have to sit it out. He didn't disagree. His other plan however, if the mist persists, is to send two people experienced at negotiating bad terrain to see if they can determine how localised it is – if we knew it ended just over there, we could contrive some assisted passage method of getting ourselves out of it – crawl mats or the like. Did I agree Nellie and Germaine were the obvious ones? You know G fell? I said. Oh she's OK, he said confidently. I don't think she is, I said, rather sheepishly. He frowned, but didn't pursue it. You'd be my next choice, he said. I don't think I looked very enthusiastic. Well think about it – it's just a contingency plan, says the Captain.

July 13th

Day three stuck in mist. Scott began speaking openly of his plan (naming no names). As the day dragged on Norris told me several times the thermometer was dropping. Then suddenly I noticed it – much colder. What he meant was, it's a good sign – he thinks it's connected with the mist lifting. And it has, now it's gone dark. So Norris is right, there's some link between temperature and mist other than the obvious one – mist making it warmer – it went colder first, then it lifted. He explained how it might work – relative pressures, air vectors, ground versus permacloud – at least for Norris, an atmospheric physicist, it's brightened up the boredom. We go to sleep with a strong expectation of being able to resume our journey. Scott's suddenly cheerful again – I don't think he had much faith in his contingency plan. Germaine finally sent for TB to look at her foot – still giving her a bit of pain, Sak says. I've kept thinking about her, I hope she's OK. Suffering in silence is the wrong sort of bravery.

July 14th

Middle of the night – I've no idea what time – TB shook me awake. Need help, medical emergency, were his exact words. I got up and followed him without protest, as you do in the mountains when such

words are used. Though I muttered sleepily about having no medical experience. You'll get it now, he said ominously. It was Germaine's tent we crawled into. She was white. An almost shapeless black thing was attached to the end of her leg when TB whipped off a cloth. I thought she'd just sprained it, I said. Gashed it, he said, massive frostbite, and he laid out several nasty looking items of cutlery. I felt sick – and doubtless looked it too. It's OK, he said, I know what I'm doing. *You* get the other end. I looked from her face to his. I can't knock her out or she'll die, he said; I've injected her with as much as I dare of that – he nodded at some bottle, I couldn't see what it was, morphine I suppose – but it won't hold her. So that's your job: hold her. And if she dies bring her back. Bring her back? I said. He leaned forward and tore the clothing from her chest. TB! I said in a tone of protest. If she stops breathing press here, he said, virtually thumping between her breasts.

Who do you want I asked her, before she passed out – don't worry, she'll come round when I start cutting – who do you want to hold you down? She asked for you. I'm sorry, there's no accounting for taste and all that, but she asked for you. If you care for her, she presumably has some inkling you do, if you care for her you'll help her, and if you don't give a shit about her you'll help her— All right TB, I said, offended, you know it's not necessary to tell me that. She'll die if I don't do it, I have to do it, he said, shaking his head – I suddenly realised he was talking to himself really, galvanising himself as much as briefing me. She's about to experience a worse pain than you or I can possibly imagine; any patient I've ever had in as much pain, I've shot. I almost laughed. You mean you really are a horse doctor? Vet in my previous shift, he said; but I know what I'm doing, I have to do it, I'm sorry but I'm saving her life ... She saved my life once, I said, gazing at her lovely face. Ah, perhaps she's calling in the debt then, he said.

I noticed Scott at the tent flap. He was delegated to hold her other leg, but had to kneel outside the tent and reach in to do so. I took a grip on her upper arms. Hold her very tight and talk to her, TB said. I hesitated with embarrassment. Talk to her NOW, he yelled. And as I began self-consciously saying Hi Louise it's me Ricky – it sounded as if I was recording a phone message – you'll be OK soon, we'll get you through, what've you been up to, don't worry, I'm here, and other such nonsense – I began to feel the slight rolling movement of TB's cutting. I'd forgotten she was covered in freckles – her chest and her arms, as well as her face – emphasised against her paleness I suppose – it kick-started memories of the night we spent in each other's arms. Then her eyes opened and she said Ricky – thanks for coming. I leaned down as if to kiss her, and at the very same moment she gasped with pain and her whole body spasmed. Brave girl, we'll get you through this, hold on to me, and such things I kept saying, until I ran out and heard myself just repeating Oh Sandy, my poor Sandy, my darling Sandy. She was screaming in a kind of stifled way. I'd started off holding her down, but we'd quickly got into a mutual clinch – she was actually hurting me very much, her arms were so tightly clasped around me.

