

# INTO THE UNKNOWN

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THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY

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## CHAPTER 1

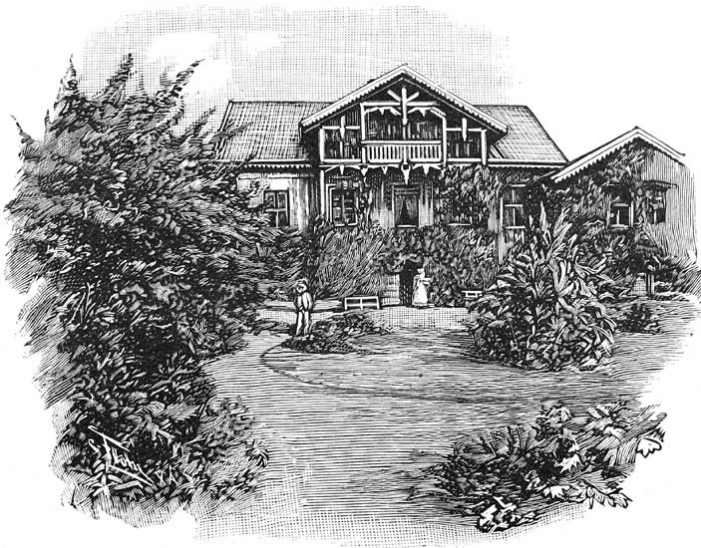
# Fridtjof Nansen

By Jacob B. Bull

Translated by the Rev. Mordaunt R. Barnard

### Section I

In Aker, Norway, there is an old manor house surrounded by a large courtyard. The house is built in the old-fashioned style. The garden, with its green and white painted fence, is filled with fruit trees, both old and young, whose pink and snow-white blossoms myriads of bumblebees delight to visit in springtime, while in autumn their boughs are so laden with fruit that they are bent down under a weight they can scarcely support.



Close by the garden, runs the Frogner River. Here and there in its course, are deep pools, while in other places it runs swiftly

along, and is so shallow that it can readily be forded. All around are to be seen, in winter, snow-covered heights, while far away in the background, are dense pine forests, hidden lakes, secret brooklets, and devious paths. And yet close by the hum of a busy city life with all its varied sounds may be heard.

It was in this house that, on October 10, 1861, a baby boy, Fridtjof Nansen, was born.

Fridtjof Nansen grew up at Store Frøen, and it was not long before the strongly marked features of his race became apparent in the fair, shock-haired lad with the large, dark-blue, dreamy eyes.

Whatever was worthy of note, he must thoroughly master; whatever was impossible for others, he must do himself. He would bathe in the Frogner River in spring and autumn in the coldest pools; fish bare-legged with self-made tackle in the swiftest river; contrive and improve on everything pertaining to tools and implements, and examine and take to pieces all the mechanical contrivances that came in his way; often succeeding, frequently failing, but never giving in.

Once, when only three years old, he was nearly burned to death. He had been meddling with the copper fire in the brewhouse and was standing in the courtyard busied with a little wheelbarrow. All at once, his clothes were on fire, for a spark, it seems, had lighted on them, and from exposure to the air, burst out into flames. Out rushed the housekeeper to the rescue. Meanwhile, Fridtjof stood hammering away at his barrow, utterly indifferent to the danger he was in, while the housekeeper was extinguishing the fire.

On one occasion, he very nearly caused the drowning of his younger brother in the icy river. His mother appeared on the scene as he was in the act of dragging him up out of the water. She scolded him severely; but the lad tried to comfort her by saying that "once he himself had nearly been drowned in the same river when he was quite alone."

Once or twice on his early fishing excursions he managed to get

the fishhook caught in his lip, and his mother had to cut it out with a razor, causing the lad a great deal of pain, but he bore it all without a murmur.

The pleasures of the chase, too, were a great source of enjoyment to him in his childish years. At first he would go out after sparrows and squirrels with a bow and arrow like the Indian hunters. Naturally he did not meet with much success. It then occurred to him that a cannon would be an excellent weapon for shooting sparrows. Accordingly, he procured one, and after loading it up to the muzzle with gunpowder, fired it off, with the result that the cannon burst into a hundred pieces, and a large part of the charge was lodged in his face, involving the interesting operation of having the grains of powder picked out with a needle.

