North to Adventure

by
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Chapter Seventeen - First Visitors Arrive

All of our geographic study took place, of course, after the officers of the supply ship had spent a day and a half with us ashore. When this ship had come in the lash boats had been roped. These lash boats are two lifeboats lashed together; then a flat platform is laid across the two to give a greater facility in unloading the mother ship. The Police must check the customs, the health and the immigration papers of those on board the ship, and when this is done we can begin to enjoy the touch with the outside world.

This time we had made fine preparations for our guests from the ship; we had even planned a hunt for seal, but the men had no time to stay, so instead we welcomed them in suprising fashion to the roar of an angry young polar bear.

Shortly after my return from long patrol I had captured a Nanook puppy, and this chap had become quite friendly. We chained him with collar and staple, and had his tether long enough to allow him to climb to the roof of the Post to be safe from the possible attacks of the king-miks. We taught the bear several tricks, and for one I teased him with a piece of fish until he reared on his hind quarters and began to cuff like a boxer. The thing which had astounded Nick and myself was the speed with which the bear grew. Of course we called this queer pet "Dempsey," and we bragged to the ship's captain about him before the group of men had come ashore. While the officers watched I played the fish trick. Probably the presence of strangers excited the bear, for he cuffed too hard and knocked me unconscious with a slap of his big spread of paw. With one terrific roar, he broke his chain and scampered over the hills. We never saw Dempsey again. If in the future some hunter shoots a polar bear which wears a choking collar, that hunter need not fear that he is seeing things. He will have captured the pet of the first Police Post at Port Burwell. That was the only Nanook I ever tried to tame, but I enjoyed the training of a couple of lemmings. They were no bigger than large white mice, and I never got them to go further in their education than to sit up on their hind legs and nibble likea squirrel at something to eat.

But these summer weeks brought us quite an influx of visitors. These were several government officials whose ships passed through our strait, and since we were the customs officers of our port, we had to board them.

Among others, we welcomed an ocean-going tug that brought in a dredge, and its home port was Cork, so into the straits we saw pass one of the first Eire (Free State of Ireland) flags to fly the seas, and we saw a million-dollar dredge - the first one to come through in the attempt to reach Port Churchill - break her tow lines and become a total wreck, as though this oldest seaway of the North resented the possibility of being made more safe for shipping, as those leading this enterprise had hoped.

The *Patrick and Michael*, despite its name, was a Canadian schooner, and as we cleared her cargo the police report was written and enclosed in the mails to be taken out by the same vessel. We watched navigators battle the great flow of tide that varies from its seven-foot rise at Port Burwell to forty feet at Chimo in Ungava Bay. It is a rough and dangerous coast, hampered by dense fog at times and battered by ice, but these shiips anchored and waited for us in the black open lane of water while the police came out from the detachment by dog team.

One of our visitors later on was named "Blackie." He was the mechanic of a crashed plane, and he gave our Eskimo ladies a hearty laugh, and gave us an illustration of their genuine spark of humour in the name they gave him. The Inuit nicknames everyone according to some characteristic of appearance or trait of character.

"Mi Kway took," giggled Ee-ma to Essie, as they watched the prone mechanic, who was uninjured struggle to his feet and strive to adjust his helmet which had fallen off his head. I chuckled, for Ee-ma had named the poor man, "Man with no feathers on his head." He was bald as a billiard ball, and clean of skull as is the eider duck of all its under feathers in setting season.

It was the women of the settlement, too, who named the genial, jovial and very corpulent captain of one of the government ships.

"Full up of baby," complimented the captain to a chief's wife who was shortly to be brought to bed with child; and "Full up of baby," was the captain named by the girls, who had never seen a man before with a fat and protuberant belly.

"Tigi took" was a visitor who almost drove the police detachment "nuts." Fussing, bothering and irritating, this good man arrived at all wrong seasons. Imperturbable as are the natives to most things, they also caught the nervous unrest when this visitor bounced into sight. "Tigi took come," Tommy would report, and I was to find that "Tigi took" when translated just meant, "It has arrived."

The night was always gay when the Labrador trader paid us a call. Luxuriating in the liquid hospitality of hosts who never drank themselves, Old Labrador one day arrived just at the same moment the missionary came to inspect the mission bases, wondering whether Port Burwell might not also be an advantageous point for one.

"We have enough civilization as it is now," muttered Nick, as this proposal met with scant encouragement on our part. Our natives were really good, but there was plenty to upset him within the sector of our control without bringing more. That we explained to the missionary later.

Meanwhile "Ladish...but there are no ladish.....gentlemen....mortician," intoned Old Labrador, who in his cups had already determined the occasion demanded a speech. "I'm here again, for when I came before that mountain," and he gesticulated across the inlet, "was a heap of pebbles." Then addressing himself confidentially to the horrified missionary, since the latter had not realized his new sobriquet of "mortician": "I did not steer nor chart my way into yonder port - I smelled my way into it."

