

With Shackleton

by Helen Dunmore

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A thud, a squeal, a pair of hot, tight arms around her neck.

'It snowed! There's millions of snow in the garden!'

Clara pulls away, rushes to the window and begins to drag at the heavy curtains.

'No, Clara, be careful! Wait a minute -'

Isabel slides out of bed. And there it is, the snow lighting the dark garden, heaped on the window ledges. A blackbird flies out of the laurels, breaking loose a

shower of snow. There's not a footprint on the white lawn.

Clara is silent too. How far away last winter must seem to her. It snowed then, and Stephen took her up to the Heath on the sledge. Clara was only five, muffled in scarf and woollen helmet. Isabel had even wound a shawl around Clara's legs. The child couldn't stir.

The sledge's runners stuck in the fresh snow. Stephen tugged on the rope, the sledge broke free with a jerk, and away they went, Stephen loping ahead, the sledge bounding behind.

Isabel was wearing her new red kimono, with her coat thrown on top. There'd been no question of her going with them that day. She'd watched them out of sight, and then gone back indoors, sleepy again, yawning as she climbed the stairs. She held onto the banisters. Stephen was always telling her to take more care. He liked to think of her as impulsive, skimming over the surface of life. Perhaps it's the things we believe about people that make up their charm for us, thinks Isabel. What if Stephen knew the heavy knot of fears that lay coiled inside her?

She'd dormoused by her bedroom fire all morning. Such delicious, luxurious, justified sleepiness. Mrs Elton had brought up her cocoa at eleven. Isabel

loathed cocoa as a rule, but all through that winter she craved it. Thick, delicious cocoa, made with the top of the milk. And again, usually Isabel was embarrassed to be found on her little bedroom sofa, doing nothing. But it was all right, on that particular day, and on all those days last winter. Mrs Elton put the cocoa down and announced, 'There's a good half-pint of best morning milk in there. And a boy's just this minute come to clear the steps. I'll put some ashes down once he's done, and then you'll be safe to go out. It looks as if this freeze is going to hold.'

'Wonderful cocoa,' Isabel breathed, not because she felt she had to, but because it was true.

'There's nothing like milk to build good bones,' said Mrs Elton, folding her arms and looking down at Isabel as if Isabel belonged to her. And they were off. They couldn't help it. The irresistible topic swam into view - as if it were ever out of view! - and in they plunged after it.

Isabel had bathed in approval, day after day. She could lie on that sofa for the entire nine months if she felt like it, and there wouldn't be a murmur. Not even from that she-elephant, Stephen's mother. Isabel had done what was wanted of her. Her mother-in-law had 'spoken her mind quite openly', once Clara turned four. Stephen had always wanted a large family. The

Kendalls ran to large families. And naturally Stephen wanted a son to bear his name. Any man would. The fact that he didn't talk about it meant absolutely nothing. Stephen was far too considerate, but Josephine believed in frankness.

'In fact,' said Josephine Kendall, 'I don't really regard it as a family, if there is only one child.'

A stain of red touched Isabel's cheeks. Not a family! Perhaps one day a manhole would be left uncovered and Josephine Kendall would step onto nothing with her usual splendid self-assurance, and plunge fathoms deep into the sewers of London.

But at the same time Isabel could not help longing for her mother-in-law's approval. She knew it was weak, the kind of self-betrayal that made her twist angrily in her bed at night. If she'd had someone of her own, it might have been different. Isabel's mother was dead.

'And do you know, my dear, she hasn't even managed to keep her own mother alive' Isabel could just imagine those words, uttered in the trumpeting half-whisper that her mother-in-law employed with the little crowd of evil-minded old monuments who were her intimate friends. Old monuments all of them, old she-elephants trampling and trumpeting and blundering their way through the jungle of north London. And Josephine Kendall, with

her hanging flaps of jowl and her massive ankles, was the oldest, most obstinate and deadly elephant of them all.

