

COLDSORE LOSER

Eternal blizzard. Continent of ice. No-man's-land.

Simple phrases, these. Mere words could never serve to capture the deathly soul-numbing cold that a five-man team of British explorers faced as they trekked across Antarctica in pursuit of their destination: the heretofore undaunted South Pole.

Having started this expedition with the intention of making their mark on history as the first to behold that never-before-seen summit, all had recognized the perils inherent in such a venture. But this was a chance to have their names live on forever, regardless of when or how they died. Almost as important was the recognition that such an opportunity might not last long, as a Norwegian team of intrepid adventurers led by Roald Amundsen was well known to be pursuing the same goal. So it was that these men had set out to secure the honor of conquering the bottom of the world for the sake of Queen and country.

Leading them on this harrowing quest was Robert Scott, a man determined to achieve for his children the enduring legacy of a valiant parent. For months he had pursued this goal with valiant determination, losing sled dogs and parts of his anatomy but remaining undaunted. He and his colleagues risked a harsh and lonely death on these frigid plains without any assurance that they would even reach the Pole, much less make it back home to tell the tale.

Now none of that mattered to Robert, cold and malnourished and almost at the brink of death. For he found himself abruptly standing at the end of his long journey. The howling gale that seemed to sink through his layers of jackets and protective gear could no longer touch Scott. What his compass was telling him at this moment made all other things seem insignificant.

It lay before him. At long last, they had reached the South Pole.

This realization produced no euphoria. Instead a peculiar deadness settled into his heart.

There, on the plain of ice that marked their ultimate goal, was what they had dreaded seeing since this journey began.

A tent.

Buffeted by the wind and the realization that all his dreams were as lost as his frostbitten toes, Robert staggered over to this flimsy contraption, making it there before the remaining members of his team. Upon entering that meager shelter, his eye was caught by something in the dim light. The only item to be found in that otherwise empty tent.

A small metal flask, there on the snow-packed floor.

Dropping to his knees, swearing he heard them crack like so much ice-cubes in water, the head of Britain's glory-seekers picked up that tiny testament to his failure.

As he did, he noticed something fastened to the back. A note of some kind. Peering through lashes heavy with frost, Robert mouthed the words that were found there.

Dear Robert,

As you can see, we've already come and gone. Tried to wait for you, but after a while the boys decided you were probably never going to show. If you're reading this, guess that proves us wrong. Joke's on us, ja?

Anyway, I just thought I'd leave you this fine engraved silver flask of brandy that I picked up last time I visited your country. I do this because brandy keeps you warm in the cold, and silver is the traditional gift for those in second place. HA-HA!

Good luck on making it back to civilization. Stiff upper lip, now! Along with your fingers, your toes, and any other appendages that haven't broken off in this ungodly iceberg of a country.

*Best regards,
Amundsen and Co.*

"Robert?" His companion Oates gasped as he flung open the canvas flap and peered inside. "Robert, what is it? Did you find something?"

Sitting with his back to the other man, Scott slowly wadded the paper up in his fingers, stuffed it into his mouth and, disregarding the lack of anything resembling saliva, ate the offending parchment before any of the others could see.

"No," he managed to utter in a hoarse voice after dry-swallowing that wad. "Nothing." Then clambering up and turning back around, he faced his crowd of brave partners.

All of them found themselves involuntarily taking a step back upon seeing the look in their leader's eyes.

Passing through their ranks, Robert Scott tugged the fur collar of his coat tight around his wind-whipped cheeks. The rest fell into step behind. There was no more cold to be felt in him. This sensation had been burned away by a white-hot rage that fueled the explorer past any perceived limits he had previously thought possible. More than a desire to win renown for himself and his home country, he was driven now by one solid motivation. It was a mantra that he repeated to himself with every footfall plunging into the snow.

Kill...

Left foot.

...Amundsen.

Right foot.

Kill...

Left foot.

...Amundsen!

Right foot.

Several weeks later, after the rest were long dead, Scott persevered, marching through unending tracks of ice in a winter that would not seem to end. Though the flame of wrath in his heart never extinguished, ultimately that proved to be the only warmth left to him. And it was simply not enough to sustain life.

His body was found with the fingers clenched around a fine silver flask that some generous soul with the initials R. A. had given him.

When they finally returned the item to his possession, Amundsen accepted the full flask with tearful gratitude and what some might call a rather sinister smile.

He never drank a drop.

Thomas Bruce Wiggins