

I Lived With The Eskimos

**by
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Chapter Eleven - I Find A Bundle Of Fur

Peveril was a good dog, but he hated my pet lemmings. Just for that reason I was a bit nervous at leaving them at the Police Post when, quite late in February, I set out on a land patrol to the Ungava mainland, with Tommy as my only companion. Our objective was trapping, furs and fresh meat, as much as we could get of them, for the settlement.

"Johnny," I said to the small native who was now quite at home in the detachment, "you take care of the lemmings of Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-noo-Ka-sak," and Little Johnny promised. He really had proved clever with them, and the only misgivings I had was Peveril, whom I did not want to have fall from grace. Of course, that pesky black dog was jealous, fearful that any other thing might replace him in my affections, which was quite impossible. At the same time the lemmings were a never-ending source of interest. Peveril liked to stand as though at point, straining every nerve and muscle, while his jaws moved as though he wanted to make a snap at the mouse-like things. He would give a low, grumbling half growl, and then I knew it was time for me to say: "Peveril!" I was never cross with him, but the one word was enough to send him, with tail and head hanging, to the corner of the bearskin where he liked to lie at the hearthside.

The lemmings came to me through Eema, who found a nest of them when she was out gathering eider down. She brought the five little animals into the detachment, and we fed them condensed milk from an eye-dropper; two of the five lived. When they were big enough, crumbs of bread and grains of oatmeal became their diet, and they never seemed to miss the roots of moss or whatever it may be they find to eat in the tundra beds where they burrow.

Nick pretended to be scornful of my efforts to tame the lemmings, which are one of the mystery animals of the world, for no scientist seems to have found out definitely and certainly why every seven years they migrate in swarms to the ocean. They allow no obstacle to stop their progress when this movement overtakes them, and they never make a detour. If there should be a house or a tent in their path they go through it or over it, never around it; then swimming miles out from the shore the whole generation of these queer little creatures end in drowning themselves.

Lemmings are about the size of white mice, and in winter they change their grayish-brown coats with the thin black line down the spine, to white. It is said that some Eskimos believe the lemmings fall from the sky in winter, and in winter also their cleft foreclaws resemble the hoof of caribou. The natives I contacted took the lemmings as a matter of course, using their tracks as a means to lead to caribou grazing grounds during hunting trips.

With considerable patience I found I could get my lemmings to follow a trail of meal sprinkled in line to a corner of a table; in a day or two I put a crumb of bread in the same corner but without the guiding trail, and the little things, after a moment of hesitation, scuttled off at the double for their dinner service. The method I followed was gentleness. I made a sort of small hutch for the two; from this I lifted them one at a time, stroked them and petted them, and found they responded to a show of affection. Gradually I taught them they could eat only when they had been petted. I found them intelligent, not easily scared, and not at all afraid of a sudden noise. Peveril never disturbed them. Soon they scratched to get out of their box, and although they would not eat meat, they enjoyed a bone to chew on. Just before I left on patrol I had succeeded in getting them to push a crumb across the table with their noses as propellers, and I never could tell which one was doing the tricks best for I never could distinguish which was which of my pets. They both snarled occasionally, but neither ever made an attempt to nip. But it was with these two lemmings that Nick and I chased away a visitor who had made a habit of coming to the detachment house and living with us for weeks on end. We did not like him.

Our plan was quite simple. On the evening I set to be the last that visitor would ever spend us, I sprinkled oatmeal under his pillow before he went to bed on our extra camp cot. As I heard his first snore - and snoring was one of the things we had against him - I padded softly to his side and dropped a trail of meal to the cage of the lemmings; cautiously I unfastened their cage door and tiptoed back to my own warm bed, bidding Peveril remain quiet. Those lemmings picked up every grain of oatmeal, and the night was more than half over before they reached the cot, then climbed up to dig under the man's pillow. They were too quick for him, as I thought they would be, when he yelled wildly and threw his kamiks at them. That man never suspected me; he talked all breakfast at the strangeness of having house mice in such a part of the world, and later he prepared a treatise on the extraordinary appearance of domestic mice in a Mounted Police post north of latitude 60, I laughed a lot about it, but the plan worked; he never did come back.

