

Beneath the Southern Cross – An Antarctic Adventure

Chapter Thirteen

[David Smythe, a young fifteen year old, is out on the Ross Ice Shelf in the vicinity of Mt. Erebus searching for rocks and penguin nests. His companions include ship's officer Mr. McCormick, ABS Hampson and bosunmate Bagley, who has threatened David on several occasions during the voyage from England.]

So there we were, four of us, trudging across the flat bay ice in search of royal penguin nests--they were the bigger birds--and rocks from the burning mountain way above us. I was trooping right alongside Hampson and behind Bagley. So long as Bagley was assigned to Mr. McCormick, I felt o.k I didn't want him anywheres near me!

Just before leaving *Erebus* Bagley seemed to be so interested that I took all the clothing I needed, asking me if I had my canvas gloves, were they attached to the string that would connect them and was it long enough to run from one arm to the other under my mac. He seemed downright helpful, but Mr. Hooker was standing right there so I was sure he was trying to fool me into thinking we would be companions. But I kept remembering the crow's nest where he seemed to push me out a few days back and being keelhauled and nearly drowned. He was the rat, the snake in my barn!

I looked up and saw that steady stream of white smoke blowing off to our left, sort of northwards in the very blue sky. Strange that it was always in the same direction. I

wondered why for a minute but not much more--just liked the fact that the smoke was up there.

Yesterday somebody ran around waking all hands yelling, "Fire! Fire!" When all of us got up on deck we saw Brown pointing up to the top of the mountain and there, sure enough, were flames, real red and yellow fire flames, shooting right out from the snow cap. Very strange to see fire and snow so close together.

Turner was able to calm Brown who thought this a sign of the end of the world, not only our little journey itself. Turner, once a preacher himself in Cirencester, reminded him of a story from the Bible about the Lord leading his people out of Egypt with the pillars of fire and smoke.

Brown said, "This ain't no Egypt!" and ranted off some more.

Very strange that man! Sometimes I wondered if God gave him as many tools to work with as He gave to most sailors!

But in a way Brown helped me make my decision. I saw him so terrified of the smoke and fire pouring out of the burning mountain that I wanted to get away from him. I hated the thought of being anywhere near Bagley out in strange territory, but figured that so long as I stayed right by Hampson and Mr. McCormick, what could happen? But I thought too quick.

Now it felt good to be out walking on the ice with the sun blazing down on us. It was warm so long as we kept

moving. Not much wind at all. We were all bundled up in as much clothing as we could muster on, wearing our green macintoshes and dark wool trousers with red caps and all. There was extra gear on the sleds we pulled.

After an hour or so I turned around and noticed *Erebus* pulling further away and asked Hampson where she was going.

"She's probably off exploring," said Hampson. "You know Captain Ross, wanting to put a new line on his charts." Well, he did find an amazing line, right around the mountain, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Hampson and I walked together pulling our sled behind Bagley and Mr. McCormick. I felt more comfortable with Bagley up front where I could see him.

But there were other dangers to watch out for, like the long dark crevasses that might be covered with a thin layer of snow Mr. Hooker had said.

"How do you know when there's one up ahead?" I had asked Mr. McCormick.

He didn't really know, he said. "Don't imagine there are any signposts down here, you know?" Sometimes Mr. McCormick just sounded off center to me. Maybe it was his love of rocks. Maybe they went to his head.

I wanted to see any holes in the ice way before anybody else just in case Bagley had any ideas. Steer way clear of anything that looked like a crevasse. That would be the end.

Keep on your toes I kept telling myself, because maybe you couldn't always see them Mr. McCormick said. How'd *he* know?

We all pulled our little sleds with our overnight gear on it--our food, the cook stove that Lady Hamilton had nested in the night before. I had picked it up to add to our stuff and she jumped out! Another orange flash! I hoped she hadn't eaten up our fruits Sweeney had given us, even as dried up as they were.

For food we had some of Sweeney's best beef left over from Hobart, some of the last green fruits from New Zealand kiwis they called them, and something called hard tack, a mixture of different cereals, meat and lard that we chewed on like candy. "Need a lot of energy out there," Sweeney said as he was packing our stores. He seemed to know so much about what we were going to do, at least with food. "Lord knows, that's what you need. Fat! and plenty of it!" I loved pig fat right out on a spit like Pa sometimes did, but I wasn't sure of this stuff. Looked awful!

