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Opening Extract from...

Shackleton

By Endurance We Conquer

Written by Michael Smith

Published by
Oneworld Publications

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A Oneworld Book

First published in North America, Great Britain & Australia by
Oneworld Publications 2014
This edition of *Shackleton: By Endurance We Conquer* is published
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A CIP record of this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78074-572-5
eISBN 978-1-78074-573-2

Typesetting by Carrigboy Typesetting Services
Printed and bound in Sweden by ScandBook AB

Oneworld Publications
10 Bloomsbury Street
London WC1B 3SR
England

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chapter 3

Love and Ambition

Shackleton, now 23, came home to Aberdeen House in June 1897 with sufficient time at sea under his belt to have lost all romantic notions about the life of a sailor. Long journeys around the Cape of Good Hope to the Far East or Australia on a tramp steamer were unrelentingly hard and the wages no more than moderate. The future held only more of the same. Shackleton wanted a great deal more than the certainty of mediocrity.

It was the rose-growing season at home and Dr Shackleton was as busy as ever as Shackleton strode into Aberdeen House. His arrival coincided with Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations, the lavish spectacular of pageantry which marked the high tide of the British Empire. But what caught Shackleton's eye was Emily Dorman, a friend of one of his sisters, who lived nearby in Sydenham.

Emily Mary Dorman was slim, elegant and blessed with striking blue eyes. She was well educated, articulate and especially keen on books and the arts. The playful smile and gentle flirting were risqué enough to make her interesting. Shackleton was aroused by the chase, especially when Emily showed only passing interest in a modest ship's officer. At 29, she was six years older than Shackleton and her sights may have been set elsewhere.

Tall, dark and wholesome, Emily Dorman came with a classically solid middle-class pedigree embedded in the Church and the Law. She was one of six children born to Charles Dorman, a senior partner in London solicitors Kingsford, Dorman, and Jane Swinford, who was brought up in the sheltered cloisters of the ancient Minster Abbey. Close family and friends called her Emmy.

The Dormans were well-off pillars of the community and the model of Victorian respectability who could call upon four servants to look after their every need. Now in his late 60s, Charles Dorman was widowed and combined his solid work in the legal profession with a restrained passion

for plants and philanthropy. He played a prominent role at The Skinners' Company, one of the City of London's ancient guilds with a long interest in raising education standards. Dorman became Master of the 600-year-old guild and in 1890 laid the foundation stone for the new Skinners' School for Girls in London.

The three Dorman sons took the predictable steps of entering the Church or law. Arthur Dorman, the eldest, was curate at St Bartholomew's next door to the Shackletons' Aberdeen House. Another son, Charles, followed his father and became Master of The Skinners' Company. The Dorman daughters – 36-year-old Julia, Emily and 23-year-old Maud, known as Daisy – enjoyed all the benefits of a good education, comfortable lifestyle and a loving family. But marriage had somehow eluded all three women.

Although marriage was always on the agenda, Emily was determined not to be rushed into anything hasty or unsuitable. She was an independent-minded woman who rejected the convention of the day that a daughter's sole ambition was to find a husband. An unhappy affair had only recently ended when Shackleton first glimpsed her in the drawing room of Aberdeen House but she consoled herself with the knowledge that men invariably found her attractive. It was said Emily had entertained 16 proposals of marriage but as she approached her 30s, marriage seemed as far away as ever.

Shackleton took an instant liking to Emily Dorman, although he was allowed only a few weeks to pursue her before *Flintshire* embarked on another lengthy trip to the Far East. His feelings deepened and the pursuit was resumed with fresh vigour after Shackleton returned to Sydenham in early 1898.

Common ground was soon established. Both came from large, affectionate families and their respective fathers, well-to-do professionals and respected members of the community, shared an interest in gardening and plants. Dr Shackleton was a keen rose grower and member of the Royal Horticultural Society while Charles Dorman owned a well-appointed farm in East Sussex where he became one of the earliest private orchid growers in England.

