

A WOMAN'S WINTER ON SPITSBERGEN

BY MARTHA PHILLIPS GILSON

THE opportunity to winter on Spitsbergen does not knock at everyone's door, nor would many people open the door if it did; but when the chance came to me to spend the long Arctic night on that barren island I grasped it with both hands, so to speak, knowing it was one of the experiences I wanted in my bag of memories.

I had accompanied my husband from America with the idea of spending the summer on Spitsbergen and returning home alone late in the fall. But as the days wore on and the light nights began to darken, and Nature stood out so clear, with no fripperies of life to distract one's attention from her, I realized what a wonderful opportunity I had to stay and see what the long, dark Arctic night was like.

The stories of the Eskimos living in their ice huts and burning whale oil and wearing furs all through the long winter months had always interested me; but they sounded more like fairy stories than accounts of real life. Now, here was my chance to equal, or even outdo, the Eskimos.

The only people living the year round on Spitsbergen are those employed by the different mining concerns, those who operate the wireless station maintained by the Norwegian Government, and an occasional trapper or fisherman.

MAGIC PICTURES OF MOUNTAIN, ICE, AND WATER

Two thirds of West Spitsbergen's (the largest island in the archipelago) 15,200 square miles is ice-covered throughout the year. There are flowers and mosses in sheltered sections, but no trees or shrubby growths of any kind, so that the landscape has a cold and inhospitable appearance; but the mountains and glaciers and water combine to make a series of magic pictures.

As we neared our destination after a five-day voyage in a small boat built for the Arctic waters, I was struck by the grandeur of the scenery. Owing to the clearness of the atmosphere, we could see great distances, and our first glimpse of

the island came when we were many miles away. Lofty mountains with snow-covered tops and glaciers between, all touched with brilliant sunlight, rose out of the water. The mountains were a deep blue and the snow such a pure white that it was dazzling.

This was Spitsbergen, at the top of the world. Iceland and Alaska were far to the south of us. Most of Greenland and all the cold countries I had ever heard of were south of us. We were 78° N., and the North Pole only 12° away. What kind of country was this and how did people live on such a place?

It was the third of August and the sun was high in the heavens during the full 24 hours of the day. Cold as I was, I found it hard to go below; I wanted to stand on deck and gaze at Spitsbergen.

SAILING POLEWARD IN A WOODEN TUB

The trip up from Norway had been a hard one and I was ready for a hot bath, a soft bed, and all the comforts of a normal life. I felt they were due me. We were aboard an unpretentious craft. She was wooden and built for the Arctic and ice conditions. The sharp-nosed steel boats are very dangerous in the ice, as they are far more likely to be damaged than wooden vessels.

I shall never forget my astonishment and horror when I first saw the boat on which we were to sail from Norway to Spitsbergen. My husband took me down to the dock in Tromsø and, pointing to a small wooden tub of 100 tons, said: "There she is; we are to sail on Monday."