That's my brave Sandy, it'll be over in a second. It was – she suddenly went limp. Oh no, no Sandy. I eased her down. Has she stopped breathing? TB said. She hadn't, she hadn't. I lay my head on her chest and cried like a baby. She'll sleep it off now, TB said. Check her mouth and nose are clear to breath, cover her up, and then hold this while I put a hem on it.

I sat outside the tent shaking and sniffing. Scott paced to and fro. When TB eventually crawled out he gripped my shoulder, and said Jolly well done. I don't think I did, I didn't do it very well at all, I said. Don't be silly, TB said; you held her, which helped me, and you comforted her, which helped her. Emotionally tough on you, naturally, that's understandable. I have to be frank, he went on after a pause, it could go either way from here. If she's infected or traumatised she'll die in her sleep, hopefully; if not she'll sleep for ages, but wake up a deal better. Well anyway alive. She's so pale, I said. You should see yourself! Come and eat. Dawn had come while we'd been horse-doctoring – Sak already had a hearty breakfast cooking. Scott rather dejectedly declared the day lost, early as it was, and still very clear. I knew how disappointing that was, and volunteered to stay with G if the rest wanted to go on. Scott wouldn't hear of it, and said We'll give this day to Sandy, she deserves our support; and then we'll set off tomorrow, mist permitting, knowing she's OK. I thought that was very touching, he's not usually sentimental.

Later he confided in me that he'd thought carefully about who to leave with G: he appreciated my offer – and understood my wish to – but was going to ask Sakani, because I was essential to the expedition's scientific purpose, and Sak's a first aider, a fantastic cook, and a woman, not necessarily in that order. I suspect it was his only attempted joke ever.

Towards dusk I heard her murmur – Sandy I mean, I'd barely moved from sitting outside her tent. I went in and wiped her brow and chatted. She didn't seem to be in pain, though very sleepy. She apologised for holding me so tightly. She wasn't hungry. We kissed, and she closed her eyes and seemed to drift off. I sat with her a while, and then came back to my tent and my notebook. What an extraordinary day. And tomorrow I have to leave her – I never imagined I could be reluctant to move on from this wretched place. But all excitement about getting away and reaching the summit and discovering a fantastic lost world has drained from me. She asked for me; we kissed again. That's lost world enough for me.

July 15th

It was, as usual, heartily disappointing. The summit was the true summit this time – we reached it in three hours. Beyond it is a seemingly endless plain or plateau of solid rock, stretching as far as the eye can see, utterly empty and featureless. Not dipping down, no humps, level and continuous to optical infinity, a huge table mountain. Except for the edge we're on, its southern side, no other edges visible. No snow whatever, just bare rock. Nor anything else, no landscape

features, no surface features, no loose stones such as we've just hobbled over. Just bare smooth flat rock. And (no prizes for guessing!) it's the usual brown stuff. Much of the surface looks as though it's been scrubbed or swept clean – the solid stone floor of a giant's house, recently hoovered by Mrs giant – almost entirely devoid of stones or fragments or dust (we came across the odd one or two loose stones as we progressed across it). It's not flat or polished like a dance-floor – it's grippable and a little bumpy as you walk over it – but over all, from a map-maker's point of view, it's absolutely flat. It seems odd that snow lies on the low land but not on a vastly higher mountain top – on a smaller scale that's what's been found elsewhere of course, so it's no surprise. The scientists don't seem to know why, though Norris has been explaining the viable theories (as he calls them).

Being totally featureless there's nothing to determine our setting off this way or that – anything that looked even slightly anomalous we'd head for and investigate, a bump or a boulder, a glimmer of light or colour – but there's nothing. Since it was half way through the day when we arrived, approximately, Scott decided we'd walk directly north for the other half day and establish Summit Camp there.

