I Lived With The Eskimos

by
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Chapter Four - Horse Patrol

Baffin Island and the far Northeast were still just names to me. I'd met two or three of the men who'd been up there, and all they talked about was the loneliness and the cold. I began to get curious and wonder if there wasn't something really interesting about the natives or the country, but nobody had much to say about the people or the places, and I began to forget about the sub-Arctic service, for suddenly I found myself on the push-ball team, and if there was any breathing, living thing that loved push ball more than me, it was Guts my horse. Guts had the game down to a fine art. He knew every move. The ball is huge, five feet tall, as everyone knows, and Guts could twist, turn, maneuver and push as no other horse ever did.

Our A Team was playing B team at the sports of the Police Field Day at Regina. The best eight men and horses were to play against each other. I was a bit downhearted before the game, for Mason had been unfortunate. A few days before when breaking in a new horse, somehow he had picked up sharp spurs instead of the dull ones which the Mounted Police use. The horses are spirited and a spur is not needed, neither would a man rake his horse. But somehow Mason was caught and blamed for the accident. His punishment was in being taken off the A Team, and he was one of the best of our men. I had a private talk with Guts.

"Guts," I said, and that old horse cocked his head and listened.

"Guts, you're to play as you've never played before, superplay, boy. We must win; just think of yourself, trotting off that field and me holding the Silver Trophy, and then you making your best bow to the Governor's daughter after she has handed that silver cup over to the pair of us."

Maybe Guts understood. He nodded anyway, and we went out to the game. Guts had a way of bending his head sideways under that five-foot ball, then he'd try to nip the other horses so they'd lose their chest grip. I'd hold his head up, but Guts had a way with them, and got his nip in quicker than I could jerk the rein. We rode off the field with that silver trophy, and Guts pushed the ball for the only goal as A team won, one to nothing.

Guts could get into trouble as well as triumph, and did. At a push-ball practice game he nipped the referee's horse and threw the referee. I had some tall talking to do to get us out of that scrape, but Guts just didn't like that referee. Neither did I.

Calgary Stampede is a rodeo all Mounted Police crave to attend. I was lucky to be there for two years in succession. The mad, rip-roaring West is dominant in those weeks; the Indians come in from the reservations and the crowds pour from the East as far as Winnipeg and Toronto, and maybe further. We groomed our horses until they shone like new paint, and we polished our brown leathers until they could be used as bronze mirrors. Constable Brown was with the bunch then, and he had done some bronco riding earlier.

"Monty," said he, "how about trying to ride down that Tumbleweed horse?" Now Tumbleweed was a sun-fishing cayuse which had unseated every last man of the competing cowboys.

"Sure," said I, who had never been on a bronco in my life, but I volunteered to inveigle two cowboys to lend us their chaps and shirts. Of course it was against all regulations, and of course we were found out. The Sergeant tapped me on the shirt that covered my shoulders instead of the regulation crimson tunic.

"What's this, my lad?" said he. I hadn't a word to say, for my eyes were glued to the chute. Brown made the leap and stuck on Tumbleweed.

"Gosh!" I said.

"Gosh, yes," said the Sergeant, and propelled me on the way back to billets. Tumbleweed was still sun-fishing and Brown still sticking.

Brown heard nothing and neither did I; we thought the Sergeant was letting our misdemeanor slide, until it came to the last day of the ride at Calgary and the horses were loaded on a palace car, each horse having a private stall in the coach. It was then I got my punishment for the bronco-busing attempt. Guts, who officially was Jeff, hurt his leg getting on the car and I was not allowed to travel with him. I knew the horse would be well cared for, but it was a terrible punishment for me. Sometimes when I sit and think of it I can see the look in that horse's eyes as I patted him goodbye.

The Commanding Officer brought a wire in his hand from headquarters at Ottawa. It was short and to the point, four of the special exhibition riders were detail to Ottawa for harvest train duty.

We did not welcome the assignment; still it was something new. I made three harvest train trips in all. The Mounted Police traveled eastward by Pullman and returned, two to a train, in charge of some hundreds of farm workers coming west on the return journey. When agriculture was at its height as many as fifty thousand men were imported to the western harvest fields. Now combines clean up the same work in a few weeks with a score or so of men to help the farmers. The train rates were cheap and the travelers were a motley crew. There'd be the son of an English lord down on his luck bunking in

with a man who was a professional hobo, making enough in harvest time to carry him over winter and spring somewhere down South.

The first trick on the train was to go from coach to coach and clear out any guns and liquor from the men's possession. I never had any trouble. The harvesters knew the police were there to protect them for their own good. Any young fellow who might be inclined to be a bit rambunctious could easily be kidded into good temper. Often the men were just high strung and excited, and maybe nervous if it was a first experience going across the vast country.

