

SHACKLETON

Based on a true story

by

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EXT. ANTARCTICA - DAY

White. We hear howling wind, someone gasping with exhaustion. Clouds of breath crystalize.

The profile of a hooded man as he strains into a head wind.

His beard is caked with ice. The exposed parts of his face are blackened and blistered. But his eyes are fierce with determination. This is ERNEST SHACKLETON.

Shackleton wears a harness over his chest, man-hauling a sledge with the help of NIMROD EXPLORER #1.

Behind them, another sledge is man-hauled by NIMROD EXPLORER #2 and FRANK WILD, a small, wiry man with pale blue eyes.

Conditions are brutal. Shackleton cranes over his shoulder and meets Wild's eyes. Their companions stumble, nearly spent.

A TENT IS ERECTED

by Nimrod Explorers #1 and #2, clumsy in their weakness.

Shackleton looks at the horizon through a sextant, adjusting the arm. Beside him, Wild consults a chronometer, which looks like a pocket watch, and scribbles down a figure.

INT. TENT - DAY

Nimrod Explorers #1 and #2 huddle in the small tent, their breath still visible. They chew a meagre ration of wizened meat. Their cheeks are hollow and their eyes dull.

EXT. TENT - DAY

Shackleton gazes into the distance, weak but full of yearning.

Wild joins him. They exchange a look.

Shackleton drops his gaze. Heartbroken.

INT. QUEEN'S HALL - NIGHT

A lecture in a darkened concert hall. A captivated audience. Guests of honor flank the stage, about six on either side.

The speaker is the great Norwegian explorer ROALD AMUNDSEN. His long face has been ravaged by the elements. His hooded eyes give him a haughty look.

AMUNDSEN

By this time, our faces were
frostbitten and covered with
sores.

Behind him, a SLIDE depicts four men bundled in furs on a vast polar plain. Only their faces are exposed. A sledge is on the edge of the shot; dogs in traces lie on the snow.

SUPER: "London, November 1912"

AMUNDSEN (CONT'D)
Although we had reached the plateau, our exertions were far from over. Here we met great waves of snow, hard and sharp-edged, like frozen sand dunes. The remaining dogs performed wonderfully.

LORD CURZON, among the guests of honor, betrays some scorn.

The next SLIDE: Four men posing with a Norwegian flag flying from a ski pole.

Beside Lord Curzon sits Shackleton, who we see properly for the first time. A strong-jawed man, charismatic and energetic. He stares at the polar scene, transfixed.

FLASH - SHACKLETON'S MEMORY OF THE POLAR PLAIN

Alone in a gorgeous white desert, seen through the cloud of his frozen breath. A shudder of exhilaration.

BACK TO SCENE

Shackleton, a hand to his smooth-shaven chin, readjusts to his gilded surroundings. This thin, unreal world.

AMUNDSEN (CONT'D)
On the seventh of December, we passed eighty-eight degrees south. We were now farther south than any human being had ever been. No other moment affected me so deeply on the expedition, not even when we reached the South Pole itself. I could not speak.

Amundsen takes a moment, remembering. Shackleton is stirred.

AMUNDSEN (CONT'D)
Of course, we did not leave that spot without remembering the man who held the previous Farthest South record. Sir Ernest Shackleton.
(gestures to Shackleton)
That he and his companions came so close under those conditions is remarkable, truly remarkable. Such hardy souls. I could nearly believe they were Norwegian.

This gets a laugh, including from Shackleton.

INT. PREMISES OF THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY - NIGHT

A post-lecture dinner in Amundsen's honour. Lord Curzon presides over the table. Shackleton sits near Amundsen.

LORD CURZON

Ahem. On behalf of the Royal Geographical Society, I congratulate Captain Amundsen for his great achievement. He and his men exhibited admirable skill and courage in their discovery of the South Pole. Of course, they were also attended throughout by good fortune: fine weather, sound health. Excellent transport.

Amundsen's eyebrow raises ever so slightly at this.

LORD CURZON (CONT'D)

I almost wish that in our tribute of admiration we could include those wonderful dogs, the true friends of man, without whom Captain Amundsen would never have reached the Pole!

This prompts laughter, not all of it good-natured. Shackleton glances at a stony-faced Amundsen.

LORD CURZON (CONT'D)

Even while we are honouring Amundsen this evening, I am convinced that his thoughts, no less than ours, are turning to our own brave countryman, Captain Scott, whose footsteps reached the same Pole doubtless only a few weeks later, and who in the true spirit of scientific devotion, is gathering in a harvest of scientific riches, which, when he returns, will be found to render his expedition perhaps the most notable of modern times. Truly great achievements, both. And now, gentlemen, I give you . . .
(raises glass)
Captain Amundsen.