I visited Sandy before we set out. She was hungry now – TB says that's the best possible sign. We shared a tray of nosh. I was lamenting having to leave – but Sandy's not that type at all. She said You haven't come all this way to sit around holding my hand, you mustn't think twice about going. Then she smiled and said But be sure and come back. I have the best reason in the world to come back now. Yes, a one-legged mountaineer, she said. That wasn't part of my picture of her at all, oddly, and isn't. Obviously TB felt bad about leaving her as well. But at least she's hungry, he said to himself; then turned to me slyly and said She'll lie there being fed by Sak, getting fatter and fatter and fatter.

July 16th

By Scott's plan we go off in pairs on half a day's trek – lunching after four or five hours and then returning to Summit Camp – our directions determined by the compass, since there are no features to head for. Thus checking out the surrounds with at least some system. Today Nellie and Norris went south-east, TB and Matsuko south-west, the Captain and I stayed at Summit Camp twiddling – that's TB's word for taking readings and doing experiments. The height determination was the most important – we get results with a mean of 20,723 feet. Both duos have returned reporting absolutely nothing – featureless identical terrain, except for one or two loose stones, the geology all the same, the temperature always the same, the plateau always seeming to continue the same as far as the eye can see. Tomorrow, Norris and TB play at scientists here, the Captain and I go west, Nellie and Pam go east (Matsuko's nickname is Pam, I've no idea why).

July 17th

I'm writing my diary unusually late, as we've been waiting anxiously for Nellie and Pam. They haven't come back. Scott and I had an uneventful and uninteresting trek, seeing nothing, near or distant, but the same-old terrain. We rested after four hours, ate, dutifully took readings, then walked back. Being thoroughly bored with the immediate surroundings, especially on the way back, you spend more time looking through binoculars to the distance, hoping to spot even the slightest feature that might be worth heading for on a future day. Nothing. We were back well before dusk. Even if the others went slower or further – or indeed found something interesting, improbable as that sounds – they're not so stupid as to have strayed much beyond the agreed routine, and they'd certainly aim to be back by dusk. Pam's a youngster, but Nellie's very experienced, and we know he respects the rule against moving in darkness – which is total under the permacloud of course, quite apart from how the temperature plunges. The best consolation is that having – for whatever reason – not made it back before dark, they carry all necessary gear for bivouacking down and keeping warmish until daylight. So that's what we hope they've done.

Norris and TB are taking turns on watch. It's several years since we abandoned routine watches, realising the whole place is completely uninhabited, by animals or anything. But obviously the possibilities – both of an unknown danger out there, and of a comrade limping back injured – require watches. At first light Scott and I will set off to look for them. I wonder how my brave Sandy's doing.

July 18th

Because of the uncertainty of exact paths – and the lack of any kind of track on this solid rock – we walked about a hundred yards apart, surveying the ground ahead and either side. We came together and had a tea break after two hours, and lunch at four and a half hours. But because they'll have walked faster, we then did an extra hour, same pattern – and back. Nothing. We feel we did a fairly thorough search of the last part of the terrain, where their turn-around and lunch-cooking spot would be, but we found no signs of it. To get back before dark we marched quicker the last leg, and are now weary and completely at a loss.

July 19th

TB and Norris went off to do more or less what Scott and I did. There's no alternative plan, except for minor variations in method – they zigzagged in places, to cover more terrain. But they too have come back with nothing to report. I can't say I have the least idea what we can do next.

July 20th

We're now at East Camp, four hours east of Summit Camp. Scott's idea, and obviously a good one – that we all four pitch camp approximately where Nellie and Pam should have eaten lunch and turned round. Based here, we'll conduct further sweeps in all directions. We've left a note at Summit Camp in case they return – though goodness knows where they can pop up from – unless they literally have found (or fallen into) some crevice or pot-hole or underground cavern. Which incidentally are pretty much the only kind of features we retain any serious thought might be discovered on this plateau – certainly the only ones that could exist without us being able to see them.

