

I Lived With The Eskimos

**by
Sydney R Montague**

Chapter Sixteen - Cave Cove

One of the most interesting pieces of information I obtained when up north was that the snow civilization in which the present Inuit live may be counted as comparatively recent. Not that poor old Lukas, who told me about it, knew anything of the sciences or archaeology, but he did know that at one time his people had been called Tunit, while he took me to see several caves where he told me these forefathers of the race had made their homes when they came to the Great Lone Land.

It was when out fixing gill nets one day that I came upon a sea cave, deep in an overhanging cliff. This aroused my curiosity although I knew no one could ever have made a home in it. I persuaded Markey and Tommy to come with me on an expedition to the cave. I took the police motor boat, and carried a kyak in tow. The cave was not far around the further headland and at low tide in summer when all the collar ice had gone, the low, flat rocks that jutted on each side of the entrance were plainly visible, although I never saw them entirely dry of water. It was into this cave I had determined to penetrate. I had been in caves before, some that were far in the Laurentian mountains of Quebec, near the farm where I often spent vacations when a small boy. Carrying a lantern, I had seen numbers of bats hanging head downward in the darkness of these queer holes in the ground; and, again, using a lantern, I had seen caves with fresh water springs dripping constantly and wearing away the stone through, perhaps, ten million years. I had even been into dark caves where queer, pale-colored ferns grew underground, but this was to be my first experience of an ocean cave.

I drew a long breath, signaled my two men to close off the motor as I hauled up the kyak, adjusted the paddles and stepped in. I pulled the ends of my keeool-ee-tuk securely over the kyaks opening, which, once the kyak-man is seated keeps this type of canoe from shipping water. I waved my hand to the men in the motor boat and was off.

I nosed the kyak between the flat rocks. Light penetrated a considerable distance into the cave, and the channel widened as I went in further. Even at low tide the greenblack water at the entrance seemed terrifyingly deep and mysterious. I saw a few lengths of seaweed waving lazily below the surface and looking like water moccassins. I was tempted to bare my hand of the fur mitt I wore and pull the

seaweed up, but good sense forbade. The water would have chilled my fingers, and I had no means of knowing what strange sea animals might lurk in these gloomy depths. I was just plain scared to try any tricks. I was advancing slowly, cautiously dipping the paddles. I dared not wield them quickly or strongly, for I could easily strike a protruding rock and lose my only means of propulsion if the paddle snapped. The channel and cave were darker now; I looked back over my shoulder and could see a pinpoint of light behind me. That was the wide entrance mouth, reduced in size as though I were looking through the wrong end of a telescope. I shipped my paddle and took out the box of long camp matches I had brought. I had an end of candle too, and fumbled for it in my keeool-ee-tuk, but somehow dropped the thing overboard. I felt foolish, and wondered why I had not thought to bring a lantern. By the light of the matches I looked from side to side; the rocks above hung low and pointed, dripping moisture. The channel narrowed and I pushed against the rock walls on either side to get the kyak through. The rock seemed to slip from beneath my mittened hands with such suddenness that I rocked to keep my balance. I had emerged into a wide and seemingly deep lake; there was a twisting turn ahead which it seemed would bar my further progress. I looked back and the pinpoint of light was gone. I got a thrill, a peculiar sensation of awful aloneness; it was not that it was so deadly silent, but I felt buried, away from all humanity. A queer feeling.

The flare from another match showed me that there was actually a wide turn of the lake to the right which I had not seen before. I turned the nose of the kyak away from the narrow lane and paddled again. I had rounded the bend, and the paddle ends grated against the rocks. I kept going; there was some fascination drawing me to find out what might lie at that most distant point, although I could not see an inch ahead of me when the last glimmer of the long match stick almost singed the fur off my mitten as I held it.