Isabel had no-one of her own, except for Stephen, and now Clara. Her father lived in Brussels - 'a *most* peculiar place to choose, and nobody knows quite *what* he lives on,' trumpeted the elephants - and as for her brother, none of the Kendalls counted him.

But Stephen counts Rod, thinks Isabel quickly. Stephen likes Rod.

Clara breaks away from the snowy window, and begins to stamp up and down the bedroom carpet, her face pale with excitement.

'Can we go out now? Can we go out now this minute?'

Isabel takes a deep breath. 'Yes,' she says. Clara swings round and stares at her mother sternly, searching her face. Isabel knows what she's waiting for: the usual adult excuses, qualifications: *After you've had your breakfast, when we've tidied up all the toys, when your cold's better*

'Yes,' she repeats, 'now, this minute. We'll just throw on our clothes, and go.'

Clara's face creases with delight. 'Throw on our clothes!' she cackles. Isabel catches the excitement. She'll do just exactly that. No bath, no brushing and

twisting and pinning of her hair, no patting cream into her skin. Why she keeps on with it all anyway, God knows, since Stephen's not here. And won't be for -

Don't think of that. She crams on an old tweed skirt, a woollen jumper, her thickest stockings.

'Now let's get you ready. But hush, we don't want to wake Louie.'

They creep into the nursery. Louie is still asleep in the adjoining room. She should be up by now. But what is Louie, after all? Just about seventeen, and still growing, judging from the way her wrists poke out her sleeves. How Isabel used to sleep when she was seventeen, as if sleep were food.

Clara is utterly silent as Isabel fishes in the chest of drawers, finding knitted leggings, woollen skirt and jersey. Clara's outdoor things are downstairs: good.

'Aren't you going to wash me?' whispers Clara hoarsely.

'Not this morning. Ssh.'

'You go to hell if you don't wash.' Clara doesn't sound troubled by the prospect, but all the same Isabel whispers back, 'That's nonsense. All that happens if you don't wash is that you smell like an old cheese.'

Clara convulses with silent laughter. Isabel grabs the clothes, lifts Clara and hurries downstairs.

'You don't have to carry me, I'm not a baby,' Clara hisses in her ear, drumming hard little heels on Isabel's hips.

The sledge, Isabel knows, is hanging on a nail in the garden shed. She tells Clara to wait at the door, and sets off across the snowy waste of the lawn. The light is so strong that she blinks.

'Here we are, Clara, you sit down here, and I'll pull you with the rope.'

'And then I'll pull you, Mummy.'

'I'm too heavy for you.'

But the truth is that she has lost weight, pounds and pounds of it. She is thin now. Her old tweed skirt sags at the waist, and her face is pinched.

'Poor Isabel, she's lost her bloom,' she heard the elephants say one day, as they popped little egg-and-cress triangles into their mouths with their trunks. All the great grey ears flapped in agreement.

Isabel begins to drag the sledge uphill. It is surprisingly heavy. She turns round, but of course there is only Clara on the sledge. How could there be anyone else?

Josephine Kendall believes that it is high time Isabel pulled herself together. After all, everyone has had a miscarriage. Why, she herself! Even a late

miscarriage, although of course *not* very nice, is something that you must not allow yourself to dwell on. You simply have to pick yourself up and try again.

The other elephants nodded again, although perhaps a shade less certainly than before.

The pavement has already been trodden. Milkmen and postmen and bakers' boys have been out already, she supposes. Her breath steams. A woman in a grey wrapper is scattering ash on the steps of a raw brick house that seems too tall for itself.

'Clara, can you get off and walk this bit?'

Clara looks sternly at her mother. 'Daddy pulled me all the way up this hill.'

So she does remember.

'Is Daddy pulling a sledge now?'

'No. You remember, I told you. Their sledges are much bigger than this, and they are pulled by dogs.'

'Dogs like Bella?'

'Bella's far too small. Remember what Daddy told you about the dogs?'

A frown almost settles on Clara's face. 'I don't remember what he said. I don't even remember what his face looks like.'

