

DREADFUL TO BEHOLD

AIDAN ALBERTS

VINCE

McMurdo Sound

11 March, 1902

Able Seaman George Vince tries his best to hurry down the icy slope despite his slippery fur boots. Snow blows around the return party like pale yellow wraiths and visibility can't be more than a few feet in each direction. The claws of negative thirty-five degrees Fahrenheit wind scrape through his outer Burberry jacket and his fine-woven cotton trousers. He shivers as the gust cuts into his woolen underlayers. Tightening his fur-lined hood around his scarred head, he spots another foothold to step onto.

Rather than being miserable, Able Seaman Vince smiles with pride, thinking about the great honour it is to be a part of the British Royal Navy. He is even more happy about the grand privilege of being selected by Captain Robert Falcon Scott to participate in the Discovery Expedition to Antarctica. Recently members of the Expedition fell into despair about their discovery that Antarctica was indeed not a smooth flat highway as hoped, but rather a frozen desert. A frozen desert that happens to be covered with ridges, fishhook sastrugi, hummocks, and dreaded crevasses. Able Seaman Vince chose not to dwell on these unfortunate facts but continued to beam about his present luck. George Vince couldn't be more pleased to be on this short exploratory sledge journey. The frostbite of his extremities and the shrieking banshee wail of the blizzard be damned.

When the blizzard intensified, First Lieutenant Charles Royds, who was the leader of the shore party, had ordered George Vince, Lieutenant Albert Armitage, physicist Louis Bernacchi, Irish Seaman Tom Crean, and five others to turn back to their ship RRS *Discovery*. Lieutenant Royds, Chief Engineer Reginald Skelton, and physician Reginald Koettlitz would be the ones to press on and complete the original objective of the shore party.

The nine returning men marched through this squally white world. They had had no choice but to obey the First Lieutenant's orders and leave the shelter of their tents and head back to the ship.

In the worsening blizzard, they had no idea where they were in relation to the vessel.

“Be careful and step slowly,” said Lieutenant Armitage to the line of men following behind him. “The slope is getting steeper.”

George Vince planted his finnesko boot hard in the icy footprint that Armitage had just left behind. Vince breathed out with relief as he searched for the next spot where his foot could find purchase.

Thank goodness, thought George. Just one step at a time and then some hot seal stew back on Discovery.

George felt something hard grip his shoulder from behind, disrupting his thoughts of a prepared meal.

It was the ice-covered glove of the physicist, Louis Bernacchi. He was third in line in the obscured chain of silent men. Able Seaman Vince turned his head slowly so he would not lose his precarious balance. Squinting in the swirling white powder that was being blown off the ground, George was barely able to make out Bernacchi’s ice-encrusted mustache. Blizzards here were nothing like George had experienced in England. These cursed storms felt somehow foreboding to him.

“Take your time George,” said Louis, displaying to George the underside of his hobnail boots. “Your finnesko boots have no traction compared to mine. Let me go first so that I can give you a hand as the slope gets steeper.”

George Vince nodded and moved in a way that allowed the physicist to step past him.

As Louis helped George descend, Irish Seaman Tom Crean appeared out of the white wall of suspended snow dust right behind George. He spoke in his County Kerry accent which gave his voice a relaxed and unhurried feel no matter what the circumstances.

“Don’t mean to rush you George,” said Tom. “But this is quite the fiasco, is it not?”

“I’d agree with that,” said George shifting his weight on the slippery ground.

“Well it’s my lot to help you,” said Tom. “Even if that means your old Tom takes an untimely slide down this hill.”

George grinned, as his smile exposed saliva that froze instantly.

Columns of snow began to blow even fiercer. Visibility shortened and now George could not even see or hear Tom Crean.

“It’s alright,” yelled George over the howl of the phantoms raking at each other in the surrounding blizzard. “I’ll be careful.”

The invisible procession of snow men continued onward. Louis could no longer aid George in his descent because the slope had become much steeper and the viable footholds grew more seldom. Vince slipped and he

almost flew forward if not for plunging his arms backward into the snowpack. Panting with fear, he collected his wits and continued climbing down the sheer face.

The twenty-four-year-old man thought of his happy childhood back in his parent's gardener's cottage. The cottage had been on the grounds of a house called Cedars in Blandford, Dorset, England. He remembered playing on his little cottage's grass lawn on warm days. He would watch the colourful fish dart around in the lily-pad-blanketed pond. There was something formative about those days when he would trip and bloody his face but grin and bear it. He learned hard lessons when he would quarrel with the neighbourhood kids because they liked to harass his family's pointer, Achilles. Returning home with black eyes and a body covered with purple bruises, his mother Elizabeth Vince would clean him up and demand to know who beat him. Young George would lie and say he did not know. Even at a young age, he had learned to settle scores in the way he thought a *real* British gentleman should.

George Vince peered ahead and saw glimpses of Lieutenant Armitage and Louis Bernacchi through the intensifying snowstorm. They were a few footholds down ahead of him and George needed to catch up. He took a lunging step and felt his boots slide on the ice once again.

What a calamity, thought George.

Descending as carefully as he could down this steep slope, George got within arms-length of Louis Bernacchi. He could hear the approaching crunching footfalls of Tom Crean behind him.

