

North to Adventure

**by
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Chapter Four - I Am About To Die

The fact that meat was needed was excuse enough for me to plan a trip with some of the natives. So I explained my desire as best I could to Lukas, who was chief of the immediate tribe in our vicinity.

It was a brilliant and gay morning in early October as we sailed out of our little harbour and Nick shouted au 'voir to me.

There was not a sign of ice on the water, although we had understood there would be drift ice to be seen in the first weeks of fall. There was a fair wind which lasted about three hours as we were sailing in an omiak, which is the name of the native large skin boat. It is really made of driftwood, whalebone or ivory, and of whichever material the foundation may be the whole is covered with sealskins. The seams of the skins are sewed by the clever Inuit needlewomen. These seams are waterproof and are held with deer sinew taken from the neck of the caribou.

Our boat was a good twenty feet long. It would have given plenty of accomodation for an entire native family or for a large hunting party, but there were just myself and five natives. There was a small crude mast lashed near the forepart of the ship, and there was a small square sail. Our sail was made of the skin of the intestines of the square flipper seal, but since a sort of civilization is reaching Baffin Land, many of these native sails are now being made of white man's cotton or sail cloth.

We had loaded provisions aboard the boat in sufficiency for eight days, the intention being to go on just a comparatively short trip, for we had already sighted a lot of seals and other marine life in the open water which strangely obtained for this time of year. If I had only known what was to come, - but that is the way of things.

As the omiak scudded over the short choppy waves I could hear the natives talking among themselves. I paid little attention because when they spoke quickly I could not understand very well, and I could attempt only a few words myself. As the trip continued I was content that all was well, for several of the natives had

already made brief excursions in their kyaks, and we had already twelve good seals in our catch.

I watched eagerly to see how the native hunts; I wanted to qualify as a hunter one of these days myself, and both Nick and I had grasped before this that to get certain markings on the winter or summer keeool-ee-tuk it is necessary to have shown certain degrees of prowess. These markings are hand-sewn into and on the outer clothing as distinguishing features of the dress.

The kyak may be described as a sort of canoe. It is made seventeen feet long, is very narrow and decidedly pointed at both ends. It is made of the same sealskin-covered driftwood as the larger omiak, to the deck of which it is lashed when not in use and when being taken out to the hunting grounds. It is treacherous craft for one who is not accustomed to it, as I was to find out. I had watched the natives lower the kyak to the surface of the water beside the bigger vessel. The man who was going out in it would hop down into the cockpit of his single-seater sports-model canoe of the Arctic. With his gun secured to the deck of the little boat, his harpoon on the stern deck and his paddle in place, off he would go from the parent vessel in search of game, particularly for seal and walrus. In a short while the native would be back with a nice fat seal in tow, and as seal meat is the staff of life to the Arctic dweller, it is a matter of congratulations for everyone when a seal is caught.

There was a bit of wind blowing around three o'clock of the afternoon of our third day out from Port Burwell, and I noticed the last man to take away in the kyak came back almost immediately and without any game. The natives were showing some excitement. Even if I did not understand what they were saying, I could see by their actions that something untoward was about to happen. We were running hard before the wind, heading due east, and I could know for myself that the fairly hard wind of a couple of hours before had now become a gale. The Inuit sailors took down the square sail. Then they attempted to stretch out sea anchors. I helped to make these, for the men were working at triple speed, and by now I was sharing their anxiety, for a bad storm was on us. For these anchors we used sealskins tied at the four corners by lines. We cut holes in the skins in several places, and then heaved the valuable things overboard in the hope they would cause a drag. We did slow down a bit, but the wind was blowing harder and we still headed due east on the drift of the water. There was no way to tack the ship round, and I didn't need to be told that going due east meant we were heading for trouble up against the mainland, and the mainland was a mass of jagged rocks and miles of what amounted to nothing beyond them. At least, I thought we were headed toward the mainland, and afterward I learned the natives believed so too.

The more nervous and excited I became, the more careful I was to try and camouflage my feelings; the natives remained apparently very cool, yet they kept peering anxiously into the murk of the storm. As the omiak careened over ever more turbulent waves, I thought of all the tales they tell of how your whole life comes up before you as you are about to drown. But not a thing which had happened in my short life-time came before me, and, in fact, the idea of danger by drowning hadn't actually occurred to me. I kept watching my wrist watch to see the time, and I watch the gale turn into a howling blast. Then I remembered I didn't have my revolver on, for this was by way of being a pleasure trip for me as well as an opportunity to study the native methods of sealing, which, later, we Police would have to use ourselves.

