

# Ode to Ernest Shackleton

by [Bill Corden](#) (March 2019)



The Endurance stranded in Antarctic ice of the Weddell Sea, 1912. Courtesy of the Royal Geographical Society.

## Overture

Talk about a close shave,

Talk about a rogue wave,

Talk about dangling from a thread—

Talk about thin ice,  
Talk about a razor slice—  
one false move, we're dead.

Talk about the skin of your teeth,  
Talk about shaking like a leaf,  
Talk about living on the edge.

Talk about taking your last breath,  
Talk about facing death—  
one more step it's off the ledge.

Talk about a granite will—  
There's no man who's  
been braver still  
than Ernest Shackleton.

1.

You know when you sign up with him  
Your future's lookin' mighty grim . . .  
Touch and go to live or die—

And on this man you must rely.

But we have got a Captain here  
Who's been in jams before;  
This is Ernest Shackleton,  
who could ask for more?

Ernest Henry Shackleton  
a man among few men;  
to take you to the limit  
and bring you back again.

Off we sail to the unknown;  
Endurance is our deck,  
Mostly by the wind we're blown—  
our ship a tiny speck . . .

into that frozen, endless waste,  
the unforgiving sea:  
this, for their existence  
is where adventurers must be.

Down toward the southern pole  
where death is close at hand  
Endurance and her steely men  
they head for no man's land;

the voyage that would bring them fame  
saw fate deny the finished game  
for winter had them pay the price  
and locked their vessel up in ice.

The ocean clamped, and crushed the keel;  
our Captain cursing at the wheel—  
Endurance groaned  
and cracked  
and splintered  
and finally-succumbed,  
and, with a final cry of  
“she's going boys”—  
the ocean depth she plumbed.

With any other man alive  
everyone would perish—  
with any other man alive  
they all would die in anguish.

But this was Captain Shackleton,  
born to beat disaster  
all but one believed he was  
the undisputed master;

He had got them into this  
and he would get them out—  
just hang on to his every word  
and rescue's in no doubt.

Let's take a moment to assess  
the qualities this man possessed,  
for what he had was rare, indeed;  
not one I know could match his lead.

Can you from any of your friends  
find one to slide the tackle on

and match the admiration and the faith  
inspired by Ernest Shackleton?

And, so, they kept the salvage  
from the sunken mother ship,  
and trekked across the ice floes  
with frostbite on their lip,

drifting on in aimless ways  
they find protection in a bay  
and here is where the boss's thoughts  
makes plans to get them back to port.

Elephant island is their base—  
there can be no remoter place.  
The only land that they could fit  
was on this God-forsaken spit;

But the Captain, he was confident:  
now we've got some room,  
now, we've got some choices  
to fight off certain doom.

Some mild dissent is muffled  
while preparations made;  
for the carpenter, he's ruffled  
the peace of the brigade.

Our Captain's not just good at sea  
he's expert in diplomacy,  
and wisely culls him from the herd  
the carping, Scottish thunderbird.

He puts him straight away to work  
to get the lifeboat ready;  
keeps him fully occupied  
and hold the mission steady . . .

and then, when launching date is due,  
he picks him for the rescue crew;  
for to leave him back with the other rivals  
would guarantee their lost survival.

All the preparations made  
the ropes, and gear made fast,  
six men began a journey  
that would likely be their last.

The men they left behind, they cheered  
for Captain Shackleton, he steered.  
Not one among them wavered  
that in this man they called "The Boss"  
They had their only saviour.

This sturdy ship it had a name—  
"St Caird" was on the bow;  
and though it wasn't made for this,  
it's all they had right now.

Fearlessly they headed East  
to pick up pushing winds,  
compass, clock and sextant  
their only useful friends.



The ocean swells they roiled, they crashed.

the waves were broken ice

but they were made of stronger stuff,

they would not think twice.

for fourteen days and nights they sailed

their misery untold;

and then, as if by miracle

a coastline did unfold.

And it was where they meant to be—

the only island in the sea

that offered them a chance, at most,

for whalers had set up a post.

South Georgia Island—

still remote and cold;

the whalers built a station here

to mine the ocean's gold.

They pulled the Caird up on the beach

but they were still quite far from reach;

a mountain range stood in the way  
of our heroes, and the Stromness Bay.

Did that stop them? Not at all.

They simply scaled the icy wall,  
and pushed their way through ice and snow  
until they reached that bay below.

The journey had been . . . epic;  
They'd sailed 900 miles  
facing death a thousand times—  
it was the trial of trials.

Did he stop to catch his breath?  
His men were faced with certain death—  
So he set out his course to find  
the twenty-two he'd left behind.

In the middle of a war  
he opened every Consul's door,  
and rigged and crewed a rescue ship  
to pluck his men

from that island's grip.

No one was surprised  
to look at the horizon  
and a boat hove into view—  
Our Captain's come to save us!  
And everybody knew.

You can't expect a lengthy life  
from someone so unique;  
the gifts that he was given  
are too numerous to speak.

So, when he went back to the fold  
at forty seven young years old  
The world was half expectant—  
they knew this man would leave the earth  
With that compass clock and sextant.

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