

## **North to Adventure**

**by  
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### **Chapter Thirteen - A Nine-Hundred-Mile Hike**

During the daylight available in the late winter and early spring of our first year I had set about perfecting myself in handling a dog team, and more especially in getting that special flick to the wrist which is necessary to make a seventy-foot whip crack with an effective pistol-shot sound, yet without its touching any of the dogs in the team. My instructor was Tommy, who was later to become my good friend and companion on many trips. Our departure on this first long patrol was hastened, for a native had brought in information to the Post of trouble at the mission station which lay some two hundred miles to the north, and which came under the jurisdiction of the Port Burwell detachment.

Our outfit for this first winter patrol of the Barrens consisted of two dog teams, my own and Tommy's, with upward of fifty dogs in each team. The other natives were Bobby, Ee-kalak and Trout-ekke whom I rechristened Troutguts, not so much for the euphonism but for my convenience in pronunciation. Tommy and Bobby's native names had long baffled Nick and myself, while later Bobby's name had to be prefixed with that of One-eyed to distinguish him from Hungry Bob, who played a major role in one of the adventures of the Northland.

The sleds were almost completely loaded with their one month's supply of food, which Tommy, as my patrol aide, had told us would be required as a load before we left the detachment headquarters. I had tentatively set a Sunday morning for the time of my start, on the basis of the better day the better deed, but early on Tuesday of that week another native turned up at the Post and this time brought a letter written by the young missionary in charge at the distant station. There was little detail, but reading between the lines caused Nick and myself to decide the young man was definitely uneasy about the native attitude in his section. These natives, of course, were of another tribe, and so far neither Nick nor I had encountered any but our own Port Burwell group, except for a few scattered individuals. The fellow who brought the note was not overly bright in understanding, and when I questioned him at length I could only find out that a woman had given him the letter and told him to find a white policeman. The letter itself was addressed to no one in particular and merely stated, "Am in a bit of a tight place; if you can get help here, do."

This understatement of conditions is not unusual among the missionaries of the North. They are brave men, morally and physically.

"Guess I'd better get going right away." I consulted with Nick and he agreed. Therefore it was by brilliant starlight on a Wednesday morning that Tommy and I shouted "Wheee-at" to the dogs and we set off at a good speed into, for me, unknown country and experiences. Nick had wrung my hand until the blood tingled, then turned back into the detachment home as I went forward into something entirely new.

The greatest adventures of the Northland do not lie always in the high lights of narrow escapes from danger. Far greater is the endurance of the long hours, days, weeks and months when the routine duty of the Police Post keeps one close to detachment headquarters. Nick would be even more alone than I, for he had not yet mastered the language with any degree of fluency, and this first winter he was without reading matter. I preferred my own duty, which called for excitement and perhaps danger, but certainly everything new. There would be no leisure moments, for the endurance of the travel hours would leave no energy for anything but complete relaxation and sleep the moment the natives got a snow house built as shelter and one got into a sleeping bag for the rest period.

Nick would be listening to those storms with their tremendous wind of greater velocity than anywhere else on earth. He would watch the persistent snow fall; he would see it close in and in. He'd get again and again that idea of confinement, almost imprisonment, which I had experienced myself, and then he'd feel that fascination of watching those driving white flakes until they became almost hypnotic. It is a curious sensation, for one feels that there is a veil, a barrier being raised between oneself and the earth.

I had the better part in this first patrol. Tommy and I with the other natives, were to cover great distances, which are so illusive in the North. And I had to watch and learn to pry as far as I could into the natural secrets of the terrain and to make notes for my reports.