The relationship struck another chord with reading, especially poetry. Emily, it emerged, shared Ernest's passionate interest in the poets and he was happy to impress her with lengthy quotations from his favourites. He also discovered that poetry was a convenient means of expressing his own feelings.

Emily's favourite was Browning, to whose work she introduced Shackleton. At the time he preferred Swinburne. Shackleton was no easy



Emily Dorman. Shackleton fell in love with the elegant, cultured woman who was six years his senior and they married in 1904 after a long courtship. Courtesy: Athy Heritage Museum



Charles Dorman, Emily's father, was a prosperous solicitor. Courtesy: Christine and Charles Dorman

convert but Emily gave him two books – a pocket volume of *Poetical Works* and the recently published biography of Browning by William Sharp – to take away to sea. 'Ernest loved Browning from that time onwards,' she remembered.

Shackleton discovered a liking for what he described as Browning's 'never say die' attitude and the 'grand way which he faces the future'. In addition, he found the passionate language gave words to his own feelings for Emily, while the burning sense of optimism in Browning's poems were echoed in Shackleton's own positive outlook and natural self-confidence.

Leonard Hussey, the meteorologist who served on two Antarctic expeditions with Shackleton, saw the connection between Browning's poetry and Shackleton's strong character. 'Shackleton held with Browning

that "we fall to rise again" and every defeat stirred him to further efforts,' Hussey wrote.[1]

'Prospice', the powerful verse Browning wrote after the death of his wife, had a special appeal for Shackleton and Emily, particularly the underlying theme of defiance. (A translation of the Latin *prospice* is 'look forward'.) Emily explained: 'Prospice! means just everything, if only it is the truth.'

The poem's title became a private watchword between the pair and he frequently signed off letters or telegrams to her with the single word 'Prospice', each knowing the special meaning of lines such as:

> *I was ever a fighter, so – one fight more,*
> *The best and the last!*

Both also wrote a little. Or, as Emily recalled, they had 'small literary aspirations' in common. (Emily's aspirations were later fulfilled with the publication in 1902 of a minor book on the monarchy, entitled *The Corona of Royalty*.)

Shackleton was in love for the first time in his life and contemplated marriage. However, the measured pace of promotion at Shire Line and even the longer-term prospects of an officer on a tramp steamer were dismally short of what the affluent Emily might expect in a future husband. Or, by custom, what a prosperous solicitor might expect for his daughter.

It made little substantial difference to his prospects when Shackleton reached what for many young men was the pinnacle of the sea-going profession. In April 1898, while in Singapore, he collected his Master's Certificate – signed by Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill – which conveyed the power to take command of any ship in the world's merchant service. He felt instinctively that it would not be enough to impress Emily.

A colleague on *Flintshire* recalled a conversation at around the time of Shackleton's promotion. Ship's engineer James Dunsmore cheerfully speculated that Shackleton would soon be elevated to captain of *Flintshire* and was told in reply: '"You see, old man," he said, "as long as I remain with this company I will never be more than a skipper. But I think I can do something better. In fact, really, I would like to make a name for myself – he paused for a moment – and for her." I noticed his face seemed to light up at the mention of her. In my bunk that night I felt convinced that the ambition of that man's life was to do something worthy – not only for himself, but for her.'[2]

According to Shackleton's version of events, it was around this time that he first contemplated becoming a polar explorer. Apocryphal or not,

he recalled that while crossing from New York to Gibraltar, he claimed to have dreamt of standing on the bridge in mid-Atlantic gazing northward. 'I seemed to vow to myself that some day I would go to the region of ice and snow and go on and on till I came to one of the poles of the earth, the end of the axis upon which this great round ball turns,' he said. 'After that I never had any doubt that sooner or later I should go upon a polar expedition.'[3]

Shackleton's ambition was one thing. Emily's uncertainty was another. She was unsure about Shackleton and seemingly unable to commit herself. At times he sensed there was someone else in her life and her mood swings played havoc with his emotions, particularly during the long, lonely days at sea when he brooded over the relationship in the solitary confinement of his small cabin. On occasions her letters offered encouragement and on others she dashed his hopes. In one note to her, Shackleton wrote that the future was 'so uncertain that I dare hardly shape a hope ...'