As George took a large step forward, he heard the cry of his leading Lieutenant.

"Halt!" screamed Lieutenant Armitage.

Unfortunately, there was no time for George to stop his momentum. The two men in front of him dug their hobnail heels in and leaned back against the near-vertical slope. As George slid he tried to dig his feet into the icy ground but his fur boots could not gain traction. His frosty gloves pulled off as he dragged his hands down the slope.

Lord have mercy.

Through the wreathing snow, George could see the black water of the icy sea at the bottom of the seacliff approaching quickly.

As the slide turned into a tumble, George heard and felt the sound of his snapping bones. Trying as he might to slow his fall with his arms, gravity propelled him down the full three hundred feet of the seacliff.

An ice shelf extended outward at the base of the cliff. He bounced off the shelf and was thrust into the frigid sea. The bitterly cold water swallowed him.

Able Seaman George Vince was instantly swept into a swift current and pushed under the sea ice. He frantically grasped at the irregular surface of the ice above him. He tried to kick with his legs but received no help from the useless limbs.

George found himself in a small pocket under the sea ice. He coughed out saltwater and inhaled the frigid air. His heart thumped uncontrollably and he could feel his life's warmth dropping rapidly.

That is when he saw it.

The translucent blue sheet of ice appeared to have a bright light shining through it. In the glassy, almost mirror-like surface of the ice, he could see an image of his face and chest bobbing in the dark sea. There was something markedly different about his appearance.

George saw a reflection of himself staring back. It had white orbs for eyes that were glazed over and pupil-less. His lips were drawn back to reveal splintered teeth. This thing that looked like him but was not him breathed out a carnal gas that filled the air pocket between the water and the ice. *How dreadful to behold*, thought George.

Along with these fumes of decay, new thoughts entered his mind that were not his own.

This is your end.

Forgotten is your ambition.

Forgotten to history.

Forgotten by your kind.

Forgotten even by these dark waters.

In terror, George hopelessly fumbled along the bumpy underside of the sea ice, as he tried to feel for a bigger break towards the surface. The Seaman felt the fatigue of his lower half beginning to creep up into his flailing arms.

Appearing in his mind was the image of his black-and-white spotted dog Achilles. Toward the end of Achilles's life, the dog's back two legs had become paralyzed. Carrying the pointer's back half with a towel for a week, George's father had chosen to free the dog of its constant pain. The dog had been brought to the backyard by his father, and in the ensuing moments, young George had heard the bang of his father's rifle. He remembered hiding in his room, underneath his covers, and crying until he had no more tears left to shed.

Now, thrashing his arms in an attempt to survive, George realized that he had become like Achilles. His legs were crooked horrors and squiggled like jellyfish tentacles. He swallowed the salty water as panic set in.

No George... Relax, panicking will not help.

Suddenly, his outstretched arms could no longer reach the ice ceiling. The water surged and pushed him with great strength. Sliding along the underside of the sea ice, he surfaced into a larger pocket of air and opened his stinging eyes.

He saw that he had emerged into an underwater ice cavern. At this point, he did not know if he was still alive or in some fleeting nightmare where he would thankfully wake up in his swinging hammock aboard the *Discovery*.

This was no dream.

George could barely peer around at the surrounding curving walls of ice. The delicate blue walls danced with ribbons of refracted light. A brilliant display of gentle pinks, burnished copper, and deep purple shadows shimmered and then shaded into a rosy-coloured ambience. This exhibit of beauty made him want to weep but he did not possess the energy to do so.

He didn't have long to take in his surroundings as a large white mass surfaced into the cavern. Waves formed as this thing roiled the icy water. Peering at the sleek curved form of this creature, George discerned that it was a pale whale. A killer whale to be sure, as he could see the white patches near its eyes. However, this Orca was different as its black pigmentation had faded. The cavern was illuminated just enough so that George could make out its black eye, which seemed to be searching into his soul.

Seaman George Vince did not fear the beast. He knew that these whales were highly intelligent creatures, unlike the Great White Shark. As the curious animal seemed to crane its head at him, a deep moaning of the ice resounded. It was a sound that possessed an arousing yet hideous bass that vibrated the cavern. The Orca submerged itself with great speed as if fleeing from an incoming predator, although in nature none should exist.

George floated on his back now and only moved his arms enough to keep his head above water. An unwelcome presence entered his mind once more.

I am your death.

The ice cavern screamed and then collapsed. Smashing him beneath the sea surface. George felt something sharp grip onto the remains of his deformed legs. It pulled him deeper into the infinite waters of the sea. He had no strength to resist whatever had seized him. The violent chill of the Antarctic deep water robbed George of his vital force.

EVANS

The Return From the Pole

17 February, 1912

Even in Petty Officer Evans's dreams, he could not escape the man-hauling of the heavy twelve-foot-long sledge. For the past month, he had been strapped into his harness as he heaved forward. His sweat would soak his wooly undergarments and boots and as the moisture froze, frostbite would blacken his skin.

Evans slept and his wounds oozed pus on his feet and fingers. His nose was blackened with severe frostbite. He had gone from the biggest man on the trip, weighing about two hundred pounds to the weakest at one hundred and thirty pounds. Only a few days before, this strongman had developed a huge blister on his foot which delayed the party from breaking camp. His body was preventing the expedition from making progress on their hundreds of miles-long march. Despite all of this, he refused to give up and die here while his mind was still intact.

