

I Lived With The Eskimos

by
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Chapter Fifteen - Astride An Iceberg

We were still waiting for our supply ship, and entirely ignorant that we were soon to have a great many people dumped in our small kingdom, when Nick surprised me one day.

"Let's have a bit of fun," said he. It was late June; the ice had been going out steadily, with huge blocks plumping off the glaciers, making a roar like thunder, tumbling, shivering and grinding against the rock cliffs until a continuous noise like dozens of trains rushing through tunnels echoed round the cove.

"Fun?" I said, and maybe I looked a bit blank, for I had been enjoying every minute of my days, no matter what hardships may have come up.

"Oh, just something new and different," said Nick. "I'll tell you the truth; since I was the height of two daisies I've always wanted to ride around on an iceberg."

I looked at Nick with astonishment. The same idea had been in my head, and I hadn't said anything about it; I thought he'd get the idea I was crazy.

After our first visit to an iceberg, those huge bodies of solid water had an uncanny fascination for me. We had to wait, of course, until the bay was open enough to navigate the *Ah Chook*. We towed a dory with us, and always had along a couple of natives to man our whale boat. They were to stand by, too, in case of emergencies, as Nick and I took turns in climbing the bergs, or sometimes went out each by himself with the natives only along. With a little maneuvering of the dory it was not so difficult, with the help of an ice hook, to scramble our way onto the icy terrace from the boat rocking below. Those terraces shone like polished crystal in the sunlight, the whole berg at times the size of a city block, with a length of nine hundred to fifteen hundred feet as a rule; the broken surface rose in towering peaks upwards of two hundred or two hundred and fifty feet above us, and yet we knew that below the ocean's surface was at least another seven-eighths of the entire mass, wallowing out of sight. My eyes, even with dark goggles to protect them from the glare, were dazzled by my first sight of this great floating crag that looked like solidified rainbow, for colors showed in streaks amidst the crystal. Creeping carefully to keep a foothold,

thrusting a hook onto the wall of ice every now and then to make sure of negotiating a narrowing bend without accident, or climbing as though one were a mountaineer straddling a crevasse in an alpine peak, I came one day on a great fresh water lake, hidden on an iceberg behind the peaks that fringed its outer edge. It was delicious water, crystal-like and pure as though it came from a secret spring. I was eager to know the depth of this lake. I saw a broader gap in the peaks that seemed to fence the fresh water, but on the further side from where I had landed. I saw no way to get around in safety, so I returned to the small boat and back to the *Ah Chook*, where I told Nick if we sailed round to the other side it would make the difficult climb unnecessary.

Nick wanted to take the depth sounding himself; maybe I was a bit disappointed at first, but I said nothing, and later I was mighty glad of my unselfishness!

I rowed Nick in the dory and he made a good landing on the iceberg, keeping his footing easily and shouting to me as I cruised up and down at the side of the berg, always just a little ahead of him as he walked about.

"I'll try here," he yelled, and I back-watered, feathering my oars a bit so that the dory would not drift too far from where my comrade would have to reembark. I leaned over the dory side and looked down into the water that was shadowed by the iceberg peaks. I wondered idly in which direction those peaks might splash should a piece break off just then, as they sometimes do. Then I heard one of the natives from the *Ah Chook* shouting.

"Nanook - Nanook!" I looked around wildly, but there was no ice pan near my boat that would hold up a polar bear's weight. And then the echo of a rifle shot made a running chatter through those ice pinnacles like machine-gun fire. I turned the dory in its own length and rowed hard in to the iceberg. Hungry Bob, aboard the *Ah Chook* on look-out, had sighted what turned out to be a nine-hundred-pound bear, casually strolling along the iceberg rim where Nick was kneeling. Bob clutched the rifle, aimed, fired and shouted all in one breath, it seemed. Fortunately his cry had not reached Nick, who, with head bent over, was leaning as far over the lake's edge as he dared. Bob's bullet got the bear through what brain a polar bear may have. I watched Nick straighten up slowly to his knees, then to his feet. He hitched his fur pants as though he'd been afraid to spoil a tailor's crease in them: he sauntered over to that bear, nodded solemnly, cupped his hands and shouted across the water gap to Hungry Bob:

"A hit!"

And we never did find out the depth of that iceberg lake, nor of any others. Perhaps they are fathomless; all the same the bergs continued to fascinate us as they split and careened away on the currents and ocean tides. "Calving" is the technical term for icebergs splitting from the mother glacier. I visioned them sailing majestically out by the mouth of Hudson Strait, into the Atlantic, rolling on its turbulent swell, each one marked and tabulated eventually on the records of the Ice Patrol, that great international police force of the shipping lanes of trade in the North Atlantic. It is paid for by many nations, but the patrol ships are manned and controlled by men of the United States Navy who, day and night, through storm or calm, send warnings of ice to ocean liners, freighters, oil tankers, fishing fleets or ocean tramps, to avoid the meance to their safety. This Ice Patrol was established after the ill-fated *SS Titanic* went down in iceberg collision in 1912, with so many hundreds of the passengers drowned.

