

WORSLEY ENCHANTED

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1

His voyage begins with a dream which, "because sailors are superstitious men", sends him to New Burlington Street, where he finds the office of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, 1914.

Commander Worsley, fired with a purpose
Plunged in his dream like a stocky porpoise,
His blunt nose buffeted sheets of ice,
A snowstorm smothered the kelp of his eyes;
As morning glittered behind the window
His striped pyjamas shone like a rainbow.

Commander Worsley supped his porridge:
"I have loved the sea, but that took courage,
To steer a ship through a sky of sleet
And a mad green sea in Burlington Street.
Dreams are dreams and waking waking
Yet still in my mind those waves are racing."

Commander Worsley put on his clobber:
"Had no grog but I'm green-seas over.
There aren't white icebergs in city streets
But pretty women and bowler hats,
I don't want bats and I don't want women,
I follow the wild white goose of an omen."

Commander Worsley squared his shoulders,
Grinned at his boots like two black boulders:
"Whether it's daylight, whether it's dream,
Whether you sink me, whether you swim,
Whether you walked or were pushed or rolled
It's you and me for the end of the world."

He travels into the country of his dream.

White, said Worsley, and glistening, the ridgy plain
 Of sea-water, frozen; being a known substance,
 Though changed. As changes the frozen brain.
 The sky, too, uncertain. At a little distance
 A violet mist arises, fume of the frost,
 Soon turned to gold to hide the killing of the ship,
 The water black in her hold when her timbers burst,
 Her body, black on the ice, raised twisting up
 On the marching floes, then dropped and trampled; crushed.
 There were men and dogs on the ice, a litter of gear,
 But where, what place in the world, when the dead sea flushed
 With the glare of five suns in the sky, five wheels of fire
 Spinning in the streams of crimson, where the winter moon
 In rushing silver swept the perpetual night,
 And gentle as dream in wavering rose and green
 In an abstract beauty, a kind of flowering of light,
 The aurora flowed its colours across the mind?
 We longed very much to stand on solid land.

True there were days of blue and rime in the sun,
 We laughed like men; and then above the horizon,
 Floating in light, a violet and creamy line,
 The ice-pack swam in the heavens, wavy and frozen,
 And someone who stood, say, where we began our drift,
 At the point in the moving ice where the ship went down,
 Would see us too with the golden bergs that lift
 And shift in the air in the blue Antarctic noon,
 Stumbling in frozen colour. I saw in that sky,
 Huge, dark, Shackleton; the tall man striding
 Through the lights that flash like mathematics at play,

Through mountains floating in air and icebergs flying,
In a land beyond that wall of ice or glass
Through which men have seen at times glowing shadows.
Is it the natural world through which we pass
Or the supernatural? In the cold shallows and hollows
I have seen the two as one, and gripped with my hand
The wood of a boat, and longed for solid land.

3

He meditates on the nine Emperor penguins which, on the day the Endurance was destroyed by the pack-ice, appeared from a crack in the ice and uttered wailing cries, "quite unlike any we had heard before", that sounded like a dirge for the ship.

Oh, there was broken wood,
There were weeds of iron and rope
The log that was bigger than a tree
Crashed on the frozen sea
And the tall dark penguins stood
And stared at the ice without hope,
Said the nine Emperor penguins.

And these were a race of birds
Majestic, beyond belief;
There where the gold mist hung
They spoke in a foreign tongue,
Loud, sharp, excited words,
They rocked and shook with grief,
Said the nine Emperor penguins.

Bowing we stopped up close,
Our numbers making us brave,
But grinding like frozen thunder
Across the black seas under
Jagged reared up the floes
And crushed that ship in her grave,
Said the nine Emperor penguins.

Oh, it was strange, it was proud,
It was the worst of things,
In the mist and the darkening clouds
Something had happened to our gods
And we were alone and afraid
Who trod the ice like kings
Said the nine Emperor penguins.

We knew what the blue sea hid,
Sea-leopard and killer whale;
There was no day beneath
The sun but we thought of death
And shook off the shadow and slid
To the comber's foam and its fall,
Said the nine Emperor penguins.