Even in his cups the Labrador trader was right in this, for during the two months of hot bright sunshine when the temperature rose to fifty above zero at Port Burwell, and once or twice even a little higher, the odor of blubber on the beach, of seal oil, of fish, dogs and all else was nothing less than terrific. Of course, we who lived in the midst of this became used to it, but at that, every time we went out on a sea patrol and returned to the home port, that smell rose up like a wall along the shore line as far as the population had its settlement. But a few weeks later toward autumn, the sterilizing effect of the cold removed all scents and smells and stinks.

Nick and I were a good deal exercised over the possibility of a mission being set up at Port Burwell. We'd really had a good deal of trouble with the natives further up the coast where there was a station, and it hurt us to have to try and explain the situation to the good man.

The missionary was truly honest in his endeavor and enterprise. We tried to explain the way we thought that a little Christian knowledge for the native was a dangerous thing before other points of living had been cleared up for him. We explained that we felt it really meant juggling more or less with unknown primitive forces of the mind, and that these primitive minds had strong religious beliefs of their own. We felt that these natives were practically untouched yet, and as they had not the slightest desire to become parasitic it would be a pity to bring civilization too suddenly. If that happened it was possible they would, like natives

elsewhere, become nothing more than charges and wards of the government. It seemed to us then safer to leave the native to his own righteous code of "Thou shalt not lie" and "Thous shalt not steal." It seemed better to leave him without confusion in his lovely simple logic that only pleasant things remain in memory, and that of all sin the memory slate is swept clean as rock with wind after snow. We explained to our missionary guest how the natives believed he was born a new spirit each morning, and that having "died" as he slept, he holds no regrets and no antagonisms. In fact, the native does not live in time, but lives in space.

The superstition of the native is not superstition to him; and, for that matter, this superstition is not superstition to the white man who has been initiated as a native as I have been. I'd rather call these beliefs the outcome of natural scientific fact backed up by the good reasoning, although far be it from me to say that the native would be able to explain any of his logic.

"You see, padre," we explained to our guest, "we police have had to punish the natives just because they have taken what they've heard in the mission school literally, and they have applied it to their own codes, which will not work."

We repeated to the padre the story of the barren women.

"Understand, padre, the young missionary was all right, but so were the natives, according to their own laws and practices."

"It's a problem," said the padre and we agreed, and then we put to him for solution a case which Nick had just solved after some considerable trouble while I was away on patrol.

We had named one of the native women "Mandy" because her own name was unintelligible to us. Mandy had gone visiting along the coast and got to the mission station, then immediately decided she was going to be a Christian. She confessed to Nick that she liked the bright dresses worn by the women in the picture books that were at the station, and she liked the hymn-singing and the music that came from the square box that was moved up and down in one place by the feet, and punched on the white teeth by the hands in another place; by which description Nick knew she had heard a harmonium.

How the situation got so complicated Nick and I don't really know, but it seemed that the young padre, whom we had rescued before, found out that Mandy was the wife of Pah-sakee, that she was older than her husband, and that Pah-sakee had three other wives all younger than his first and more lately acquired, also more comely than Mandy. Now to Mandy, because there were more women than

men in her clan, this was a friendly and right family arrangement, and she was quite satisfied. According to her law, every girl must be given an opportunity of attaining her dignity of full womanhood, although not all would be chosen as a Mother of the Race, and Mandy had that honor herself.

Well, the young padre was sorely tried. Good soul, he was confronted with a situation which arises in no theological seminary, and yet, to the crude minds of the layman in the police force, the same situation must have had some sort of counterpart in other ages. Solomon the king had a thousand wives, or so it is in the white man's Book, and Jacob labored seven years for Rachel, and then had to take Leah first to wife. Now the native Inuit of the northeastern coast of Baffin Land is living somewhere back about the times of Solomon, or a few thousand years earlier. So far, he has just come to some realization that he "is" an nor more.

The missionary spoke with Mandy and said:

"Mandy, you cannot be a Christian until Pah-sakee puts away three wives and takes you for only wife because you are the first wife."

That's when Mandy came to Nick, policeman, and this is what she asked.

"Does the white man remain all through life only with one wife, policeman?"

"He's supposed to," stammered Nick in reply. You see it is a part of our code that we will not lie to an Inuit man or woman. If the policeman should do so, all trust in government, in law, in justice and in right would be destroyed forever, and the faith the tribe has put in us would be completely lost.

Mandy is no fool, any more than is any other of the Inuit, ignorant and uncivilized as he or she may be in white eyes.

"So, the white man cheats and lies to his one wife," concludes the astute Mandy, and she remains faithful to Pah-sakee and kindly to the three other wives, but she goes no more to the hymn-singing, and she will die a heathen.

"What would you have done?" Nick asked the visiting padre. And then he went on to explain:

"Remember, padre, we have no venereal disease among the natives, and they do not recognize any sin in sex. Maybe he should be allowed, within reason, to

practice his own religious forms, though all honor to the men who are sacrificing to try and bring these people something else."