Emily's apprehension about becoming a sea captain's wife was underlined on Christmas Day 1898 when Shackleton had to report for duty on *Flintshire*. Less than 24 hours later *Flintshire* ran aground in a storm off the Yorkshire coast. Shackleton, making the excuse that he wanted to celebrate his father's birthday on New Year's Day, rushed south to meet Emily.

Shackleton went straight to the Dorman household where he and Emily spent the evening in the billiard room, locked in deep discussion around the green baize, heavy drapery and ornate furnishings. Throwing caution to the wind, Shackleton told Emily he loved her and pledged to make a name for himself in preparation for marriage. Emily was deeply moved by his earnest conviction. For the first time she began to accept the possibility of marriage. It was a turning point in their relationship.

The conversation was so intense that Shackleton forgot about a lighted cigarette left on the oak chimney piece which slowly burnt a small black dent in the wooden frame. He kissed her hand and left through the conservatory at 10.30 p.m. But the memory of the special evening would always be summoned by a knowing glance at the black mark on the chimney piece.

Shackleton was greatly encouraged, helped with the knowledge that he was also winning the charm offensive with Emily's father. Charles Dorman, like most people of casual acquaintance, initially found Shackleton amiable and likeable. But he was less convinced the more he looked beyond the pleasantries and small talk. Dorman needed to know that Emmy's welfare was in safe hands.

To help satisfy himself, Dorman put Shackleton on probation. Shackleton was invited to a few of the regular dinner parties. On occasions, he spent weekends at Towngate, Dorman's farm overlooking the rolling pastures of Tidebrook Valley at Wadhurst, East Sussex where he successfully grew orchids and could take the measure of a prospective son-in-law. 'My father liked him and was very kind to us both,' Emily said. Others, she recalled, thought the relationship 'foolish'.

Shackleton was now a driven man and a week after absent-mindedly burning a dent in Dorman's chimney frame, resigned from Shire Line in search of a posting which carried more prestige and better prospects. Helped once again by Owen Burne, he took a job as Fourth Officer on *Tantallon Castle.* Prospects suddenly seemed brighter.

Tantallon Castle, an impressive 5,000-ton passenger liner in the Castle Line, was a significant step up for an ambitious young officer on the make and a prominent enough posting to make an impression.

Castle Line held a place among the elite of the British merchant fleet whose ships like *Tantallon Castle* provided the link between England and the colonial outpost of South Africa. Castle, with a timetable which ran like clockwork, carried passengers and cargo to the Cape with metronomic regularity and was one of only two shipping lines permitted to carry the Royal Mail. By repute, Castle's voyages across the equator created a new word in the English language – 'posh', meaning Port Out (coveted shady cabins on the left on voyages to the Cape and India), Starboard Home (shaded right-sided cabins on the northerly homeward leg).

Shackleton made three 12,000-mile (19,000 km) round trips from Southampton on the mail run to South Africa in 1899, with the added bonus that the regular sailing schedule made it easier to meet Emily. The stylish surroundings of *Tantallon Castle* were also more convivial and Shackleton, with his easy manner and engaging personality, had developed a distinct knack for picking out and impressing the more influential passengers. For someone trying to make a name it was a handy skill.

Gerald Lysaght, a prosperous steel manufacturer, was typical of those who were captivated by Shackleton's winning and eloquently amusing style. But Lysaght also saw beyond the blarney to spot a rugged determination and innate power in the young officer. He recognised in Shackleton what another acquaintance described as his 'inexhaustible animal spirits and explosive energy'. In time, Lysaght became one of Shackleton's most generous patrons.