I lost count of time; it seemed I had always been underground, and when I jerked to reality it was because a sound, a terrible groan, reached my ears. It seemed like the last cry of a horribly wounded human being. I was terrified; my heart jumped into my throat and I swallowed hard; I could feel the hair on the back of my neck crawl. The groan came again, longer, more horrible, drawn out and becoming a low moaning sound. I fumbled with the matches, lighted one, and it went out as though some monster breath had blown on it; the groan came at the same instant. I started as though shot and dropped the matchbox. I grabbed futilely to catch it; my hands were clumsy in the mittens, and the small tin rolled with a sickening soft plop along the slant of my keeool-ee-tuk made to the kyak side. That groan - it was gruesome! I tore off my mittens and pushed at the rock with my bare hands. I forgot the cold, for the kyak did not move, not a foot, not an inch. Somehow I had wedged myself into a too narrow space; I put out my left hand determined that with extra effort I might release the streamlined craft. My

hand squashed down on a clammy lump of something soft. I think it felt like matted wet fur; I can never tell what it was for at that moment there came again the unholy, hair-raising groan. Desperation seized me; I pushed with all my strength, leaning backward, and felt my kyak slide back, an inch, a foot, another foot - I was free of the rocks. The channel was too constricting for me to turn. Backing slowly into the darkness, stopping for seconds to draw my breath and steady myself for another effort, at last I reached the open, larger pool; it seemed as big as a small lake. I prayed I would not miss the narrow channel opening that led to the outer air. Suppose I missed and got into another one that wound in and out under the cliff! I bumped a rock and found the channel. It was the right one. I looked over my shoulder and saw with thankfulness that pinpoint of light that marked the entrance from the ocean; I could no longer hear the moaning groan and whine. I backed out to the open sea, and kept my face turned from Markey and Tommy until I could get myself composed. I knew I must look jittery; I felt it.

It seemed as though I had been gone for hours; I had visioned the natives staring vainly up that waterway for the first sight of me on return. I had wild images of the tide on turn, creeping higher and higher to cover those flat entrance rocks, to fill the cave mouth with surging water. I shuddered as I relived those momentous moments of the pitous, awful half-human groan, and I looked at my hand to see what trace was left of the soft, squashy mass I'd clutched, My hand was absolutely clean!

I turned the kyak toward our small boat, where it lay at anchor; Tommy lay motionless on his back, his legs and feet high against the side of the cabin. There was no sign of Markey until I had rounded the bow of our boat and found him lazily dropping a line overboard to bring up sculpin, even as I swung the kyak toward him. Neither man had seen me come out from the cave. Neither seemed to have a care in the world. I felt mad clear though - was this all they cared about the white man who had disappeared into the cave hours before? I was indignant, and then I looked at my watch - how long had I been in that place anyway? It seemed to me I had been in that darkness a lifetime; I had been in it thirty-five minutes according to my trusty timepiece, so no wonder the natives were not uneasy. I felt more foolish than before.

"Auk shu ni!" I said, and startled Markey so that he lost a sculpin into the sea as he took it off the hook.

But I told Nick of that awful cave, the ghastly repeated groan, and the slimy, mushy mass I had touched.

"Just how far is the cave?" asked Nick, and I gave him the position in detail. Ten days later he startled me as we sat at supper in the detachment house.

"I found your cave," he said.

"You what?" I was taken by surprise; I had not thought Nick interested; in fact, I thought he was a bit contemptuous of an adventure that led nowhere and ended in nothing.

"I found out what that groaning is."

"But you weren't out by boat today.

"I know, I calculated the position as you told me, and walked along the headland. I'm sure I walked over your cave too, and about five hundred yards from the cliff's edge there's a narrow cleft in the surface of the rock; its the beginning of a ravine I guess. That cleft makes your groan; the wind just catches in it and by some queer acoustical quirk, the whisper of wind above becomes the terrifying groan in the hollow cave below".

"But what about that soft, hairy mass?" I asked triumphantly, although a bit downcast that my awful groan was nothing more than wind.

"That I don't know," said Nick, "and I'll bet you a million dollars I'll never have enough curiosity to try to find out...you can go into caves, but I'll stay topside the earth as long as I can."

I never went back to the cave; it may be silly, but I was no end scared of it. Yet I did go to Akpatok several times, and always against the will of the natives, who said the island was the home of an Evil Spirit. It might have been for all I know, but at least the whole place was in the open air, and there was daylight when the sun had risen.