We continue to have a clear and distant view all round, the weather entirely stable, the mist staying at most a very distant haze, even at night. It implies that the mist problem we had, not all that far south of here, was as we suspected a localised phenomenon. They're probably still experiencing regular dense mists, our friends at Interim Camp, says Norris – a micro-climate, caught between the low snowy plain and the high bare plateau.

July 21st

We were making a broad sweep east, not the first of the day, widely spaced but keeping each other visible. It was Scott who spotted something, flashed his light and went off away. I signalled Norris and headed for Scott. I couldn't see what it was he'd seen. He'd caught, he said later, no more than a glint of unusual colour through the corner of his eye. It was Matsuko – sprawled on the rock on his back, dead, his eyes staring upwards. He looked odd, peculiarly misshapen somehow. Scott thought it was as if he'd been crushed. TB eventually arrived – he'd been furthest away – and examined him more expertly. If it weren't impossible I'd say he'd fallen from a great height, smashing bones and dislodging internal organs. That's the best I can make of it. We stared at each other incredulous.

We've spent several further hours examining the vicinity – obviously looking for Nellie, but also wondering about their belongings – Pam doesn't have much of his travelling equipment on him, nor his camera. We found his flask, quite a distance away, dented. After a little heartsearching, we left Pam where he lay. There's no means of burial on this land of rock, not even enough loose stones to pile over him, so we adopt the mountaineer's strategy of leaving him lie. We bowed our heads over him – but in all honesty couldn't think of any words to say. The Captain was gutted, we all are, but of course a leader feels responsible when these things happen. Pam was the newest member of the team, I hadn't got to know him terribly well, I'm sorry for that now. Apparently he specially asked to be assigned to the expedition. Scott's writing everything he can remember about him in his notebook – for his mother, he says. I suppose we must continue

searching tomorrow, even though we now assume Nellie met with the same fate – whatever that was.

July 22nd

Another day of searching but we've not found Nellie. A small part of their stove was found. Norris is working on a theory of a sudden powerful air vortex (as he calls it), or column of wind – rather like a tornado. But wouldn't we see such things, like you do tornadoes, especially the view being so clear and so distant up here? Well, if it was pure air, rather than a column of cloud, and if – on this solid, clean surface – it contained virtually no debris, no dust, perhaps we wouldn't, he says. Such a thing seems impossible to imagine in such infinite-seeming stillness – we've felt no wind whatever since we've been up here, not the slightest breeze. That's a very good point, Norris says – as though I'd said something clever; we could be describing the prevailing meteorology, a new climatic situation where wind behaves differently, only manifesting itself in these concentrated phenomena, instead of conventionally. Such an air-vortex might descend very suddenly on to you and crush you; or it might gather around you, whisk you up and throw you out, or carry you far up and then dissipate and you just fall out of the clouds. It happens back home, he says, but isn't common.

July 23rd

Scott thinks Norris's theory is sound. So we spend some days looking for these invisible tornadoes, the Captain decrees. Today, at East Camp, we've each had several very boring stints gazing round with binoculars for any apparent air disturbance, tornado type column, or object in the sky. Since we know there are no birds or flying creatures, anything in the sky must be windborne. It strikes me as pointless – the searching for them I mean, if they're invisible – though I grant the theory itself is very clever.

July 24th

Returned to Summit Camp this morning, watched for invisible air vortexes this afternoon. Norris says – he's been searching his database – there have been at least seventy corroborated reports in the twelve years since primary colonisation of undefined objects thought to be seen in the sky. Many of them popularly sensationalised as UFOs of course, and some still down as suspected flying creatures, but most of those seen by scientists are logged as inexplicably airborne inanimate objects. It's enough to make him think these are linked phenomena, and that the vortexes or wind columns he suggests do exist, or else some similar form of concentrated air disturbance – even if they're rare events, for a proportion of the reports will be errors and optical illusions.