When we started on our land patrol Tommy and I had eighteen dogs to our komatik, or sled, and we had very light equipment as we hoped to have a heavy

load of meat on the journey home. I had some white man's iron traps along, but I planned to catch white Arctic fox in a native snow trap if I could.

At the end of our second day's march over mainland ice, Tommy said "Igloo," wasting no words. I started to set the traps, spacing them out two miles from the camping spot, and circling back where Tommy was almost finished with his snowhouse construction. I heard Tommy call out that the igloo was ready, just as I completed the last of the native snow traps. I had circled back and made the last trap not far from the rest shelter. I scooped a fair-sized hole in the snow, narrower at the base than at the top, and into this I put a piece of seal meat as bait, then cut a thin sliver of snow with my knife and laid it carefully over the hole. When the fox came along, as I hoped he would, he must smell the bait, step on the thin snow, fall into the hole, and, digging downward since he cannot climb out, smother himself. The plan follows much the same idea as used by tropical natives who spread a pit for an unwary lion in the jungle or on the African veldt.

"Wolf," said Tommy, as we crept through the tunnel to our snow hotel, dragging the last of the supplies behind us.

"Wolf," I echoed, and shivered a bit, for I could never become used to that long-drawn-out howl that told there was wolf in the neighbourhood. This was not a usual place for wolf, since they keep further inland for the most part.

"What's that?" I whispered to my companion later, as we huddled in our sleeping bags.

"Wolf," said Tommy again, "wolf quite near."

It must have been just outside the igloo; I could hear the snuffling shuffle at the wind side of the igloo, and I heard the dogs whimper. We had put them in an old igloo for the night and blocked the tunnel door before we went to our own rest. We dared not take a chance on losing any dogs.

"I'll shoot," I said, and struggled out of my sleeping bag and into the half-frozen furs I had turned inside out to freeze the perspiration and have them ready and sterilized for putting on in the morning.

"More than one wolf," warned Tommy; "it's dangerous."

There came a scratching at our tunnel entrance, and I wondered if the beast could break down that solid snow block; I wondered if I moved the block what would happen. Tommy held me back as I started to crawl along the passageway,

and then he shouted loud to scare the beasts. The scratching stopped. I waited, tense in the darkness of the narrow entrance and cramped on my hands and knees.

Tommy loosed my arm; I pulled back the entrance block, put out my hand to grab my rifle, which stood ready as always. Instead I clutched a soft warm mass. I tugged and there came an unearthly yowl. I opened my hand as though I had clasped a bar of red-hot iron, and fell flat on my face half in and half out of the tunnel as a howling, yelping terrified wolf streaked round a hummock of ice beyond our igloo. I was more frightened than the wolf, for he had the nerve to come back, making a sheer case of curiosity that killed the wolf.

The moon was high, the stars like gleaming flashlights, myriads of them. I secured the rifle and settled myself to await developments. Tommy brought out furs for us to squat on; in the two hours or more of waiting we had time to make strong hot tea on the Primus, and I was pinching myself to keep awake when a long, black shadow crept from behind the hummock. That wolf wanted something. I raised my weapon, aimed slowly and fired. It was almost a blind shot, but the long shadow became a twisted lump, and the dogs closed in the forsaken snowhouse were going wild. I waited another hour for safety's sake watching to see if the black shadow would move; then Tommy and I dragged the big wolf where we could make a cache and have him safely hidden before we let the dogs out.

We caught six white Arctic fox in the white man's traps, and I turned away four times when Tommy found the trapped animals were not dead. I hated to watch the natives kill them, although their method is humane. The native hits the trapped fox on the snout with the hilt of his heavy snow knife; then when the beast is stunned, he kneels hard upon the heart, and death comes without pain, while the pelt is kept perfect without mark of bullet or slash of knife until the skinning proper is done.