Others found a more complex character. John Hussey, a captain with the Line, said he was 'several types bound in one volume'. Shackleton, with

his shoulders hunched, square jaw set and his eyes cold and piercing, could suddenly switch from quoting Keats or Browning to being a 'determined, self-reliant, fearless, and dominant personality,' Captain Hussey found. 'When he was on a subject that absorbed his interest or appealed to his imagination, his voice changed to a deep vibrant tone, his features worked, his eyes shone, and his whole body seemed to have received an increase of vitality, he added. 'At such a time he might have been likened to a bull at bay.'[4]

The outbreak of war between Britain and the Afrikaans-speaking settlers in South Africa in October 1899, which was initially viewed as a minor scrap, brought new challenges and opportunities for Shackleton. He was appointed Third Officer on *Tintagel Castle*, a 3,500-ton Castle liner which was commissioned to carry troops to the Cape to quell the rebellious farmers and irregular Boer guerrillas. (Coincidentally, Castle was simultaneously negotiating a merger with the Union Line, the other shipping line permitted to carry the Royal Mail to the Cape.)

In a mood of near celebration and heady patriotism, *Tintagel Castle* sailed from Southampton on 14 December with a complement of 1,200 soldiers who, like the officers and crew and cheering well-wishers on the quayside, shared the widespread belief that the revolt would be crushed in a matter of weeks. Some feared the fighting would be over before the troops reached the Cape.

The optimism soon had a hollow ring since *Tintagel Castle*'s departure from Southampton coincided with Black Week, the ignominious opening episode of the war when the Boers inflicted three heavy defeats on British forces in the space of a week. Almost 3,000 soldiers were killed, wounded or captured in Black Week, forcing a rapid change of strategy and a call for extra troops to be sent to the Cape. Among those who answered the call was Frank Shackleton, a 24-year-old member of the Royal Irish Fusiliers and younger brother of *Tintagel Castle*'s Third Officer.

Tintagel Castle returned to Southampton carrying lurid details of the humiliations of Black Week and after a rapid turnaround sailed for the Cape again in early March 1900 with a convoy of fresh troops. The merger of Castle and Union, creating the powerful Union Castle Mail Steamship Company, took effect on the same day. It was a journey that also changed the course of Shackleton's life.

As unofficial entertainments officer, Shackleton was the effervescent soul of the crowded ship, breaking up the dull days at sea by arranging a flurry of sporting activities or concerts to entertain the troops. He taught semaphore to some officers and then, in an attempt at something new, tried his hand at publishing.



Shackleton with Emily Dorman (left) and her sister Daisy in 1900.
Courtesy: Athy Heritage Museum

The new diversion arose when Shackleton helped produce a small *souvenir de voyage* to commemorate the passage south which in a vague way he hoped might generate a profitable future sideline in books or journalism. The book, which was compiled with the ship's doctor, William McLean, and others, was entitled *OHMS or How 1200 Soldiers Went to Table Bay*. Shackleton, it seemed, had discovered a previously unknown flair for publishing.

The book included patriotic poems to chime with the popular mood, an article on the workings of the Maxim machine gun for armchair soldiers and a roll-call of every regiment and the peace-time occupations of the troops on board. About 2,000 subscribers were assembled, enough to print a limited edition. Shackleton, with an audacious display of self-confidence and feel for the value of good publicity, sent a specially bound copy to Queen Victoria.

Enlivened by the thrill of something new, he gave another copy to Emily with an inscription that hinted at the prospect of delving further into

journalism or publishing. He scribbled in the book: 'E to E July 1900 The First Fruits.'[5]

Shackleton moved easily around *Tintagel Castle*, enjoying his moment as centre of attention and networking with those who caught the eye or who he thought might be useful. 'A vision in white and gold' said one witness who watched as Shackleton played the crowd and deftly filtered the interesting from the uninteresting.

One man who caught his attention was Lieutenant Cedric Longstaff, a young army officer with an immaculate connection. Longstaff's father was Llewellyn Longstaff, the wealthy industrialist. Almost single-handedly, Longstaff's generosity had provided the money to launch the proposed new expedition to explore Antarctica.

The expedition, the most ambitious attempt to explore the last unknown continent, would open Britain's programme of Antarctic exploration for the next two decades. The chance meeting also began the transformation of Ernest Shackleton from anonymous ship's officer to the country's most acclaimed living explorer.