The first day out, Tommy insisted upon making camp early. I knew very well this was on my account. Our total milage covered on this particular patrol came to eighteen hundred miles; nine hundred miles out and nine hundred miles back, and our average speed was ten miles a day. Yet this travel by foot and dog team can reach a speed of seventy miles per day, and in forced travel I have accomplished this, when the lives of white men were at stake and we thought we could save them. To the Inuit forty, fifty and sixty miles a day is not out of the ordinary in accomplishment. The native is a deliberate person and his slow

movement around the camp or settlement can irritate the white man beyond all reason. The walking step of the native is at an unbelievable leisurely tempo, and yet he is the swiftest runner known when he follows his dogs across the desert of ocean ice, swings around crunching, crackling blocks of ice that tower like skyscrapers, or skirts the treacherous tundra and muskeg that loom dark amidst the rock at intervals.

We had barely unharnessed the dogs that first evening, and the men were still constructing our igloo, when a black dot on the white of the snow could be seen approaching us. This turned out to be Nashula who, traveling at double speed, had overtaken us. He had a message from Nick. It appeared that Lukas had reported, just after we had left, the non-return of one named Hak-atok, his wife and two children, who had set out on a hunt several weeks before and were now overdue back at the settlement. The natives felt anxiety, since the period of the thirteen-day blizzard had intervened. I was to add looking for these travelers as one of my major duties.

For the first days of this patrol we held to shore ice and made good time. But our arrival at the mission station was none too soon. I found the young padre practically in a state of siege, protecting in his station house eight women of varying ages, and all most evidently terrified of something. Outside of the station there was a patrol of the weirdest appearance I had ever seen. There were a score of men and women arrayed in travesties of uniform, bits of cloth, rags, tag ends of shawls covering their keeool-ee-tuks, and each carried a stick from which flared a tattered banner of torn material. As we came over the summit of high ice which sheltered the mission station we heard a monotonous and awesome chanting. As we got nearer I thought I could almost recognize a tune to this sound. It tantalized me, but I could not place the tune until later. As a matter of fact, this troop, armed to the teeth with their rifle, drawn hunting knives, and one or two with harpoons, were attempting to sing "Onward Christian Soldiers."

I sent Tommy forward to fetch to me the chief of this outfit. It took some time, but most evidently Tommy convinced the chief that I had authority. Meanwhile I made a point of producing a flag and planting it in a mound of snow close by our sleds. The Chief understood that symbol of authority and stepped forward. It really did not take me long to get an explanation. And no one could very well be blamed for the situation, although I had to deal out the punishment of banishment to several of the leaders. It seemed that the young missionary, zealous and totally unaware of the dangerous ground on which he was treading, had seemed to make extraordinary progress in his work with the natives. They attended services and seemed to understand his efforts at teaching them. He ventured away from the very simple stories of the New Testament, and read to these children of Nature who rate hunger first and sex second of the natural laws of life, and each as

simply satisfied, the story of the stoning of the barren women. The poor young missionary had not the slightest idea of native laws and practices. He was not long from his seminary, and this was his first charge up north. He did not know, or had forgotten, that the native councils and traditions designate certain women to be Mothers of the Race, and certain others are not to become mothers, although they are not barred from sex experiences.

The clan members listened to this story and took their teacher literally. The story came from the white man's Book, and he had told them that everything in it was a rule of life and absolutely true. All right. Presently these natives banded themselves into a sadistic group, lined up the eight women among them without children, and prepared to stone the creatures to death. The young missionary intervened and succeeded in stopping the tragedy, but only by taking the women into the mission station and barricading them and himself inside. Then another story had come to the top of the confused boiling of half-knowledge in the Eskimo mind, and fired with an uncouth Christian zeal, they had arrayed themselves as I had found them. They were portraying "The Church's Banners Flying," these people who had never heard of soldiering and to whom fighting and war were utterly alien. They paraded up and down, up and down, and thundered the phonetic sounds they had decided upon to express "vengeance." The young missionary was far out of his depth, and it was well one of the women had managed to slip the note out to a man of her family who was less infected by this peculiar virus of fanaticism.