But now we have learned a truth
Not easy to shake from the feather
For we know what the blue sky hides,
Penguins that stride like gods,
And under the killer's tooth
Lie gods and birds together,
Said the nine Emperor penguins.

Nobody knows where they went,
They came from the sky and are gone
But we remember a ship
Crushed in the ice-floes' grip,
The black thing broken and rent,
And we shudder with cold in the sun,
Said the nine Emperor penguins.

4

He watches the men on Elephant Island after their six months' drift on an ice-floe.

But these men picked up pebbles
Wet from the sea and cold
And cradled them in their hands
As if they were coins of gold;
As if they had ended their troubles
On those lost frozen sands.

As if out of shells on the shore
Human voices would speak,
As if the crag was a house
And the kind wind would cook
On the thin and hungry fire
Gobbets of stone and ice.

Well might the seagulls screech
As reeling upon the sand
Like madmen and like devils
That starving, ragged band
Danced on the strip of beach
Their brief and scarecrow revels.

5

He hears Crean singing at the tiller of the James Caird, when, with the singer, Shackleton, and three other men, he is voyaging in the ship's boat to South Georgia to bring help to the men on Elephant Island.

“Nine hundred stormy miles”
The wet wind sang to Crean,
And Crean sang at the tiller
“The Wearin’ o’ the Green”.

“South Georgia’s far away
And Ireland’s further yet,
And black are the night and the sea
For a man to be singing at.”

6

He hears, as the sixteen days’ voyage progresses, the undersong of that “flat, dreary but somehow heartening tune”.

It’s cold, says Crean at the tiller,
And dim in my mind I hear
The sound of a keel on shingle
And surf on a faraway beach
Where ice and pebbles mingle
And, thin for a moment, a cheer
Dying on crags out of reach.

Grey water, grey weather,
Sang Crean at the tiller,
The snowflake's cold feather,
The hiss of the foam;
Four days of grey weather
For whale and for killer
And I have come home.

Oh grey-green abysses of water
Oh mountains that fall on the deck,
Deep in the trough of a comber
Then high, sang Crean, in the sky
Matting I saw and timber;
Somebody's dead in a wreck,
Alive in the storm am I.

My friend the porpoise is coming
To roll and to plunge and to tunnel
Black where the blue seas are gleaming,
Sang Crean in the sunny *James Caird*;
So hang up my socks till they're steaming,
Roll off the ice in a runnel,
Wring out the salt from my beard.

Morning and evening failing,
Crean sang at the tiller,
And stones and men rolling
Gather no kindly moss
But the spray from the wind howling
As low on the long grey roller
Skims the great albatross.

Twelve days of endless combers
Roll, said Crean, in my song,
A weary voyage for roamers
Almost as tired as the dead
Fumbling in broken murmurs
For words that dry on the tongue
Or fade in the fog ahead.

Oh cool ice, sweet snow,
Oh spray that pretends to be rain,
Oh brooks that sing as you flow
Blot yourselves out of my thirst,
Sang Crean dogged and slow;
A man with a bearded grin
Licking his lips in the mist.

Crean sang in the storm
The loneliest song on earth
Of how the heart was warm
And yet a man might come
With his hand on the tiller firm
To his last setting-forth
Gaunt, frozen and dumb.

7

He watches Shackleton.

They waved good-bye and good luck my twenty-two men
Says Shackleton riding the seas in the little *James Caird*,
The mountains dwarfed them and when shall I see them again?
Gripping the mast I stood with my face set forward
And found a lane through the pack and so we were out;
Jagged the ice behind us, grey in the dusk,
And the whole Antarctic heaving beneath the boat
And a smack of the sea in the broken water cask.

A hundred miles, two hundred from Elephant Island
Where under an upturned boat on the icebound shore
Between the Antarctic surf and the snowy highland
Are twenty-two men and all of them under my care;
And here in the smoky flare with the ballast boulders,
Crumbling their salty biscuits in salty mouths,
The leaking decking dripping on heads and shoulders,
Soaking in clothes not changed for seven months,

Here half-way to South Georgia in the midst of the ocean
Are one man sick, and two men weakening, and Worsley,
And Crean, that saturnine bear, with his tireless devotion—
How much do I care for them all? I care for them fiercely,
That each should do well for himself, so well for me,
And proudly come swaggering home, each knowing his courage,
And none to be wasted, dead on the snow or the sea
With the seagulls screaming the wreck and ruin of the voyage.