We were all full of our jobs, Mr. McCormick and Bagley looking to get onto land from the bay ice so's they could find the rocks he was always talking about. "Evidence of volcanism," he said, rocks that would tell us the story of the mountain and if others around might be like it. There was a word for you, "volcanism," sounded sort of like the rocks we found would come from below the surface. Well, that made some sense, since a volcano bursts up with flames and all. Then I remembered what Brown said about Erebus and

Mr. Hooker's story about how the Greeks believed that Erebus was where all the dead were. But someone had said something about that's being where all the sinners were, too. Strange name for a ship, I thought. Full of darkness and sin. I figured our preacher back home, Williamson, would talk a lot about sin every Sunday, but why name a ship after where no one wanted to go, ever? Where I figured all the Browns and Bagleys would wind up, right down there in Erebus territory.

"Move along, there, Davey!" said McCormick. "You'll never find those blasted penguins if we don't get some rocks first." That was Hampson's job and mine, to follow penguin tracks along the ice to find their nests and try to rescue some eggs or just to observe their behavior if they had their young right with them. Mr. Hooker wanted to find out when the royals gave birth and how they fed their young, if they did it the way the little ones did.

I kept looking over my shoulder to see our ship or *Terror* and for the first hours could see them just off the ice, tacking here and there, our dirty brown sails luffing against the black and white mountains across the way. Made me feel better. Those pointy mountains looked so far away but amazing.

"Captain Ross won't lose sight of our landing, Davey," said Hampson. "Don't worry." But I did. I thought we were just going over the ice for a few miles. Then I stood still and watched her sail farther away--the Captain, Sweeney, my hammock, Lady Hamilton.

I stared at our ship thinking, of course, that she was closer than she really was. Everything looks so close down in Antarctica. Like the first time we saw those mountains from the crow's nest. It looked as if we'd reach them in a few hours, but it took us a few *days* to get there. Then Hampson and I tried to figure out why we were so fooled by the looks of things. Never did figure it out, except that down here things in the air seemed different, very different from back home where in some places there were a lot of things burning, coal and so forth. Maybe that made a difference. Anyway, everything was so very clear and maybe that's why I didn't notice what was happening to my eyes. They began to hurt a little, giving me more of those headaches I'd been having. But I just ignored it, not knowing what to do.

As we got a few leagues away the surface got rougher.

"Damn all this wind," said Hampson referring to the ice we had to pull over. The wind must've blown up the ice into small waves looking like we were walking over the fields in winter when the furrows were all frozen up.

I kept falling on to the peaks that were very sharp, some of them.

"Here, let me give you a hand," said Hampson so many times. But we all fell, not just me. No one was used to walking on such a surface, and we weren't prepared for it, but we couldn't go back home and pick up a new pair of shoes. What we needed were nails on the bottom of our

shoes, but no one thought about that beforehand. My feet were all right then, so long as we kept moving.

We camped for our first rest at what looked like several leagues away from where we left *Erebus*, and Hampson and Bagley prepared a small meal, really only the hardtack. The wind was calm as I recall and we sat on the sledges. Couldn't see much because we were surrounded with high ice cliffs on two sides of us that blocked out the mountain, but we knew which direction it was. And the smoke up there was still blowing off to the north, seemed like more of it now for some reason. Captain Ross said to keep a sharp eye on the mountain smoke, because that would be our beacon. We should all see it plain. He kept at that, "See it! See it!" like he was hammering a nail into our heads.

Right about then I was hoping for some of the fireworks to flame out of the top, like what seemed to scare Brown so much. It would've been kind of good to see fire, even though it had been so bright with the sun. Reminded me of Mr. Symmes' idea about holes at the poles and the heat down below, in the center of the earth. Maybe we'd just sort of fall down one of his holes and get a lot warmer, I thought. Or I was beginning to hope as the sun moved behind the burning mountain.

"I think we go off to the right," said Mr. McCormick, who was the officer-in-charge and could tell us to go any direction he wanted. "Looks like a ramp up to the mountain from over there," he said pointing to a lower plane of the

ice cliff that seemed to dip down to our level sort of like a dirt road coming down a hill.

"Beggn' pardon, sir," said Bagley and I was surprised at this. "Do you think it will take us long to find some of the rocks you be looking for?"

