I Lived With The Eskimos

by
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Chapter Thirteen - Just A Bit Of Trouble

The April before the coming of the supply ship had been a hectic month. There came two lost-man patrols, dangerous any any time, but twice as dangerous when there is a chance of the ice breaking, for travel is far more difficult when the long stretches of river ice may not be used with safety.

One of our patrols was caused by the stubbornness of an Inuit whom we named Sammy, and who had come in from a Baffin Island settlement. A strange, morose type of fellow, we found him to be a trouble-maker. What his reasons could have been I do not know, but he made open statements that the white policeman was not to be trusted. I took no direct notice, but watched carefully. The man was plainly ugly.

"Too much white man's baking powder," he said when he found his two children joining Little Johnny and half a dozen other youngsters who made a habit of coming to the Police Post, where we told them stories and showed them pictures of the countries which, of course, they would never see, but which they loved to hear about. The youngsters liked to think they were learning to write and figure, and they made a game of that, just as they made a game of their dog-sled driving and kyak-making in their own homes. Often I had two or three native children watching the tracings of my pencil "make tracks on paper," as they put it. They called our typewriter "gun that shoots and does not hurt anybody."

At last Sammy forbade his children to come with the others when he found them tracing on a snowdrift with sticks the figures I had taught them representing their own method of counting. From one to ten the numbers go: Ah-tau-she-mik; marki; pean-nuh-stoot; stutamut; tid-ha-nut; pea-naj-shu-yuk-tuk; shu-ah-munge-ouk-took; shut-ah-muy-yuk-took; ko-lounga-yuk-took; ko-lee; and for twenty the word was avity. After the twenties, the same sounds were used with the addition of "avity" before each one. That was as far as I could count myself in Eskimo, and I never found need of higher numbers.

It did not really surprise me when Little Johnny brought the news that the Sammy children could come no more. Sammy was at outs with everyone, and one day it came to showdown.

"Bring up those supplies," I instructed him, pointing to a load of goods that were to be transferred from our storehouse to the native settlement. The other natives were working hard at the same job. Sammy refused. I took no notice, but repeated the order an hour later, for the man had continued to hang round, smoking his pipe, and at times obstructing the other men as they made their trip along the snow-beaten trail. But Sammy stood stolid as a mule, letting the supplies which were for native use and benefit lie on the ground where he had let them fall. I would not let Tommy touch them, as he offered to do. I repeated the order to Sammy once more, and sharply. The natives stopped their work to watch. It was not until then that I noticed Sammy had his rifle with him. He must have concealed it under his keeool-ee-tuk, but now he was fingering the weapon, and I knew I was meeting a ticklish moment. If Sammy got away with this rebellion and if I had to show real anger, the influence of Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak would be over. The police are instructed to rule with kindness. But it seemed now that we had reached a deadlock.

I turned to speak to Chief Nashula, who had stepped from the group, evidently with the intention of trying to influence Sammy. I shook my head at the old man, and I felt he understood, for he said no word; Sammy would have to obey me of his own free will, or not at all, and in that case his disobedience would end in the usual trial, charge, conviction and punishment, for the Mounted Police have a right in these unpopulated districts to act as arresting officer, judge, jury, prosecuting attorney and defending attorney, all in one. I waited, and did not look at Sammy, but I saw that Tommy was shuffling his feet uneasily; and I felt, through that instinct for danger that a man acquires in the wild places of the world, that there was something threatening. I wheeled quicky on the rebel, and found myself staring down the barrel of his rifle. I confess it took nerve, although I did not think of fear at the moment; I was too angry. I gave Sammy stare for stare, literally daring him to pull the trigger.

"Put that rifle down, Sammy; if you kill the white man, you will die too - what will become of your wife and family?" I spoke slowly, deliberately, making my face and eyes as hard and firm of purpose as I could, for I was used to looking at these men with friendliness. The whole situation was strange.

Sammy's eyes wavered, then he dropped his look from mine and stared at the ground. Slowly, inch by inch, as though reluctant in itself, his rifle lowered, and I knew I had won.

"Take those supplies to the settlement, Sammy," I repeated, without raising my voice. I forced myself to turn my unguarded back to the man, and to saunter across the frozen beach. But I was not as cool as I appeared. I could hear the excited talk of the natives, so thrill and fast I could not understand the words they said, but when I turned to go up to the detachment house door Sammy was carrying the supplies as I had directed. His path crossed mine.

"Auk shu ni, Sammy!" I said.

"Auk shu ni," said Sammy, but he did not give the salute of outthrust arm which the native usually does. It resembles the Fascist salute of Italy.

