

Everything recovered/nothing preserved

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**Alles teruggevonden/
niets bewaard
(1982)**

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EVERYTHING RECOVERED/NOTHING PRESERVED

On 11 July 1897, three Swedes took off from the island Danskön west of Spitsbergen in their balloon Örnén ('The Eagle'). They were in search of the North Pole. With them they had a Swedish flag with which to mark precisely this theoretical point of the globe. The interest shown in their undertaking was considerable, also outside their own country.

The names of the three men were: Salomon August Andrée, Kurt Fraenkel and Nils Strindberg. A study of the historical material would seem to indicate that Andrée and Strindberg had serious doubts about just how manoeuvrable and airtight the balloon, manufactured in France, actually was. They set out even so. A year earlier, a previous attempt had had to be abandoned, due to the lack of a favourable wind. The enormous public interest and the financial support of such eminent figures as Alfred Nobel and the Swedish king, however, turned into a matter of honour what in advance and by its very nature was doomed to be a fateful undertaking.

The lack of manoeuvrability was obvious soon after the start. So much ballast had to be jettisoned that the balloon rose too high. Within 65 hours, it had become so top-heavy as the result of freezing rain that they were forced to make a landing.

On 14 July, they began to trek through a drifting landscape of ice-floes, ending up on 5 October 1897 on the small island of Vitön ('White Island', pronounced: *veet-ern*) east of Spitsbergen. Shortly after arriving on the island the members of the expedition perished.

Not until 1930 were their remains discovered by a Danish group of scientists. Among the objects left behind was a case

with negatives that Nils Strindberg had taken with a self-designed camera. A number of these could be developed; the others seemed to be of too inferior quality. In 1979, however, it proved possible to develop some more of the photos. Because of this, the Andrée expedition was briefly - and probably for the last time - once more a matter of public interest.

Microscopic analysis of the pieces of polar bear meat found on Vitön, combined with notes in the discovered journals kept by the members of the expedition, had a number of years previously revealed the cause of their death. From eating contaminated bear meat the members of the expedition had become infected with trichinosis, a gradual but fatal disease caused by a type of worm that rapidly multiplies in the intestinal canal, from where it perforates the muscular tissue of the victim. The objects found on Vitön in 1930, as well as a reconstruction of the balloon, are on show at the Andrée museum in Gränna, the birthplace of the balloonist.

We step into the museum in Gränna
sweating and on tiptoe because of the heat

Why try to break open something that
belongs to a distant past? I know quite well

And yet. Here's a hatchet. There's
A photo of the ice. Write so as

To drive in a wedge, make a tiny breath hole
through which past oxygen may hiss

And spout to form a present kiss
so that I feel you're alive - here

Every museum has some chink

Framed in an oval setting: Fraenkel, Strindberg
and Andrée in Florman's photo atelier in Stockholm

Expenses arranged, the balloon now
ready to ascend from the close of a century

Where a will seemed to be a way, a dream
high-flown that froze into a petrified statue

This the pose of Fraenkel and Andrée too
as if everything's past, consigned to history

Not so Nils Strindberg, no not he
he is five and twenty and in love, his gaze

is still quite visible, is fixed on her
on Anna Charlier, his delicate fiancée

The stares of his moustached colleagues remain clouded in sepia

Half a year later it was all over
in 1930 their three corpses were found on Vitön

Salomon August Andrée, you knew all along
yet dragged even so the two others along in your fall

To Gränna to this your own private museum
in the mid-20th century, on a fine sunny day

You knew in advance and in the name of
progress, of the king and Nobel

We will not return to this country
where undreamt-of machines have now got to the point

Of regulating all aspects of life
for ever like the cogwheels of your watch the time

All arms were pointing upwards, all faces radiated not
Fear or Hope, simply belief in the Future

Almost everything's still, nothing completely moves

That which they undertook was from the start quite
senseless and for that reason maybe preserved

To get to the very centre of the pole
whose sole existence is on maps

Only 65 hours and they were heavier than air
were forced to land upon the frozen water

There stands Andrée peering for land legs wide
apart while beneath his feet everything moves

They set off on their sleds or so at least they thought
in actual fact though they stood still

Posing for posterity they had in fact been cut adrift

They set their course westwards and they
drifted off to the east

They set their course eastwards and they
drifted all the while further to the west