Edgar Evans had carried on man-hauling more than eight hundred miles to reach the South Pole. At the end of this colossal effort, he was horrified at the sight of the Norwegian flag planted before his arrival. In times of his constantly disturbed sleep, he dreamt of his fair wife, Lois Evans, and the everlasting love they shared despite nearly being on opposite poles of the Earth. They had three children together, two boys named Gwynant and Berwyn and then one girl named Margery. He had not seen them for more than two years; in his dreams, he could see their endearing faces smiling at him and he wondered how much they had grown.

On this one night, the vision of his children shifted and his dream took a terrible turn. In place of his children's mouths were pitch-black lines. As each child of his began laughing, their mouths gaped open. Inside their mouths was a birds-eye view containing all the terror of this Antarctic land.

In the next moments of the dream, Edgar Evans found himself in his sledge harness, his full weight leaning forward on his skis as he trudged alongside the Captain of the Expedition, Sir Robert Falcon Scott. Without warning, the two of them suddenly slipped over the invisible edge of a crevasse.

The fall lasted a couple of seconds until the tracing line rope made a whipping sound. The rope went taut and swung them like a swing. Evans slammed his head into the crevasse ice wall and everything seemed to spin round and round. Scott crashed into him and the two men hung suspended by

their harnesses over hundreds of feet of open air, saved only by the line attached to the sledge.

Edgar Evans awoke. The dream was real, the fall into the crevasse had happened a few weeks before. He sat up in his stiff reindeer fur bag.

"How are you feeling Taff?" asked the doctor of the expedition, Edward Wilson who slept next to Evans in the sledging tent.

"I am feeling quite well Billy," said Evans, denying the pain of his fingers that were missing their fingernails as well as his frostbitten nose and feet.

His four companions, Captain Robert Falcon Scott, Edward Wilson, Henry Bowers, and Titus Oates examined him carefully. None of them truly believed that he was well.

"Let us get going," said Evans. "There is no time to waste."

The five men broke camp. Beginning their march, the explorers realized that the surface was awful. Newly fallen snow clogged the sledge's skis and runners, making the man-hauling a Sisyphean effort. In this land of haze and overcast skies, the sledge groaned for half an hour more with Evans in the harness. Edgar Evans heaved until his body could no longer pull the weight. He left the sledge-hauling to the other four men and trudged alongside the wooden craft without skis.

Stumbling in the sledge's wake, Evans found it difficult to keep up when the others were moving so *fast*. He picked up his feet through the claggy snow powder despite the shock of intense agony that came with each footfall.

The boundless fields of shattered ice appeared violet and purple in the clouded-over lighting. The mellow silence of the white plains was only broken by the grunting of his comrades and the creaking of the jostling sledge. Lumbering after the sledge, Edgar Evans managed to catch up to the stout Henry Bowers. An incredibly important thought emerged in Evans's mind.

I could really use a piece of string.

"Excuse me Birdie," said Evans. "Do you have a piece of string that you can lend me?"

Henry turned his head to the side. Evans could barely make out the man's face through his thick fur hood. What he could see was that Henry's face and aquiline nose were drenched in sweat from the heavy labour.

"Come along now Taff," cautioned Captain Robert Falcon Scott from the other sledging harness. "We need you to move as quickly as you can."

"Yes Con of course," said Evans with a cheerful smile on his face.

Pushing onward, the four man-haulers continued to soak their woolly underlayers with perspiration. The sweat penetrated through the wool and dampened their windproof Burberry jackets as Evans began to fall behind.

Wait for me...

Plodding in the thick snow embankment, Evans watched as the sledge gained one hundred yards of separation...Then two hundred yards...The Seaman continued to lift his feet which felt like they were bound by leg irons. Antarctic fog lowered obscuring the sledge and black silhouettes of the weakened men. Evans was completely engulfed in a world of grey. Lacking direction, the dehydrated, sick, and frostbitten man began to spin both in body and mind.

Evans fell forward and his face struck cold, hard ice. The impenetrable fog blew in circles around him and then lifted. Bringing his arms forward into a push-up position, the Seaman tried vomiting but nothing came out. He angled his head so that he could see forward.

Captain Scott and the three others were three hundred yards away and still man-hauling away from him.

"Wait for me," called Evans, though his voice was no more than a dying man's whisper.

Evans could feel his heat being sapped out of his cooling body into the ice below. His frostbitten feet, hands, and nose flared with unimaginable pain which sent his concussed brain into a tailspin. He felt more queasy than he had ever been on any of the Royal Navy's ships in the gales of the Southern Ocean. He crawled forward on his elbows because the agony in his legs refused to allow him to stand.

If they just see me crawling they will turn around... Won't they?

Evans was determined not to fall out of his comrades' sight. He was confident that his friends would retrieve him. How could they not? He was not only the best man-hauler on this expedition, but he also had the strongest will to survive. He knew that his only weakness was the damned double-digit negatives of this ninth circle of hell.

"Wait!" His cry was no louder than the whinny of Titus Oates's poor pony Christopher. Months earlier, Christopher had given up hauling the sledge and was shot for food.