Tommy moved on to reach the seventh trap; I delayed to examine a cache I had found. It was full of ducks some hunters had left since summer, as is the custom. The ducks were frozen hard, and since Tommy and I had plenty of fresh meat, I put the birds back. But soon my attention was taken by a clanking sound in the Arctic silence round me. There was a snarling and spitting and horrible choking yelps.

"Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak," I heard Tommy's voice shrill with excitement, and I ran forward with all speed. Evidently Tommy was in trouble, and I had no wish to be alone on the Barrens, perhaps with a wounded man. Tommy was

hanging half way up a snowy hummock which must have been rock beneath its white crust of frozen snow. He acted as though terrified, and pointed downward with one hand. There on the snow was a twisted heap of streaked fur and iron clamps. In the seventh trap we had caught a Canadian lynx, a most unusual visitor in that part of the country, for the lynx rarely comes above the timber line. I shot the lynx. He was an ugly fellow, big, tremendously strong and caught only by the forepaw; he was maddened and dangerous.

We moved the traps and found one silver cross fox with unusual markings, and I saved the skin to bring out for a special friend. I had old Lavinina cure it with extra care. First she scraped the inside of the pelt, then painted the hide with urine; this painting, done once or twice a week for three weeks while the pelt was staked out on the rocks or snow where the sun and frost set up a chemical reaction, made a safer tanning than any discovered in civilized regions.

We saw no blue foxes on this patrol, for we did not come to the glacier country which is their favorite haunt; neither did I see in my three years in the North a fight between an ice fox and a land fox, which are counted to be bitter enemies. But one of our trapped white foxes was headless when we came upon it, thereby making the pelt valueless for trading, and that was a sure sign there were land foxes in the neighbourhood, for they will eat off the head of their trapped enemy, and leave the body intact.

"Enough," said Tommy, as we gathered up our last catches. The native has no desire to take more than he needs for food and furs for clothing, or for trade to get those products of the white man which he sees at the trading posts. Some natives will form themselves into a group to earn enough for a white man's small motor boat; others may want a new rifle and extra ammunition, or some may desire that their women folk have white women's dress materials, or the bright wool plaid shawls which they love. Some natives trade, too, for white man's towels, for the native habit has been to dry the hands with the wing of a bird, with everyone using the same wing, just as all the family uses the same towel until it wears away with use.

It was on this patrol that I learned from Tommy that a number one grade fox skin comes from an animal which is fairly hungry when caught, for then the fur is in best condition; there should be a good length to the guard hair, which is best in the coldest winters.

"Nat-chee," said Tommy, as we swung along the ice on the way home, and we could see a blob of darkness loom against the horizon.

"Nat-chee," I repeated, and asked him how a silver seal, which is the common harbor seal, could get on the ice at that time of year. Tommy did not know, but he was sure that brown blob was a seal and so he left me with the dogs and put on speed alone. The "seal" went behind a hummock. I spanned out the dogs, threw them a sack of meat to keep them from eating their harnesses, and then bore sharply to the right so that a half circle should be thrown round the seal's path as Tommy came up on it from the straight.

Ten minutes later I was sprawled flat on my face, struggling with a mass of squirming fur under my stomach, I kicked and twisted, trying to get a firm footing on the ice, then I rolled over on my back, and as I sat up stared right into the face of a baby polar bear not half yard from my nose.

It was really a lovely little creature, soft and yellow white; its rounded head was like that of a puppy, and only the blinking small piggy eyes spoiled the prettiness of the face. I put out my hand and touched the little animal; the baby thing snuffled, whimpered and made no move to go away. It was frightened and maybe hurt by my weight falling on it, for I must have tripped over it as I rounded the hummock; I now stood with the baby bear pup in my arms, its head snuggling in the fur of my keeool-ee-tuk. Then two rifle shots rang out. I started. I had forgotten Tommy and his silver seal, so I rounded the ice hummock that blocked my view, and laughed at what I saw.