"Oh, no," he said full of confidence and himself. Mr. McCormick was one of the few onboard *Erebus* who seemed full of himself. Full of his own past stories like sailing with Mr. Darwin. Seems as if he sailed with Darwin, off in the Pacific somewhere studying animals for some reason. Hardly looked at you in the eye, Mr. McCormick. Not like Mr. Hooker.

There wasn't much talk as we each sat on a sled eating the hardtack, a real funny kind of meat, all wrapped up with suet and stuff. Not the best, but somehow it was filling. The sun shined down on us, but was gradually working its way to behind the mountain and then we'd be in shade. But now it was so bright! My eyes began to hurt a little more and I had to wrap my wool scarf around my head a bit to keep some of it out. No one else seemed to mind much at all, but it sure did bother me some. My head began to hurt some more.

I sat next to Hampson, keeping my eyes on Bagley, watching his every move. Didn't want to get too close to him. At one point when I fell on those ice waves he pulled me up, not Hampson, with that same iron like grip he has. Terrified me for a minute, until I got upright and saw

Hampson and Mr. McCormick right there. Nothing could happen while they were right there.

"Let's get a jog on," said Mr. McCormick. The meal was over and now we had to get underway. But for some reason Bagley and I got onto the same sled! I don't know how it happened at all, but when I harnessed up, there he was. How in the world he tricked that out, I never figured. Must've sat just in the right spot to make it happen kind of natural like.

We all put this rig on, like getting our horses ready for a spring plow. And there he was just a few feet away. Now I really got nervous. He'd threatened to shove me down any kind of hole in the ice he could find and leave there to freeze! Actually held me out over the main deck sort of like I'd done with one of our cats out of the hayloft. Thought it was fun to hear the little critter holler and did he ever!

I thought of immediately asking Mr. McCormick to switch, or Hampson. But it all seemed like some plan on their part and I didn't want to make up any suspicions on me.

I looked back toward the dark water of the bay and couldn't see the ship, but now my eyes were hurting so much I saw purple and pink whenever I looked anywheres near where the sun was bright on the ice, and just now that seemed like all around me.

I cursed myself for ever stealing away on this black boat, this *Erebus*. I wanted to see Jenny and Ian playing around in the sun light, chasing a goose or grabbing a chicken and swinging it way over my head and throwing it into the hay loft! Pa hated when I did that. "Kill the eggs!" he yelled as he rapped me with the horse reins if he caught me.

What to do? Call out or just keep my eyes open? I knew I was no match for the weight of him, even in these deep snows, getting deeper. But I was faster. Could run around him before he even turned on his feet. Maybe that would help.

"C'mon, Davie, lad lets take a jog at her!" he said from behind me as I started up. That wasn't good, He sounded all too happy to me looking like team of mules himself all dressed up in his big green mac with a red wool cap down over his black eyebrows

Maybe Mr. McCormick just decided he wanted Hampson with him, since he was more in physical shape. Actually, Bagley was along not because he was a good specimen, but because he was best at making meals. And by the size of him that seemed right.

So the two of us started pulling our sled and after a few minutes. I was practically running over the ice, but Bagley kept yelling at me to slow down, "This ain't no race," he kept saying. I knew that but had to keep my eyes wide awake, as Mr. Hooker was always saying about examining

the bottom fish we pulled up from the ocean between Africa and New Zealand. I missed our botanist just now.

Then I stopped going so fast because Bagley couldn't keep up when we began to climb. The ice started to slope upwards and become all sort of hilly like. It was no longer full of sharp furrows as it had been before our little meal. Now we were walking up hill and there were mounds of ice all around us. It was like we were in the middle of a field right after harvest with stacks and stacks of white hay. We had to pull and navigate around the stacks.

"We should mark some of these," said Mr. McCormick thinking that we needed a trail to follow on our way back. So we stopped every once in a while and rigged up some of our bamboo sticks with red cloth tied to them and stuck them in the snow stacks to mark our pathway.

"Should we do more than one?" asked Hampson.

"Why?" asked McCormick.

"Suppose we're coming back along here and we miss one, then we'll need others nearby to get us back on track." Well, that was a good idea, and we hadn't done it down on the bay ice. Probably couldn't have stuck anything in that ice it was so much like frozen farmland, anyway. We just walked along the furrows, thinking we could easily retrace our steps. But we left no tracks in the snow it being so hard.