'You do, Clara. Just close your eyes and you'll see it.'

'No,' says Clara, shaking her head like a judge, 'I don't not even remember what his tongue looks like. I'm afraid it's gone,' she adds. The sound of one of Josephine's favourite phrases on her daughter's lips makes Isabel want to slap Clara. False self-deprecation followed by deadly insult: how typical of Josephine it was. *'I know I ought to remember your name, but I'm afraid it's gone.'*

'They are called huskie dogs,' she says levelly. 'And stop kicking snow into your boots, Clara.' She takes Clara's hand and they walk on, the sledge dragging behind them. *Close your eyes and you'll see it.* But no, she realises, it's not as easy as that. She can capture the back of Stephen's head perfectly, but his face is turned away. She gives Clara's hand a little squeeze.

'Sorry I was cross, Clarrie.'

But Clara answers out of quite a different train of thought.

'Are they biting dogs, where Daddy is?'

'No. They don't bite people. Only their food.'

'What is their food?'

'Oh - meat.'

'Is that Daddy's food too?'

'Yes, but he has other things as well.'

'What other things?'

'Things out of tins, and biscuits.'

'And things from the Stores.'

'There isn't any Stores there. You remember the pictures we showed you.'

'Actually they are building a Stores where Daddy is,' says Clara casually. 'I saw it in the newspaper. Anyway my feet are cold.'

'Come here, let me rub them.'

She pulls Clara's right foot out of its boot, and brushes off the snow. Her leggings are not too damp. Isabel takes off her own gloves and chafes the foot with her bare hands.

'Are you really cold, Clara? Do you want to go home?'

'We haven't even gone down a hill yet!' Tears of exasperation jump to Clara's eyes.

'All right, sit on the sledge again, and I'm going to wrap my big scarf round your feet, like this.'

As for where Stephen is, she's not even going to think about it. Josephine had been bursting with it when the invitation came, her trunk pointing to heaven as she trumpeted the news around her circle. Stephen, Isabel's gentle, funny, thoughtful Stephen, was going off to some unimaginable wasteland of howling winds and blistering cold, to spend weeks and weeks struggling to reach a place that wasn't even a place at

all. Just a point on the compass. Josephine could scarcely have been more thrilled if she'd managed to send Stephen into battle.

'A most remarkable opportunity. He simply leapt at it. The Society -'

How many Stephens were there? There was her Stephen, so close that she couldn't describe him. Gentle, funny, thoughtful: yes, he was all those things, sometimes more. Sometimes less, but they weren't really what he was. She could not add up Stephen in words. The closer people came, perhaps the less they saw each other. Like bringing something so close to your eyes that it went out of focus.

But Josephine's Stephen was quite another matter.

'I feel I must give you a word of warning, Isabel dear, at such a very exciting time for us all. You do realise that it can cause *great trouble in a marriage* if a man is not allowed to pursue his career because of all sorts of fearfulness and tearfulness - and of course to be invited to take part was the most extraordinary honour - although naturally no more that we know Stephen deserves - I happen to know that Archie Cannington *himself* recommended Stephen most highly

- You know who I'm talking about, Isabel dear? I only speak to you like this because your own mother -'

'Not allowed?'

'Come, Isabel, you know what I mean. A man must feel that his wife is *behind him*.'

Maybe that's why I can only see the back of his head, thinks Isabel now, because I am behind him.

At last, at last she has dragged Clara up to the top of the hill. Her heart thumps, and she is sweating. She must get strong again, she must. She will drink a glass of milk every morning if it chokes her, and eat second helps of everything, as Rod used to say. When summer comes, she'll go down to Eastbourne for sea bathing. She glances behind her. Clara is sitting tight on the sledge, her mittened hands gripping its sides. She beams at her mother. There is not the smallest cloud of doubt in the sky of Clara's face.

And now they are up there, on top. The white vista spreads. There's the city, smoking in the cold, remote and intricate as a jewel. Ants of people toil up the slopes with sledges and tin trays.

