

I Lived With The Eskimos

by
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Chapter Seven - A Date With Adventure

Before winter could set in and the bay filled with the rubbery ocean ice the natives call sea-coo, we knew the first and last ocean patrol of the season would have to be taken. But Nick and I felt that we really owed ourselves a day off. So we decided upon making our day a picnic, using our police boat, and getting in a spot of fishing. Our idea was all right; just how it worked out was another thing.

The government had sent us with a Peterhead whaleboat which came up on the deck of the *SS Bay Rupert*, on which we traveled from Montreal to Port Burwell. This whaleboat was a sturdy craft, built to stand terrific seas and made for ocean work. There was an Arcadia two-cylinder gasoline engine, for which we carried tanks of fuel. The forward deck was roomy, below was the sleeping place for four men, amidships was the engine house; we had supplies on the after deck, and this twenty-foot boat gave us two holds for cargo. It was a one-master and we always carried sail, but never failed to have plenty of the five-gallon cans of gasoline with us too. The first few times we had her out, we found a bit of trouble with the exhaust choking; a couple of hours' work had set this right.

There dawned a perfect day. There was wind, of course, for there's always wind on the edge of Baffin Island, but the sun rose high just after dawn, which follows so quickly on midnight in those regions in summer. I could see snow patches behind the rocks disappearing as if by magic.

"Let's have our picnic today," said Nick.

Now, customarily one of the two policemen in a northern post must remain at the detachment, but as it was to be a matter of only a day we decided it would be all right for both of us to go.

Our boat, the *Ah Chook*, was anchored off shore. The natives loaded on the supplies and brought up the kyaks for us to paddle out in. *Ah Chook*, which is the native sound for "I don't know," was the name we had given the boat. They were the words Nick and I had to say most often in the strange new life we were beginning which was to last so many more months than we bargained for.

The engine purred as we pointed the nose of our little vessel through Grenfell Trickle, the narrow strait that runs with a swift current where McLellan Strait separates Port Burwell from Northern Ungava. It makes a tide race and ice seldom gathers in it, for the water moves forward into the Labrador current.

Our idea was to go down Ungava Bay, have a look around for some fish and return. We took Lukas and Tommy and plenty of supplies, which last was lucky; it was lucky, too, that we had the natives along, for native knowledge is essential to aid the white man until there have been enough white men up there to have learned the curious ways of the country and the ocean near it.

I stood on the forward deck and howled like a coyote just because it felt so good to be alive. There was the lift of the boat under my feet like the lift of my horse Guts when we bounded across the open prairie together. And then I shut up abruptly, for above the noise I made myself and the *sluish* of water against the speed of the boat's side, I heard one of the natives cry out:

"Sea-coo!"

It was well along in September, the lookout man standing before the mast had spied something most unusual for the time of year; it was a low-lying field of ice edging toward us from the horizon. I had come north expecting to see ice and snow in plenty, but I had not thought of it on such a bright, clear morning.

Lukas raced forward to scan the horizon, and scattered chunks of ice began to appear amidst the choppy waves. I knew we were in danger, for it was only a few seasons before that the Hudson's Bay Company's reinforced steel ship, *SS Bay Eskimo*, a trader, had been caught in pack ice and in ten hours was slowly crushed to scrap, although without loss of life among the crew.

Tommy came down from the lookout, and gestured to his kyaks that had been secured almost the full length of the two sides of the *Ah Chook*.

"Take over," nodded Nick, who had idled down the engine, so we barely kept our head straight. We trusted the natives to get us out of a tight place quicker than we could who were still ignorant of the coast and of weather signs.

Tommy lowered his kyak and paddled ahead. He was scouting for open water and was not gone more than thirty minutes. He reported one narrow open channel too dangerous to take a chance on getting through. There was only one thing left to us, and that was to turn the boat and race the ice behind us. We hoisted sail and scudded before the wind. It seemed a mad race, but wind and

tide were in our favor, even though they were also helping on the ice that closed in behind us at the same time. Ahead of us were the swirling currents of the North Atlantic. I took my turn before the mast to keep a sharp lookout for rocks. The speed was grand, and I drew deep breaths as the salt spray flew up around me. The spray froze on the silver sealskin of my keeool-ee-tuk. Ahead I thought I saw something moving in the water. It might be an ice chunk, but we were leaving those behind; then I saw more of the moving objects. We had run upon a school of silver seal. The natives were below; Nick was at the helm; I did not dare to call and so make a noise, and the wind would have been too strong to carry my voice to the men below. I stooped to where I saw a harpoon lying on the deck; I snubbed the end to the boat rail, poised as Tommy had taught me, aimed toward a sliding gray-brown body in the waves below and just a bit ahead of him, threw the harpoon and made a perfect bull's eye. I let out a wild "Whoopee!"