That was the only unpleasant incident of my three years with the Eskimos, and I was to find it had not ended. Sammy had been humiliated before his fellows, so in a few days he harnessed his dogs, loaded two sleds - one small and the other of regular size - and took his wife and the boy and girl, and the whole family pulled out of our camp. The friendly natives had not made it easy for them, but in the end it was to look for Sammy and his family that on this April morning I was starting on lost-man patrol.

I chose Tommy and Troutguts as companions, and not one of us wanted the job. The weather was treacherous; there was fog, then sudden harsh winds that, if they scattered the fog, also brought with them a continual hail of driven snow pellets against our faces. They stung and burned, and it became hard to breathe. Troutguts had the only clue as to where Sammy might have gone. He had overheard Sammy announce that he would head out for a settlement we knew as Solomon's Place. This was on the mainland, and we headed for the same spot. We missed it, stopped, rested twenty-four hours, turned and made a fresh start.

We found Solomon's and the settlement was in an uproar. It seemed that every natives was outside the igloos; two were loading a sled, others were harnessing dogs.

"What's up here?" asked Tommy, whom I had sworn in as a deputy policeman, and who liked to give himself airs of authority. "Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak is here," Tommy continued and the men dropped their work.

"Auk shu ni!"

"Auk shu ni!" I stepped forward and found the reason for the uproar.

The need for haste was great. The story was one that may happen to any person who lets himself be ruled by stubborn temper. Sammy and his family had lost themselves; Sammy had become ill, how ill I was not to know until we found him a few hours later. But the Good Spirit had not given up Sammy altogether to Evil. It was a story of real courage of these native folk. Sammy's wife had constructed an igloo, and when the party had been without food for two days she had managed to shoot an Arctic hare, the queer little beast which does not jump like a rabbit, but runs like a dog.

At last the small son and daughter determined to set out to find aid. Taking only three of the dogs and drawing the small sled which the mother unloaded except for some furs, with the boy wielding the shorter, forty-foot whip, the two children trudged out into the wilderness of snow to find the nearest settlement. It was three days' travel. The first day, when weak and weary, they came on a cache of frozen fish; the children promptly turned the dogs and brought back half their find of food to where their mother waited. Again they started out, and somewhere along the foggy trail we must have passed them, maybe not a mile away. An hour before we reached Solomon's Place, the two children had staggered in to tell their story, barely able to walk, hardly able to speak, their dogs and sled gone, and each with only a roll of furs on the back. I spoke with the boy while the women of the settlement were caring for him and his sister, and in this way I gained some idea of the igloo's direction. Somewhere along the trail the children had lost the dogs, who would no longer obey the whip for the boy was too weak to crack it smartly. The boy made a rude snow shelter for rest; they slept, and on waking found neither dogs nor sled.

"Tommy," I said, when I rejoined the natives outside, "if the boy is right and he has been three days on the way, counting that day they went back to the mother and out again, then we should cover the same ground in five or six hours of forced travel. I've a fair idea where the parents are waiting."

I left cans of milk from my grub box for the women to feed the children; I was satisfied both would recover with sleep and warmth after their terrible journey.

We swung out, keeping a quarter mile between the racing dogs and sleds, and each following a trail which zigzagged. We were certain thus we could not miss the stranded couple.

Night fell, and we urged on the dogs; following the trail we broke at a racing lope. There was to be no stop for food or rest. Tommy scouted ahead, and then twice I heard a rifle shot ring out. It was much too dark to shoot an animal, for the clouds were thick, with moon and stars hidden. I signaled Troutguts to take my driving

line, and ran ahead myself in the direction from which the rifle fire had come. It was well I did. Tommy had found the woman struggling to lift her unconscious husband. It seemed that in a moment free of delirium, Sammy had realized the children were gone from the shelter. Too strong for his wife to restrain him, he struggled outside the igloo, harnessed the remaining dogs to the larger sled, and then out of his mind with a raging fever, he drove the dogs recklessly. Somehow the sled overturned and, entangled in half-tied lashings, Sammy now sprawled on his face down an icy hummock sharp as a razor edge. The ice had laid his cheek open from eye to chin, a ghastly wound. Tommy had come up just as the wife had overtaken the stricken man. Desperately she was fending off the dogs with the long whip, for they had turned all wolf, as they do, at scent of human blood and sight of a prone human being.