It was now quite dark, but the illuminated hands of my watch marked that it was seven; and then somehow it was nine o'clock. I can't tell anything of those two hours between. You couldn't hear yourself think with the noise of the storm. The natives and I just crouched in the boat, and it seemed that only a few minutes more had passed when our omiak was piled up on the rocky coast that seemed to have loomed straight into our headlong path.

Shipwrecked! Nothing in the training manuals of the Mounted Police had told me what to do under these circumstances. Instinct helped me as much as it helped the natives, for the first law of the North, as at all other points of the compass, is self-preservation. With amazing speed, as I look back on it now, we all leaped from the omiak, then slipped and scrambled back to a foothold on the rocks, and reached what at least was not yet to be a watery grave. The waves tossed the omiak out of sight, and when we came to ourselves the next daybreak, there was not even a broken spar to be seen bobbing on the combers.

No eastern Inuit can swim. Even all my skill as a swimmer would have done no good, had I fallen into the breakers. No one tries to swim in those northern waters, for they never get over twenty-nine degrees above zero at any time, and to be submerged in that temperature means certain death.

The natives and I had saved ourselves thus far, but we had lost the ship and all supplies; everything was gone but the clothes we stood in. As it happened, each of the natives had a six-inch hunting knife, and I had one too; concealed in my keeool-ee-tuk I also had my small but ever-present package of first-aid materials.

It was dark and, added to the wind, there was a steady downfall of chilling rain that poured all night. Sealskin clothing will keep out "weather" for a number of hours, but not weather like this, so by morning we were soaked to the skin, and the air was turning colder although the wind had dropped. We had left Port

Burwell wearing our sealskin summer suits, not the caribou suits of the winter. This was neither bad judgment nor lack of foresight. There had been no reason to doubt that good weather would hold at least another two weeks, and we intended to be gone only eight days. I'd had no personal experience of these things, and I just followed the example of the natives, wearing what they did.

Dawn came after the short October night; my watch kept ticking and I blessed the works that stood up under these conditions. When I staggered to my feet from the rock bed on which I had thrown myself the night before, there stood grinning five natives who were drawn up in a semicircle before me.

"If they can smile," I thought to myself, "the white man can do no less." I grinned back at them.

"Wheyanna," said the one called Lukas.

Wheyanna," said the man whom Nick and I had named Tommy, and "Wheyanna" repeated all three of the others.

"Wheyanna," said I, copying their tone as nearly as possible, and with no ghost of a notion what the word or sound meant.

But that brought broader smiles to the native faces and a general cheerfulness into the murky atmosphere. The rain had stopped; the wind was decidedly going down. We went back to look where we thought our omiak had come ashore, and could only see the waves boiling in a terrific rage. There was not a vestige of anything to be seen, just rock and water, spume of waves, water and more rock.

"Wheyanna," the native chaps chorused again, and this time I said nothing. but smiling "wheyanna" was my first thorough lesson in the philosophy and psychology of my small brown brother. "It matters not," is the English of it.

The situation we were in may have looked all right to my comrades in this pickle, but it looked all wrong to me. There was no boat, and there were no provisions and no rifles. There was not a trace of human being in sight but our own six selves; not a bird or a beast, and of course not a tree, for in Baffin Land we are far from the timber belt. The surroundings were the nearest thing to complete nothingness I ever hope to experience.

I tried to be as stoical as my friends, but I wished I could talk to them. I rubbed my stomach, and they rubbed theirs. I opened my mouth and pointed to it, and

they opened their mouths and pointed to them. We were agreed on one point; they were hungry and by Jupiter, so was I!

We began to explore where we were, and found a dip in the rocks where some rainwater had collected. It was refreshing, although I suspected it of being slightly brackish; still it was fresh water. As daylight increased the natives began walking forward slowly, every few minutes stooping and peering at the ground.

"Driftwood," I muttered to myself, "or moss perhaps." I thought they were looking for something which to make a fire. Then Lukas came to me and signed that I should stay around the place where we had first landed. He put a couple of loose rocks together by way of a seat and motioned for me to sit down; then he made gestures that showed me he and the others would go away, but they would come back, and they evidently expected that I would be where they had left me when they did come.

I was there.

I watched the five men going slowly out of sight, sometimes moving separately, and sometimes getting together in a group, but all the time they were stooping and peering, peering and stooping. Then Lukas returned alone and invited me to stop on to the higher ground that went inland. He signed for me to help in the looking process. It was driftwood we sought, and moss, but more important yet was the hope that there might be found tracks of an animal, maybe a bear. I thought of nice juicy steak, and I could begin to feel the saliva run in my mouth. Then I came on another pool where rainwater had gathered, so I cupped my hands and drank sparingly.