Evans wormed forward on his belly, losing his mittens in the process. He dug his fingers into the snow and ice as all sensation left his hands. With great effort, Evans managed to squirm a few feet forward.

"Wait!" His low voice was lost in the wailing of the wind.

I am only thirty-five years old, he thought furiously. I can't die today.

Using his chin as a lever in the ice, Evans tried to propel his frail body just a few inches further. His neck muscles fatigued and so Evans bit down on the ice. The frozen earth's chill bolted up through his teeth like an electric

shock. He tried digging his chin into the ice again. He moved his body another half an inch. The fog descended and completely enshrouded him.

Gasping for air, the whiteness overtook everything he could see. Clawing at the ground, his mangled fingers leaked red from where his fingernails should have been on the white canvas ground. His mouth was parched and he longed for a sip of water. His stomach burned with desire for real food, not pemmican—the mixture of precooked dried meat and lard that they had been rationing all this time. Evans's thoughts turned to the pony meat of Christopher and the other deceased sledging beasts. That was real sustenance, unlike the putrid taste of seal liver and blubber.

"Wait!" called Evans.

The sun pierced through the ice-crystal wall of fog, forming an upside-down rainbow. Evans saw a rim of diffused light encircle the pale white sun in the sky. The refracted rays formed a halo that looked to be an eye with a darkened iris and glowing pupil. Evans believed in this moment that God had turned his gaze to him, and would now save his faithful soul.

Staring directly at the light, Evans realized the awful menacing glare it gave him. This was not the eye of his Christian God, this seemed to be some satanic corruption of a malevolent being. Evans bared his frozen teeth at the cursed pale yellow star. He tried to raise his arm to wave to the others for help but the limb lay dead at his side.

If not for your zeal, you would go unpunished.

The thought did not arise from Evans but it came from the howling of rushing ice crystals that engulfed him. Evans hated this place, this land had broken his body and spirit. He wanted to be back in his hometown in Wales or in New Zealand or any place that was not constantly trying to kill him.

Though he could not see Captain Scott or the others through the white gloom, he called out.

"Wait!"

The halo surrounding the star turned blood red. Five forms emerged out of the swirling mist in front of Evans. He painfully cocked his neck to a position where he could make out the approaching figures.

There was a version of himself, his wife Lois, and his three children. The five visitors were a few feet before him, standing in a way that made it seem that they were preparing for a family portrait photo.

Lois had a black look on her face. Margery held her mother's hand and stood a few feet tall with a pink bow in her hair. Gwynant and Berwyn stood side by side and looked ice-blue from the cold.

The Edgar Evans that he saw standing next to his wife was much more muscular and bull-necked than his current state. This was a family man, a proud father, and an officer of Britain's Royal Navy.

Evans thought of how he had convinced Lois to agree to a pact, a marriage covenant that granted him the ability to join Scott if the Captain ever called upon him again for an expedition. Lois had reluctantly agreed to the pact and years later Scott had contacted Evans. Leaving behind his family, Evans had always felt a pit in his heart, an absence of love. His drunken nights in the port town of Lyttelton in New Zealand would sometimes end with a back-alley knee wobbler, a sleepover in a dockyard doxies' room, or a fling with a Māori girl in exchange for some beads. His drinking had become so heavy and severe that one time while returning to the ship, he had fallen into the sea. For several months he had experienced "romance" in this way while the expedition geared up for Antarctica.

In truth, he believed that he committed adulterous actions and he regretted having left Lois. She was a loyal wife and a marvelous woman, faithfully raising his children on the other side of the world. He remembered their wedding, it had been beautiful as it took place in the tiny medieval church of St. Mary's. Evans felt a keen sense of humiliation.

"I'm...Sorry..." mouthed Evans. His family stood and was unresponsive.

Shame. Disgrace. Dishonour. A blemish to your kind, wiped away by death.

Opening his eyes, the fog had completely blown away and his family was gone. Incredible weakness weighed down his body.

Evans managed to climb up onto his knees which he spread apart to keep from collapsing. He would try to stay upright to stay in view as he could not be sure if the others could hear or see him over the cracking of the ice field.

He heard the swish-swish of skis approaching as four people grew near to him.

"Christ, Evans," said the familiar voice of the Captain. "What is the matter with you?"

Evans looked at his leader with a wild look in his eyes. His hands and nose were black as coal and ice had crept into his disarranged clothes from his desperate crawl.

"I...don't...know," said Evans.

It took Captain Scott, Bowers, and Wilson to lift the ragdoll man to his feet. Taking two or three steps, Evans sank to the icy earth in complete collapse.

"Titus," said Scott. "Stay here with Evans while we get the sledge."

Lawrence “Titus” Oates nodded and knelt to hold Evans in a position that allowed him to breathe.

Scott, Wilson, and Bowers raced back to the sledge as fast as they could on their skis. As Captain Scott returned to the duo, he noticed that Evans was unconscious.

“Hurry,” said Oates. “We need to get him onto the sledge and back to the tent. He needs to be warmed up.”

The Captain nodded and it took all four of them to hoist the man onto the sledge. By the time they reached the tent, the sick man’s skin had paled of life, and his eyes were closed. Dragging the immobile body of Evans into the tent, Scott realized that his friend was comatose.

“*Hurry*,” said the Captain. “By Jove, he’s dying.”