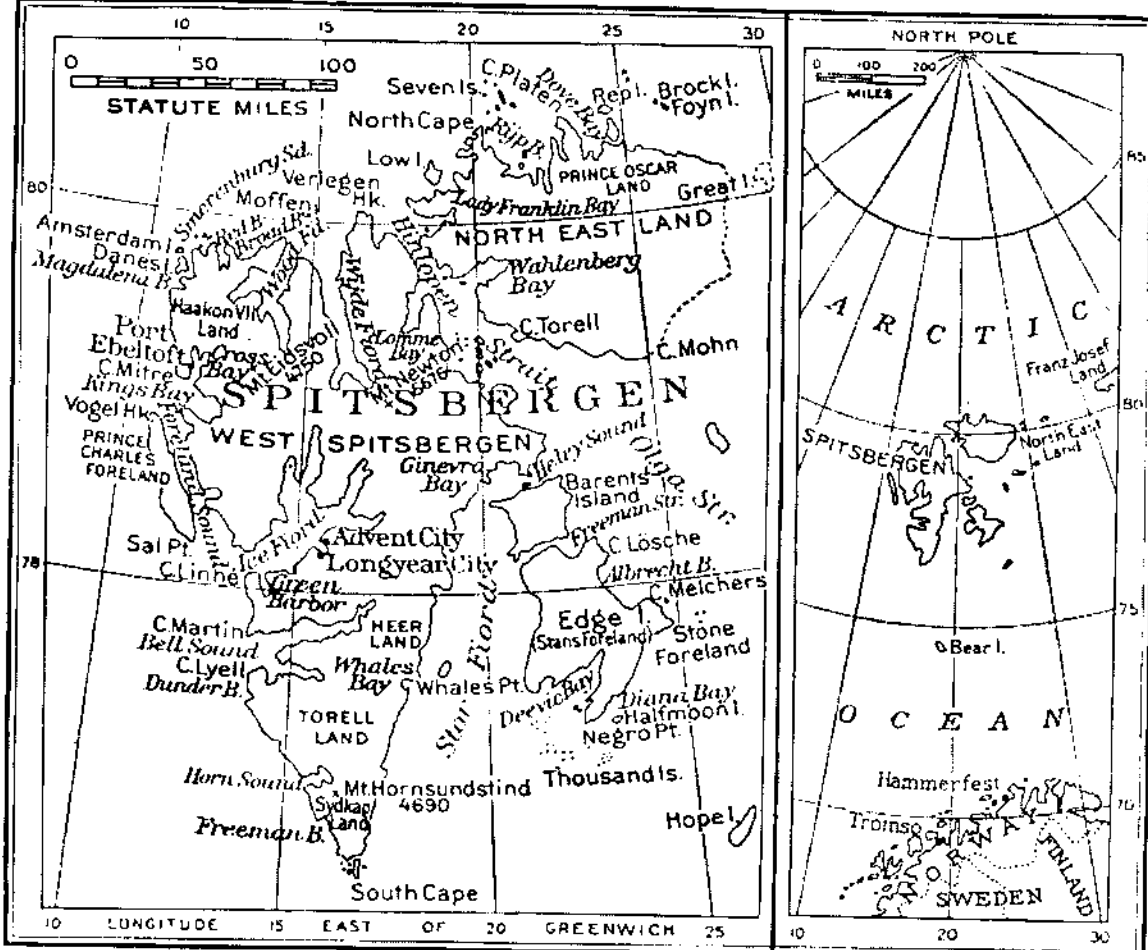
I took a look at the little boat, bobbing and rolling at anchor in the harbor, and then looked around at the rest of the shipping. Seeing nothing that looked big and solid and strong enough to travel almost to the North Pole in, I asked him where the real boat was.

"What boat?"

I told him I meant the boat on which we were to sail.

He answered, "Why, there. I just pointed her out to you."

Then it dawned on me. I had thought



A MAP OF SPITSBERGEN

This Arctic archipelago, lying about 360 miles from Norway, consists of five large islands, with numerous smaller ones. It covers a total area of 25,000 square miles. The smaller map (right) shows its geographical relation to northwestern Europe and the North Pole. Spitsbergen's permanent population is small, but some of its coal-mining camps are inhabited the year round. The largest is Longyear City, where the author wintered. The archipelago has figured prominently of late in news items, owing to the disaster to the Italian dirigible *Italia* off the coast of North East Land, near Cape Leigh Smith. Many names of note, many nations, have struggled and suffered, with this inhospitable island group as a base, to increase our knowledge of polar geography. This goodly company includes Horatio Nelson, hero of Trafalgar, who served as midshipman on an expedition in 1773 and was nearly killed by a bear. Almost 100 years later the remainder of the Nordenskiöld party, with which it hoped to advance toward the Pole in sledges, escaped in a snowstorm. The air heroes include the ill-fated André, the originator of polar exploration by air; Wellman (see page 125), Byrd and Bennett, Amundsen, Ellsworth, and Nobile.

I was looking at the ship's tender! So that was the *Isfjord*, on which I was to sail away from friendly Norway and up into the Arctic!

I had another shock when I went aboard. The *Isfjord* had a small deck aft. The railing did not reach to my waist. "Very dangerous in rough weather," I thought. The deck was littered with stuff peculiar to a boat of her type.

A short ladder led to the boat deck; no railing on that deck; just the rigging and the lifeboats swung out in their davits be-

tween me and the ocean. There was not a deck chair anywhere on the boat.

My husband had told me I would find no comforts aboard, but I had not thought things could be quite so bad. In after years, as I became hardened to travel in the Arctic, it had no terrors for me—only thrills—but the first sight of that boat will always stand out in my memory as a thing of horror.

We stepped back on the aft deck and entered the tiny saloon by way of four or five narrow, ladderlike steps. Our cabin,

which was off this small saloon, consisted of one very narrow berth on top of several tiers of drawers. I could see plainly I should have literally to "climb into bed."

