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Reading Article GP2

Article #5: Excerpt from SHACKLETON'S STOWAWAY

by Victoria McKernan

"Ernest Shackleton!" Perce said excitedly. "What I'd give just to meet him!"

When Greenstreet had told them exactly what they were applying for, Perce could hardly believe it. The Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, under the command of Sir Ernest Shackleton. Billy hadn't heard much about Shackleton, although he was a legend in England.

"So he's the guy that *didn't* make it to the South Pole?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"And the Brit that *did* make it—what's his name?"

"Robert Scott," Perce reminded him.

"Yeah, Scott, he died on the way back, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"And that Norwegian guy—Amundsen. He actually got there and came back alive. So he won the race."

"There's more to it than that," Perce said with exasperation. "Americans were so bloody stuck on winning and losing. "Do you know how far it is to the South Pole and back?"

"Farther than anybody in their right mind would ever want to go!" Billy laughed.

"It's almost two thousand miles!" Perce said. "And when Shackleton went, back in 1909, he didn't even know what to expect. No one had seen much beyond the coastline. That'd be like you setting off to walk across the United States, only you didn't even know if there were mountains or deserts or what to cross. Shackleton pioneered the way!"

Perce was surprised at how little Billy knew. In England, polar explorers were regarded as heroes. Magazines printed long stories about them, and people packed lecture halls to listen to them speak. Perce remembered his father reading the newspaper stories aloud to the family. How Shackleton led his men across endless miles of the Ross Ice Shelf, hauling heavy sleds with all their equipment.

Sometimes the ice would crack beneath them, opening a huge crevasse hundreds of feet deep. They found an enormous glacier, a mountain of ice blocking the way.

Shackleton and his men clawed their way up. For weeks they trudged across a high plateau where the air was so thin, they could barely breathe. It was freezing cold. Blizzard winds knocked them down. They walked for 660 miles. They were almost there, only ninety-seven miles from the South Pole, when Shackleton turned around.

He knew they didn't have enough food. They were already desperately hungry and exhausted. They suffered from frostbite. They were only covering six or eight miles a day. He knew they could reach the South Pole, but he didn't think he could get them all back alive. He could be the most famous explorer in the world, but instead he turned around.

Perce was eleven years old then, far too old to cry, but as he heard about the desperate struggle at the bottom of the world, he couldn't help it. "Two years after that, Scott made another try for the pole," Perce explained. "He followed Shackleton's route. It still wasn't easy, of course, but at least he knew what to expect. Scott did reach the South Pole but found out Amundsen had already been there by a different route. Then Scott and his men all died on the way back."

"How?"

"No one really knows. They were found dead in their tent months later. Starved, probably."

"And now Shackleton wants to go back and cross the whole continent." Billy shook his head. "Is he *nuts*?"

"Think what an adventure this would be!"

"Are *you* nuts?"

The *Endurance* was the most beautiful ship the two had ever seen. She was a barkentine, 140 feet long. Not terribly big compared to the modern ships that filled the harbor, but strong. She had clean lines and a sturdy hull built of oak and fir.

While she had a coal-burning engine, she was also fully rigged to sail. Perce and Billy weren't the only ones enchanted by this ship or the journey she was about to make.

Word had spread fast. When they arrived at four as instructed, there were at least fifty other men on the dock, waiting to be interviewed for the two open positions. Some men eyed each other suspiciously, some talked and joked, but all were trying to measure their competition. Billy leaned over and whispered to Perce.

"By the way, in case anyone should ask, I'm Canadian."

"Why?" Perce asked, puzzled.

"They're all Brits!" Billy nodded toward the ship. "Not likely to take a Yank along. But Canada is still tied up with England. Got their queen on their money and everything. Besides, I cut enough lumber up there, I ought to be an honorary citizen at least!" Billy grinned. He recognized a couple of sailors from the *Golden Gate* and went to talk to them. Perce stood off by himself and looked at the ship.