Lukas and Tommy tumbled up from below. In a moment they saw what had happened; Lukas dropped sail and at his gestures Nick swung the wheel hard toward shore. It was a lucky strike; in less time than it takes to tell that seal had drowned and we had him on the well deck of the *Ah Chook*.

It was my first square-flipper seal, and rather a big one. Tommy laughed as he skinned the animal carefully, then pointed to the soles of his native shoes, kamiks, and I got what he meant. It is the skin of the square flipper that is used for making kamik soles, and thus Tommy was congratulating me. I felt I was a great hunter, and maybe my head began to swell, but it was not long before I was to have it deflated. I was to learn that the hardest part of success is not the first triumph, but keeping the success up to the level won.

The natives took over; Nick was frying seal liver in the galley, I opened a can of bully beef and we ate heartily. The boat was still running hard before the wind, we were out distancing the sea-coo, and the question of how to get back to Port Burwell did not really trouble us. I turned in and Nick took the 11:30 watch. The sky was overcast with a light fog; already there was a decided change in the atmosphere, for in no place are there such vagaries of weather as up on that eastern shore line. In an hour there was a dense fog round us. The natives dropped sail again, and with the engine going hard we turned toward the open sea. We dare not risk sailing close to the outcropping of sharp rocks that mark that mainland. Our speed wasn't above one or two knots, and I rolled out as the difference in going penetrated through my sleep. I did not reach the deck a minute too soon. There came a yell from Nick:

"Rocks ahead!"

I caught up the boathook and held it like a pointed bayonet in the direction we were going, but I could see nothing. I pushed ahead, and the top of the hook rammed against a solid wall. The boat slewed over, and I had a couple of badly bruised ribs. I doubled up with pain; Lukas came running, and Tommy at the helm swung the boat out toward more open water; the fog lifted a yard or two, and Nick hauled me headfirst down the companion steps to give those ribs first aid. They were not broken, but how they hurt!

Then the sun rose in a brilliant gold, the visibility became good and I found I could breathe with a little more ease, but I dared neither cough or laugh, for the ribs played old Harry with me. We brought the boat about and hugged the inshore. We determined to try to get back through the Tickle, and thus go along Ungava Bay. We knew that by this time we must be off the Labrador Coast. I've been on many an expedition along the coast since, but the Mountie has no authority on Labrador, which is counted in with Newfoundland and is separate part of the British Commonwealth of Nations and distinct from Canada. Now we had to make Port Burwell. We had started out on a one-day picnic; it was to become a ten-day patrol, playing hide and seek with packing ice, before we got back to the detachment.

Tommy and Chief Lukas smiled their broad grins as my comrade pointed to a headland a mile beyond us, or so it seemed.

"That doesn't look far," said Nick to me, "I've a hunch something interesting might lie round that corner."

"Komik-to-bik," said Lukas, which later we were to learn means Louse Bay in English. Not a very elegant name for a very lovely spot.

"Let's camp," said Nick, and I agreed, as I saw some yards of sandy beach and what seemed a good bottom where we could anchor the *Ah Chook*.

I gave vent to a long sigh as I eased myself down on a tarpaulin spread upon the sand, and as I stretched out groaning I noted there was a fresh water stream of good width running into the bay. Nick brought off the Primus stove and made us hot tea.

"I'm going to tape you up," he said, and opened the first-aid kit he had brought from the boat. I felt as though some lovely heaven had opened for me when I got the support round those stove-in ribs; fortunately we now knew quite certainly they were not broken. I think I slept, for when I opened my eyes Tommy and

Lukas were fraternizing with three or four strange natives. Nick was busy bending over the Primus.

"Hey," he said, "the natives went off in the kyaks up the stream and speared salmon - we're at the mouth of some river. The fish is mighty good." He forked up a chunk of the meat that bubbled in our open kettle, and my mouth watered as I thought of the way that red meat would flake off with the string of good fat down the back of it. Later I was to enjoy the kay-uk, which is the name for the broth saved from boiled fish, and is counted an excellent food.