July 25th

Same again today – searching the white and empty sky. It's white and empty. TB and I are fed up. We think – no disrespect to our lost comrades, nor to Norris's theory – we should either abort and go back to Interim Camp, or push forward in fulfilment of the original expedition plan. I don't object to the latter. I realise my instinctive preference to head back to Sandy's Café – as TB calls it! – is coloured by thoughts of Sandy and concern for her health. It's baffling why we hadn't kept up our friendship. Perhaps it was just one of those silly cases of neither thinking the other wanted to. Or perhaps the sleeping bag spoiled it – the transgression of boundaries and all that – until starker choices up here brought it into perspective. I'm going to take that desk job in the mapping unit when we get back, if they still want me. TB says he can guarantee me a desk job, if I like, and begins to pull out his amputation kit. Morbid sense of humour, these horse doctors.

July 26th

Norris is vindicated – and Scott, more so, for persisting in making us look for them. We all watched what was presumably a large rock – hard to fix a distance and thus a scale to it of course – spiralling upwards to an enormous height, till disappearing from view in the sub-permacloud haze. And then – after a long tense wait, seven minutes to be exact – falling at normal speed back to the ground. The air column itself, being pure of haze or precipitation or dust, was simply invisible. But that's what it must have been, Norris's vortex.

It's the same phenomenon that causes crop-circles on earth, he said casually. TB and I simultaneously said But they're hoaxes. Well the one's that aren't – I knew you'd scoff, that's why I didn't mention it. He's serious. So this is a major meteorological discovery – albeit discovered at a tragic cost. But how common are they? Trust Scott to ask the sensible question. Norris shook his head. They're invisible, and we've neither measured nor felt any air-movement phenomena ourselves. It's impossible to say. A good deal more evidence will have to be collated before we've any idea. What Scott was getting at wasn't the pure scientific question but the risk, if we went on. Does it catching Pam and presumably Nellie mean they were just very unfortunate, to find themselves at that million-to-one moment in that million-to-one spot on this vast plateau? Or does it mean it's we who've been very fortunate, not to have bumped into one – so far? Being so difficult for us to detect at all, we could be invisibly surrounded by them in inestimable numbers. In truth I know Norris thinks they're rare, but his scientific instinct wants to study the phenomenon for a few years before pronouncing. I wondered if the lack of surface debris up here (in the way of dust or stones) might be taken to mean they're very rare – so little debris being dumped – or very common – the surface being regularly swept clean. Trust you to posit an opinion that cuts both ways, Scott said.

July 27th

We're pursuing the intended mission trajectory and pressing north. A day's trekking, but at quite a leisurely pace. Boring though it is, through utterly featureless landscape, there's been no chatter – we're all very subdued. Delayed effect of the loss of our friends. Plus a sense of the futility of pressing forward – though we don't dispute it's the right thing to do. It's only fair to our comrades to continue the mission they were committed to when they died. And it's what Sandy would do, or have us do, of that I'm in no doubt. So even I – who initially advocated going back – accept that it's right to press on, after coming all this way at great effort and expense to explore an unexplored land, to see what no human eye has seen before. But there's the futility of it – for what the eye's seeing is unspeakably boring and disheartening, and promises nothing in the way of discoveries but more of the same. Solid rock, solid sky. So far as we can tell the plateau goes on for ever, and goes on exactly the same.

July 28th

We walked faster and got a good deal further today. I think – though we're still feeling quiet and solemn – it came naturally to us all, a kind of defiant burst of energy; and since there's nothing to see, sheer vigorous exercise substitutes. Not that we neglect the expedition basics. Norris pauses every quarter-hour to take his readings, and I help him. He's recommissioned his balloon anemometer, which he'd previously concluded was pointless – we blow up a balloon and it lifts the little wind-gauge thirty or fifty feet up, to tell us if there's a breeze up there even if there isn't at ground level. So far not. I also keep up my magnetic readings (even though they never change) and maintain my rudimentary map – a rather pointless, featureless one I'm afraid – not remotely the lovely map I planned, as there's nothing to put on it and nothing to fix measurements upon. TB does the radioactivity and some chemical tests. He's also put a few fragments of the boring brown rock in a bag – for Nellie's sake, he says. The sameness of the geology is mightily disappointing, but Nellie was dutifully collecting typical specimens at calculated distances for analysis back at base (they're at Summit Camp, his specimens, we'll pick them up on the way back).

