

Chapter Nineteen - Airplane Patrol - Crash!

There had never been a record, as far as Nick and I knew, of a wolf attacking a man, but around the detachment a queer thing had been happening. Each night for a week there had been fresh wolf tracks, and one of the tracks showed that the animal had a missing toe on the right forepaw. While Terry and I had been away a native called Jonah, who rarely went far from the settlement because he had a twisted foot received in a sled accident when he was young, was found dead. He had been traveling without dogs over the small divide to the valley floor. Round where his mutilated body lay when found, were tracks of a wolf, and the tracks showed that one toe of the right forepaw was missing. We had to find Harold, for that wolf had not been caught. Harold was a nice chap; he has asked if I would take him trapping and help him to get some fox skins to take home to his sweetheart, and I had promised.

"He can't be far away," we concluded, "especially as he surely has sense enough to keep in one place and not run in circles."

Tommy and I found Harold. He was little more than an hour's walk from the Base, over on the other side of the high rocks which made a sort of foothills to the main plateau.

"Look, Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak," said Tommy.

I looked, and felt sure that Harold had gone stark, staring mad. He was running up and down just behind a fair-sized boulder, too high for anyone to see over to the other side. First he darted to one side, peeked around the corner, then crouched down, turned and did the same thing at the other side. He stumbled as he ran, and he seemed almost exhausted.

Tommy and I loped over the rocks and shouted, but the running man was much too engrossed to notice us.

"Let's make a wide circle," I panted to Tommy. "There must be something screwy at the back of that boulder." There was. I was glad I had made the circuit as wide as I had. I yelled to Tommy to stand where he was, and I fired my rifle into the air. Harold was playing hide and seek with a polar bear. It seemed to be as scared of him as he of it. I did not dare fire point blank at it; if my bullet missed and ricocheted off the rock it might wound the man we were trying to save. But at the rifle fire the bear galloped off at tremendous speed, fortunately for us in the other direction.

"That --- bear!" gasped Harold, panting for breath. "It's been playing peek-bo with me for an hour. I don't know where it came from. I started to round the boulder and there it was. I was afraid to turn my back on it, for I knew it could run faster than I."

"Were you lost?" I asked.

"Lost!" Harold looked at me blankly. "Lost! Of course I wasn't lost; I just wanted to get off by myself; I know where the Air Base lies, but, by jiminy, that bear though he had a date with me."

Harold had the jitters again when we went after the fox. We spaced out six traps; in two of them white foxes were caught, both frozen to death; in the third there was nothing. I could see the fourth trap some distance ahead with a heap of black held by it.

"There's your silver fox," I called to Harold, and suggested he go ahead and look for himself this time. In five minutes he was back, white as a sheet and stammering.

"Th-th-the fox isn't a fox!"

It was not a fox, at that, but another of those dreaded animals, a Canadian lynx. This one was fighting hard to get free, with one hind paw held in the vise. Its snarls and catcalls were enough to chill the blood, now it had been aroused by the scent of humans near it; the front paws were tremendous, with their flexing claws that can be as dangerous as those of a tiger. I shot the creature fast, for they are ferocious. The natives could hardly believe what they saw as we brought the animal in, for it is so seldom that lynx stray beyond the wooded tracts below the timber line.

Back at the Base there was another plane ready for testing, and of course I had to go up in it. Little Johnny had been round the Base all that morning, and I needed him to send a message down to the detachment. I could not find the youngster, although I was sure I had seen him dodge out of the radio room not five minutes before. But now there was no Little Johnny, and I had to let the message go for the time being; the plane was tuned up, the pilot was already in his seat and they were waiting for me. Many of the Mounted Police are able to fly themselves now, just as they have a marine section for water travel, but our use in the experimental survey round the Baffin Land area was because of our previous land patrols.

We were casting off for a test flight over Hudson Strait, and to gain a height of nine thousand feet. This time the pilot swung inland; if we had crashed it would have been my job to direct the party home if we lived through the crash. I knew very well the pilots of the planes could not realize what the surface land was really like. From all those feet above, it was like a vast white tablecloth, and the patches of windswept rock reminded me of gravy splotches. We swung away from land again, and coming low I could make out Savage Island where we had been shipwrecked; then we were over Resolution, and in what seemed another minute we were soaring like the ghost of one of the extinct auks over Akpatok Island, when I heard an unusual sound, different from any other in an airplane. It was between a snuffle and a sneeze. I turned in my seat. Creeping out from behind the fuselage, smudged with grease, his furry keeool-ee-tuk making him seem like an out-size in teddy bears, came Little Johnny. He stood up, then slowly grinned at me.

"Auk shu ni, Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak," he said; then, rubbing himself up and down behind, he added, "Please do not make it that one cannot sit down!" Johnny remembered the feel of a Mounted Policeman's hairbrush. I did not have the hairbrush with me, and the young stowaway looked so funny I could not help laughing.

"Here's the message I wanted you to take to Policeman Nick," I said. Johnny looked at me, and then out of the window.

"It's a long way down," he concluded. It was a long way down. In five minutes Johnny had forgotten his sin of becoming a stowaway and was enjoying himself no end, but thereafter the planes, when about to rise for a flight, were watched closely. We gave rides to the natives, but it was too great a risk to let them get into the airplanes when we might not be looking.