The four surviving companions huddled around their dying comrade in the tent. They kept him company until Evans slipped away from this world at 12:30 A.M. Half an hour after Evans’s death, the four survivors packed up and marched onward over the pressure ridges. They easily found their next depot of stashed pemmican, horseflesh, biscuits, and paraffin oil. The four cooked a good meal, wormed their way into their frozen sleeping bags, and mourned poor Evans as each bone-tired individual descended into the realm of sleep.

OATES

*Thirty-Five Miles From One Ton Depot
Friday March 16, or Saturday 17, 1912*

Coming from a family of landed gentry, a man named Lawrence “Titus” Oates had always sought out adventure and ways to serve the British Empire. His father died when he was only sixteen, and Oates became the Lord of the Manor of Gestingthorpe. This inherited title could not and would not satisfy his ambition, for he had come from a long line of great men. An Oates had fought in the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and in the year 1270 Hugh Le Fitz Oates had accompanied Edward I on a crusade to the Holy Land.

In likewise manner, Lawrence Oates had signed up for Captain Scott’s British Antarctic Expedition to be the first to reach the South Pole and he had sweetened the pot by contributing £1000 to this mission. However, events had not gone according to plan.

Sitting in the ice-covered pyramid tent on the last day of his life, he stared at his bare feet. A blizzard shrieked its death screech outside the tent and battered at the canvas walls. The temperature had consistently been in the negative forties and the effect was evident on Titus’s feet. His toes were blackened stumps and where the frostbite touched healthy skin, big bubbles of pus ballooned. This turned man-hauling into absolute suffering. A few days before, Titus had asked the expedition’s doctor, Edward “Billy” Wilson a question.

“Do I have any chance Bill?”

“I don’t know,” said Dr. Wilson. The tone of his reply revealed that he had no chance of survival. Everyone including Titus knew this basic fact. Even without his burden, the three other surviving men thought that they stood no more than a dog’s chance at making it off this cursed continent alive.

Titus had always known death as a close friend. Now sitting on top of his icy sleeping bag, he thought about his days as a soldier, serving in the Second Boer War. Ten years prior, he had been deployed as a soldier to Transvaal, the Orange River Colony in South Africa.

He thought about the words he had said to his brothers-in-arms when they had been surrounded by the Boers in that god-forsaken riverbed. *We came here to fight, not to surrender.*

Titus had been in command of a patrol of fifteen soldiers. With their backs pressed against a mud mound, they clutched their Lee-Enfield rifles to their chests. Most of the men’s rifles came with bayonets attached, and every steel blade was dripping red with fresh blood.

Their situation was dire. One of their soldiers was captured, and four were wounded which left only ten soldiers fully combat-ready. All of them were scared, except Titus Oates. Boer Mauser rifles thundered from the top of a nearby hill, and bullets whizzed a couple of feet above their heads.

The barrage suddenly ceased. At the sound of a single man's running footsteps, Titus peered over the inadequate piece of cover.

He saw a disheveled, khaki-uniformed soldier sprinting toward them. Titus quickly realized that it was their captured friend.

"Sir! Sir!" called the released prisoner. "They want us to surrender."

The man dove into the cover of the mud mound, panting for air.

"They want *what?*" said Lieutenant Oates.

"Surrender," repeated the man, "They say that they will show no mercy if we do not lay down our arms now. They ceased fire only momentarily so that I could reach you, and they demanded that I return to relay your answer."

"No," said the Lieutenant, gesturing to his men huddled around him. "Who has the spare rifle?"

One of his men crawled over to Titus dragging an extra Lee-Enfield with him.

Titus reached out for it. "Hand it to me."

Passing the rifle to Titus, the Lieutenant thrust the firearm into the freed soldier's arms. Titus kept low to stay out of the hill's line of fire and placed a hand on the man's shoulder.

"We will kill the Khaki Hooligan Dutchmen to the last man," said Titus. "Even if it means that we will die here."

Titus swung his Lee-Enfield bolt action rifle up toward the hilltop. Resting the rifle on the top of the mound, he looked through the circular aperture sight. He spotted Boer movement about three hundred yards away. One soldier's head was exposed and his broad-brimmed hat, the kopje breek, gave his position away.

Titus operated the rifle bolt and chambered a .303 caliber cartridge. Lining up his sight and adjusting for wind and bullet drop, Titus squeezed the trigger.

The firing pin released, striking the primer at the cartridge base. A mixture of lead styphnate, barium nitrate, and antimony sulfide ignited in a chemical reaction as the primer exploded. Gunpowder in the main charge flared orange and in rapid combustion produced a large volume of gas. Gas propulsion of the bullet sent the projectile into the rifle barrel. Interior grooves within the barrel forced the bullet to spin as it ejected from the Lee-Enfield.

The spitzer bullet traveled past the rotting corpses of both Brits and Dutchmen. The Northern men in the coming months will decompose and over time reincarnate into Southern trees.

The pointed bullet found its target. Traveling at twenty-seven-hundred feet per second, the metal bullet smashed through skull bone, through pink matter, and exited out the other side. A fourteen-year-old boy's life ended in less than half a second.

"Another Boer vanquished," said Titus proudly, ejecting the empty cartridge case and seeing that his target had fallen.