The cabin was long and narrow, with one porthole at the end, opening out directly in line with the steersman at the wheel. As there was not the sign of a curtain, we immediately hunted up two tacks and, tying a string across, used a piece of paper for a curtain. We looked in vain for any toilet accommodations worthy the name, and then knew for a certainty that ladies were not expected to travel on boats of this type.

BATTLING THE ICE PACK FOR EIGHTEEN HOURS

The first three days at sea were terrible. The rolling of that little boat was indescribable. There were no sides to my berth, and I had all I could do to keep from being pitched on to the floor by day and on my husband, who slept on a mattress on the floor, by night.

The third day out we entered the ice pack and had to lay to for a few hours. I dressed and went on deck. All around us, as far as the eye could see, was ice—large, flat cakes and huge icebergs. Many of the latter were beautiful and of fantastic shape. Some looked like medieval castles, others had great, deep-blue caverns.

The sunlight on all that ice was blinding. There was not a dark spot on the horizon. When the wind shifted and



Photograph from Martha Phillips Gilson

BOUND FOR "THE COLD COAST"

The *Isfjord*, the uncomfortable, 100-ton vessel which the author mistook for the ship's tender (see text, page 227), formerly belonged to the Duc d'Orléans, and was used for exploration work. When Norway formally took possession of Spitsbergen, in 1925, she gave her new province the old name, Svalbard—The Cold Coast. Her claims to it were based on a probable Norwegian discovery in 1194, more than 400 years before the recognized discovery made by Barents (see page 231).

opened lanes in the ice pack an experienced ice pilot went up in the crow's nest and threaded us through. On seeing a spot of clear water ahead he would call down, "Left" or "Right," as the case might be. The steersman would repeat the order and turn the wheel as directed. The little boat would push ahead, bump any ice that lay in her pathway, ride up on the cakes not pushed aside, and with a grinding noise either break through or slide off.

It was all very exciting to me, but I

could not stay on deck very long at a time because of the intense cold and the blinding light. My husband brought up from below the two wicker chairs we were taking to camp and we had tea served on deck.

We were in the ice pack for 18 hours, which was a relief after the rolling and tossing on the open sea. As we sailed up the west coast of Spitsbergen the water cleared, except for a few bergs here and there.

We were struck by the barrenness of the land. The mountains were only that deep, wonderful blue at a distance; close up they were brown, with not a sign of vegetation—just brown rock, with here and there a touch of snow. It was 10 o'clock at night and the sun was shining brightly.

As we neared the dock at Longyear City (see map, page 10), we could make out the figures of people moving to and fro. Smoke and steam showed that man was making himself at home and carrying on his activities here on Spitsbergen as elsewhere.

We were welcomed most hospitably by the staff and given the best there was at the mining camp. But that best did not mean a hot bath or a soft bed. I bathed that night in a small enameled basin in an iron stand, with water heated on the small cookstove in our cabin, and lay awake for hours on a very hard bed.

I would pull the curtain aside and stare out

at the brown mountains across the calm, peaceful bay and comfort myself by thinking, "All this strangeness will soon wear off, and this view will become as familiar as the one I left behind me in beautiful New England."

My husband and I were the only Americans at the camp. All the other members of the staff were Norwegians, but most of them could speak English. There were no women. If I were to have companionship at all, it must be that of men.

I was very young, just twenty, and had never been so far away from home before. I had not known the man to whom I was now married eight months ago. It was all very strange. Even Nature was strange, with her 24 hours of daylight. But youth is adaptable and I soon began to feel as if I had always lived on Spitsbergen.

Some of the miners had their wives and children with them, but they were mostly of the peasant type and did not speak a word of English.

The camp consisted of a staff house, hospital, office, small four-room bungalow where we lived, store and warehouse, and

quarters for the men. All these buildings were strung out in a narrow valley between two mountains which terminated in two glaciers a short distance above the camp.

COAL MINED IN WINTER IS SHIPPED IN SUMMER

The powerhouse and large warehouses were nearer the dock, about a mile from camp, and the coal mine was in the mountain back of the camp. Operations were carried on all winter and the coal conveyed by aerial tramway from the mine and stored in a large stock pile near the dock, for shipment the following summer. Our entire winter colony numbered about 250 persons (see page .).

Spitsbergen has a very short summer season, when open water can be expected. During July, August, and September the loading of coalboats goes on continuously. Some years ice conditions are very unfavorable. Seasons have been known when no ships entered the bays until August, and the last boats out should leave by the first of October, when the dark season is beginning. After that they run the risk

of being frozen in. Maritime insurance closes on September 20.