Norris is now the Captain's confidante – impressed by the vortex theory obviously – and rightly. It's Scott's way, I had my turn, he's a good enough leader but he likes to sound his ideas out on somebody and then present his decisions as representing a degree of consensus. Sandy – though they're different as chalk and that other stuff – was an excellent number two for him, equally good at bolstering him when he deserved bolstering and nudging him in some other direction when that was needed.

Tonight the Captain's plan is phrased as a question: they're both game, do we (TB and I) think we can stand another three days? If by

then we've come across nothing new, seen nothing in the distance, the terrain and horizon remaining the same, we'll pitch Far North Camp, twiddle for a day or two, then head back. The truth is that TB and I are *very* game for another three days – the suggestion surprised us, as the expedition's over-all timetable and supply parameters allow a good many more. So it's jolly good news (as TB would say – and did). Three more days out, a day or two twiddling, about six days back – and then SANDY. Then about four days to get down the steep Scarp to Base Camp, safer environs, endless nosh, and better medicine for my Sandy. She'll be no problem, and jokes about Sak's cooking aside she's a wiry girl, she's not heavy – TB and I have already discussed stretchering her down, the stretcher slung between us, me leading (expert on the Scarp terrain) and TB (who's heavier) anchor. We've got it all worked out, it'll be no problem.

July 29th

But I think it is not to be. Heaven help us. During the night the weather has changed. The haze always comes in a little at night, but today we woke up in mist – or rather Norris woke me. We'd better take a full set of readings of this, he said. It was the only weather change we'd had up on the plateau. It wasn't pea soup, you could see a few miles – but that's instead of the usual (query) hundred miles, or nominal optical infinity. Temperature a little up, more so than usual. And the balloon anemometer registering a breeze at thirty feet, another first. We dismantled the instrument, cleaned and adjusted it, and sent it back up. The reading was real – the air was beginning to move. I looked at him worriedly. No, vortex and mist, I don't think so, he said.

So we stayed put, no point setting off. Let's watch what happens, Scott said. He might have been uttering a prophecy. Mid-morning something very peculiar indeed began to happen. The mist, which had a visibility distance of three miles – I'd calculated it more accurately – began to assume a pattern, a pattern of – as it slowly emerged – gigantic vertical stripes, alternately light and darker. Norris and I, watching it in different directions, saw it simultaneously. Are you seeing this? he said. I was about to say that to you, I replied. We shouted Scott (I'm almost certain he'd gone back to sleep). All around us the same thing was happening – the mist was resolving into these regular vertical columns of lighter and darker tone – not dramatically different, the dark was just that relative greyness you get in mild rain-clouds. And eventually these grey segments, seeming I'm sure at first thinner than the white areas between them, were obviously, if very slowly, widening.

It's moving, Norris said after a while – he was looking through his powerful telescope. or rather my powerful telescope, for surveying, though I hadn't been using it much. Visibility distance down very slightly, I said – I'd set up a sighting device to monitor it. No I don't mean moving that way, Norris said; I mean ... He looked in silence for a while, then handed me the telescope. See if you see it. Where the mist was white it showed nothing but its usual grainy, flat whiteness;

where the mist was greyish there was a distinct sense of internal movement. He was right – the grey parts were huge swirling columns of cloud, like tornadoes, revolving or spiralling anti-clockwise.

Bally peculiar, said TB. I handed him the telescope. And as he was just getting it, I said grimly: It's a vortex storm. Norris nodded without taking his eyes off it. I thought there was a slight breeze, said Scott. He was right – while we'd been watching this spectacle a mild breeze had started playing about our ears. Before long the dark and light columns of the haze were more starkly differentiated. The movement, the internal swirling sensation, gradually became visible to the naked eye, and with it the grey columns assumed a kind of three-dimensionality, they seemed to stand out from the weaker white haze. And they were definitely bigger, they were growing – or coming nearer – or both. Through the telescope dark specks were spiralling upwards within them, presumably rock fragments, probably quite large, small as they appeared at what was now two miles distance. The vortexes were closing in – we were now beginning to hear them.

