

Chapter Nine - I Become an Author

It was on the second day of this lonely vigil during the blizzard that I decided to become an author. I planned to put on paper the many legends which Lukas and Nashula had told me, particularly Lukas. The story-telling had started when we were confined to the snow house waiting for Nick to send us the rescue party after our experiences of two shipwrecks. The telling of these tales not only interested me, but they helped me learn the speech, which has no written form. The sounds of Eskimo words must be set down phonetically, and the variations of the spelling lie in the fancy of the white man who is trying to record them. It was in tones which became hourly more simple for me to follow, and with the aid of rough pictures drawn on the snow flooring of the shelter, that I began to understand something of that from which the philosophy of this peculiar race stems.

So, happy it was for me that the government had supplied us with a plentitud of pencils and notebooks, for I filled several of the latter.

First in my writing I wanted to make it clear that the Eskimo objects to that name, for Eskimo or Enook is actually an Indian and therefore an alien word. It was given these coast dwellers by tribes which wandered over to Baffin Land from Labrador, and means, "he who eats raw flesh." The Eskimo asks us to use the name Inuit or, if we had rather, the word Huskie. Now, in the Northwest the "husky" is the sled dog; but not so in the Northeast where the dog is known as "kingmik," and is a very different kind of animal, as we shall see later.

Resting that torn limb of his which he had got in the fight for food to save us all from death, Lukas would smile at me and say: "The arm, it matters not. One is very lucky person; if the polar bear had not been quite so sleepy one would have had the head crushed, and Lukas would now be with the departed Nanook in the land of departed spirits."

And then the soothing old voice, varying in utterance by no more than a major or minor interval of half a tone, would tell me the Legend of the Loon, repeating it many times until I comprehended the sounds and their meaning. Thus, Lukas speaks:

"Different from all things in the North which change their coats to white as winter comes, and all birds their feathers, there are but the loon and the crow which remain, the one black and white and the other all black, during the days of darkness".

"Years ago the then white crow was a mischievous bird; one day with his claws he drew patterns on the back of the loon; the loon resented this and spat on the crow so that he turned utterly black, then the crow's friends beat the loon so severely on the feet that now the bird can only fly or swim; he can neither walk, nor hop on the land. But the crow remained all black. Now, in the still of the evening there comes the loon's raucous cry of triumph. He sings his song of defiant victory for he thinks he was the victor, and the crow caws one last croaking call as darkness fall, for he takes also the belief that he was the victor in the encounter. And now hate reigns between crow and loon to this day, so great a hate that the Inuit need not kill either one. They, by Nature's own antagonisms, rid the land of over-many of either species, by killing each other."

Then old Lukas would fall into silence and stroke the fuzz which is the only beard which comes upon the faces of these northern dwellers, and that not until they are "aged." They do not live much beyond forty or fifty years, for their life is hard, their travel of the most strenuous, and it wears down the heart. No disease attacks them until contact with the white man is made. "The Eskimo eats baking powder and he dies," has now become a proverb, and so he must be protected from too rapid civilization.

Slowly I knew I was gaining the confidence of Lukas and Nashula, for one day they told me the legend of their race's origin. Lukas speaks again:

"Many, many sleeps ago there came to Ungava, which is the great lone land and across to this country, one who committed the original sin of all sins. He killed. Before that time, ah, but then it was heaven, there was no Evil Spirit and no need for hunting. If food were needed a seal came up at that moment. But this stranger took up the bone of a walrus and went out and killed the seal, so that the Evil Spirit continued to kill to eat. And not even satisfied with that depredation, he stole a beautiful girl, and from this union there was born the Inuit."

Thus it was that Lukas explained to me that the Inuit has kin to the misnamed countries of Greenland and Labrador. Greenland, where for the greater part of each twelve months the land is under a white ice cap a mile thick; and Labrador, the unsubtle twisting of the French words, *La Bras Dor* (The Golden Arm), where no trace of gold has ever been found.

From old Lukas, too, I found out why the ocean eagle remained sacred to the Inuit. Long centuries before the *Mayflower* or Columbus' galleons rode the ocean lanes, the eagle was the national bird and emblem of this Baffin Land native. It is

still his sacred bird. The eagle carries in its soul the spirit of that girl, the mother of the race who was stolen by the Evil Spirit, and more than that, it carries to the happy hunting grounds the spirits of all good Inuit. Each year the tribes make a trip to the nest of the eagle and there pay tribute to the Mother of the Race. Each year, as spring comes, the women participate in a two-day Eagle Dance. This is a symbolic ritual of fertility. One woman, dressed in feathers to represent the sacred bird, with spread wings squats, and from under the wings there comes two small eaglets, a boy and a girl in similar feathered garments. Later in this ceremony all the women of productive years are rubbed with bull seal oil, the coating being left upon the entire body for a week, and then the ceremonial is ended.

It was from Chief Nashula I learned of the Dance to the Return of the Sikiuk (sun). Each January, when for a few minutes of white man's time the sun appears above the horizon to signal the coming of light, the tribe gathers upon the seashore and forms into a huge circle. Few or many, each member of the tribe has in "one's" hands a piece of meat. A watcher calls out "Auk shu ni" three times and this heralds the coming of the sun. The chief lifts both hands up high, then drops them to his sides as he turns out of the circle. There is silence as the sun goes down from sight again, and then is heard the Sun-intoning - "Auk shu ni Sikiuk...Be strong O Sun!" The dance continues in a slow shuffle, the music made by a monotone of humming; the food is dropped on the ground where each native has held his place, and then they dance, weaving in and out among the meat pieces. As the dance ceases, the meat is left on the ground where it lies, and the natives return to their daily tasks.