The system on which the Nansen boys were brought up at Store Frøen was to inure them in both mind and body. Little weight was attached to trivial matters. The mistakes they made they must correct for themselves as far as possible; and if they brought suffering on themselves they were taught to endure it. The principles of self-help were thus inculcated at an early age—principles which they never forgot in later days.

As Fridtjof grew up from the child into the boy, the two opposite sides of his character became apparent—inflexible determination and a dreamy love of adventure. The older he grew, the more marked did these become. He was, as the saying is, “a strange boy.” Strong as a young bear, he was ever foremost in fights with street boys, whom he daily met between his home and school. When the humor took him, especially if his younger brother was molested, he would fight fiercely, though the odds were three or four to one against him. But in general, he was of a quiet, thoughtful disposition.

Sometimes, indeed, he would sit buried in deep thought half an hour at a time and when dressing would every now and then remain sitting with one stocking on and the other in his hand so long that his brother had to call out to him to make haste. At table, too, he

would every now and then forget to eat his food or would devour anything and everything that came in his way.

The craving to follow out his own thoughts and his own way thus displayed itself in his early childhood, and he had not attained a great age before his longing to achieve exploits and to test his powers of endurance became apparent.

It began with a pair of skis made by himself for use on the Frogner hills, developed in the hazardous leaps on the Huseby slopes, and culminated in his becoming one of Norway's cleverest and most enduring runners on ski. It began with fishing for troutlets in the river, and ended with catching seals in the Arctic seas. It began with shooting sparrows with cannons, and ended with shooting the polar bear and walrus with tiny Krag-Jørgensen conical bullets. It began with splashing about in the cold pools of the Frogner river, and ended in having to swim for dear life amid the ice floes of the frozen ocean. Persevering and precise, enduring and yet defiant, step by step he progressed.

Nothing was ever skipped over—everything was thoroughly learned and put into practice. Thus the boy produced the man!

Meanness was a thing unknown to Fridtjof Nansen, nor did he ever cherish rancorous feelings in his breast. A quarrel he was ever ready to make up, and this done it was at once and for all forgotten.

The following instance of his schooldays shows what his disposition was.

Fridtjof was in the second class of the primary school. One day a new boy, named Karl, was admitted. Fridtjof was the strongest boy in the class, but the newcomer was also a stoutly built lad. It happened that they fell out on some occasion or other. Karl was doing something the other did not approve of, whereupon Fridtjof called out, "You've no right to do that."

"Haven't I?" was the reply, and a battle at once ensued. Blood began to flow freely, when the principal appeared on the scene.

Taking the two combatants, he locked them up in the classroom. "Sit there, you naughty boys! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves," he said, as he left them.

On his return to the classroom a short time afterward, he found the two lads sitting with their arms around each others' necks, reading out of the same book. Henceforth they were bosom friends.

As a boy, Nansen possessed singular powers of endurance and hardiness and could put up with cold, hunger, thirst, or pain to a far greater degree than other boys of his age. But with all this he had a warm heart, sympathizing in the troubles of others, and evincing sincere interest in their welfare—traits of character of childhood's days that became so strongly developed in Nansen the leader. Side by side with his yearning to achieve exploits there grew up within his breast, under the strict surveillance of his father, the desire of performing good, solid work.

Here may be mentioned another instance, well worthy of notice.

Fridtjof and his brother went one day to the fair. There were jugglers, cake stalls, gingerbread, sweets, and toys, in abundance. In fine, Christiania Fair, coming as it does on the first Tuesday in February, was every child's paradise, with all its varied attractions. Peasants from the country driving around in their quaint costumes, the townspeople loafing and enjoying themselves, all looking pleased as they made their purchases at the stalls in the marketplace, added to the "fun of the fair."