So we marked down at least four bamboo sticks at what we thought were the four points of the compass by sighting

the smoke from the volcano. Captain Ross said it went off northward by west. So we tried to figure on north, east and so forth. That Hampson knew what he was about. Maybe he learned that in Paris, where he also was. I don't know. Now that I was with Bagley I missed him singing his favorite tune "Froide.. . Froide" from that German composer's big symphony, the one with the singers in it. Beethoven.

So Bagley and me were marking our way up the side of this hill that really was the beginning of the mountain come to find out later. Mr. McCormick was ahead all fired up because he thought he saw some dark things up the side of the slope and he and Hampson went on ahead. Captain Ross had said over and over again: "Stay roped together, always. Your lives depend on it!" and I remembered that, but it seemed as if McCormick didn't and he was the officer and all so I couldn't say anything to him.

"That's too close, Davey!" Bagley yelled. "We'll run out of sticks if we do it that often." I didn't want to take any chances on being lost, at all!

"But it's so confusing right about here," I said and it was. The snow stacks got closer together but at other times there were these long more sloping ridges that looked like the swells out at sea. So I stuck only one in some of the stacks and the rolling waves of snow. This stuff was hard to walk around because it was so deep in places and we'd never had snow like that around home that I knew of then.

All of a sudden we looked up, Bagley and I, to realize that Mr. McCormick and Hampson were way up on the slope. He must've been so hell bent on finding those rocks, or the dark shapes he thought were rocks. I guess that he'd have to go a mighty long time before getting to them, because distances were so full of foolery down here. Nothing was as close as you thought.

"Shouldn't we catch up to Mr. McCormick?" I asked, wishing the two dark green shapes were more than tiny specks up on the side of the white mountain.

"Aw, he'll come back down when he gets those rocks in his head."

"What?"

"You know what I mean."

And I did. Mr. McCormick was now ahead of Hampson, whose backside I could see doing what we were doing, stomping through some deep drifts of snow.

I started thinking that with all these flags and the snow and looking for rocks that my little job, finding the penguin nests, we had all forgotten about. There were no birds around here, no sight of anything like them at all.. We couldn't even see the top of the volcano from here, but we could see the trail of its cloud still streaming off to the north against the blue sky. Except for the sky we were trudging around in a bowl of milk down on the ice.

"Don't you worry about the damn birds," said Bagley. "You keep your eye on that smoke up there. I don't trust

McCormick to do anything but load up on his rocks. Think they was made of gold or something."

I watched the smoke not so much because of what Bagley said, but because if I ever lost sight of McCormick and Hampson. . .well, I didn't want to think about that anymore. "Just watch your hide, Davey! Watch your hide!" Pa always said that, so I guess he was right about some things.

Then the weather changed in the awfulest way. All of a sudden we couldn't see much of anything, a storm came up and was blowing its business like we'd seen out at sea. Right out of nowhere! I couldn't believe it. One minute the sun was shining behind the mountain and there had been some heavy dark clouds, but then this wind full of snow came roaring down the side of the mountain blowing like a hurricane and we were trapped in our own tracks.

Bagley and I stopped and yelled and we heard nothing, because the wind was so loud. Nothing. And then I began to get much more scared, because I didn't hear or see Hampson and McCormick. They were too far away from us and now caught up in the same storm. Now I'm in for it! God has done me in for not going to church enough, for beating up on the old fools in Canterbury and for my poor ways with some folks around home. I was so sorry for all that stuff right then!

Here was Bagley right near me, but I could barely see him in the snows that were now blowing so hard that it got right into my eyes that already hurt bad. I was sure he'd

sneak up on me and if there weren't a hole in the ice, he'd make one and stuff me down and that would be the end of little Davey Smythe!

"What do we do now?" I shouted at Bagley as he pulled himself out of the harness and I did the same. We had the sled with all the clothes on it and they had the one with the stove and all the food stuffs. We should've both had a little of the same thing, but when we were packing, someone, I don't know if it was Bagley or McCormick or Sweeney or who said to divide up the gear and so we did. Not a good plan at all!

"Find the last flag and set," he said. And that made me feel awful. He knew what to do and we turned around and started to walk back in our tracks, but we must've wandered about too much after the storm hit. We couldn't find our tracks! I got nervous again. I was following behind Bagley stepping right in his big footprints. The wind sounded like factory horns and my eyes were getting frozen. The lids were closing up on me and I couldn't keep them open they were so crusted up with ice. It was howling white outside, but it was getting darker inside.