As I climbed higher to the top of the bluff I found, as the natives must have already discovered, that we were not on the mainland as we had hoped, but on an island. Later I was to find it was Savage Island, which lies in the mouth of Hudson Strait, practically at the edge of the North Atlantic.

We found no trace of wood or animal, and as darkness fell we returned to the place where there were loose rocks and shale. We constructed a sort of rock shelter and windbreak, and fell down exhausted. I tried to sleep, but that was the hardest bed and worst night of my life. Luckily it rained some more, although not very heavily, but at least that assured us that the rock pools would be filled. There would be no thirst, but hunger was something else again.

And the next day came. My watch continued to tick. "Wheyanna," I said to myself in truth, when I lay down at the end of the third day. It did not look as though we

would ever leave the place alive. We had no fire, no food and no boat, and as far as I could see no prospect of any of the three.

Then, early on the morning of the fourth day after we had been shipwrecked, through a nightmarish half sleep I heard the roll of a displaced rock. I opened one eye, and against the faint light of the morning I saw one of the natives, Eey-ay-tok, steal away without disturbing any of the others. I wondered for a moment what he was up to, and then my thoughts wandered again. I thought of roast turkey with chestnut stuffing; of roast beef with yorkshire pudding, gravy, potatoes and green vegetables, and I thought of that crunchy kind of pudding that has dates and nuts in it and whipped cream on top. That was on the menu of the last dinner I had served to me before I left home during my farewell furlough. I thought of canned beans and tomato soup, and hot dogs - oh, yes, they all marched before my mind's eye. It became like a parade of the army of food calories going by a reviewing stand. It was plain hell. I tried to jerk myself back into full consciousness, and then I heard a shout.

I stumbled to my feet and found Lukas was pulling at my arms. He drew me to where Tommy and the others stood, and then we could see Eey-ay-tok lumbering toward us at a half run and shouting as loudly as his now lessening strength would allow. He said one word over and over again, but I could not catch what it meant. Much later in my sojourn in the North I was to find out that the native never shouts directly at his fellow, but has an impersonal method of imparting information, so there would have been plenty of excuse for my not understanding even had I been more familiar with the language sounds.

But the natives were now standing with their mouths wide open, and then they took on expressions of great seriousness. I wondered what new disaster could have overtaken us, for presently they made a tremendous commotion and there was a great deal of talk. I wondered if these usually silent natives could have gone crazy - was I alone on a barren stretch of rock with five mad men? I felt none too comfortable.

The five men went into a huddle and I realized, having been among them long enough at the Post, that it was most unusual for natives to hold an informal conference of this sort. Usually, outside of their councils, there is no argument about anything. One will say whatever means "let's go," and they all start moving in the same direction.

Now the conference broke up, and all five natives stooped down and picked up small stones and gravel which they started throwing into the air to a considerable height, and then watched where they dropped.

"Humph," I said to myself. "Are they drawing lots as to who'll kill me?"

Fantastic things were passing through my brain, and I didn't fancy myself being used in lieu of bear meat or seal meat. This was only a bit of delirium; I knew perfectly well these natives were my friends. I knew, too, that I, the white man with all the discoveries of science at the back of me but helpless now as a baby on a barren island, was the first care of these primitive brown men.

Finally Eey-ay-tok, who was still quite the most excited of the group, urged us all down toward a small sandy cove which we had investigated only the day before.

But there was something new here. I could even sense that myself. There, as plain as thought sunk in wet concrete, I could see tracks of feet.

"Man Friday," I croaked rather than spoke, for my throat bothered me; and then I broke into peals of laughter, but I caught myself up when I saw the natives looking at me closely. I stooped over the footprint, and saw it was not that of a man, for it was huge and it was flat. I thought, "If it should be other natives we are saved," and then I felt that laughter coming on again, and I turned away.

Lukas had taken charge of things. I saw him release his hunting knife from its sheath, and as he talked and gesticulated, he flourished the knife. Two of the natives came over to me, and each took hold of one of my arms, thus they led me away from the beach. The third and fourth man followed close behind us, but Lukas stayed on the lower ground. But after a while he joined our group again, and I was made to understand that we were to go further along. Obviously we were tracing the footmarks, and it seemed we went miles over slimy rocks until we reached a second sandy cove almost like the first. The tracks appeared here again, but they were deeper and, it seemed to me, fresher. I signed to Eey-ay-tok, and he rubbed his stomach then he put his filthy mitten almost half way into his mouth. As plainly as though he had spoken Oxford English, I got his meaning. There was food somewhere around here, - walking on four legs, it is true, but food.

I began to hope.