

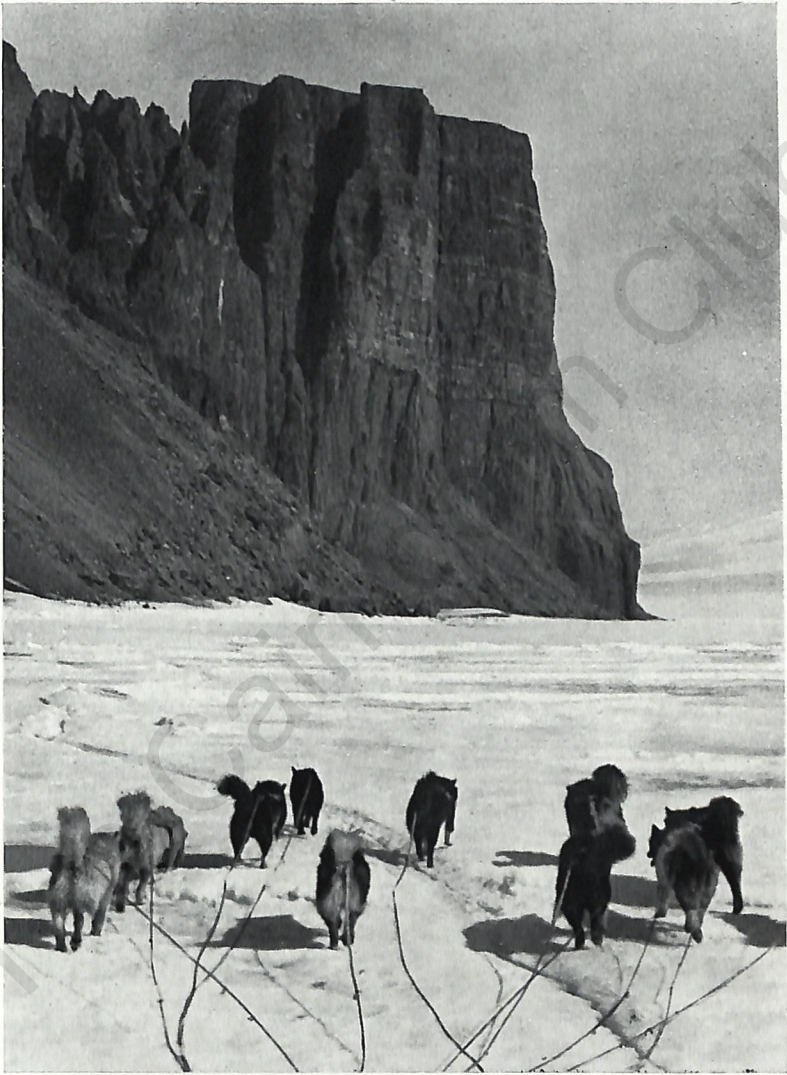
KOMATIK OVER THE SEA

ADAM WATSON

MANY are the wishes of a boy, and how few are fulfilled! One of mine was always to sledge in the Arctic and see the Eskimos; in mid-May last summer I still found it hard to believe it had come true. Yet here we had come in a wee orange ski-plane, like some insect, droning over the wild peaks and ice caps of the Cumberland Peninsula in eastern Baffin Land, to the lonely weather station of Padloping Island, and we were bound for a sledge journey with an Eskimo on the sea ice of the outer coast. With me on this trip was Don Kidd, always a source of wonder to me. Don, though born stone deaf, won his struggle to be able to speak, and has become a Doctor of Philosophy in geology and a keen explorer. We had come here as members of Colonel Pat Baird's 1953 Baffin Expedition organised by the Arctic Institute of North America.

At Padloping we met Samo, a local Eskimo whom Baird had hired through the Hudson's Bay Company at Pangnirtung to take us around the outer coast by sledge. But meantime a storm was brewing and sledging would have to be postponed. Next day it was gusting up to 70 miles per hour and the first thaw of the year had come out of a cloudless sky. Hearing that wind, we could appreciate the hothouse-plant life of the station. We could lie back, eat magnificent food and drink canned beer while watching evening movies. Above all we could enjoy the very fine comradeship in this desperately lonely place, where uniforms were discarded and officers and men swore affably at each other on the best of terms. But we were itching to be away. And so, two days later, it was good to be on the sledge at last, for a start a wild rush down the snow slope to the ice and then smoothly on over a fine, silky surface. It was quite warm and we could easily doze, sitting on the back of the komatik in the sun and looking out over the heads of the dogs. They were in fine fettle, their bushy tails all waving erect like ostrich plumes. They were pulling a load of almost half a ton.