My ribs felt fine after the heavy meal. Nick and I got spears and helped the natives spear more salmon. We worked until nine that night, spearing until the beach was lined with fish and our hold was full. We went back to the *Ah Chook* and slept, without standing a watch as we supposed we were at safe anchorage. And then, a few minutes after midnight, the pitching and tossing of our craft sent us sprawling from the bunks to haul on our outer clothing and race up on the deck. We had dragged anchor; and for the next two hours we fought with engine, oars and boat hook to keep from being beached by the rushing tide. At last we made a sheltered spot close in by the cove.

"Mug up!" I said, and the four of us went below, "Mug up," in the northeast country, means just "come and eat." But the squally wind was rising, and in an hour the natives made us understand that it was safer to head out to sea again.

Lukas and Tommy shook their heads as we pulled anchor and rounded the headland. A fair wind pushed us northward and we cut the engine, but the rudder jammed. Lukas took an oar to improvise as rudder. Nick tried to unhook the rudder, which was split and bent, and for hours Tommy alternated with Lukas to hold the *Ah Chook* half sail in to sea. The repairs took time, our craft was shipping water; she seemed to be leaking a bit and the storm was rising. We dared not try to make shore, for the rocks stood up through the dashing surf like dragon's teeth. I unhooked the hand pump and started to bail, and every moment the pain of my rib seemed to get worse.

All that day, that night, the next day and the next night the fight against the storm went on. It seemed the end of endurance was reached when I went to refill the engine tank and found the hose that fed the gas tank from our cans had gone overboard somewhere along the way. In the heaving, pitching boat, it meant lost fuel to try to pour the liquid from the small opening of the can to the smaller one of the tank.

Tommy watched me wrestle with the thing, grinned and spoke to Lukas at the helm. He swung the boat in toward a rock. I thought we'd strike for sure, but Tommy fended her off with the boat hook and brought in on the end of it a mass of long seaweed. It was that kelp which is hollow and thick as garden hose. He cut off several feet of it, inserted one end in the can, put his hand over the open hand, drew it away smartly and produced a steady flow of gas from can to tank.

But the wind was rising and we rounded Cape Chidley almost within sight of the strait that led to our own bay. The wind kept rising to a howling gale. We saw no more ice. Tommy climbed the mast and I shall never know what for, but a howling roar of storm overwhelmed me, I bent my head to it as I heard a sickening crack and then a thud. The mast had broken. Tommy was sprawled on the very edge of the deck. He hung a moment on the low rail, and I reached out to grab him. I forgot my hurt ribs, slipped in the fresh mess of fish that littered a corner of the deck, and yelled as the icy water closed over my head. I had gone overboard.

I had not time to go far under; Nick caught my keeool-ee-tuk and hauled me over the rail. I was cold, drenched to the skin, scared pink, but I knew I was safe. Tommy had been tossed in toward the deck on the pitch of the boat that put me overboard; he was winded but no bones were broken. My ribs groaned in rebellion at the treatment they had been given, and I crawled down the steps to get out of the clothing that was freezing even as I made my way below. For the first time in my life I became horribly seasick.

Nick threw some of the salmon over the side to lighten our load; in another hour, dry and warmed with the hot tea I had boiled up for Tommy and myself, I stepped on deck in the second outfit Lavinia had stitched for me. The storm had gone down as suddenly as it had come up; it was a bright night, the moon and stars hung brilliantly above us in the sky which the sun barely leaves in the twenty-four hours of the northern summer day.

"Home," said Nick, and I looked ahead to see Port Burwell; the flag at the Post was ragged but waving, for we had raised it as usual that morning ten days before when we'd set out to have twelve hours of ocean patrol and a picnic.

I think every native of the settlement was at the jetty when we landed.

"Different from our first arrival," I said to Nick, as the men from the shore called out, "Auk shu ni," and we answered them.

"They're actually glad to see us," I continued. I felt we must have made some headway, for we were there to establish a real trust by the native in the white man and the white man's justice.

"Bring out a can of sliced peaches," called Nick to me as I went into the storehouse to look around for something for dinner. We were a bit fed up on salmon and seal.

"Are we celebrating, old-timer?" I said, as I hacked open the can. "I guess we should," I answered my own question; "that was a near squeak from a watery grave, if you ask me, and I seem to have neglected to say thank you for yanking me overside in time," and then I added, "I just wonder how tight a place a man can get into up in this country - there are a lot of things to be tried yet."

"You never know until you try," said Nick, and neither of us realized that the storm we had been in was nothing in comparison to what was to come.