The firefight continued in this manner, with each of Titus's men taking turns to peek over the mound to shoot. Until once again, the shots raining down on them from the Boers came to a halt. Titus heard approaching footfalls in the drought-cracked mud on the other side of the mound.

The man blended in well with the landscape in his khaki trousers and tan long-sleeved shirt. The white flag he waved gave him away.

"Sir," said the Boer. "I come unarmed and with a written message from my commander."

Like the released British soldier, the Boer also panted in the African heat. He extended the message out to Oates.

Titus quickly read the note and then discarded it. He looked the messenger in the eye and said, "We came here to fight, not to surrender."

The Boer nodded and was allowed to retreat to the top of the hill.

Titus and his men continued to fight the Boers for six more hours before reinforcements arrived. They successfully resisted their enemy while wounded and without water under the hot South African sun.

Oates did not escape unscathed. One of the parting shots fired by the Boers struck him in his left thigh. The sniper bullet shattered his femur. This injury still affected him in Antarctica as his left leg was now one inch shorter than his right, leaving him with a permanent hobbling gait.

Back in the present moment and sitting in the sledge tent, Titus was sure that he, Captain Scott, Wilson, and Bowers had fought like hell just as he had done back in South Africa. Despite the constant setbacks and insurmountable challenges they had encountered in this land of ice, they had given their best effort like true Englishmen.

Oates knew that his sledge party had plenty of bad luck. The unimaginable nightmare that the Norwegians might reach the South Pole first had come true. They constantly had to spar with the ever-worsening conditions of the terrible sledging surface and the terrorizing effect of this ice-planet weather. They had pushed onward even with the sledge capsizing multiple times. They had climbed out of predatory crevasses on more than one

occasion. All of them had suffered from the constant torture of frostbite and starvation.

Titus understood that his time had come. Staring at his dead-frozen feet, Titus knew that there would be no more marching for him. The others had urged him to continue marching, but the Soldier understood that none of them could stomach telling him the truth. A week before, Dr. Wilson had distributed thirty Opium tablets for each man and kept a tube of morphine for himself. Now each member of the doomed expedition possessed the ability to end their own lives.

That was not the way Titus was going to go out. He would face death as a Christian man, as a British soldier, and as a true explorer of the British Empire. Titus would not hold his friends back by continuing to be a handicap; he would not rob them of their last chance at salvation.

Looking at the world of whirling white snow outside the tent, Oates had already made his choice. He had just awoken from a long sleep and from which he had hoped he would not wake up. However, now that he was awake and once again feeling all the agony of his injuries, he was ready.

"When you all make it out of here," said Oates to the three men sitting around him. "Tell my Mother that my last thoughts were of her."

The three men nodded.

"Yes, of course," said Scott.

Titus's face illuminated with a strange grin and he rose to one knee as if to leave the tent into the raging blizzard, "I imagine that my regiment would have been pleased knowing that this is the way I met death."

"Don't go," said Bowers, "there is still hope. We are only a couple of pony marches from the next depot."

Titus shook his head, still managing his odd smile. "There is hope, but only for you three. My lot has been cast and God is calling me home. I have marched to my limit, and my body has broken down."

"No," said Wilson. "You must come along with us."

The Soldier rose to his feet. He swayed but managed to stay upright as he visibly grimaced.

If I stay, they will all die.

Captain Scott, Bowers, and Wilson stared at their brave friend with wan faces, seeing their fate in him as if he were a mirror.

"I am just going outside and may be some time," said the Soldier, stepping through the tent flap and closing it behind him.

Lawrence Oates staggered forward into the whiteness. Each step sapped him of his warmth. The tent slipped out of view almost instantly as the blizzard wrapped its cold mouth around his body and began to devour him.

The Soldier was resolute in limping as far as he could so that the others would not have to bear the sight of his lifeless body when they emerged. Stumbling through the thick snow drift, Oates knew that he did not have long to get some distance away from the tent.

Raising his right foot for yet another step, Oates's descending foot did not connect with the icy ground. Instead, it plummeted into open air. Tripping over the edge of an unseen abyss, Titus felt gravity hurl his weight downward.

Crevasse, thought Oates.

Nature's perfect snare engulfed Titus Oates. As the man fell, he was shocked by the extended duration of his free fall. *Hit the bottom...Hit the bottom... and kill me instantly please.*

But Titus did not hit the bottom. He could feel the icy air whip past his face and this bottomless crevasse seemed to never end.

Plunging into a freezing wet womb, subglacial water rushed around his body as he sank deep into this...

Lake? Underground reservoir? What the hell is this place?

For the first time since leaving the tent, Titus fully opened his eyes. He held his breath underwater but wanted to gasp at what he saw.

A curved arc of bright orange light made the icy water glow. The earth at the bottom of the crystal clear lake resembled brilliant molten blood. Turning his head side to side, he saw shapes falling alongside him. Thousands of them. He quickly realized that the forms were human, and each descending corpse left behind a streak of ruby red. There were men and women who must have been from some future age in tattered green camouflage uniforms, patrol caps, and combat boots. Falling as well were sailors still wearing their tricorne hats, dark blue trousers, and jackets with brass buttons. Just out of arm's reach, were brown heavy-set men with facial tattoos, flax skirts, and carved pendants made of bone and green stones. There were scores of different types of fallen warriors, too many for Titus to count.