There stood Tommy, and there stood Troutguts, both grinning, their mouths wide open with surprise, and both with smoking rifles in their hands. Fortunately neither was wounded. It seemed Troutguts had come out on to the ice to fish a few miles from the settlement; he had turned from the hole chopping to see what he thought was a silver seal squatting on a corrugated lump of ice. He stalked it for a while, fired and missed; at the same moment Tommy sighting along his rifle barrel at the silver seal he had stalked, fired also, and also missed. Troutguts sprang to his feet and yelled, and Tommy echoed the shout. It was a happy ending to a mistake which might have ended in tragedy. The two men clasped hands white man style to show there was no ill-feeling, and then I showed them what I had found.

"Nanook miki-yuk," said Troutguts; "if miki-yuk here, then mama near."

I had forgotten that; we might look out for an attack from the mother polar bear; but our watchfulness was in vain; and whatever may have happened to that bear, we were lucky not to see her. I brought the baby bear home to the Post.

"We'll call it Dempsey," said Nick as I showed him the new pet. "We just cannot call it anything else because he'll be a boxer when he grows up; they all are."

That settled the name, so I put a collar and chain on the little Nanook, and stapled the chain with sufficient length so the animal could climb over the snowdrift to the roof of the detachment house, and thus escape from the dogs should they try to attack it. Dempsey stayed with me nearly seven months, and that bear was smart. I taught him to lie down on command and to sit up, and then taught him one master trick. By teasing him with a piece of frozen fish held just out of his reach, I trained the beast to shadow box with me, but it was this trick that lost me Dempsey. The Captain and officers of a supply ship were ashore at the time, and we planned to entertain them with cod fishing, as the runs were on in the summer days when they happened in with the water open. I bragged about Dempsey when we went aboard ship, a part of police duty as Customs Officers at a port Post.

"I'll show you a tame polar bear," I said, and the Captain laughed:

"You're joking..."

"I'm not, cross my heart and hope to die, that bear obeys the word of command, and he'll box to order, what is more." But I bragged too soon. Dempsey had grown in the few months I had had him until he stood almost five feet high when reared on hind quarters, and he had become ugly. I led the sailors up to him, left them at a safe distance and advanced myself. Dempsey lay down, and Dempsey reared up, just as I had promised, then I produced the fish and dangled it at a safe distance.

"Now, watch him box, watch him," I called, and took a stance myself, glancing back just a moment at the spectators, with my arm in position. I remember nothing more of the next few minutes. Maybe it was having the strangers there, or maybe Dempsey chose that day to become fed up with games and tricks and white man's ways; maybe I was careless and showing off a bit and gone nearer the bear than I thought. The spread boxing paw of the young half-grown bear caught me a clip on the head, and I went down for the count in no rounds. I was out - poof, like that.

"Two hundred and twenty, two hundred and twenty-one, two hundred and twenty-two!" I heard a monotonous voice counting, and opened my eyes to find the ship's doctor, who was of the party, bending over me where I lay on the couch of the detachment livingroom. I do not know who was counting, but Nick was holding ammonia under my nose, someone was counting my pulse beat and the doctor was listening to my heart. Now Nick dropped some burning, poisonous-tasting liquid into my mouth. I gulped and sat up.

"What happened?" I asked, and the men all laughed.

"Out for the count of two hundred and twenty," chuckled the first mate, and then added, "You're all right - the bear knocked you for a row of pins."

The doctor interrupted: "Better take it easy, Montague, you'll have a headache for a week or I'm mistaken - that bear could give some clout. Fortunate his claw didn't rip you - we'll believe anything you tell us about bears after this."

"Where's Dempsey?" I asked: but that is to be another northern mystery. In the confusion after I fell, Dempsey, scared by so many people, had snapped his chain and bounded out of sight over Ship's Hill. Some day perhaps an explorer will find a bear up north with a collar worn into his neck, although I suppose it might well have choked the animal to death or broken as the beast became full grown. But if you are the adventurer to find the bear just call him "Dempsey." The Nanook might remember he has been a white man's pet.