And, Lord, what dangers, disaster piled on disaster,
I have met and mastered with the curt word of command
And something like joy in my heart, a pride of laughter,
But terrible laughter in death's own chosen land:
The ship our home and our refuge trapped by the winter,
Crushed by the pressure of millions of tons of ice,
That tangle of rigging and timber smashed to a splinter,
And rearing above her as she sank the enormous force,

White, grinding, frozen; and the simpler perils
When men who have lost their ship renew their lives
On the moving flocs that destroyed it: the foolish quarrels,
Despair and weakness and hunger that tear at the nerves,
And each man's thrust and parry with his merciless fate:
Straying from the camp in the fog, or the pack-ice splitting
At the rim of my tent that night, and a man in the water,
Dragged out in the freezing midnight, coughing and spitting,

One instant before the black jaws closed again.
And days among the ice-floes, sailing the boats,
James Caird and *Stancombe Wills*, through a narrow lane,
And an iceberg coming and terror gripping our throats
While slowly, superb and deadly, it sails its path
Straight for the boats in the sparkling light of the spring,
Towering upon us, so noble a shape of death
My heart rose up to meet that majestic thing . . .

And then when it comes it rushes beyond all reason,
The wave of my fate so vast I thought some tempestuous mass
Of cloud and thunder banked upon the horizon
Had lifted, crested with light, and begun to race,
Cries Shackleton pointing to the wave, to the sea itself,
Risen in a wall, in the sky, in a midnight deluge,
All racing under, all hurtling round to engulf
The boat and the men and the heart's most secret refuge.

A log in the turmoil, a coffin of choking and drowning,
Not a boat or a log or a coffin but part of the ocean
That shouts with the voice of surf, crashing and groaning,
That jerks and tumbles like water, that shows in confusion
Eyes, hands, faces like bubbles and foam,
Dark swirling eddies of bodies, all part of that force
That gathers us with it, rushing on out to the gloom.
And if you traced that upheaval back to its source,

“It was I!” Shackleton shouted, triumphant with laughter,
Feeling within me, and holding to this as my truth,
A power as tall as my foemen of ice and water
With whom I have chosen to battle in the frozen South,
Alone, in my heart, alone at the end of the world.
The waters of midnight beat and blinded my eyes
One desperate night, then dazzling the spindrift curled
And bright in the morning the way to South Georgia lies.

As if the little *James Caird* was a fishing smack
Slithering her blood and silver home to the beach,
Thought Shackleton watching the blue waves tower and break,
The seabirds crying their greeting just out of reach
Petrel and snowy Cape Pigeon that flash as they pass;
Only, its big head turning, its wings not moving,
Silent as horror in the air, the albatross
Watches the speck of the boat on the billows heaving.

8

He looks at a sick man.

I knew a ship whose rigging was white with rime
The sick man whispered in sleep below the decking,
A bird that flew in the silver and darkening time
On a creeping sea where the tall waves stood without breaking;
I do not know the name of the spider of cold
That searches the whole of the heavens for ships and men
But the timbers cracked and the sea walked into the hold
When the weaver of that white web had ceased to spin.

If that is the sun let it not shine in here
The sick man said, tasting his mouth of salt;
Here's where the sleeping-bag sheds its rotting hair
And the boulders lie like skulls in the icy vault.
When somebody burnt himself with the primus stove
Three nights ago, you laughed, then laugh at me,
For I am burnt inside me, and cold when I move,
Freezing cold and breathing the cold of the sea.

What light is it there on deck, what hour of the day
Said the man who sweated in the frozen sleeping-bag,
What day in the week, what week in the month you might say,
What year of our lives where wallowing the minutes drag?
What place in the sea have we got to? Let nobody answer.
Has the big wave gone? I do not want to know.
Among the stones with my head lolling like a dancer
Here is no place and no time and let it be so.

