

## First Ascent

Andrew Smithson trudged up the snow-covered hill, dragging the heavy sled behind him. There was a hard crust on the surface, which shattered like a broken window when he put weight on it. Then he sank almost up to his knee before his boot reached the frozen ground underneath. He tested his footing carefully, making certain it was stable, before putting all his weight on it so he could lift his other foot above the snow and take a step forward.

He squinted against the glare of the morning sun, reflecting brilliantly from the vast expanse of snow that surrounded him. Should he have brought sunglasses? Or snow goggles? He'd read about the painful snow blindness that afflicted arctic explorers, but he never thought it would happen to him.

A sudden gust of wind pelted his face with tiny ice crystals, swept off the surface of the crusty snow. They stung when they hit his exposed skin. Fortunately, most of his face was protected by a woolen muffler pulled up over his nose. Tiny icicles clung to its surface near his mouth and nose, where his exhaled breath froze when it reached the bitterly cold outdoor air.

He struggled to take another step forward. Already he was beginning to sweat from the exertion, despite the frigid temperature. And he was barely half-way up the hill, on his first ascent of the day. How many ascents would he have to make on this trek? He was certain there would be another ascent. And another after that. And who knew how many after that? All he could do was to keep climbing. And keep dragging his precious sled behind him.

"Is this how the members of the doomed Scott expedition felt?" he wondered. "Dragging their sleds over the Antarctic mountains after the last of their dogs had died? Praying they could reach their food cache before malnutrition, exhaustion, and hypothermia made it impossible to go any farther?"

Finally, he reached the crest of the hill. He pulled the sled up to the crest and made certain it was stable before he relaxed to catch his breath. He looked back at the track he'd made trudging up this hill. Beside the ragged furrow made by his footsteps there was a broad slope of unbroken, white snow.

"OK kids," he announced. "Everybody out of the sled."

Evelyn and Benjamin clambered out of the sled, giggling with excitement. Their bulky snow suits made movement difficult, but they managed to extract themselves in record time. Evelyn lost a mitten in her rush, but Andrew shook the snow off it and helped her put it back on. Then he carefully positioned the long sled at the edge of the hill, facing back the way they'd come up. He climbed into the sled, with his legs extending in front of him.

"OK, Benjamin. You sit on my lap and Evelyn, you climb onto Benjamin's lap. Benjamin, hang on tight to your little sister. I'll hang on to you after I push off. Ready? One, two, threeee!"

He pushed off and wrapped his arms around the two children. They screamed in terror and delight as the sled rushed down the hillside and coasted well into the field beyond. When it finally slowed to a

stop Andrew climbed out and pulled the sled back to the hill. He would make many ascents that morning. Too many to count. He would keep pulling the sled up the hill until the chattering teeth of his children belied their protests that they weren't cold.