These rigor-mortised bodies continued to sink all around him in this necropolis of souls. The deepest bodies vanished into the blinding vermillion light.

Titus tried desperately to swim upward with his useless arms. The effort was futile, some unknown force pulled him down. As his faculties began to slow to an almost complete halt in this freezing Styxian water, the lake vibrated with an intelligible sound.

Flesh to dust. Bones to Ashes. Die in glory and enter the Stronghold of the All-Father.

The body of Oates was sucked into the crimson magma at the bottom of the subglacial lake and then was no more.

SCOTT

The Last Camp, Eleven Miles From One Ton Depot

Thursday, March 29, or Friday 30, 1912

The next month after Oates's courageous sacrifice was marked by awful sledging surfaces and terrible temperatures of negative twenties during the day to negative forties at night. Everyone suffered from frostbitten extremities and they were starving despite the careful rationing of the fuel and the stew fry of pemmican and horseflesh. The three surviving members of the expedition were now Captain Robert Falcon Scott, Henry Bowers, and Doctor Edward Wilson.

For Captain Scott, the last four days waiting out the tempestuous blizzard in their pyramid sledge tent had been dreadful. Both Wilson and Bowers found the hopelessness of their situation soul-crushing, but for Robert Falcon Scott, the failure of their mission took on a whole new meaning. He had led these young men to their premature deaths. He was responsible for the mess that they were in, he knew it and he owned that miserable fact.

He would not let the hand of history write his story.

For the past four days he wrote, despite his grievous injuries—his foot was frostbitten to the point where he could no longer walk. He wrote despite the incredible finger-freezing chill of the air. The Captain journaled the circumstances and happenings that led them to reach this unfortunate conclusion. He penned letters to his wife and Sir Clements, the President of the Royal Geographical Society, who had put him in charge of this expedition. Scott wrote proudly of Wilson, Oates, Bowers, and Evans to their soon-to-be bereaved families. He asked his nation to raise his boy, Peter Scott because he would be unable to. He addressed a nation that could not accept failure with his head still held up high.

In his writings and actions, Captain Scott proved that Englishmen can still die with a bold spirit, fighting it out to the end.

Setting down his journal, Captain Scott huddled against both Bowers and Wilson who were in their sleeping bags. The three shivering men were out of food and were incrementally freezing to death.

"Well," said Captain Scott. "I believe this is it for us."

The gale shrieked outside and rattled the tent walls. Bowers and Wilson looked at Scott from their burrowed positions in their icy bags. Dr. Wilson's voice quivered from his reclined position.

"God help us indeed," said Wilson. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

"Amen," said Captain Scott and Bowers in unison.

"We are very near to the end," said their Captain, "I should like you two to know how splendid you both have been. You two are the best of comrades and the staunchest of friends. I am grateful to have finished this journey with the two most gallant, noble gentlemen I have ever met."

Birdie beamed, his long beak nose the only thing showing from his sleeping bag.

"I would have liked to see my mother and sisters again," said Birdie. "My mother Minnie, Edith, and Hilda would have enjoyed hearing all that we have done and been through. I do think that I will miss them greatly——"

The wind scraped hard across the tent walls.

Bowers swallowed in a throat that had not drunk fluids in a long time.

"I believe that God's mercy will see us all together again," gasped Bowers, "once all of our mortal coils have come to an end."

"Yes," whispered a weakening Wilson. "His Mercy will."

With his energy waning, Captain Scott scrawled a final entry into his journal.

Since the 21st we have had a continuous gale from W.S.W. and S.W. We had fuel to make two cups of tea apiece and bare food for two days on the 20th. Every day we have been ready to start for our depot 11 miles away, but outside the door of the tent it remains a scene of whirling drift. I do not think we can hope for any better things now. We shall stick it out to the end, but we are getting weaker, of course, and the end cannot be far. It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write more.

R. SCOTT.

Last Entry

For God's sake look after our people.

Shutting his journal closed and placing his three notebooks in his wallet, the Captain croaked in a cold voice, "I fear we have shot our bolt, but we made it to the pole and made the longest journey in the world."

A sound of agreement came from Wilson's bag. Not a word came from Birdie.

"Birdie?" said Captain Scott.

Feeling the twenty-eight-year-old's icy bag, Robert Falcon Scott realized that the young man had grown cold and departed. With his sleeping bag closed over his head, Scott knew that the man died in his sleep.

Captain Robert Falcon Scott felt every urge to weep but his body was far too dehydrated to shed tears. He threw back the flaps of his sleeping bag and opened his coat. The leader was furious at his Lord for taking young, ambitious life away so soon.

The ways of Providence are inscrutable and wicked.

Captain Scott sat upright, wanting to face death like a true Englishman. His black, blistered, and forlorn foot screamed with pain with each of his small movements. Sitting on his rear, he placed a hand on Dr. Edward Wilson's closed sleeping bag and knew in his soul that his silent friend had also slipped away from this world.

Captain Scott felt the eerie and uncanny feeling that though his two companions passed away, he was not alone.

Scott squinted in the low light and looked through the slit in the tent flaps. Something moved out in the blizzard on the ice. He blinked and then the only movement was the whirling drift. The blizzard continued to shriek its banshee death wail.

