Magic Words

Only moments before, I had walked down River Street, totally unaware. My stride picked up and I half ran for more than a mile. Each step brought my nagging rounds. Until I reached the Union Theatre building, I didn’t pause. Once there; I walked casually inside, filled with an air of entitlement.

My plan was to meet W. A. McDonald, a longtime reporter and highly respected journalist who had written several articles about Hyed andobbiously knew the famous moral reformatory well. I would ask him to speak with Hyed on my behalf. Although I had never met the newspaperman, surely he would be delighted to facilitate my appointment.

I asked for the reporter at the desk, prepared to argue if anyone tried to stop me. To my surprise, the man sent me straight to the editorial department. When I reached the right floor, someone passed my McDonald’s desk.

I looked him over, but I appreciated. He was short, in his mid-twenties, with soft and proper hair; the first aging lines had etched themselves across the contours of his face. He wore glasses as thick I couldn’t see the
color of his eyes. He sat behind a large desk heaped with stacks of newspapers. Next to the papers rested a telephone, a typewriter, and a pile of paper, leaving him a small area for work.

I introduced myself and said, "I read your fine story about Com-
mander Boyd, and I want to go on the expedition."

He leaned back in his chair and stared at me, his face devoid of any
expression. "Why come to me? I don’t have anything to do with the
expedition."

"I realize that, Mr. McDonald," I replied confidently, having
already prepared myself for his answer. "I know you know him. Besides, I’ve
already been to his house and I couldn’t get in to see him. I want to go on
the expedition. I’ve got to go!"

"That’s it?" Despite his non-committal answer, I detected a spark of
interest.

"No, sir. And I’ll do anything to get that chance."

"I see," he said. "But what qualifications do you have?" His face took
on a sternness.

I hesitated, wondering if I would have to fight the same hostile
protectiveness that the maid had shown. I could almost hear him say,
"You’re nothing but a stranger, riff-raff, just a young man. Leave not going
to get by me."

This time I was not going to give up. McDonald was going to
intimidate me for me. I relaxed deeply and said, "I’m a dog driver and I’ve
had a lot of experience."

"I see."

"No, it is. I spent the winter of 1925 driving dogs for Doctor
Greely."

"You mean, Doctor Wilfred Greely? Tell me about that."

I told him how I had dropped out of Harvard two years earlier to work
with the much-admired Sir Wilfred Greely. A successful British physi-
cian, Greely left England in 1892 and had been serving ever since as a
medical missionary to the Eskimos in Labrador and Newfoundland. He
traveled the coastal waters in a specially equipped hospital ship and went
overland by dog sled. For eight months he drove his dog sled in Labrador
and observed a detailed humanitarian monitoring to the health and
MAGIC WORDS

eductional needs of the fishermen of the region, winning their respect and international recognition for his outstanding devotion to their welfare. He had established schools, hospitals, nursing centers, scores, even industrial projects in that far-off land.

"Hasn't actually worked with the dogs?"

"I certainly did," I said. "And I still do. When I finished my work with Grinnell, I brought back my own dog, Simon, along with two others. My friend Eddie Goosdike has a dog, and so does my father. I could have five dogs available for the expedition."

"So you're a dog musher, huh?" He leaned forward, making me feel I was undergoing a police interrogation. "Where do you drive dogs?"

This part of the country isn't like Laramie.

"I do it right here in New England all the time." I explained that I belonged to the New England Sled Dog Club, which featured the breed- ing, training, and racing of sled dogs.

"I've heard of the club over the years," he said, "but I didn't know much about it."

Ever the reporter, eliciting facts, he gave me the opportunity to talk about one of my favorite topics. I told him how much I loved dogs and the sled dog club that he probably wanted to hear, but he continued to listen. Since there was still a chance that he'd refuse to make contact for me, I kept talking as he turned over.

Although occasionally interrupting with questions, he listened intently. His expression drained from his face, and he released.

Encouraged now that he might do what I could for me, I said, "Well, while reading your article in yesterday's Transcript, I felt I had to go on the expedition."

"Oh! Feel that strong, huh?" he said, the first hint of a smile on his face.

The evening before had decided it. Five of us were studying at a table in a Harvard dormitory. Hearing the outside door open, I glanced up, always ready for a disruption from my books. The other four, deeply immersed with their assignments, paid no attention to the paperboy who turned me the Providence Transcript.

I unfolded the paper, intending to read only the headlines before
resuming my studies. In large, bold letters I read five magic words that
would change the direction of my life: BIRD TO THE SOUTH POLE.

"Listen to this!" I slapped the paper on the table and pointed to the
headline. "Did you notice the headline? "Birds going to the South Pole"? My
eyes hurried down the two columns, and I turned the page. The already-famous
U.S. Navy commander, Richard Evelyn Byrd, was going to fly over the South
Pole—a feat never before attempted.