It must have been quite a month after this venture of ours that an iceberg stranded on our beach. There had been a heavy storm, with wind, snow, squall, and howling gale. It held us to the detachment for three days, and then as the weather cleared we found this mountain of ice in what we called our front yard. We explored it thoroughly, until we began to realize it might be a danger. The huge upper structure might crack and fall, and the great bulk of it was making the neighbourhood very cold. The iceberg blocked easy access to our jetty. Nick and I decided we would blow up that ice. We excavated under the berg, filling the hole with dynamite sticks which the government had supplied us in plenty. We saw that every man, woman and child and every dog of the natives was safely hidden a mile beyond the inland rocks. We set a good long fuse, lighted it, and ran as if we were trying to make a home run, to shelter ourselves from the impending explosion. There came a half-hearted rumble, then a blast that shook every foot of the detachment house in the back room of which we were crouching. Peveril yelped as though a bee had stung him. We waited a space for absolute safety, then went to our front room to peer through the windows at the place where the berg had been. The iceberg was still there; large as ever, unmoved and as I thought unmovable. When we reached it there lay a bushel of ice splinters scattered on the shore. Nick and I stared at each other.

"I guess our iceberg means to stay," said Nick. "There were fifty sticks of dynamite in that little bundle."

"Seventy-five you mean; I added another quarter-hundred when you were not looking."

Next day the iceberg showed a slight crack on the shore side, and seemed to be floating a bit off shore, stately and beautiful. I could not resist going out to it, and I

made the trip dry-shod at low tide, hauled myself hand over hand with the ice hooks I had with me; then I gave myself over to the beauty of it and to its exploration. Why I did not think of a change of tide I do not know. I looked back toward the shore from which I had leaped so gaily; I looked again, then consulted my watch and felt thunderstruck. I had been over four hours on that fool iceberg. No one knew where I was, as far as I knew; my comrade was off inland on a short patrol, I had seen no native along the shore, and no kyak had passed the berg that I had seen. Although Eema and Essie, the native house girls, had been cleaning up things in the kitchen when I left, I had not spoken to them. Peveril I had left lazily asleep on our doorstep. He was used to my going out without taking him, and never expected to accompany me without direct invitation. Peveril had opened one eye as I went by, and flopped an indolent tail,

Now I stared through the fading light as the channel widened at alarming speed between me and the shore. I was more than five hundred yards from land; the sudden lurching of my queer ship told me something I had not dared to think about before. The tide had swept the iceberg into that current that swirled round the headland in an angry race. Once definitely round the bend of shore, only a quick change of wind would drive the ice mountain in toward land again. There was little chance of a storm hard enough to change the iceberg's course; and if there should be a storm I wondered how I could keep my footing, unsheltered as I would be from the wind. I shouted, and heard my own voice come back in a dozen echoing repetitions from amongst the ice turrets, for this berg did not have the extremely pointed peaks and pinnacles of others I had been on before; rather, it was like a battlemented and floating fortress. I had been over it from end to end and side to side. There was no bear on it, and no seal; not even a seagull lighted in the hours I had drifted on unthinkingly.

Another hour passed. I was tired of standing; I sat down, but ice makes a chilly throne even if one is king of all he surveys. Again, as when shipwrecked, I was in a tight place all right, but it could be worse. I could slide into those freezing waters if my ice hook slipped; I could fall into the smaller but evidently deep pool in the middle of my berg. I stood up again and hello'd once more, just because I hated to sit down and do nothing. I might have fired my revolver, for I had it on the lanyard, but caution prompted me not to waste ammunition. I might want to shoot a seal stranded on ice, or perhaps I could attract attention from a passing omiak, or even a trading ship at that time of year. There was not a sea captain on the seven seas who would not put about to investigate if he heard the report of a service revolver coming from a lonely iceberg.

Somehow I knew my luck would hold; I heard a spashing over the sough of the wind and the eternal creaking whine of the ice; there came a pinpoint of artificial light in the gloom below me and at water level.

"Auk shu ni," I called, and crawled carefully to the iceberg's edge.

"Auk shu ni," said a voice, a voice I did not recognize until I had crept down slowly, letting myself down by inches to slide as lightly as I could into the dory that bobbed below, with a native holding a white man's oil lantern low enough to guide my groping feet.

The man was Markey, he who had come from the Ungava mainland accompanied by his son; the man who had brought a black fox skin with one white paw to give to Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak, because he had had a dream which told him what he must do.

"Auk shu ni," I said again, and I took my place on the cross seat to take up the second pair of oars Markey had had the foresight to bring. We rowed hard against the tide, got ourselves away from that treacherous current, and spoke no word until we gained the jetty of our inlet. I helped to tie up the dory, then turned and clasped old Markey by the hand. That was another narrow squeak from death, and this man had saved me, even at the risk of his own life. It was hardly possible that one man alone at the oars could have made shore against that tide and current. Markey had taken a tremendous chance.

I took the native up to the detachment house, for he was hungry and pallid with cold, and so was I. While I prepared hot tea and got out dried meat, opened cans of bully beef, fried bacon and fresh wild duck eggs I had found the day before, Markey repeated the story of his dream.

"Now Markey goes back to his home," the native said, waving his hand in the direction of the Ungava mainland, and I realized that for months that man had stayed in the Port Burwell settlement to fulfill the will of the Good Spirit, and to work out the end of a dream instruction about myself in which he firmly believed. Maybe I believe it now too.

But before Markey and his small son, who had shot the dwarf bear, left for their home district, the father and I were to have one last adventure together, but this time with another native along.