At least the surface was now easier to walk on, harder it was, but I didn't remember its being so firm back a few minutes before.

"Where are we?" I yelled into the wind and now I was also getting colder. A lot colder. The wind seemed to find some holes in my pants and my underwear all the way down to

my ankles. We all tied strings around our pants just at our ankles to keep snow out, but it wasn't working good. I could feel my feet getting wet.

Mr. Hooker had warned me about my feet. He'd said to keep them moving and if you lost feeling in your feet to stop, get cover and get them warmed up on somebody else's flesh. Mine were wet and beginning to burn right about then. But I could still feel all the toes.

"Here!" Bagley said moving to his left. He saw something, but I didn't. Seemed to me we were way off the trail and we were, because we were sort of skating on the ice now, not trudging through deep stuff.

"Where?" Now I'd lost sight of Bagley and I was just following his voice. He was off to my left, so I walked over to his voice and then I lost him. He wasn't anywhere. I didn't hear his voice. All I heard was the winds louder than any thunder storm I'd ever heard. I was deaf to any other sounds. And I couldn't see him. Nothing. I turned around and around and yelled and almost cried out for Bagley. The storm got worse, blowing into my face and I couldn't see. I was alone for the first time in months. All alone out there and I was now angry and beginning to shiver in wet clothes.

He must be hiding behind one of the snow stacks! Sure! That's his plan all along, I thought, my teeth chattering to myself. Should've run off when I had the chance back in Hobart!

I took a few more steps toward his direction still pawing at my eyes to keep them open and then I saw what looked like a dark crack in the ice--just ahead--I didn't move. I yelled again and that's when I heard his voice. Or not his voice, exactly, but something that sounded like his belching after a meal. It seemed to be coming from below the ice! I couldn't figure it out but dared not move too close with snow blasting my eyes shut. A long hole right there in the ice--what McCormick warned about.

I crouched down like a cat I guess because the wind was howling something fierce and the snow was blowing in my face like hot sands and I didn't know what to do.

I mean what was I going to do about Bagley? But it was so uncomfortable out there near the dark hole that I almost couldn't think about him, for all my trying to stay warm and not blown away or right into that damned hole myself.

For a minute I forgot Bagley, couldn't even hear him.

Just tried to figure on what to do for myself and couldn't really get a handle on that so wrapped up was I in the mac and trying to keep my feet warm. Couldn't even think of the burning mountain or Jenny in the sunlight as she always did.

Then I heard that moaning coming through the wind.

Must be Bagley. Down in that long crevasse. I crept a little closer and heard him. Sure enough. He'd broke through the ice and that's where he was. I didn't see him,

just heard him down there. Sounded like a wounded cow, hit with lightning or something. Very strange.

What am I gonna do?

Now I was plopped down on all fours with my head bent down like a sick pony, my miserable self all covered with snow building up around my legs. Snow was burning up my nose and ears and hot pellets were getting down my back like an iron icicle.

What about Bagley?

I could just leave him there! No one would blame me! I can't get him out by myself. He's too far down. I got close to the edge and couldn't see anything. Just heard this strange sound from deep down below.

No one would blame me for his fall. He's the one who changed partners, not me!

Yeah, just leave him there and I can deal with his mates, Oakley and Baxter, on my own. Without their boss, those two wouldn't have much tar in them at all!

My hands were inside my canvas mitts and I stuffed them up under my macintosh to get them as close to my stomach as I could, because somebody said put cold hands on your stomach if you can.

I was getting covered and then realized if I didn't do something, I'd freeze right there. Never mind Bagley. I needed to get out of there, quick!

I stood up and immediately got blown down and away down the slope from Bagley, sliding on the ice tearing up my mac

in places and bumping my head and back on some rocks sticking up out of the ice.

Lying there with the blizzard raging all around made me so angry that Bagley had switched sleds and gotten us into this pigsty of a mess.

I had to do something to save myself, so I started to crawl back toward the dark hole and when I got close so's I could see it I saw one stake we'd put down.

Now you got to decide! Leave him there to freeze up in that dark hole and nobody will know the difference! Or crawl back to him?

John Barell

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