Like most Americans, I had been ardently following the career of
Byrd, who had emerged as one of the world's great explorers alongside

Like them, he was determined to conquer the North and South
poles. Since the turn of the century, the exploration of the two polar
regions had captured the attention of the whole world. These stories were
taking place in my lifetime, and I had read voraciously about the men
and their achievements, often planning myself traveling with these
pioneers.

As an American, Robert Peary, had reached the North Pole by dog
team in 1909. In that same year Roald Amundsen, a Norwegian, had
planned to reach the North Pole. On learning that Peary had already
reached north, he secretly headed his crew southwest to compete with a
British naval officer, Lieutenant Robert F. Scott, who was attempting to
discover the geographic South Pole.

When Scott reached the Pole, he saw the Norwegian flag already
flying. Amundsen had arrived thirty-two days earlier. Shocked and
depressed, Scott headed back to his base. While Amundsen rode his dogs
back to base camp, Scott and his four companions laboriously walked
and occasionally drove toward their food cache at One Ton Depot. En
route jeopardized, and with only eleven miles to go, the last three, including
Scott, froze to death.

By the time he planned his expedition to the South Pole, Byrd had
already made headlines with three important feats.

First, he developed the seaplane and worked out the complica-
tions for navigating a plane across the Atlantic to the Azores, a group
of volcanic islands west of Portugal. For two months in 1928 he had lived in
Trepassey Bay in Newfoundland, working with the three Navy-Ohio
plane that the U.S. Navy had assigned to fly the Atlantic. Byrd planned to navigate his land plane. Before the flight, the Navy Depart-
ment, concerned about the dangers of the undertaking, pulled Byrd and
replaced his weight with additional fuel. But because he had already
navigated the mission on paper, the Navy records gave Byrd full credit
for the success of the flight.

Second, he flew from Kings Bay, Spitzbergen, a group of islands to
the north of Norway, over the North Pole and back, a flight no one had
ever tried before. He and another famous flyer, Floyd Bennet, were the
first to reach the Pole by air.

Third, on June 19, 1927, Byrd flew the first multistage plane
across the Atlantic. It was also the first flight to carry overseas air mail.

Now, according to the newspaper, Byrd would take a party of forty
men with him to Antarctica. The expedition would also conduct geo-
graphic and geological surveys. He expected to have the United States
by the fall of 1928, contingent on his raising half a million dollars to
finance the trip. He was asking individuals and corporations to con-
sider.

"He plans to live there—in Antarctica—for a year!" I read a few
paragraphs aloud. Had I stopped to think about my companions, I
would have realized they were more interested in their homework than in
Byrd's plans. But the news excited me, and I couldn't stop talking about
the expedition.

"This will open up the South Pole!" I said. "Think of the minerals
that might be under the ice. The only land on earth not yet explored—
and no American has ever set foot on Antarctica."?

"It'll be a history-making event, all right!" Freddie Crockett said,
dropping his head toward his books.

Edith Goodale, my best friend since childhood and a fellow volun-
teer with Greathall, expressed a mild interest. "Sounds like an exciting
trip. Would be quite an adventure to go along. But how could you get on
board?" She, too, returned to his books.

Silence descended on the room, broken only by the musing of a
pup or the scraping of a chair. I read the entire article and then turned
it, passing to daydreams about being on that still-unoccupied continent.
MAGIC WORDS

Having lived with Greenland under Arctic conditions for eight months, I had some idea of life in southern land. Once again I could feel the sharp wind ripping mercilessly at my face, despite the fur hood of my parka. The sled dogs viciously snapped among themselves, yet were instantly ready to go out on the trail. Once again I cursed the food we had talked about, a concoction high in protein and fat, ideal because of the cold temperatures and the enormous work of traversing rugged land.

This fairy soup, with its generous portions of meat and spices, produced an aura like nothing else in the world.

In imagination, I relived the air—clean and unclouded by factory smokestacks. The snow-covered ground remained white, disturbed only by the occasional prints of dogs, sleds, and skis.

"I've got to go," I said. "I must go with Byrd!" In speaking these words aloud, I had made my decision. I would become part of Byrd's expedition, even though I didn't have the slightest idea how to get involved.

But I would find a way.

I was twenty-two years old, back in Harvard for the second time. On my return from Labrador, I had promised myself and my parents that I would study hard, make up my missed work, and graduate. Now, only a year later, I was toil, dear朋 who could meet any kind of physical demands. Having seen proofs it in the Arctic region, I was now ready for the ultimate test: living in Antarctica.

Young and infused with enthusiasm, I didn't allow a negative thought to influence me. Had I analyzed the situation, I would have realized that Byrd didn't have the funds to hire people. But once I set myself why Byrd would want me with him, I didn't even stop to consider that taking off for another year would delay my career plans—and lower the disappointment and despair of my parents.

"Sir, please help me. I want to go with Byrd to the South Pole!"