We had pleasant weather during August—some fog and some sunshine, but no rain. It seldom rains during the summer, although there are many damp, foggy days. On clear days the air is very dry, and while walking or exercising one is quite comfortable clad in light tweeds. In fact, when climbing the mountains I often had to stop not only to rest, but also to cool off. However, the latter was soon accomplished, and before long the cold wind would force me to start climbing again (see page 100).

Frost is always found in the ground two feet below the surface, and in places where the sun does not reach snow stays on the ground the year round.

FROST HEAVES THE DEAD FROM THEIR GRAVES

One day I walked to a spot where a few Russian hunters had been buried many

years before. The frost had heaved the bones and rude coffins up out of the ground and they lay strewn about a weather-beaten cross of wood. It was a sad spectacle and one it did no good to dwell upon, as I was already deciding to overwinter myself.

On August 23 the sun dipped below the horizon at midnight. After that we had no midnight sun actually, although the nights were as light as ever; but they began to darken and by September 20 we were using electric lights for 6 o'clock dinner. Our first snow fell early in September; it would melt from the valleys during the day, but remained on the mountains. Each week saw the snowline creep farther down the mountain side.

The sunsets were marvelous and lasted for hours. The snowclad tops of the mountains were suffused in brilliant rose light, while we in the valley were in a deep, blue twilight.

We had a comfortable little bungalow,

with a dining room, living room, bedroom, and kitchen—all small and opening into one another. A storeroom and coalroom, and last, but not least, a bathroom, completed the establishment ().

ICE CAKES MELTED FOR BATH WATER

I thought I had reached Paradise when I first saw that bathtub, but on investigation found it to be a day's work to get things ready for a bath. The tub and a large stone caldron were the only things in the room. In the summer months my husband carried water by the pailful from a pipeline at the back of the house, filled this caldron, built a fire under it, and when the water was hot drained it into pails and filled the tub.

In the winter, when the water supply consisted of cakes of ice, we filled the caldron with ice, built the fire, melted the ice, heated the water, and then filled the tub.

When I announced my desire to spend the winter it caused quite a bit of discussion. The Norwegian women over-

wintering were used to cold weather and the dark season and would not suffer from the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables, as they were used to a heavy diet in their own country; but I would miss the sunshine, outdoor exercise, fresh fruits and vegetables, and would have no company except my husband and the five other members of the overwintering staff. We would be frozen in on Spitsbergen for nine months.

Such were the reasons weighing on the side of my going out on the last boat, while on the side of my overwintering was only the great urge, "Experience." But it tipped the balance and I stayed.

LOOKING IN VAIN FOR A SUNRISE

We made a list of things needed to see us through the winter and sent to Norway for them to come up on the last boat. Talcum powder and toilet soap were among the items ordered. It was a precious stock when it arrived and kept me in touch with civilization. No luxuries of any description could be bought on Spitsbergen.

The hours of darkness were increasing rapidly and we had very little daylight, with no sun at all by the first of October—just twilight—and a very depressing light it was, hard on the nerves. One looked in vain for a sunrise that would not come for several months. In the meantime it would get darker and darker, until continuous night settled down. One felt as if a tight black cap were being pulled slowly over one's head.

The last boat left for Norway early in October. She became frozen in the ice, but after two days of hard work on the part of her crew, and by dynamiting the ice, she finally broke through and steamed away for the south. She carried with her our farewell letters to loved ones back home. We did not sleep very well that night, wondering if we had made a fool-hardy mistake in staying behind.

The weather was really cold now, with strong winds blowing most of the time. The wind is the worst feature on Spitsbergen. A still, cold day, with the temperature 50° Fahrenheit below zero, is not so dangerous as a windy day with a much higher temperature. When it is around 30° below and the wind blowing, look out for frostbite!

We settled down to a long winter: played cards, read, and sewed; sewed, read, and played cards. I spent as much time as possible over cooking and housework, but the former was limited, owing to a lack of things to cook. We had no eggs, but used egg powder; there were no fresh fruits or vegetables, not even lemons.

My husband and I suffered more from the lack of green things to eat than we did from the cold. We had a few old copies of an American weekly magazine and I would fairly weep over the colored advertisements for oranges, celery, salads, and so forth.

THE NORTHERN LIGHTS SHAKE OUT THEIR COLORS

The northern lights were magnificent. We saw them first early in November. They were like a giant handful of different-colored chiffon scarfs being shaken across the sky. As each one changed shape and position it changed color.