But not even the policeman, not even "he who is almost an Eskimo," may see the Dance to Tukik (Moon). This has apparently always been kept absolutely secret from the white man, and again the fertility of the race and the fertility of the animals which keep the race alive, are the theme. The sun has disappeared for the winter, the moon is bright, the Oudluviak (stars, or little daylight) are brilliant. The men gather on the seashore, the women remain indoors and entirely out of sight, and the white man, trusted though he is, is subtly but surely guarded so that he does not intrude upon this ritual. Long before vitamins were thought of or the beneficial rays of sunshine were heard of in the white man's lexicon of living, the Inuit was invoking the moon to send her rays down to substitute for those of the last sun.

I asked Lukas where the pattern of the omiak came from, and he answered me: "It made itself." The white man can only deal in speculation about the omiak as he notes the squared lines of the vessel, the square sail, and scans his knowledge back through the centuries until he finds the omiak is practically a

reproduction of the Viking boat, but when made by the present-day Inuit, the omiak is constructed without a prow.

Of the kyak the native explanation to me was: "It is one's." By that he means that it is of his own invention. This streamlined boat, designed to meet pressure of tide and swiftly running current, long before the day of steam or oil or electrical power had been chained to white man's use, is of incredible speed, and is propelled by a double-ended paddle. Old Lukas, Nashula and Chief Charlie chuckled with amusement, they told me, the first time they watched the white man row his boat backward, pushing against the natural play of his own muscles, and twisting his head backward to find direction and to avoid floating scraps of ice or driftwood.

"One white man goes behind to get before," laughed Lukas and Nashula, and I could sympathize with their laughter when I saw the native pushing forward on his paddle with a clear lane of vision ahead of him, and all the natural leverage working with him. Certainly it would seem the white man has complicated his own thinking to his own confusion.

Lukas, leaning on a carpet of Arctic foxskins in our snow house, told me of the eider duck.

"Kill the eider duck, yes, and kill the sea hawk, but never kill the eagle. But when you kill the duck, eat first the poorest bird, then take the best duck and place it in a cache beneath a pile of loose rock."

This rule I always followed. The duck cache, found on any point in this land of hard travel, over snow packed so hard by the driving wind that a loaded two-ton freight sled will leave no impression on the surface, may save the life of many a traveler. There are no trails through this country, just great waves and rolling hillocks of snow, plateaus of snow, and as far as the eye can see there rise skyscrapers of ice which tower above the snow surface to glint and gleam against the dusk of a land grown old and harsh. Here the traveler, left without meat, and with no game in sight, may be lucky enough to find a duck cache; perhaps there will be one, or perhaps a dozen ducks therein. The traveler eats, and then strives to find more duck with which to replace those that have given him succor.

Then as the story-telling proceeded, "he who is almost an Eskimo" strove with unfamiliar throat sounds to tell Lukas, Nashula and the others of the white man's manner of living, and especially the ways of the policeman and why he is up in the North Country.

Lukas and the others always listened intently. They understand what they can of policeman duty. They know that the police will protect "one", which means the whole tribe, from too much bad; the policeman can soothe pain after an accident; he can make a leg which as been broken stick itself together again so that it will be straight and strong again; in short, the native hits the bull's-eye when he gives the Mounted Policeman in the North the name, "servant of the people."

I could not make Lukas understand dates when I tried to explain that the Police Force had been organized in 1874, but he did understand when I told how the Police being on duty in the early days of Canada's prairie provinces meant there was practically no shedding of Indian blood. He seemed to understand how then, as now, the Mounted Police are drilled in the use of human ethics, humane methods in keeping the Indian and the white man peaceful. Whether he understood or not, I told Lukas of this colorful Police Service I was in, the glorious record that proves the point that human understanding, diplomacy and a little applied psychology has made for Canada one of the world's most efficient police bodies. I wanted to disprove even before it might seep in to the tribe, that "the Mountie gets his man" while wielding a fearsome six-shooter, is not exactly a true picture. I showed the natives, when we returned to the detachment headquarters, the Crown atop the police badge which gleams on our crimson tunic, and signifies that he is a member of the Royal Forces. Then I explained to them the significance of the group of maple leaves (the Canadian national emblem) surrounding a buffalo head, and around the maple leaves the three French words "Maintiens le droit," literally in English, "Maintain the Right," or "Keep the Law," but which I translated to the natives as meaning their own two commandments, "Do not steal and do not lie."

Here and there as my stories advanced I would see Lukas and Nashula give me a glance of growing comprehension. They could understand that where trade came alone, destruction of morals, and even life might come, the last because of the possible wholesale destruction of game; and I hoped they understood that were the missionary to come alone to an untouched land and natives, such as Nick and I were experiencing for the first time, there might follow a breakdown of their own ethical standards and of the very native sanctity of life and custom, and of moral sense too, for disbelief in all native tenets, politics and law, even though they may be heathen in Christian sight, must be handled with gentleness, and another belief cannot be substituted in their minds with suddenness. It is easy to establish a doubt in the native mind, and the native's lost trust means spiritual disaster.

Lukas and the others gradually understood the white policemen had come to keep a fair balance, to teach, to explain and to say:

"The white man is different, but this difference does not make the Inuit entirely wrong."