"No, no," McDonald said. "But I still don't quite understand why you came to me."
MAGIC WORDS

"Because you can get to Commander Byrd and tell him about me. If you can't, tell him, tell him, and tell him.

Three words sound harsh as I repeat them. Yet I honestly believe that only Byrd knew how badly I wanted to go on the expedition, how badly I needed it. I decided, "I come here for one reason: I need your help. I'll like to talk with Commander Byrd. Ask him to give me a chance. I will leave college immediately and report to New Hampshire, where he is assembling his dogs and supplies."

When McDonald made no comment, I added my final plea. "Tell Commander Byrd I'll leave for New Hampshire with absolutely no obligations on his part. Furthermore, I'm prepared to work for nothing for one year, driving dogs, training dog handlers, building their cages, and doing whatever is necessary to get those dogs ready for his expedition to the Antarctic. At the end of the year he can examine what I've done and then decide whether he wants to take me."

"I don't see how he could turn that offer down."

"That's why I made it," he said with kindness in his voice. "Tell Colonel Byrd I've sent him about you. I'll get back in touch and tell you what he says."

"Thank you, Mr. McDonald. Thank you!" I must have sounded foolish, thanking him again and again, but I meant it. McDonald was going to pack the door open for me.

My source of just the hour before disappeared. I knew Byrd wouldn't turn me down. He couldn't! Yet for the next two days I could hardly wait for McDonald's phone call. I sat all my classes and stared in the dorm. Every time the phone rang, I rushed to answer it.

When McDonald finally phoned, he gave me a message that sounded more like a telegram: "Commander Byrd has accepted your proposal.

I was so elated, I ran through the streets, yelling at anyone who would listen, "I'm going! I'm going with Byrd to the South Pole!"

Once I calmed down, I knew that I had to tell my family before I could make any further plans. Although they hadn't fully approved, my parents had allowed me to drop out of Harvard to go with Byrd."

MAGIC WORDS

Father, highly successful in business, understandably wanted me to get my degree, settle down, and lead a normal, productive life.

When I started out to the twenty-seventh miles to our home in Hamilton, Massachusetts, that evening, I planned to arrive just as my parents finished dinner. Being a few minutes early, I waited outside, peering through the living room windows, until I saw the butler take the chafing dish from the living room. That ended my race. Mother and Father would come in immediately, and I could be alone with them.

Father, a large-framed man with a dark complexion, looked up in surprise as I entered. "Norman, what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in college today?"

"No, but I had something important to discuss with you." I sat down across from him. Mother poured a cup of coffee and handed it to me.

Father listened while I told him about Byrd's expedition to the South Pole. I walked on, not giving him a chance to interrupt or argue me out of it. Mother, who said nothing then or later, listened with a helpless expression of dismay. Despite my enthusiastic enunciation, I knew myself for bringing a sore and disappointment to her life. While she had given me nothing but encouragement and affection, I was causing her misery by departing from what she wanted me to do. Believing a college education was the best thing for me, Mother wanted me to finish my schooling before I did anything else. She had already given it when I went to Labrador, and now I was asking her approval for a second postponement, one that was potentially life-threatening.

Speaking with more frankness than I did, I said, "Father, I want to go on this expedition. I must go. It's the most important thing in the world to me. I know it's a disappointment to both of you, but it's something I must do."

"You feel that strongly about going, do you?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," I said. "As a matter of fact, I've already told Commander Byrd I would go. Naturally, I didn't tell him the conditions under which Byrd had accepted me. As I explained my role in the expedition, not once did he offer an opinion or state how he felt.

When I stopped, he looked up at me and asked several practical questions. "Norman, have you met Byrd himself?"
"No, not yet. He sent me a message, though."
"When will you meet him?"
"I'll be coming to New Hampshire to meet me."

Finally came the question I had dreaded: "What kind of salary are you going to receive?"

"No salary," I said.
Even if I hadn't known Father well, his startled expression would have told me that my answer was not what he wanted to hear.

"Do you receive this correctly?" he asked quietly. "You will have no salary from Commander Byrd, even though you'll work for him for a year before you leave for Antarctica. Who'll take care of your expenses?"

His question hinted at something that had won his approval, even if reluctantly.

More confident now, I said, "Don't worry, Father. Commander Byrd is going to take care of us."

"I see," Father turned to Mother and said, "We won't need to send him his allowance then, will we?"

I hadn't counted on that response. My parents sent me $5 a week—good sums in those days. I just assumed that once they had granted me permission, they would continue to send my living allowance. But I couldn't backtrack. Besides, I had overcome my own big challenge. Byrd had accepted me, and my parents had approved. Nothing would stop me now.

As I drove away, stark reality set in. I faced one hell of a problem. I would be gone a year, and I would have to eat. What would I do if I ran out of money? I would have to solve that problem once I reached New Hampshire.