

# **I Lived With The Eskimos**

**by  
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## **Chapter Ten - From No Man's Land**

It was after the blizzard which lasted thirteen days and nights that we acquired Little Johnny. During all those days the wind was so strong that we dared not open an outside door in the detachment house, and a drift of snow twenty feet high was on the two sides of the house. There was nothing to be seen from the window but the swirling snow; there was nothing to do but eat, sleep, clean up, put on a gramophone records and take them off again, read a bit, try to write letters which go out to the home folks on the summer supply ship. Then we did it all over again. The experimental radio set was a help through which we sometimes caught music from London and words from France that told us there were people thousands of miles away doing the things every day that we had been used to doing, and that we were not actually alone on some strange star. But in the worst of the storm the radio crackled, frizzled, sputtered and went dead.

On the fourteenth morning I awoke to find a trace of daylight in the sky; the wind had blown itself out, the snow had become light frozen particles, and we could get outside.

"Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak," said a voice as I stood on the doorstep of our house. I could see no one and nothing but heaps of snow. Then Tommy appeared; he had dug a tunnel and crawled through the deepest of the drifts.

"Auk shu ni!"

"Come in Tommy, what's the trouble?" For Tommy, who smiled all the time as do most of the natives, was looking serious.

"Big Johnny has not come back."

I knew Big Johnny, his wife and two children who had gone on a hunting trip a few days before the blizzard started. They had only eight dogs with them, and the natives in the settlement were uneasy about the traveler's safety.

"You're sure you're fit enough to go on patrol?" asked Nick, as I came in to tell him the news, for a lost man patrol takes all the strength and endurance of which a man is capable.

"Sure," I said, "I'm all right now, just rarin' to go places."

The authorities usually pair off two men of different types, physically or otherwise. There's a reason for this. Nick was tall, dark, heavily built; he could command and was a fine executive type as well as being one of the truest friends and best fellows I shall ever know. But in hard travel I had the advantage over him; I was younger, lighter by twenty or thirty pounds, and I could keep going longer at greater speed, while it took less to feed me, and the equipment which has to be taken is always a vital consideration. Anyhow, now I was counted as a native, and I knew I could manage to subsist on native rations.

We loaded the sleds. I had fifteen dogs, and Tommy the same number in his team. There seemed no question as to who was coming with me. Troutguts ran with my team, and there was Hungry Bob with Tommy. It must have been 52 degrees below zero as we left the Police Post.

"Whee-at!" we drivers shouted, and the lead dog set the pace. I looked back as we turned the bend at Ship's Hill, the name we had given the headland jutting far into the cove, because from there we could see the approach of the trading ships coming in to the Strait. Peveril yelped me a fare-ye-well.

It seemed a wild goose chase that we were on, for how could anything be found in this wilderness of snow? We traveled the first day on ocean ice, and then turned inland where, here and there amid the glaring white, a speck of gray rock was swept clean by the wind. Across the surface of ice and snow there was a continual swish of snow particles. I pulled the thongs of my fur hood tighter and adjusted the dark goggles over my eyes. The natives wore white man's goggles also, but each man had a reserve pair of the native type made from stretched, transparent intestinal skin of the walrus. Snow-blindness was not our only dread, but also frostbite of the eyes.

A needle in a haystack would seem an easy thing to find in comparison with men lost in these barren wastes, I thought, as the miles piled up behind us and the teams met for a rest. We had driven for sixteen hours without stopping. The short hours of daylight were long gone, and the moon and stars gave the men light as they built our igloo for the rest hours. I helped to unload the sleds, set up my Primus and then boiled tea. There were thousands of acres of trackless waste around me, not a tree and not a landmark. The natives said Big Johnny had been

bound for Fort Chimo, that was all we knew. Tommy did not expect to find any trace of the travelers for three or four days, and so that night we laid a plan of search, using the "tracing" system of the Mounted Police when we ride zigzagging through the bush to hunt the missing or a hiding criminal. Now we zigzagged the dogs, running parallel with each other, but keeping a mile apart and meeting on the inside swing.

"Leave it to the dogs," explained Tommy. "If there is an igloo buried in the snow, they'll smell it out."

I had fallen behind to shoot two Arctic fox so that we might have a stew of fresh meat; I heard Troutguts shout as I overtook him on the trail. The dogs had found something; they were digging frantically, and I seized a snow knife, as did Troutguts. It seemed hours before Tommy and Hungry Bob arrived; their dogs joined the scraping, scratching animals of our team, and then we drove the kingmiks off to be held a mile away, for we had surely found the last home Big Johnny was to build.

My knife struck on something hard, yet yielding. It was not rock.

"Dog bone," said Tommy as I held up a white lump. We worked on silently and harder. To find a dog bone in the snow told those natives a story hard for the white man to understand. It meant the family had been trapped by the blizzard, their food had given out, and they had not found a cache, for every traveler in the Barrens endeavors during the hunting and fishing seasons to leave a cache of fish or meat for those who may follow that way. The dog bones meant Big Johnny had taken the last desperate way out; he had killed his dogs.