There has not been the same development of air service on the east coast as there has been over other parts of Canada, but everything must come slowly in this part of the world. Only Nature can work overtime in the North, forming new earth by erosion, with the rocks splitting, the glaciers deepening the ravines, the great rivers carrying silt, and the little lemmings burrowing steadily in the tundra. The North demands sustained sacrifice, and the young man who want to go there must first prepare himself by education so that he has something of value to offer for the good of humanity. There is no set way for planning a future in the North, for jobs don't grow, and the pioneer must support himself.

I thought of those things and how best to explain conditions to those who would take our places at the detachment, for now the Air Survey by the government

men was drawing to a close. They had worked hard and taken tremendous risks, and their reports were invaluable. It was close, too, to the end of my third year in the Northland. I was sad and glad at the same time. I was really fond of the Eskimos who had worked with me so faithfully, and when I left I could not expect to see them ever again. I did not plan to remain in the Mounted Police; I had vague ideas about running a ranch I owned in Saskatchewan, and I was planning to write all I had seen and heard of the people I believe the most courageous in the world, the Inuits. Orders were up on the headquarters notice board of a roundup of the airplanes. There was one plane from Burwell, two from Wakeham and two from Nottingham. The plan was to meet at Erik Cove off Cape Wolstenholme, just where the Hudson Bay flows out into the Strait. It is an historical place, supposed to be where the first mate in charge of the mutinous sailors of Henry Hudson landed to refill their water kegs.

The *SS Larch*, a coaling ship, had come in with the breakup of the ice, and was standing by; also there was the *CGS Montcalm*, an ice breaker carrying gasoline in drums, which were for caching down the east coast of Hudson Bay. Each plane carried five hours of gas. Among the planes was a single-motor Wright Whirlwind, and a six-passenger cabin Fokker monoplane. There were a first class pilot and mechanic in each plane, and the five planes under command of a most able Squadron Leader of the Royal Canadian Air Force. The ceiling elevation was approximately ten thousand feet.

Man had the stage all set; but old Mother Nature of the Northland was not so easy to control. The planes were taking off from the Cove one by one, and circling in the air until two of the ships coming up behind the others should join in the formation. We watched the first plane zoom up with no difficulty; the second following in a graceful swoop. The third pilot, sensing something wrong with his plane, swung round, then up, but the fourth plane coming up had to vary the course to avoid a collision with the third. It got into a sudden flurry of rough water, got caught in a down draft or cross current - no one will ever know just what happened; maybe the load was not just accurately judged - instead of rising, the airplane bumped back on the water. We could only clutch the ship's rail and wait breathlessly.

The plane's under carriage broke; a pontoon jammed up and was torn to ribbons by the revolving propeller. I saw the pilot begin to climb out, and it seemed he would be too late and must get sucked down in the tangle of wings and machinery of the rapidly sinking flying-ship. It was impossible for us on the ship to get a small boat launched and to the plane in time. I saw the mechanic stop at the edge of the cockpit, with the air raft half inflated, and then the fifth plane came into sight. The young, able pilot saw the situation. He taxied his machine within a few feet of the marooned pair, struggling now to get out on top of their

plane. The pilot threw them a towline, circled, still taxi-ing. The pilot and mechanic took the rope, and secured it to their sinking ship in less time than it takes to tell the story. There was a jerk, the rope became taut across the water, the wreck heaved, moved; slowly but surely the airplane was towed inshore and safely beached. The rescued pair jumped to dry land, wet but safe.

Now the three planes still circling above had seen something was wrong. They landed and taxied in to shallow water. A harsh, high wind was rising, and cold rain falling. We had come through the year of pioneering adventure with many narrow escapes, but with no loss of life, and the Squadron Leader determined not to try our good fortune too far. He ordered the planes dismantled, and swung aboard the *SS Larch* .

The ice-breaker *Montcalm* was to make another stop at Port Burwell before leaving for Montreal. I had to pick up my dunnage, and say "Tah-bow-ah-tay" to all my Inuit friends. They heaped gifts upon me. There was a model kyak that Little Johnny had fashioned with his own hands; a harpoon that Tommy had made; a long, beautifully woven walrus-hide dog whip that Lukas had helped to braid, using the one strong hand left to him since he had saved our lives. There were a pair of fur mitts that Little Round Moon Face had struggled hard to sew, the first sewing she had ever done. I picked the little girl up and gave her what she loved, a ride on my shoulder, and I laughed a little as I thought of the way she had hugged that big salmon. Away down near the water's edge Old Lavinia, who had tailored my suits, was standing. In her hands she held a heap of furs which she pushed at me, telling me to take them. They were the skins of two kingmik puppies.

"Carry them wherever you go, Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak - nothing will ever harm you if you do."

So I took the puppy skins, and I carry them with me everywhere I go, but I like to think it is the same Good Spirit in which my friends the Inuit believe Who keeps me safe. It was old Chief Nashula, my Eskimo foster-father, who used to say:

"Think good thoughts out, and you will get good thoughts in."