What is there here but my matted beard and my hair
Like seaweed dank on a face worn white as a skull?
In the spit of the ocean I weep, for I have come far,
Come far, and would like to die; and am lying so still
In the roll of the boat I am dead; and am watching my hand
There on the stones like a crab, a hand that is moving,
Is clawing my burning throat, is stretching for land,
So close to us now through the sea though we come to it raving.

9

They find and lose South Georgia.

Land, land! Stony and monstrous but land!
Shackleton cries, watching the burst of the breakers
On cliffs of granite and ice in the fog and the wind;
And somewhere over the mountains in those fierce acres
There are huts and men, and snug in a deep green harbour,
Dead whales with enormous bellies, and anchored ships
With blood on their decks, a shambles of ribs and blubber,
Oh, scour the decks, good seamen, cast off the ropes,

For I shall be sailing to rescue my twenty-two men
And wash from my heart and my dream an icy shambles
Of blood and defeat, like foam showing black in the sun
In the scream at the glacier's end when the iceberg tumbles.
Steady now if we do not want to lose her
At the journey's end as the stormy dusk converges,
For steep are the crags as they loom up closer and closer,
High on the snowy cliffs is the snow of the surges.

There on the ledge there is rock, there are tussocks growing,
There are runnels of water flowing, it is land, it is life,
It is victory white and tremendous; and a breath is blowing
Of hurricane coming; and we cannot land in that surf.
Turn her to sea, said Shackleton staring in horror,
Where is the land? There is only shadow and spray
And the howl of the gale and the seething of broken water—
They could not do it, they could not take it away.

10

Worsley in the hurricane.

Not the hunger not the thirst,
All this world's a world accursed;
Since the day we lost the *Endurance*
Nothing's come but came like nonsense;
Black she lay with her frosty mast,
Here's their dirtiest trick at last.
Not the storm, the devil take it,
I can bale it out in a bucket,
But on what fool's errand bent
To cross the Antarctic continent
Came I here to the South at all?

Not the shrieking knife of the gale
Slashing off the comber's crest,
Not the land we found and lost,
But here the whole world stands on its head
Crazy alive and crazy dead.
Stand up straight or upside-down,
Die in your bed or swim and drown
But why and in what shadow play
Fights a man till break of day
Where the hurricane that raves
Where the midnight, where the waves
Are shadows of some vaster doom
Shaking the spirit, seen in dream?

11

He hears the sick man.

Crazy with thirst and cast on that terrible ocean
Of midnight and nightmare, the sick man said, I go down,
Shouting with mouthfuls of combers, gulping the suction.
Of depths below me, swirling in water alone;
Staring at walls of greyness, a glaze on the eye,
A cracking behind the eyeballs, a roar in the brain,
The phantoms of horror and pain as I struggle to die.
Wavering now, grown calm in the deeper green,
The sick man said, how quietly down I slip
Where the long weeds wave in the peace of the deep-sea pool
And the fishes with goggling eyes swim near to gape
And the crab may finger the tranquil body at will.

Let the dead thing bloat and rot and dissolve in the tide
For this is the ultimate blackness and I am no more
Than seaweed uprooted and lost, I am part of the mud,
Nothing in the midst of nothing on the ocean's floor.
Suppose a man were nothing and knew he was nothing
And rose and fiery green in a cold aurora
The deep-sea fishes rove where the weeds are waving
And time has stopped so time goes on for ever—
Who can I talk to drowned in that great gulf,
What can I listen to, look at, be thinking about,
Alone for ever with the thing I have made myself,
Alone for ever in the water that batters the boat?

12

He sees the end of the boat journey.

A rag of sail in a hurricane, Shackleton said,
And now I know why we looked like a fishing smack
Rolling far out in the sea with a load of the dead.
Where do the white gulls go when the night is black?
Drifting, drifting, drifting in endless disaster
And a leaking boat and tired men longing for land
And nothing at all to be done but struggle with the water
And wait for the dawn with the thought we are near our end . . .

Call it the grace of the South or call it luck,
Shackleton said, it would have been wrong to perish
And golden as life is the light on upland and peak
And white as delight are the pennants the breakers flourish.
Sixteen days out from Elephant Island—
Lord, here are haggard men with hollow eyes
Staring beyond the reef at the water inland
Where Haakon Bay lies blue between the snows.