The dark season was upon us now, but when the moon was in the heavens we had

moonlight the full 24 hours. The scenery was indescribable during these times. The snow on the mountains sparkled as if the heights were inlaid with diamonds, and the sky was a deep blue, full of mystery. The moonlight was so bright one could almost see to read out of doors. We took some very successful pictures by moonlight.

The view from our front door faced across the bay. There was not a sign of life to be seen—just cold, brilliant, frosty, snow-covered mountains when the moon shone. At other times everything was black.

CHRISTMAS CHEER FOR LONELY AMERICANS

At Christmas time we were in the middle of the dark season, without even the moonlight to brighten things up. It was a very dark time inside as well as out, with no holly or greenery or anything of the sort to give a holiday aspect to our home; not even a red apple to lend its note of color.

We realized that Christmas would have to be a mental state with us that year, with no outward means of expressing ourselves.

I found it hard to conceal my keen disappointment in not receiving a wireless message from home. I learned long afterward that my parents had tried in vain to send us Christmas greetings, but owing to a misunderstanding on the part of some one the message would not be accepted for Spitsbergen.

Christmas Eve found us making a heroic effort to be cheerful. We were at dinner when we heard the front door open and something drop on the floor. Footsteps hurried away before we could reach the living room to see who was there, but lying on the floor was an envelope addressed to "Mrs. and Sir Gilson."

Opening it we found a souvenir folder of Duluth, Minnesota, showing the coal and iron ore docks. Written on it in Norwegian were "Good wishes for the season," and the name of one of the miners, a Finlander, who had been in the United States several years before and had worked at the loading docks in Duluth.

That he prized that folder there is no doubt, else he would not have had it with him on Spitsbergen. But he knew we

were Americans and far away from home! So the kind deed of that big-hearted Finlander was the means of cheering us on that worst of all times to be away from home. We had a "Christmas gift" and, what was more, we had proof that the Christmas spirit was alive and in the air

all around that little settlement near the top of the earth!

Need I say that that souvenir folder of Duluth, Minnesota, has a place second to none among my few really prized possessions?

For three months we saw not a ray of light other than moonlight. It was as dark at 12 o'clock noon as at 12 o'clock midnight.

There was a great deal of wind. Regular gales would blow for three days in succession. During that time it was almost impossible to keep warm. The stoves would become red hot and burn quantities of coal, but all the heat would be drawn up the chimney. The frost was a quarter of an inch thick on the door hinges in the living room. The fine snow would sift in through the double windows and gusts of wind would actually lift the cards from the table as we sat playing.

At times like that we felt very small and friendless in the great Arctic, but consoled ourselves by saying it would all be over within a year, not knowing at the time that we were to spend the next winter in the north of Norway.

The water for all purposes was brought to camp in the form of large cakes of ice. These were dumped at the rear of the houses. We had a large boiler, which we kept filled with ice on the kitchen stove at all times. As this melted we filled other kettles and heated it for washing purposes. During the summer months water is piped

to the camp from the glacier.

On January 19 I stepped out of the door at noon, and there, to the south, was a narrow, faint, pinkish light on the horizon.

Oh, the joy of it! It lasted but a few minutes, but its promise was great — the coming of daylight! Each day after that we would see the light for a longer time. It steadily grew stronger, and by the last of January we could distinguish objects in a room for a few hours around the middle of the day. The sunrise is a long-drawn-out affair as far north as Spitsbergen.

WHEN THE SUN RETURNS—A GLORIOUS SIGHT

With the coming of daylight we began to sleep better. During the dark season one finds it very difficult to sleep. It seems strange, but is true. One would think it might be the other way, and that people would want to hibernate like bears. Perhaps we did want to, but could not.

We were surprised to note the January thaw on Spitsbergen. We had several days of warm rain, when all the snow melted! When the weather changed it turned the whole camp into a skating rink. It was very dangerous walking and darkness added to the discomfort of getting about. The camp was built on a slope, and it seemed as if all who tried to walk would land in a heap in the valley below. Electric lights were strung here and there along the "main" thoroughfare, but they looked like lightning bugs, surrounded by so much vast space.

"As the days lengthen, the cold strength-

ens," can truthfully be said of Spitsbergen. We had our coldest weather as the light season came on, the thermometer often showing 50° below zero.