But there are so few loose rocks, the surface is smooth and bare, I muttered to Norris. Too smooth and bare by half, he said; look at that one! I caught it well enough – in the binoculars it looked gigantic, but spiralled up at speed as if weightless. By too smooth you mean you think vortex storms like this actually scour the surface. Like a wire brush on rust, he said; in fact it's slicing the surface off, more like a meat slicer, huge slabs of it as well as masses of dust. That's why it's grey. But it's not coming back down, I said. He nodded again. It doesn't come back down Geoff, I repeated emphatically, to my own horror.

Why are we outside of it? said Scott. Norris turned and gave him the ultimate you-must-be-stupid look, that I couldn't help wishing I'd dared give him on occasions – except this time I had great sympathy with his bafflement, even though I could see the answer coming. Come on, why is it happening all around us but missing us? he reiterated, brushing windblown hair from his face. Norris didn't turn round to reply – he just said very calmly: It isn't. It's a heart-stoppingly dreadful thought, but I have to concur. We're not protected by some magic force-field. If we're viewing the spectacle as if we were in the middle of it, it's because we're in the middle of it. We're *in* it. We're not in a grey vortex – obviously – so we're in a white in-between part. And the grey vortexes are growing, the white in-betweens are shrinking away. And it continues to get windier, and noisier.

But there's that other dreadful thought, that Scott interrupted. I repeated myself yet again, quietly: It doesn't come back down Geoff – for heaven's sake – you don't think ...? He was more sympathetic with me than with the Captain, but he had equally cold comfort to set against the terrible realisation that I was trying not to let form in my mind. I think you're right my friend, he said, with a smile of resignation; I'm afraid what you're thinking is probably right. He must have seen my eyes fill up, for he added: Perhaps it'll be quicker for them.

TB had crouched beside me, gazing with us at the columns of mist, about a mile and a half off, dominated now by the grey ones, clearly three-dimensional, clearly whirling rapidly. And clearly audible – a terrifying, deep, enormous sound, like the blades of a windmill. I can hear it as I write, getting louder and closer. If you don't mind chaps, I said, I'll go to my tent to write my diary, before the wind gets too strong. Just a second Ricky, I didn't catch it all, TB said; what did he mean, what is it you're thinking? I explained: An isolated and mild Norris Vortex picks something up from the surface at random and drops it back nearby – like Matsuko, or the boulder we saw the other day. A violent, concentrated Vortex Storm we think scours the whole plateau, tearing masses of rock and dust from the surface – that's why it's so flat and smooth and clean – and rains them down somewhere else. Like a hailstorm, he said. A bit like that ... it rains it all down in a torrential, deadly downpour – on the Interim Scarp.

The rest of Pioneer Eiriksdottir's notebook is empty. The Relief Party found it fluttering about on the Great Scarp the following spring. Its contents have been of inestimable value to scientists, and it is now preserved here in grateful memory of eight gallant explorers who at the cost of their lives advanced knowledge of New Earth, discovered the Forbidden Plateau, and warned us of the famous Norris-Eiriksdottir Vortex Storms. Press here for a livecam image of the names inscribed on the Memorial Rock at Ricky's Landing, 17000.00 feet above ground datum at Great Scarp Educational & Tour Center.

In Memory of the Discoverers of the Forbidden Plateau

Colonel-Pioneer Charles Gordon "Captain" Scott, expedition leader
Captain-Pioneer Louise "Sandy" Germaine, deputy expedition leader
Captain-Pioneer Vernon Geoffrey "Geoff" Norris, chief scientist
Lieutenant-Pioneer Manuel "Nellie" Martinelli, geologist
Lieutenant-Pioneer Erika "Ricky" Eiriksdottir, surveyor
Lieutenant-Pioneer Theo "TB" Thwaites-Butterworth, acting medic
Ordinary Pioneer Hitomi "Sak" Sakani, quartermaster
Ordinary Pioneer Peter Addington "Pam" Matsuko, photographer

"The mountain keeps them, jealous of their valour"

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