Praying that the zero weather and the tin container of my first-aid surgical kit would be sterilization enough, I stanched the wound, then put seven stitches in to close the cut on Sammy's face. We hauled him to the igloo, Tommy crowding inside with the wounded man, the woman and myself. Troutguts undertook to find the other half of the searching party.

"Tea," I said, and the woman, reassured of the safety of her children, took the Primus stove which Tommy had brought in with our supplies, and prepared us food. I set myself to use what medical skill I had acquired in training in Ottawa, to bring down Sammy's fever. We never found out what had caused his illness, but Sammy recovered and became one of the most trusted of the white man's friends. It did not surprise me when, some months later, we had Sammy arrive at the detachment house. He was carrying his little girl on one arm, and in the other hand he had a broken ski. The ski was mine. There is not much use for skis in the Barren Lands, for the terrain is too rocky, the surface much too treachorous and rough, and only in the deep valleys of Central Ungava and the inland stretches of Baffin Island, can skis be used to any advantage. I had put my skis in an outside shed to get them out of the way; the small daughter took one, hauled it to a higher piece of ground and bumped on the ski, using it as a narrow tobaggan. I don't know how many times she had made the perilous trip with success, but the last run had been disastrous. The youngster snagged her sealskin pants on a knifelike piece of frosted rock. Sammy had run to Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak for help such as had been given him when he cut his own face. And it was fortunate that he did; it required four stitches of my trusty surgical needle to pull together the gash that small girl had made in her little sit-down. Plucky youngster, not nearly as upset as was her father. Nick gave her a whiff of ether and in a few minutes we had her bandaged, tucked up on the couch in the detachment living room and feeling herself a heroine.

Nor were my surgical troubles ended, for the small boy who was son of Hungry Bob, managed to break his arm below the elbow. This accident proved to me that those native youngsters can figure as far ahead to their own advantage as any other person. I set the broken bone, which was a simple fracture; then, as always, the patient and his mother who had brought him, received a treat. This time I gave the small boy tea, cooled by the simple method of laying a slice of snow in it, and made almost thick by pouring in molasses, for the natives do not like white sugar. I figured the tea would pull the youngster together after the shock of the break.

The next visit to the "doctor's" brought a gift of chocolate, and then hard candy. At last I removed the splint, but the small boy could not move the limb.

"Take your arm down, Miki-yuk," I told him, and he just stared dumbly as he held out the good arm and hand to grab the candy pieces.

I began to be a bit nervous, wondering if I had set the bone correctly, and yet I was suspicious. I played a trick on the boy, and found out that for three long anxious weeks he had been playing a better trick on me.

"No candy." I shook my head and watched the small left paw being drawn back, but the broken arm was still held tight up against the young man's chest, as if the splint were still in place; the small fingers - clean, because washing them had been part of the treatment - were as stiff as match sticks.

"No candy," I said, "to anyone who has only one hand!"

Like a shot that stiff arm was thrust out straight. The hand, of course, was weak from disuse, but was able to clutch the sweetmeat which I offered.

"All right for you, young man," I said aloud; "but you had me scared about that arm and I don't mean maybe," I added to myself. The arm needed exercise, and I made that boy come back daily to the Post to play the native game of cup and ball, until I am quite sure he wished he had not tried to fool me.

The cup and ball game is played by everyone, adult and child, in the Inuit settlements. It reminded me of games I had seen Mexican children playing, although their toy had been made of painted wood. Up north this game had really led to our telling stories to the children, for I found they understood the art of make-believe. The "ball" of the game among the Inuits is the dried bony head of a dead Arctic hare, scaped of all flesh. To this skull is attached a fair length of walrus-hide line, the other end of the line being fastened to the leg bone of a

larger animal, most often that of the Arctic white fox, which is no bigger than a good-sized domestic cat.

Each person playing the game takes three turns to hold the long bone, and then to swing the head in an endeavor to catch it on the knuckle top. As the game is played each one tells a sort of story to himself or to the company, and the story may go this way:

"Swing! I shall place the eye of the fox on the bone top, for I shall be a great hunter and shoot the fox in the eye. Swing!"

Or it may be that the ambition is to get the head on straight atop the bone, and the story-telling will be of how caribou is shot. If the player is a grown man and a hunter, he tells how he has caught his biggest trophies, and the stories are not much different in the telling from any white man's fish story, for the animal grows in size the more often the story is told. Once I heard one of the older chiefs tell of killing a musk ox, but that was a man who must have traveled far, since it has been against the law for many years to kill musk oxen, which are now only to be found, with rare exceptions, on the special preserve known as the Thelon Game Sanctuary, which lies hundreds of miles of land and water west of the district in which I was.