Round the east end of Padloping Island we passed, below great red cliffs where the glaucous gulls shouted at us, and then out to the open sea. And then, around a corner, suddenly there rose a vast wall of towers and pinnacles out of the ice: Cape Searle. Samo announced "Kaxodluin!" the place of the fulmar petrels. A tingle



THE INNER BASTION OF KAXODLUIN

Adam Watson

of satisfaction ran over me. It must certainly be one of the most spectacular sea cliffs in the world. One hour later we were setting up camp on its beach of black sand.

It was blowing hard in the morning when Don and I set off for the top of the island. Vegetation is scanty except below Kaxodluin, the bird cliff. Yet on these bare slopes of dark gravel and scree we found the first catkins of arctic willow already out and purple saxifrage showing tiny pin-points of blood red. Snow buntings were everywhere, the cocks singing lustily from every prominent boulder. On the top we arrived at a shelf looking out to the fantastic inner bastion of Kaxodluin, where 1,500 feet of volcanic rock arose in vertical walls to a flat grassy top edged with great snow cornices and tinged grey with thousands of fulmar petrels. The sky was full of fulmars sailing about the cliffs, and wherever one looked there were fulmars on the ledges. Excitement was at a peak, and now and again waves of loud chattering rose above the roar of the wind, from the fulmars in their sexual display on the ledges. These great bird cliffs never fail to fascinate me. There is a multiple appeal to the senses: The smell of sea-bird dung and rich vegetation; the feeling of verticality and space as you look through fluttering masses of birds down the dizzy walls; the din of the birds, the wind and the sea. Here we had a real mountain rearing up out of the ice. Only 3 miles out, a great strip of inky blue rent the white carpet, and beyond, as far as the eye could see, Baffin Bay was full of ice. Vast icebergs trailed there, like a line of giant soldiers, each one an individual, full of mystery, marching slowly southwards to its doom.

What a wonderful place it would be up there on that airy platform in the midst of the birds. A helicopter could do it. Maybe even it could be climbed. As I looked, I could see a weakness in the keep's defences, where two tremendous parallel gullies split the western face. The right hand one was filled with snow for more than half its length, with rock pitches here and there. The general angle would not be severe. No trace of ice could be seen. The snow would be in good hard condition, and if the rocks were reliable, then the gullies would probably go. Without a climbing companion I couldn't begin to try. Later experience of climbing on some of the shorter pinnacles in Vibrams proved that the rock tended to be dangerously loose. If the keep is ever climbed it will be from this side. Night will be the best time, when the snow is frozen hard and there is less danger of rock-fall.

From the shelf we moved along the crest of the island to the west and finally up an arête of steep snow to the highest peak. Ravens

circled the great northern precipices effortlessly, rolling over on their backs and up again in their display. Up here the view was wide and cold, from far out over the icy sea to the Penny Highlands buried in snowstorm, and north along the bleak snowy coast to Kivitoo. From the top there was a glorious sitting glissade for over 1,000 feet. I paid for it with a hole in the seat of a pair of trousers that were destined later to become a standard expedition joke. The hole was to become so big that I had to sew on a patch of more than a square foot of white canvas, on which the various members of the expedition later wrote their signatures accompanied by rude comments and drawings.

On return to camp I found the dogs had broken in. Happily our food was all in a heavy box covered by stones. But they had worked havoc with my great baking of bannocks, biting them, trampling and fouling them, yet not daring to eat them! One bacon tin had a perfect punched impression of dog's teeth marks on it. That dog must have been frustrated.

We stayed on there for some days, as there was plenty of work to do. In the evenings, talking was a challenge. Don could lip-read, and I used to talk with him, spelling only the difficult words with my finger on the wall of the tent. With Samo it was a mixture of sign language, drawings, Eskimo and English. A grin rarely left his face, and whenever we cracked jokes he would giggle loudly, even though there were few that he could possibly have understood.