Applause. Amundsen dips his head in acknowledgment.

HALL

The Royal Geographical Society MEMBERS disperse from the dining room. Drinking, talking, smoking.

Shackleton, smoking, hands Amundsen a glass.

SHACKLETON
I'm sorry we can't offer you
aquavit.

AMUNDSEN
One adapts.

They draw near a few Members chatting with Lord Curzon.

MEMBER #1
Oh, I don't know. Skis and
dogs. It does seem more noble
to get there under one's own
steam, does it not?

AMUNDSEN
With respect, I must disagree.

LORD CURZON
Man-hauling is part of the
English tradition, you
understand.

AMUNDSEN
But when there is a better
method, one should make use of
it--

SHACKLETON
Yes, yes, I've learned my
lesson!

MEMBER #2
But *dogs*. And then, after all
their loyalty and hard work,
you turn them to cutlets!

MEMBER #1
I could never do such a thing.

AMUNDSEN
You have perhaps never been
in a position such as mine.
Sentimentality has no place in
the polar regions.

LORD CURZON
Quite. Gentlemen.

With a condescending smile, Lord Curzon moves off to join
another circle.

LIBRARY AND MAP ROOM

A book-lined space with a spiral cast-iron staircase leading
to the upper floor. A huge globe calls attention to itself.

Shackleton and Amundsen, separating from the others, enter.

SHACKLETON
 Don't mind them too much. They
 had great faith in Captain
 Scott, you know. Their
 disappointment, in seeing a
 Norwegian first at the pole . . .

AMUNDSEN
 This English hypocrisy. They
 find losing the race so
 bruising to their self-regard
 they must pretend there was no
 race.

Amundsen recalls himself, raises a hand.

AMUNDSEN (CONT'D)
 Apologies.

SHACKLETON
 (no need)
 I'm Irish.

AMUNDSEN
 Perhaps that's why I like you
 so well.

Anglo-Irish, really. The pair gravitate to the globe.

SHACKLETON
 What do you think happened to
 Scott?

AMUNDSEN
 I would prefer not to
 speculate. But the silence is
 ominous.

SHACKLETON
 Never liked him much, to tell
 the truth. But all the same.

AMUNDSEN
 It would be a better death
 than many.

A somber moment for the likely fallen explorer.

SHACKLETON
 We've still to hear from
 Filchner as well, if he
 succeeded . . .

Shackleton flips the globe over, slowly traces a path across
 the Antarctic continent, from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea.
 A private, intense moment, filled with longing.

AMUNDSEN
 It is the last great exploit.
 To cross the continent. You
 wish to make the attempt?

SHACKLETON
Might well be too late.

Amundsen looks at him, understands him.

AMUNDSEN
Men like us, we are not meant
for places like these. We need--
vastness.
(then)
Perhaps Filchner will fail.

Amundsen downs his drink.

EXT. GRYTVIKEN WHALING STATION (SOUTH GEORGIA ISLAND) - DAY

A battered ship anchors in the harbour.

A sub-manager at the whaling station, JACOBSEN, Norwegian, walks towards a bearded and bedraggled man: FILCHNER. Men in similar condition range behind Filchner.

Jacobsen calmly registers the dejection in their faces.

INT. MARLBOROUGH CLUB - NIGHT

Shackleton, moody and discontent, loiters in the coffee room of his London club, avoiding the other club members. His everyday suit is rather worn, snug at the waist. He smokes.

He stops at a window. The rain slants under a streetlamp.

SHACKLETON
"O the mind, mind has
mountains . . ."

Turning away, he picks up a newspaper (dated January 1913) and reads idly-- and then with quiet excitement.

We glimpse a small headline: "TRANS-ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION FAILS" and something about "German explorer Wilhelm Filchner".

Shackleton comes alive. A WAITER passes.

SHACKLETON (CONT'D)
Howells! I must send a telegram.

INT. KING'S CROSS STATION - DAY

Shackleton waits impatiently on a platform as a train comes to a shuddering stop.

Among the disembarking passengers is Frank Wild, who we may recognize by his pale blue eyes.

Without making a fuss, they are delighted to see each other.

EXT. KING'S CROSS STATION - DAY

The pair exit, with Shackleton talking excitedly. Wild looks uncomfortable in the bustle of the city.

SHACKLETON

Never even had a proper
foothold. Built their hut on a
berg and it floated away! Just
floated away!

WILD

Disappointing for them.

SHACKLETON

Well, yes, of course. Very
unfortunate. But now we have
our chance! If we can get the
funds, that is, and no one
beats us to it. What do you
say, Frank? Will you come with
me once more?

WILD

I'd be honoured, Boss.

Shackleton claps him on the back.

SHACKLETON

Good man! Excellent! Excellent!

WILD

Knew I should've packed my
mittens.