"Fellows," said Sergeant Oakes, who met us as we got into Winnipeg on our last trip, "here are the orders. I guess we're being split up - I'm off for Montreal myself.

"It's right here in Winnipeg for mine," said Brown, who had stuck with me on the harvest trains.

"Me for Ottawa," Ashe was speaking.

"Halifax," chimed in Mason and looked toward me:

"How's for you, Monty?"

"Edmonton," said I, rattling the official document I held in my hands. "Edmonton, Alberta, and wouldn't that jar you? - here're you, Mason, you've trained with me, pal-ed with me, fought with me - and after the fight being better buddies than before - and they have to order you to Halifax and me to Edmonton - another step and they'd have you in the Atlantic Ocean".

"Another step for you, Monty, my boy," broke in Oakes, "and you'd be at the North Pole."

Sergeant Oakes didn't know the half of it. Of course I never was near the North Pole, but after an interval, Edmonton was actually to become my jumping-off place for the land and sea named for Henry Hudson, that great pioneering explorer whose origin no one knows. I did not think of that again until after I had arrived in Edmonton and one Sunday afternoon when it was too bad to go out in my free time, I poked around in the Police Library. I found a book about Hudson. I guess those things are meant to be; anyhow, I read about that extrordinary man. He was thought to be the grandson of a prosperous London aldermen back a few hundred years, in 1607 to be exact, and had taken his small son, John, with a few men, in a ship of sixty tons called the *Hopewell*, in which he had sailed north with Sir Martin Frobisher on a trip twenty-nine years earlier.

"I'm going to the North Pole," announced Hudson and set his course for Greenland. He was met by icefields that barred the way, but he reached latitude 81 off the coast of Spitzbergen. Here he was stopped by ice again, and tried to round the north of

Greenland. Of course he failed, but he saw great schools of whales, and later sent out scores of whalers to make a successful busines in whaling. Hudson tried to find a northwest passage and failed, but he explored the Hudson River and Nova Scotia, and then the tragedy of Hudson came near Cape Wolstenhome, called so after Hudson's first mate who led a mutiny of the small crew, and set Henry Hudson adrift in icy seas with his boy and two devoted men of the crew. This was the year 1611, and for three hundred years the fate of Henry Hudson has been one of the mysteries of many in the North.

That history book told me that as far back as 1553 Edward VI of England, a lad who was to die young, had said farewell in person to the men who hoped to find a shorter way as a trade route to Asia by going northward. There was Sir Hugh Willoughby in command of one small ship, and Richard Chancellor in another, with Captain Durforth in a third, each with small crews. Willoughby and his men were frozen to death off the coast of Lapland. They were found three years later, with Willougby's body seated in a chair by a desk in his cabin. He had been writing of strange beasts that roamed round the ship when death overtook him. Often in the years I spent north of latitude 60 I thought of the story of Hugh Willoughby when I came across a polar bear. I could think of no beast which could have appeared more strange to him than that.

Chancellor was the lucky one of this trio, for he found his way to the White Sea and managed to survive a journey by sled to Moscow, so trade was opened up between England and Russia and as far as Persia. I cannot but think that Chancellor must have had the good sense to follow the instructions of natives, probably dressed like them and ate like them for that journey. It has been proved to me a hundred times that when in the cold, new lands, the only safe thing is to follow the native example which he has learned by experience.

Forty-six years later than Chancellor, Sir Martin Frobisher got as far as Labrador and there he saw the first Eskimo. He took one home to England. But the Eskimos of the Labrador mistook Frobisher for some new sort of fish-beast. They baited ivory hooks and threw them into the water, thinking they could catch Frobisher and his ship.

A year after reading all this I was to remember that very story when I watched Eskimo children baiting hooks with seal meat, then sitting patiently on a rock, dangling the fishing line in the air an inch or two above the ground. It took me a few days to figure out just what they were after, until I saw a sea gull land, waddle toward the bait and swallow it until he was firmly caught with a hook in the throat. That was the only really cruel thing I ever saw Eskimo children do. My comrade policeman and I put a stop to it.

Sergeant Oakes razzed me about jumping to the North Pole from Edmonton, and it was not so much of an exaggeration at that, for now the airplane service from Edmonton makes daily trips, with a landing port at Cooking Lake for those with pontoons. Cooking Lake is about forty miles from Edmonton, and although the planes do not fly to the North Pole, but in and out from the Mackenzie district, along that astonishing river named for

one of the intrepid pioneers who, two hundred years after William Baffin had tried to find a passage to China by the north, was to track with others over a great part of northern America. Now airplanes fly in and out and about Lac LaBiche, and away far beyond the Great Bear Lake regions. Airplanes take in old sourdough prospectors, and modern scientists; they take in freight and they bring out wealth of minerals. The North has taken a long time to open to the white man, but it is now yielding fast; maybe the men of tomorrow are to be the final conquerors of another great land.