On the day we left we packed up at noon and set off for the south. All day it was below freezing, and cold sitting on the komatik. Bump, bump, we went onwards over a bad hummocky surface, and across great leads in the 6-foot thick coat of sea ice. But at last after a long time, the great peaks to the south came nearer. We began to look for a camp site on a long island. This was hard to find, for nothing could be seen but steep rocky slabs dropping to the ice, and unbroken snowfields behind. An exposed little peninsula just gave room for the tent. Soon we had ice melting over the roaring stove, and hot noodle soup revived our flagging spirits.

When we went out again at midnight we saw that the grey skies, as often in the high arctic, had produced only a fluffy dusting of snow. Already it was clearing in the north, where the sky was turning yellow and mauve. The light had that strange quality of colour and sharpness and space that has its home in the far north. In Scotland we just catch a glimpse of it sometimes, especially on the northern seas in the short June night.

Samo had to return to Padloping for more supplies and with a wave he was away again, the dogs, tired now, leaping sluggishly even at the crack of the whip.

Don and I had breakfast of the last of the food, grinning like schoolboys as we spooned jam and peanut butter down our throats. Then off to explore the island. It was a perfect sunny day. The snow had just begun to melt and in sheltered places the vegetation had appeared. There were lots of arctic redpolls, snow buntings sang, and the first pipit we had seen was bursting into a flood of song as it fluttered stiffly down to its little patch of snow-free ground. Then there were ptarmigan, at sea level here, the cocks still snow-white, belching furiously at each other and raising their blood-red combs. Catkins of arctic willow were fully out; from near them a bumblebee droned noisily. Here and there were patches of bearberry and blaeberry plants, and many berries lay there, in good condition after a winter's cold storage.

From the top of the island it was possible to see a long way. To the south lay great mountains, heavily glaciated and rising to over 6,000 feet. Few black spots broke the surface, and even the cliffs were white with ice and rime. What sport a climbing expedition could have here! This area of many fine peaks and glaciers remains totally unexplored. I longed to travel the 30 miles in and climb one of them. But time, so easily forgotten in the arctic, was at our heels now. By the evening Samo had returned with a box of food and two more dogs. For dinner we had a great feast of fried fulmar and ptarmigan breasts, and bannocks with syrup and tea. Then into our double sleeping bags. Samo asked for a paper and pencil, and scribbled happily, letting his imagination run on figures of animals, sledges and grotesque Picasso-like humans. Then my battered mouth-organ came into play with a last flourish. Don turned a puzzled face to us. Finally silence for us too, save for the scratching of a dog outside. The chattering of the redpolls was our reveille.

Padloping was our next move, and we left after another day. It was dull and freezing hard. The sharp edges of snow ice were cutting the pads of the dogs and blood trails darkened the snow. Samo made little boots to fit on to the dogs' feet. Soon they all had their sealskin boots. We had to keep moving toes and arms to prevent freezing. Even Samo's face showed an arctic blaeberry blue through his Eskimo tan. But there was Padloping at last, and the dogs tore on like mad things. Soon we were drinking hot coffee in a hot mess room, and the boys were giving us their news.

We heard a report of an unsuccessful attempt on Everest, then there were important score sheets with the latest baseball news! At our expedition camp on the Penny ice-cap at 6,800 feet, Svenn Orvig and Bill Ward had been having temperatures well below zero. Once again we lived a hothouse-plant existence for a day or two. The dogs were getting a rest, but still no food. Samo was playing snooker in the mess and putting one record after another of hill-billy and Dixieland on the station gramophone! It was quite a shock when he announced that nearly all his dogs had vanished, clearly in search of food. Time had no meaning here. We would just have to wait till they returned. Meantime it was Saturday night, when Captain Lange, the commandant, let the Eskimos have an empty Nissen hut for a dance. There was American square dance music on the gramophone, and Anilik's wife got going with a Scottish reel on the accordion. Lively music, but livelier still was the dancing; strip the willow and the eightsome reel, these and no others! They enjoyed themselves mightily as they padded about in their sealskin boots. This was part of the heritage from the old days of East Scotland whaling. I knew that the whalers had left behind more immortal things than dances, and I looked hard to see if I could detect a trace of Peterhead or Aberdeen in their faces. It was hard to find. Farther south in Pangnirtung there were some who would not look out of place in the streets of Aberdeen.