But would he have gone anyway, even if the baby had been born? His little boy, seven months old by now, bundled in shawls and peeping at a white world for the first time. Isabel would not have failed, and

Stephen would have shut the door on his adventure. He'd have done it reluctantly - she had to admit that - but he would have done so. Even the most fearsome rampages and trumpeting of all the she-elephants in north London could not have influenced him.

'Mummy! Mummy! I want to slide down the hill.'

Suddenly the hill looks very steep. Has she come to the right part of the Heath? Is this the place where Stephen brought Clara? Perhaps it isn't safe. If they run over a bump and Clara is thrown off and she strikes her head against a stone concealed by the snow -

'Mummy! I'm getting cold again.'

'All right. Hold tight to the rope now, Clara, while I get on.'

Isabel places the child between her legs, tucking up the folds of her skirt. The runners of the sledge fidget on the snow. The sledge wants to trick her by sliding forward slowly, inch by inch until it's got the momentum it wants and it can swoosh forward, catching her off-balance so she loses hold of the rope and then -

But it's not going to happen, not until she's ready. She digs her heels in, takes the rope from Clara and then eases the sledge forward, under control. They are at the lip of the hill.

'Hold tight, Clara.'

Clara grips her mother's knees. Isabel shoves off. The sledge sticks. She pushes harder and suddenly the sledge shoots forward, over the edge. She gasps as the cold air flies past her. A bump in the ground jolts the sledge and then they are gathering speed, hissing down the fresh, clean icy snow with the rope taut in Isabel's hands. And for a moment Isabel is superb, steering them masterfully to the left of a bush while Clara screams with pleasure.

The slope slackens. The sledge runs out, losing speed, and comes to rest in a deep, unsullied patch of snow. Isabel clammers off.

'I didn't remember it was like that,' says Clara. Her cheeks flare like poppies. 'Is that what Daddy's doing?'

'You mean now this minute?'

'Yes.'

'I'm not sure.'

Those cliffs and lakes of ice, those deep crevasses shining blue, those winds so cold they burn like fire. Is that where Stephen is? She can't get close to him. She can't hear what he is saying, or listen to his breathing. He is much too far away. Just a dot, like a baby before it's grown or born. Come back, she begs him. Come closer. But even when she manages to bring him back

into focus, all he does is to hammer pegs into the ground and fix twine between them, before taking careful measurements.

'I want to do it again,' says Clara. Isabel looks at her. Clara sounds so exactly like Josephine that Isabel almost expects to see her daughter swing a tender, baby trunk. But she also sounds so like Stephen that Isabel's eyes prickle.

'You're sure you'll be all right, Isabel? Because if you minded dreadfully, you know, I wouldn't -'

'I want to do it again. Are you listening, Mummy? I want to do it again.'

'All right, but help me pull the sledge back up the hill.'

The child takes the rope in her fist. Isabel holds it too, and they begin to haul the sledge up the steep slope. Isabel is soon out of breath.

'Let's stop a minute, Clara.'

'Are you tired?' demands Clara, her face suddenly tense. She shouldn't look like that, thinks Isabel.

'No,' she replies, 'Not tired a bit. We'll get our breath, and then we'll go on up.'

Clara searches her mother's face with bright, suspicious eyes. She doesn't trust me, thinks Isabel. She doesn't think I'm strong enough. I've cried in front

of her. Weak, oozing tears that slipped out, hour after hour. Clara stared, then put on a bright blank face and ran off to find Louie.

What does she think about Stephen being gone? What does she really think? The elephants have told her how proud she must be. Isabel has told her that Stephen thinks of Clara every night, before she goes to sleep. But they are all lying, thinks Isabel. And she herself, why she's the greatest liar of them all. Her 'gentle, funny, thoughtful Stephen'. Why does she tell herself such stuff? Why does she want to edit Stephen so ruthlessly?