"Your train goes first," said Mason, wringing my hand in farewell, for I was the only man scheduled for the Northwest. I left my pals with a fairly heavy heart. These men had been my best friends and I hated to leave the company of such good fellows. There was no more chance, either, for taking part in muscical drills and exhibition riding. Other enlisted men were waiting their turns on that. But I never really expected monotony and that is what I found in the job I drew. Now I know it was my own feeling toward it, for it is exactly what you put in a job that you get out.

"Report to accompany Inland Revenue Officer on search for illicit stills," read my orders. I felt pretty flat. This was quite a change from horseback riding, this trundling round the country in a flivver with Mr. Fiddler at the wheel. I hated it, and like all things one hates, it became worse as the weeks went on. Mr. Fiddler always had a place to go on a still hunt, and he seemed to choose Saturday afternoon for these trips with too great regularity. I liked to get a date and go to the movies or to the afternoon tea dance at the MacDonald Hotel on Saturdays, but there was always Fiddler and the Flivver. I set about figuring my way out of the fix I was in. I applied for leave to attend to some detail on the farm land I owned near Assiniboia. The leave was granted and after thirty glorious days of freedom from duty, I approached Edmonton feeling I would surely hide if Fiddler showed up again.

My luck had turned.

"Horse patrol into Cold Lake, Montague," ran the orders and I made my way to the stables.

Guts was waiting. You'd think that pesky horse already knew of the trip we were to take together. He whinnied and nuzzled for sugar. His leg was long since cured and there was no scar.

"Guts, my boy," I said to him as I saddled up, "it's you and me for the open road."

I knew I was stretching a point, and Guts knew it too. There were no roads where we were going. Though now a freightcar load of whitefish comes down each week to Detroit and Chicago from Cold Lake, when I went in by horseback there were only one or two experimental freight airlines flying.

"Horse patrol" means visiting the scattered settlements; and investigation of naturalization papers for every stranger who has settled in the further reaches of the country is made by a Mounted Policeman.

Guts and I billeted most nights at lonely farmhouses where the farmer and his wife would make us welcome, or maybe there was just a homesteader batching it. There were a few nights when we had to camp out, and I made a pillow of my saddle, slept under the stars and rolled over awake every hour or so to keep a fire going, for there are lynx still in those areas and a Canadian lynx is a nasty customer to meet unprepared.

There was a new Russian settler in the district near St. Paul de Metis. I got to his home and found no one there, the stove cold and no sign of life about the place.

"He's up at the Cold Lake fishing, and has no livestock," said a few people in St. Paul de Metis whom I questioned and who knew the man I looked for. I suppose I could have left Guts in the settlement and gone by train back to Edmonton, then to Lloydminster and in to the Cold Lake, but I hated to do it, and thought I could ride across country easily enough.

It was ten day's ride, with bad weather, bad travel and the horse billeting wretched. But Guts was game and he kept going. At Cold Lake the Indians had a story that the Russian had been there, but he was gone again with his supply of fish, back to his homestead and his cabin. I made the trip over again, and never realized that I was overdue for the regular length of a horse patrol; three weeks overdue and I hadn't sent in word of my well-being to headquarters. They were getting worried about me, and all the while I was perfectly happy.

"My land, it's Monty!" exclaimed Jack Garland as I hove into sight in the barrack square. He called Frank Armstrong.

"Hey, Frank, Monty's back! He's fatter, he's healthier than ever before."

I wondered what all this fuss over me meant, and then I found out. When I'd been ovedue a week the boys, for a joke, faked a last will and testament of one SR Montague, whereabouts unknown. This will gave instructions that after paying all debts, the money left, if any, should go to the erection of a monument for his man and his horse. Somehow the Commanding Officer found out about this in its circulation round the barracks.

"That's very funny," said he; "Where is the man who did this?"

Armstrong and Garland stepped out of rank. They still thought it a pretty good joke.

"This man Montague is unaccounted for now," said the CO in a voice of thunder. "A joke's a joke, and I'm all for jokes, but to be a joke it must be in good taste - what do you fellows think you'll feel like if Montague does not turn up? You tack that last will and testament to the door of Montague's cubicle - you can read it evey time you pass through the dormitories."

Garland and Armstrong took their reprimand, nailed up the will and shook with fear for another two weeks, for still I did not come.

"Man, we've felt like murderers," said Garland. "Where were you anyhow?"

"We've been in wonderful country," I said, for I always spoke of Guts as being a second person traveling with me. "I'm going to volunteer for the Mackenzie; there's country waiting up there for the pioneer of tomorrow." It's a country richer than any Eldorado old Henry Hudson ever set out to find; richer than the Labrador - La Bras D'or - that Martin Frobisher thought he had found when he named the new country he saw "The Arm of Gold."