Shackleton rubs his eyes with a frost-bitten hand,
I have beaten the wind, he says, and the sea and the ice,
As five times tacking, inch by inch to the land,
The *James Caird* comes where the sunlit breakers race
And streamers of kelp show brown in the gap of the reef.
Steady her in on the swell, she will do it now,
Shackleton said as the boat rode in and was safe,
Shackleton said as he stood up straight in the bow.

13

The landing.

Gigantic the mountains rear
Where rocks and glaciers mingle
But we have done with fear
Who thought to have done with speech
And at long last we hear
The sound of a keel on shingle,
The thrust of a boat on a beach.

14

Worsley, with Shackleton and Crean, the sick men left in King Haakon Sound, climbs the mountains of South Georgia to cross to the whaling station at Stromness Bay.

High peaks, impassable cliffs, steep slopes of snow,
A landscape of black and white where in shadow and gleam
And streams of icy silver, immeasurably slow,
The glaciers move in a time not human time
And far below us like a broad fallen tree
With branches and leaves of silver, its crown in the sea,
King Haakon Bay lies lapped in the trance of dream.

And again it seems, as the flame of the moonlight throws
Among the ridges vast as a frozen gale
Our shadows in long black rivers across the snows,
That we are but dwarfed reflections and our shadows real,
Warring with shapes of mountains, watched from afar,
While cold and jewelled with light, the earth is that star
Where move the mysterious beings our skies conceal.

15

They have the impression that a fourth man is travelling with them.

This man is nothing, invisible,
This man is ghostly, impossible,
Nobody following us, nobody
Keeping us silent company.
Casting no shadow he follows
Our long black following shadows.

“Some seaman’s ghost perhaps?
Some traveller from the crevasses?”
In the mountains there are no ships,
And this way no traveller passes.
He is not here but he watches us,
Checked on the edge of the precipice.

“Creatures of tempests and mists?”
God help them if they go
Wandering these white wastes
While centuries sink in snow.
This is no country for men,
A land like the back of the moon.

“I cannot touch him nor see,
I cannot speak to the air.”
Only we know we are three
And a fourth man is moving here:
On his own purposes bent,
Grave and indifferent.

All night and all day and all night
In the mountainous land without rest,
And the trudging of heavy feet,
The fingers of fog on the crest:
He gives no direction, no warning,
He is light in the sunlight burning.

All things flower out of nothing:
Here nothing itself is moving;
For this man is nothing, intangible,
Yet he is with us, unchangeable,
Travelling the snowfields, somebody,
Keeping us silent company.

16

Crean and Worsley fall into the sleep of exhaustion.

At the foot of the final spur we lay in the snow,
The light drift whitening our clothes. The last I saw
Was Shackleton, hunched and immense, the moon on his brow
Lighting the eagle's mouth and the bearded face.
The glittering planet swung in the circle of space.
Shackleton woke us: “I was not alone while I watched
But if I had fallen asleep he would not have spoken
Nor laid on mortal flesh the touch of immortal;

Pity is in their mind, their actions pitiless.”
These words were spoken at dawn at the end of the world.
The bundles of death that had slept in the snow uncurled,
A gap of colour showed where the peaks were broken
And there, far down, with a grey and misty glimmer
Lay Stromness Bay, and safety, and Husvik Harbour.

17

Out of the waterfall at Stromness Bay.

Commander Worsley fired with a purpose
Plunged in the stream like a stocky porpoise,
Down the fall in one wild charge
His blunt nose burst like the bow of a barge,
Rocks and branches battered and tore him,
Mosses and clay gave way before him.

Crean fell down and Shackleton after,
Three wild men in the blinding water,
Primus stove and ropes and axe
Flew through the air like startled ducks,
Worsley roared to the sky on top,
“Here’s a waterfall right side up!”

Commander Worsley squared his shoulders,
Grinned at his boots like two black boulders,
“You rolled me down to the end of the earth,
You rolled me south and you’ll roll me north,
But bright’s the sunlight and bright’s the stream
And a man can walk in the midst of a dream.”

Where the leaves are green on the branches
Three wild men like water monsters;
Ragged and hairy and dripping wet,
Hungry and haunted and human yet.
Out of the water into the sun
Three wild men come one by one.