He explained it all to her. The clothing he would wear, the instruments they were taking, the pack ice, the way the ship was designed to yield to the pressure of the ice rather than be crushed. He told her about sea leopards, whose existence she had never suspected. So many things, a jumble of them spilling out onto the carpet as he stood with one foot on the fender, his eyes alight with unshared joy.

He was pregnant with his journey. She didn't understand that then, but now she does. The journey was all folded away inside him, a life that was as real and immediate as his own heartbeat, but to everyone else just a possibility that might happen or might not

happen. And if it didn't happen, well, it was not a tragedy. Pick yourself up and start all over again.

For him, it has happened. He is there. He isn't thinking of her or of Clara, she knows it in her bones. She doesn't expect him to do so. He's taking measurements, skilfully and meticulously, to make a map where previously there has not been a map. It is summer there, or what they call summer. At the end of his long day he'll lie in his sleeping bag, writing up notes.

She was happy to let them go off together that day last winter, without her. She wasn't fearful, because she had her own baby safe inside her. Such calm is a kind of folly, she thinks now. It's self-deception.

'Don't take your mittens off, Clara.'

'My hands are sweating so much they are wet,' says Clara, with her usual severe accuracy. She has pulled off both mittens. She wriggles the fingers of her left hand, and spreads them out into the shape of a star. Impossible to believe that hand was ever part of Isabel's own body. Clara is so separate, so forceful. She seizes the rope again.

'I want to pull it.'

'All right, see if you can.'

'Don't help me, Mummy, I want to do it all by my own.' Clara starts to clamber up the steep side of the

hill, hauling the sledge. She'll defy me all her life, thinks Isabel. It makes her want to laugh. And if the baby - yes, you're going to say it this time, she tells herself - if the baby had been born, he would have defied you too.

Stephen was sorry not to have his son. He'd looked at her with his eyes wide, bright, blank. 'I'm awfully sorry, Is.' Sorry for her, he meant. And she'd taken it as no more than her due.

There's that small dot again, far away in the wasteland of snow. He's bending over something, concentrated. She can't see his face, but she knows it will be taxed with thought. He has got to get this right. In the glassy, untrodden waste there is not so much as a single elephant's footprint to distract him.

'Look at me! Look at me, Mummy! I'm right up at the top of the world.'

And so she is. 'That's wonderful, Clara!'

But Clara scorns her mother's hyperbole.

'Watch out!' she trumpets, 'I'm coming down!'

'Wait, Clara, not on your own -'

But the next minute Isabel has to leap aside as the sledge, propelled by a flushed and shrieking Clara, hurtles towards her. It careers on and overturns, depositing Clara in the snow. Clara gets to her feet in silence.

'Are you all right?'

'I meant that to happen,' says Clara. 'It's your turn now.'

Up the hill again. Suddenly Stephen is close. He's stopped for a breather, he's wiping his face and peering in her direction. But perhaps he doesn't even know that she is there. She won't distract him. With that sort of close, meticulous work, one slip can lose you hours.

When I was having Clara, she remembers, I didn't want Stephen in the room.

But all the same, almost in spite of herself, her hand creeps up. She gives a small, tentative wave. Does he see her, or not see her? It doesn't matter.

'I can't tell you, Is, what a feeling there is among the men.'

No, she thought. You can't tell me. She shrank from his euphoria as if it were a flame that might burn her. He was so considerate, too. He left behind a thick packet of directions, to be opened 'in the eventuality of my death'. And he told the she-elephant of the packet's existence, but not Isabel. Josephine could not resist one fatal hint, and Isabel was onto it like a tiger.

They saw Isabel at last, those elephants of north London.

Here they are again, at the top of the hill. Here is Clara, taking the ropes. Isabel holds the sledge, steadying it.

'Ready, Clara?'

She pushes the sledge and it reaches the lip of the hill. It hesitates, then glides forward, gathering speed.

Here is her daughter, flying away from her. Stephen, from the bottom of the world, shades his eyes to see Clara fly.

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