We were now through the drift, and cutting away the little igloo roof. Tommy broke through, and swung down. I followed. Big Johnny with his wife and the little girl lay as though they were asleep, wrapped in their fur outer garments. They must have killed four of the eight dogs, for the bones lay around; evidently the other dogs had run away. We were only a few hours too late, and I felt again the tremendous courage of these people who fight to live, against such awful odds of weather and of country.

"The boy?" I asked.

"Little Johnny," said Troutguts, and we searched further in the igloo, for the child was not with his parents and his sister.

"Here," called Tommy, and close to the igloo tunnel entrance we found the little boy. Maybe he had thought he could get out and go for help, for the children try to do all that men can do. I picked the small fur bundle up in my arms. It was warm.

"Why, he's alive!" I said. "The boy's breathing - here, Tommy, Troutguts, Bobby, - help me!"

I massaged the small thin body; we warmed a can of condensed milk I had brought against the chance of finding the party alive. A spot of color came to the boy's pallid face, the eyelids fluttered open, and I forced a few more drops of milk between his blue lips; he choked, then swallowed. The three natives stood by, silent and fascinated.

"Please God," I prayed, "let the wee fellow live."

And then Little Johnny looked at me and smiled. I judge the boy to be about eight years old; he was a sturdy chap, keen and intelligent. He'd made me laugh at times, for Johnny often had come to the Police Post. He loved music, and sat by the hour while the gramophone was played.

Quickly now the men built another igloo for us; Troutguts went to bring up the dogs again, and we wrapped Little Johnny in furs to tuck him in comfortably before the sad work of laying away those of his family who had not survived.

The Eskimos with me sought for a wind-swept rock where loose stones abounded. Quietly and quickly the bodies of the three unfortunate travelers were placed in their sleeping bags, the hoods drawn close, and each one passed from hand to hand of the natives and myself, bearing them to the place where they were laid side by side and face down on the cold stone. Heaped above them were the smaller, loose rocks, secured so that no marauding wild animals might disturb their rest.

"Tah-bow-ah-tay," the men repeated, and I said "Tah-bow-ah-tay," also, for it means farewell. The Inuits do not fear death, although they enjoy living, but they believe that death releases them to an immediate heaven where no Evil Spirit can touch them any more.

I took Little Johnny up to the Post on our return.

"Nick," I said, "I guess we're to be responsible for the youngster." So Little Johnny made his home at the detachment house except at night, when Chief

Nashula took him in to sleep among his big family circle. The Eskimo children belong to the tribe, and it is hard to say if Johnny realized that he had become an orphan. In two days he was running round as though he had always been a part of the police detachment.

"Nanook, Nanook," he yelled out one day, a week after our return from the patrol. I had been looking out of the front windows to where the water of our cove was hidden under heavy ice, and where massive cliffs seemed now merely larger sections of the rough, hummocky ice. Little Johnny was in the kitchen watching Nick mix up a batch of bread dough. From the window he had seen a huge polar bear climb over some smaller rocks less than fifty yards from the house. How the animal wandered there is a mystery, for the bears keep far away from habitations, nor is it commonly known where they make their living places, except that they are not known to hibernate as does the grizzly or the brown bear.

Electrified into action at the youngster's call, I caught up my rifle and thought of what a boon a thousand pounds of fresh meat would be, besides the bearskin rug for the living-room floor would be mightily nice.

"Too late," said Nick, as I struggled to open the ice-stuck back door.

It was too late. Cautiously we drew back and closed the door. Five of the dogs had seen the bear and had gone to the attack. Peveril heard the row, shivered, whimpered and retired, as he usually did when kingmiks fights started, under the bed. The noise was terrifying; there was snarling and growling, and with snapping jaws four of the dogs chewed at the bear's heels; the fifth dog sprang at the poor beast's throat. Half blind as the bear is, his instinct came to his aid, for he backed up until he found a rock behind him. With this protection he reared against it, standing full height, flailing his forepaws right and left. But the dogs were too fast for him; they jumped in to the attack and jumped out again. I sighted my rifle but did not dare to fire. I might have missed the bear, so rapidly was he moving, jerking from side to side, and most certainly I could not have missed wounding a dog, if not killing one outright, for those animals seemed to be everywhere at once.

What a method they had! As though rehearsed, the fifth dog now lay down tense and waiting as the bear tired, his swinging paws with their fixed claws moving more slowly like two pendulums of a clock that is running down. The fifth dog was waiting for that split second when the bear would leave himself wide open. Then he sprang and fastened his fangs deep into the big beast's throat; they went down and rolled together on the bloodstained snow. In a moment the dog was up, unhurt. The fight was over.

I turned away. It had taken five dogs just eighteen minutes by the clock to down that thousand pounds of bear.

I heard another noise and knew there was something more to come. There came the barking crack of whips; natives had watched the fight too, and half a dozen of them ran from behind the further hummock. They wielded the seventy-foot thongs of walrus-hide. The dogs snarled back but soon were cowed; trained to obedience, they let go of their prey and slunk off, their tails dragging, jaws slobbering, to wait sullenly while the women came and skinned out the bear. The offal was thrown to the dogs, while choice cuts of meat were taken to the trading post, and a steak was brought to the police. The trader came over bringing his share of fresh meat, so that we had a celebration, with the natives coming later to have a party, something they loved.