And if the sun broke through the mist
Fraenkel reached for his sextant

Sought the sun's altitude and
stuck his hand out: this way

Right to the end he measured on
fixing positions, all that mattered

Now was the meticulous registration
of impending doom

Figures and data form the frame of their swansong

Just as the seeing of your own face can
only ever be caught in a mirror

I view in photographs the things they looked at
as the ice began to form fissures and cracked

Powder snow whirled itself into skintight veils
dense fog encased them like some great bell-jar

Their voices reeled hollow and hoarse all around them
and they were completely alone on the floe

A seagull defiantly screeched, where were
they drifting, what were they feeling

I want to live through it, all whiteness removed,
want to look through them on this paper

Here they vanish yet whiter than me once more out of sight

They perished on Vitön, Fraenkel
and Andrée, side by side in their tent

With an aluminium cup, a primus
some roubles, dollars, an empty bottle

33 years later (a reconstruction) they still lie there
snowed-in and huddled close together

The primus is ready for use
for a scalding-hot mug of coffee or tea

But every gesture's completely gone
I stare at a photo of a heap of stones

Nils Strindberg's grave, the tent 35 metres away
80 years or so ago, now hangs behind glass

I think of his finger and then of the shutter

From the blackness of 82 Kodak years
they gradually emerge from the developer

Here Andrée and Fränkel are pulling their own sleds
behind them leans and lurks the millpond sea

And are the murky flecks just flakes of snow
or ingrained particles from years of winter?

The stare of the curator shows surprise,
why I should want to know, that difference

He holds the negative to the light
that fades into a positive at once

Miniscule perforations through which this light
here and on Vitön fell and falls on 82 long years

On two men and on a sled
on their balloon 'The Eagle' that

gently sways in the museum garden

Where everything was white and bright
every one of the photos came out

Always the same one really
two men just searching for landscape

Here Fraenkel burrows intently
with his shoe in the snow

Andrée with kepi and stick a bit behind
stares still as leader at the lens

He surely knew (not Strindberg though
with steady camera) how limitless

Their hopeless hike was, one
that plotted on a map's a web

A fabric where a blind spot sits

Many last ones. This the photographer
Nils Strindberg, 25 years old, yet

Here quite unrecognizable
even down to the moustache

Two ropes connecting him to the sled
it too now housed in the Andrée museum

He prods the snow with obvious caution
in search of fissures in the ice

The final time light was to strike him
upright - he was to be the first one

Blizzarding out in his own camera

Of Fraenkel himself we have nothing
but figures and data, their position on the ice

Was he devoid of imagination? For sure.
Andrée writes in detail of his complainings

He was only a child of his time, the
slave of wind and weather with data

That were to offer protection against his thoughts
of home, against his tears and his pain

Which he refused even to mention
lacking any form of valid and convincing proof

He died stiff on time's stroke as a figure

The last one was Andrée: without date
handwriting quite illegible

Five lines, made up of sixty-one words
with the last word unfinished

I turn back the pages: *we are full of hope*
plenty of provisions, sturdy shoes

Somewhat further towards the end: *bad sign*
no polar bears sighted for days

And then the very last page
that ultimate and never finished word

Staring into the surrounding white

Everything preserved, everything recovered
the sled, the prickles and the ship's biscuits

Boat, tent, their diaries, their shoes
and here too on a pedestal even the plate camera

Thirty instants of bitter-filled whiteness
frugally framed and hung as exhibits

We amble over floors that are creaking
I add up the bones of your hand

A bumblebee inspects the curtains
you want to know this country's names

While the curator's voice drones on
about their stranding on Vitön

Everything recovered - nothing preserved

I place you by the colourful balloon
in the summer garden (a birdsong chorus)

Quite still I say and take you
take a polaroid (a birdsong chorus)

Quite still till I'm ready and look
how you show against the balloon (a birdsong chorus)

I look at your breasts, at your inquisitive
toes in all that succulent grass (a birdsong chorus)

And I see behind your dress the scars
the hair that I know (a birdsong chorus)

Well, did it come out? Oh yes, just look!
Your turn!

Listen, the chorus...

Come towards me through the grass, straight through
the moist grass still full of summer, come

In the failing light around Andrée's balloon