Fridtjof and his brother Alexander went well furnished with money; for their parents had given them a dime each, while aunt and grandmamma gave them each a quarter apiece. Off the lads started, their faces beaming with joy. On returning home, however, instead of bringing with them sweets and toys, it was seen that they had spent their money in buying tools. Their father was not a little moved at seeing this, and the result was that more money was forthcoming for the lads. But it all went the same way and was spent in the purchase of tools, with the exception of a nickel that was invested in rye cakes.

More than one boy has on such an occasion remembered his father's and mother's advice not to throw money away on useless things and has set out with the magnanimous resolve of buying something useful. The difference between them and the Nansen boys is this: the latter not only made good resolutions, but carried them out. It is the act that shows the spirit, and boys who do such things are generally to be met with in later days holding high and responsible positions.

Fridtjof was a diligent boy at school, especially at first, and he passed his middle school examination successfully. He worked hard at the natural sciences, which had a special attraction for him. But, gradually, as he rose higher in the classes, it was the case with him as it is with others who are destined to perform something exceptional in the world that he preferred to follow out his own ideas—ideas that were not always in accordance with the school plan. His burning thirst after knowledge impelled him to devote his attention to what lay nearest, and thoroughly to investigate whatever was most worthy of note, most wonderful, and most difficult. High aspirations soon make themselves apparent.

Although Fridtjof had so many interests outside his actual school studies, he was very diligent in his school work. In 1880 he took his real artium [test], with twenty-one marks in twelve subjects. In natural science, mathematics, and history he had the best marks, and in the following examination in 1881 he gained the distinction of getting the top score.

Though brought up at home very strictly, for his father was extremely particular about the smallest matters, yet his life must have possessed great charm for him, spent as it was in the peaceful quiet of his home at Store Frøen. If on the one hand his father insisted that he should never shirk his duty, but should strictly fulfill it, on the other he never denied him anything that could afford him pleasure.

This is evident from a letter Fridtjof Nansen wrote home during one of his first sojourns among strangers. On writing to his father





in 1883, he dwells on the Christmas at home, terms it the highest ideal of happiness and blessedness, dwells on the bright peaceful reminiscences of his childhood, and ends with the following description of a Christmas Eve.

*“At last the day dawned—Christmas Eve. Now impatience was at its height. It was impossible to sit still for one minute; it was absolutely necessary to be doing something to get the time to pass, or to occupy one’s thoughts either by peeping through the keyhole to try and catch a glimpse of the Christmas tree with its bags of raisins and almonds, or by rushing out-of-doors and sliding down the hills on a hand-sleigh; or if there were snow enough, we could go out on ski till it was dark. Sometimes it would happen that Einar had to go on an errand into the town, and it was so nice to sit on the saddle at the back of the sleigh, while the sleigh-bells tinkled so merrily, and the stars glittered in the dark sky overhead.*”

*“The long-expected moment arrived at last—Father went in to light up. How my heart thumped and throbbed! Ida was sitting in an armchair in a corner, guessing what would fall to her share; others of the party might be seen to smile in anticipation of some surprise or other of which they had got an inkling—when all at once the doors were thrown wide open, and the dazzling brilliancy of the lights on the Christmas tree well nigh blinded us. Oh, what a sight it was! For the first few minutes we were literally dumb from joy, could scarcely draw our breath—only a moment afterward to give free vent to our pent-up feelings, like wild things . . . Yes—yes—never shall I forget them—never will those Christmas Eves fade from my memory as long as I live.”*

Reminiscences of a good home, of a good and happy childhood, are a wonderful thing a man can take with him amid the storms and struggles of life; and we may be sure of this—that on many a day that has been beset with almost insurmountable difficulties, when his powers were almost exhausted, and his heart feeling faint within, the recollection of those early years at Store Frøen has more than once recurred to Nansen’s mind.

The peace and comfort of the old home, with all its dear associations, the beloved faces of his family—these have passed before his mind’s eye, cheering him on in the accomplishment of his last tremendous undertaking.

## Section II

There is hardly a boy in Christiania or its neighborhood who is fond of sport that does not know Nordmarken, and you may hear many and many a one speak of its lakes, the deafening roar of its cascades, of the mysterious silence of its endless forest tracts, and