And it was that night I found out Little Johnny was something of a natural musician. The trader had a harmonica in his pocket; Johnny begged to be allowed to blow on it; after a few false starts he was playing tunes he had heard on our gramophone, and without a mistake.

"Gosh," said the trader, "there's an old squeeze-box over in the stores, must have been lying there for years - I'll bring it to the boy."

Later we called Johnny the one-man orchestra of the North. Soon he was playing his concertina for the native dances. He played all the time, creeping away to the empty blubber shed, and hiding himself in the darkest corner, where he sat perched on top of an empty gasoline drum to make music. It was there that Captain Edmund of one of the trading vessels coming into our port, found him when the boats came through with the ice break-up in the spring.

"Heck!" said the fine old seaman, who had a gruff way with him, but a heart of gold. "There was that young tyke perched on a barrel pushing that squeeze-box of his for all he was worth - and the music was good. I'm going to bring him a real accordion my next trip in."

But Little Johnny was not equipped with wings.

"What's that?" asked Nick one day, as we climbed Ship's Hill to play our favorite game of bowls by rolling round boulders over the cliff edge. We looked down along the ice slope that made the detachment front dooryard. There was a moving spot of crimson streaking across the white.



"That young monkey!" shouted Nick, and set off at a run. The crimson object was Little Johnny sure enough. His ambition was to grow tall enough to become a policeman. He had gone to Nick's closet, taken down the red tunic of the uniform, then bundled himself into it and was now marching about with nothing visible but a pair of furry feet, since the tunic on him almost touched the ground and the collar stood up stiff beyond the crown of the youngster's head, the sleeves flapped empty at either side. Nick swooped down and Little Johnny was a policeman no long, and neither could he sit down for his supper.

It was just two days after that that young Markey shot the dwarf bear, and Johnny had a hand in that too, for he had stolen out of the Post with my rifle, a thing he was forbidden to touch. The Eskimo children are usually most obedient, although they are never corrected by their parents; besides, I believe Markey put Johnny up to this bit of mischief. It ended in such an interesting way that no one remembered to be angry with the boys.

Little Markey was son of a man who had brought me a black fox skin, a peculiar thing about this skin being that the animal had one white paw. The Markey family were total strangers to the settlement. They had traveled from the inland district of Central Ungava, I never did make out exactly from where.

"The Good Spirit, in a dream, told One to bring Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak the black fox with the white paw," said the stranger who had been brought to the Post by Lukas. I took the fox and the man's word about the dream. I'd never seen him before, and I wondered what he wanted. He asked for nothing; it was just one of those queer things that happen in the North, for the man continued to stay on in the Port Burwell settlement, making headquarters with Lukas' family. He had a sled, a few dogs and an old rifle in his equipment, and an old box of a violin, besides the small son. It was not long before he and Little Johnny made music together. The possession of the violin was simple to explain. The man had been down to Labrador, and there Scottish fishermen had taught him to play jigs and reels. Someone, a missionary perhaps, gave him an old fiddle. It was battered, but he had restrung it with stretched sinew and gut and had made a bridge of ivory cleverly and finely carved. This man firmly believed that he had had a dream that the black fox with the white paw was to bring good fortune to the white man who was almost an Eskimo at the Port Burwell detachment. I might have thought nothing more about it if the man, Markey's father, whom I called Old Markey because he never seemed to give a name of his own, had not saved my life, but that was still several months away.

Now Old Markey and his son stood on the ice that bordered the cove. We were trying to teach the natives to play baseball. They were quick to understand the

idea, but the rules were more than they could be bothered with. Those not on the teams chosen had no wish to stand around; they did not think it any fun to watch. Just as the game got well under way half a dozen spectators, men and women, would dash on to the snowy diamond and the quickest one of the lot always caught the flying ball. The game usually ended in a mad and hopeless scramble, but they had a lot of fun.

Old Markey and the boy paid no attention to the game, and I did not notice when Little Johnny wandered off. I saw the little Markey handling a rifle, and suddenly there came the sharp crack of a shot. Old Markey and the boy were loping across the ice hummocks, the rifle lay on the shore where they had dropped it, and Johnny was standing still beside the weapon. I stooped to make sure the catch was on, and saw it was my own rifle.

"Johnny!" I thundered, but Johnny was grinning at me wide-eyed. "Nanook," he said, and pointed where the Markey father and son were running over the ice.

"My son has shot Nanook," said Old Markey, and his face beamed with pride.

"Nanook miki-yuk," I answered and looked at the heap of yellow-white fur that seemed no bigger than a small brown bear of the southern forests. It is not considered honorable by the natives to kill a half-grown bear, but strangely enough this one proved to be full grown, although so small. Chief Nashula examined the teeth and claws, and judging by them there was no question as the age of the animal. It was fully grown, but a dwarf of the species. A few weeks later I thought I had found another dwarf bear, but I was to find out the difference in a short time.