I held court, heard evidence and handed down my findings. I stayed with the young missionary until we had the barren women all returned to their respective igloos and families, and then I saw the offending leaders off on their exiles. I had never known a native under punishment to try to sneak back to his settlement before his "sleeps" in exile were completed.

Hak-atok and his family were yet to be found, so I took a reluctant leave of my new-found friend, the missionary, and Tommy and I with the teams and other natives pushed on toward Central Ungava, a stretch of country to which later I returned time after time. These rocky Barrens had a magnetic fascination for me. I was never lonely in them, although frequently I went some distance from my native companions in a solitary few hours of exploration, or took only Tommy with me.

Alone I would stand on the plateau and there I would see stretching before me for unnumbered miles, gray swathes of granitelike rock. At times these rocks rose to sheer mountain height, at others they rolled like the billows of an ocean stricken into immobility. Often I felt as though I were a straggler from earth upon

the sun-deserted moon. There, with no human thing in sight and often not a living thing, one realizes the quiescence of Creative Force. One wonders whether aeons since, a chip of mineralized rock stirred in the womb of Nature and became impregnated with the seed soul of life. One wonders if this mineral may in billions of years break from the mother lode and quiver into a separate existence. One wonders if, within this granite which teams now with mineral wealth, the actual germ of man, sentient and palpitating, is being urged outward from what some scientists call the Mother-Father God.

I do not know. I know I have stood at the edge of these vast distances and believed the scientist who dogmatically states: "This is pre-Cambrian, the oldest known rock formation; it lies within the Laurentian shield." and the youngest child in the grade geography class knows that the Laurentians are the oldest range of mountains on the American continent; the same child knows that in comparison the Rocky Mountains are of comparatively recent date, the sea but withdrawn after a high tide, as one might say, in point of the unrecorded years and contrasting strata. I believe very sincerely there is something still to be found "back of" these Barren Lands. Others believe this too, or the Mounted Police would not have been sent to pave the way for the scientist and the expert in other lines.

When the first awe and wonder of the Barren Lands passes, curiosity lays hold upon the white man's mind, or it did upon mine. First, though, I had to establish myself as master of my surroundings before I had conquered that feeling of awe and littleness which was beginning in a small way to undermine my self-confidence, for self-confidence is the first line of defense in continuing to live in a country so very hostile. I got this feeling of command and, if I may say it, captaincy of my soul, by the simple expedient of using a stick of dynamite against a boulder which had a fascination for me. I saw this boulder from a distance, struck camp and trekked across to see what it was, and then I became so engrossed in the thing that I stayed several days, returning again and again just to push that rock with my finger. Outlined against the horizon, the boulder had not appeared so large from a distance as it was when I got up to it. It was a rounded rock, smoothed on the surface by the tons of gritty particles of frozen snow which must have silted across its surface for aeons of time. No snow stayed upon it, nor piled up around it where it was poised upon a finger's breadth of nether granite. With a gentle pressure of my hand I could make this huge ball sway from side to side, yet it never faltered in balance as it teetered on the edge of a deep canyon.

I suppose the civilized man's instinct to destroy that which he does not understand attacked me. Finally the boulder became an irritation because I could not leave the thing alone. I got one thin stick of dynamite from my sled load of many things, and set it at the point where the boulder balanced on the rock. I

lighted a long fuse, and ran to a safe vantage point. The boulder leaped skyward and plunged over the cliff's edge with a detonation that was ripping to the eardrums. There came a profound silence within a second of time. I heard no echo, and I went upon my way. I had accomplished nothing, but I can remember how high I stepped. Man could not balance a hundred-ton boulder on a thread of rock, but with his puny stick of concealed and concentrated power, he could smash the boulder and five hundred tons of rock besides. I may not be able to create, nor solve the secret of Nature, but I, two-legged and two-handed creature of flesh and blood, of muscle and brain, because of that brain can change the actual face of Nature. It was all very interesting, even to the studying of myself..