There it was again. A vague outline, an apparition of sorts, a formless blackness among the endless world of white.

Captain Scott threw his little wallet containing his three notebooks behind him right beneath his improvised scarf pillow. He lay down, his shoulders covering the wallet. He flung his arm across the lifeless body of Wilson.

Deep cold, unlike anything Scott had experienced out here in the winter plains of Antarctica, pierced into his fluttering heart; bringing an end to the life of the greatest explorer that this world had ever known.

The Finding Of The Dead

Eleven Miles South of One Ton Depot

Eight Months Later

Lieutenant Atkinson realized with rising shock that the cairn in front of him was Scott's sledge tent buried underneath layers of snow.

"Lashly," barked the Lieutenant. "Help me get the snow off the tent."

Chief Stoker William Lashly rushed toward the white cairn-looking mound and aided in sloughing off the fallen snow. The tent flaps now exposed, Lieutenant Atkinson pulled them back and saw the bodies of Captain Scott, Doctor Wilson, and Lieutenant Bowers.

Saddened, but knowing this had been the fate of their comrades, Lieutenant Atkinson, Lashly, Dr. George Murray Levick, and Apsley Cherry-Garrard recovered all their gear and dug out their buried sledge. They found Scott's writings in a wallet beneath his shoulders. Also in the tent were thirty-five pounds of fossilized geological specimens that Wilson had requested to have hauled from the moraines of Beardmore Glacier. With everything gathered up, the crew covered the corpses with the outer tent. With the search party standing in a circle, Lieutenant Atkinson read the Burial Service in his deep, authoritative voice.

"Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." The Lieutenant paused and flipped to a different bookmarked page of his King James Bible. He cleared his throat and spoke again.

"Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Breaking out of the funeral circle, the search party proceeded to build a large snow cairn to commemorate their fallen brothers. A rough cross made of two skis was placed on top.

Lieutenant Atkinson placed a metal cylinder on the cairn which contained a note that summarized Scott's party's demise as described in the Captain's recovered journals. The recorded note was signed by all members of the search party. With respect paid, Lieutenant Atkinson decided to march twenty miles south to search for the body of Lawrence Oates. They found nothing more than his frozen sleeping bag, which Scott had hauled and abandoned once it became too much of a burden. A cairn was erected in the general area of Oates's disappearance with a small cross placed on top. Another recorded note honouring Oates's bravery was left on this cobbled-together gravestone in a metal cylinder.

On the second day of the search expedition, Lieutenant Atkinson and his crew headed back to McMurdo Sound. Passing the Last Camp, they bid their final farewell to their Captain and two fallen friends. Lieutenant Atkinson would reflect, "There alone in their greatness they will lie without change or bodily decay, with the most fitting tomb in the world above them."

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The following January, the *Terra Nova* vessel arrived to retrieve the survivors of the British Antarctic Expedition. The surviving men were elated at the sight of the wooden ship. Those who had not gone to the pole had spent the better part of the year sheltering in the *Discovery* Hut. Before the men left the icy land of Antarctica, they erected a cross on Hut Point overlooking the Great Ice Barrier of the McMurdo Sound.

The cross, standing nine feet in height, was made of Australian jarrah wood and was planted on Observation Hill's summit. Engraved on the cross in memory of the deceased, are the words.

IN
MEMORIAM
CAPT. R. F. SCOTT, R.N.
DR. E. A. WILSON, CAPT, L. E. G. OATES, INS. DRGS.,
Lt. H. R. BOWERS, R.I.M. PETTY OFFICER E. EVANS, R.N.
WHO DIED ON THEIR RETURN FROM THE POLE,
MARCH 1912.
TO STRIVE, TO SEEK, TO FIND,
AND NOT TO YIELD.

VINCE'S CROSS
McMurdo Sound, Observation Hill
Present Day

Atmospheric scientist Solomon walks up Observation Hill and approaches George Vince's oaken cross standing nine feet tall. She reads the inscription.

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
GEORGE T. VINCE, A.B. R.N.
OF THE

“DISCOVERY”
WHO WAS DROWNED NEAR THIS SPOT
MARCH 11TH 1902

The scientist pulls up the zipper of her neon orange parka as the screeching wind whips past her exposed face. The air temperature hovers around negative twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit and the icy lashes of the gust have a sharp sting. She peers out into the distance and sees the ghostly white mountain range across McMurdo Sound. Much nearer to her is the Great Ice Barrier which floats atop the Antarctic Sea, preventing access to the interior of Antarctica by way of ship. Shivering, the scientist thinks of Captain Robert Falcon Scott’s eight-hundred-mile man-hauling march to the South Pole.

As daylight fades, the brilliant sky shifts color as the sun dips toward the horizon and the polar world turns green and pink. Floating in the vivid blue sea, ice floes are backlit by this pink lighting and cast mauve shadows. The wind picks up strength again and bites her face and toes. Thoughts of the warm seventy-degree dormitory convince her to start the trek back.

I’ve got to get going.

Bundled up in her parka and balaclava, the woman’s peripheral vision catches movement to her right. She sees the surfacing of a pale white whale in a black tongue of open water. The scientist strides faster to tell her dormitory-confined colleagues of the extremely rare sighting.

The End