After the dancing they had tired, and they gossiped at length with each other. A baby yelled and the mother gave it her breast. The women whispered their secrets to each other, and whenever we looked near the younger ones they burst into fits of giggling and hid their faces. Later Lange appeared with tea, and after a while we all went out, into crackling hard snows rosy in the sunglow of night.

Next day Samo's prize husky Oona appeared with a few of his mates, and we decided to set off with the loan of some of "Little" Samo's dogs. "Little" Samo would come on to join us when the rest of the dogs turned up. We left in the afternoon, grey and overcast. The dogs were hungry but in great fettle to be in harness again, and raced down on to the ice. Soon, behind us, Padloping was just another black speck in a white world.

It was late afternoon, and all around us were rocky peaks rising into dense grey clouds. We were rattling on at a great pace on a velvety carpet of new snow on top of the ice. Samo would urge on the dogs, talking softly to them, and the heavy komatik would glide swiftly on like a lightweight ski. We had gone far and the dogs

were hungry, but still there was no sign of seals. We found a good camp site on the sheltered southern side of a rocky peak, and here, in spite of the bleakness of the place, were the first flowers of bearberry and some dwarf birch beginning to show buds of fresh green.

Next morning we awoke to the chorus of howling dogs, the mournful eerie cry of the north that one after another would take up, head raised to the sky. There seemed to be dozens of them. And there was "Little" Samo sleeping outside on his komatik. The dogs must be all back. It was the first of June, a grey cloudy day again and snowing lightly. I set off to look at the land to the north. Here was a hillside rising in slabs and rocky steps, with slopes between covered in hard snow. It was good to get on to these rough gneiss steps and clamber steeply upwards on beautiful holds. Wearing sealskin boots, I had a great feeling of agility and freedom and true contact with the rock, almost as with stocking soles. Even on the hard snow slopes they gave a wonderful grip, as it was possible to curl the toes right into a step. I climbed up, taking the line of least resistance, over fine rock never more than difficult. There wasn't time to go to the top, which was swathed in snow clouds. Back at camp we found that one of Samo's bitches had produced puppies during the night. They were feeling the cold, lying out among the berry plants. They snuggled as hard as they could under their mother. Later they would never feel cold.

We packed up and so on again up the fjord towards the far mountains. It was a long, bitterly cold ride till we stopped to camp on a grassy islet. We had got one seal at last, not much for a score of ravenous huskies. As Samo cut up the seal on the ice, they began their soul-destroying howling, clawing the snow and slavering. We had to force them back with whips, then jump clear as the mass of mad things rushed in. The carcass lay smothered in a frenzy of furry bodies, fighting and yelping and tearing, flesh, bones and blood. Teeth clashed like swords. But soon the living mass fell apart as each individual slunk off, snarling, with a bit of meat, the top dogs with the best cuts. Fighting went on until there was nothing left but skin and blood-stained snow, often the lot of the weakest member of this complete social hierarchy. They must still have been ravenous, for after work next day I returned to camp in time to see one great yellow brute slinking out at the tent door. With a yell of rage I set upon it, but the damage was done. The dogs had chewed through door and food box. Flour and cocoa lay scattered everywhere. Several tins bore their signatures. Their saliva lay over our precious hard

tack. One had eaten half a sealskin boot and a glove. Outside, I found another contentedly chewing a large hole in a skin rug. Still another, the very last word in insult, had eaten Samo's 30 foot long whip! To all this, Samo remained impassive.

That night one of them sniffed out a lemming and we were able to catch it. It looked thoroughly frightened. I considered keeping it as a pet, but at once rejected the idea, as I would then have to carry the extra weight! Next day was Coronation Day and still very cold. That evening we came in sight of the great inland peaks and ice caps and reached the end of the fjord in the Padle Valley.

To-morrow we would set off to cross a pass through the mountains leading to the rest of the expedition. Our packs would weigh 100 lb., an uninviting prospect of what is certainly a form of torture in difficult, snowed-up country. Behind lay the sledge journey; ahead lay—what? We could see a wall of great peaks rising from silky bowls of snow. I could feel awe, a touch of fear, and that vacant feeling in the lower regions that takes one before any big new undertaking, especially into country that is still a complete blank. Yet this as usual was a good tonic and I felt a tingle of exhilaration beyond measure. My only regret, and a great one, was the thought of leaving for good our great companion Samo and his faithful dogs. I wish I were back, riding the komatik again.