LONG NIGHT BRINGS PALLOR OF DEATH

By the middle of February we could see the reflection of the sun on the tops of the mountains. It was a glorious sight. They looked so warm and colorful high up in the air, all bathed in that beautiful sunlight, while we were cold and dark down in the valley. But we were gradually getting more light each day. By the last of February we turned out the elec-

tric lights for a couple of hours in the middle of the day.

How awful we looked! We were a pale and sickish yellow color. It was rather a shock to glance in the mirror by daylight. We were bleached out and dead-looking. But I was not the only hideous one at the camp. We resembled a colony of corpses.

I saw the sun for the first time that year on March 9. With so few dark objects on which to rest one's eyes, the light was dazzling. Some of us had to wear dark glasses whenever we went for a walk.

It is difficult for one accustomed to living among trees and houses to realize just what the terrific glare of sunlight is like on an unbroken expanse of snow. There was not a dark object anywhere on the landscape, except the few buildings in the camp. When one is away from camp it is sometimes necessary to rest one's eyes on the dark clothes of one's companions.

This strong sunlight is especially hard

on the eyes after the long dark season. One of the men on the staff nearly lost his sight through eyestrain. He had to sit in a dark room for many days with his eyes bandaged (see page 177).

With the coming of the light season the dogs were trained to pull the sleds. One day I saw the team going by the house. Norman, the man who was training the pups, was running ahead of the team.

The pups were following along in such good order that Norman thought he could take a rest, so he ran around behind and hopped on the sled. As he did so every one of the pups copied their master, until there sat the driver and nine husky pups all in a row on the long sled! They were large pups, with very thick fur and heavy legs, and were awkward to an extreme.

The men went on skiing and hunting expeditions. The first fresh meat brought back to camp was eaten with relish. Reindeer are plentiful and the meat is very good. Some of the men hunted seal. I did not care for it, as it has a strong,

fishy taste. There are many eider ducks, ptarmigan, various species of wild geese, and members of the auk family, all good to eat.

On April 10 we saw snow melting in the sun. It was the first sign of spring and a welcome sight. The birds were twittering and the sun shining. It seemed good to be alive. We were getting very few hours of darkness now. The sunsets were wonderful, the color remaining in the sky for two hours or more.

By the end of April we had the mid-night sun again. We took long walks in the evenings to help put in the time, which began to drag heavily. All agreed that the dark season had gone quickly, but the months of March, April, and May were each an eternity in length. It was too early to begin to look for a boat from Norway. We were all talked out, worn out, and our nerves were frayed out. It was a hard time for everyone. The only communication we had with the outside world was by wireless, and all were get-

ting anxious for personal news. The weather was warm and melting or cold and snowing, by turns.

The first of June I took a ride on the dog sled. The ice in the bay showed no signs of breaking up, and looked as if it would be there forever. We took several pictures at midnight. I loved the light nights and always enjoyed taking pictures at night. It gave me a thrill of pleasure to think where I was. I admit I often felt a keen satisfaction in realizing I had come through a winter on Spitsbergen.

THE MEMORABLE DAY WHEN THE BOAT FROM HOME ARRIVED

At the beginning of June the main topic of conversation throughout the camp was when the first boat would arrive. Some of the men even went so far as to draw crude sketches of the company steamer and tack them on the walls of their cabins. In the staff mess it was also a subject of intense interest.

The boat arrived at the ice edge, 40

miles from camp, on June 8. The men came over the ice on skis, bringing with them the mailbags, some apples, eggs, and candy. It was a day to be remembered! My mail from home was indeed welcome, even if the latest news was two months old. Some of the letters had been written the previous September!

The eggs were the first we had seen in a year. I could not eat fast enough! That evening we spent talking with one of the staff who had come up on the boat. We almost wore him out answering questions about the whole world.

Conditions were bad that year; the ice did not leave the bay until July 15. The first boat did not get in to the dock until July 21. What a wonderful sight she was! It had been nine months since any of us had seen a boat. It was one of those mo-

ments that bring tears of emotion to the eyes of men, to say nothing of poor, weak, young women.

Several boats came in for coal during the next two weeks, and the camp was a busy place again, loading coal day and night. The summer staff was there, and once more conversation was heard, loud and long, of an evening.

I was planning to leave for Norway on a coal boat about the first of August. As the time drew near, I found myself spending more and more hours out of doors. I took all my favorite walks again, sat looking at my beloved views, wrote descriptions of them in my diary. I promised myself that I would return to Spitsbergen if ever the opportunity presented itself. The "call of the cold" was in my blood.