

North to Adventure

**by
Sydney R Montague**

Chapter Eight - Life in a Refrigerator

In my close association with the natives during my experiences on Savage Island, and again while Nick and the others went back to the Post for a sled and the dogs, I'd had plenty of time to reconsider my former prejudice and preconceived ideas that the Eskimo or Inuit was a dirty and immoral savage. First, I had discovered that it is comparatively easy to understand the language, given a fair ear for sound and tone. Eey-ay-tok was gifted as a primitive artist, and by using a sharp piece of stone he outlined for me objects in the snow; as he pronounced the words represented I acquired a vocabulary which astonished myself as much as the natives, and which left Nick dumbfounded when he heard me converse with the natives at the Post later.

One thing I discovered was that, despite scents and smells, odors and stinks to the contrary, the Inuit of the Northeast is not dirty. He has no bathtubs and until the trader comes he knows no soap, but he has discovered that dirt and cold cannot mix.

Cleanliness is most important in the Arctic for white man and native. The Eskimo is never really dirty. He does more than a lot of white people toward the end of cleanliness, for he dry cleans his winter underwear every night; in fact, he sterilizes the articles, for there is one thing in Baffin Land which has no cost, and that is constant refrigeration to the nth degree. And the Inuit renews his winter suit of underwear every season.

Madame Eskimo tailors all the clothing, inside suits and outside suits, and her stitchery is a real art. She has a homemade bone needle and her thread is of deer sinew. Each of her seams proves to be windproof and waterproof, while the whole of the wearing apparel is expertly tailored, exquisitely hand-wrought; and yet an Inuit woman, working diligently as they all do, can make a coat complete in five to seven hours.

The "lingerie" of an Eskimo consists of fur socks; pants with the fur turned inside, and then a caribou coat with the fur also turned inward. As he travels with his dog team over the rough ice, the native heaves and shoves, tugs and pulls beside his sled. He helps the dogs to haul what is always a heavy load over miles of the earth's worst possible surface. This means hard physical exertion. An Eskimo is

hugely strong to stand the enduring grind in the nomadic life he must lead to seek existence. As he strains and pulls this way he perspires, and perspiration in the frozen North is one of the greatest hazards which the native and we of the police have to battle. Strange but true, if you become overheated in the Baffin Land you freeze to death. The slogan is: Eliminate the moisture from body and underwear each day, sometimes more than once a day - and live.

The underwear suit, made out of the dry, hollow-haired skin of the caribou, absorbs perspiration during the day. When the day's work is done and a night's rest is in prospect, the Inuit goes into tent or snow house, promptly divests himself of all clothing and climbs into his sleeping bag, which is also made out of caribou skin. Then he turns his underwear completely inside out - coats, pants and socks, and the moisture from his body adhering to that dry, hollow hair will freeze into little particles of ice during the night. The next morning, still in his sleeping bag, the Inuit takes his snow knife and, using it as a stick, he bangs out the little particles of ice. They come out easily, for the fur is brittle and dry. Now the lingerie is dry cleaned, completely free of all the previous day's perspiration and possible dirt. The native (or the policeman) climbs into his refrigerated suit, and there you are - not a dirty Eskimo at all.

Of course, we do not paddle about the northern wastelands garbed in underwear only. There is the outside suit. First, boots, which are made of caribou and sealskin, and are called muliks; then pants, with the fur outside. Eskimo fashions do not vary and the trouser legs are always made to flare at the bottom. That is to allow free circulation of a certain amount of air between the two suits, outer and inner, and the pants are always made rather short in the leg. This is one of the daily surprises that one meets in the North, that aeons ago these Inuit's ancestors must have discovered the value of air space as an insulator against extreme cold. Modern man turns up with the same theory and applies it to dwellings no more than a quarter-century ago. The Inuit has quite a bit of intelligent inventiveness.

Then there comes an outside coat which the white man calls parka, and the Inuit calls keeool-ee-tuk. The expert tailoress of this coat allows for absolute freedom of movement on the part of the wearer over the arms and shoulders. Since one has to run with the dog team, crack the dogwhips, throw harpoons, fix fishing tackle, climb rocks, clamber over hummocks of ice and snow that seem like small mountains, and do it all without splitting seams, the fact that one never does is a tribute to the suitmaker.

There is a hood to the keeool-ee-tuk which slips over the head easily on a very cold day, and there are two little thongs on the hood's sides which, if the wind is blowing, are pulled tightly to allow the face to be covered completely except for the eyes. The Police also wear a type of goggles, as frostbite of the eyes is frequent.

The caribou suit is now complete, with fur mitts and waterproof overboots, the whole outfit weighing only about eight pounds. The police trousers are made with a white line along their side seam, following the pattern idea of the gold stripe along our blue uniform trousers. The Inuit has plenty of ingenuity and originality, and it is by these white stripes that he distinguishes his "servant of the people" from his brothers, when all are dressed in furs.

Along about March of each year the temperature in Baffin Land at the coast begins to rise until it becomes a few degrees below zero; then by July it has risen above zero, and we consider it a suffocatingly hot day when it registers fifty degrees above. Nick and I had arrived in July, and we found that the construction of our quarters was of paramount interest for the first weeks. Until the first year was completed we found we had neither the time nor energy left to invent outdoor entertainment for ourselves beyond the hunting, fishing and sealing which up in the Northland become a necessity before they are a sport or relaxation from duty; in fact, hunting patrols come in the line of duty. Living in this northeastern country requires an almost superhuman ability and intelligence beyond the normal, as shown by the native. Until we Police introduced some few articles of daily use which the Inuit had never seen before, but which he adopted readily, living was entirely off the land and from the sea.

As August that first year had advanced, Nick and I began to see the necessity of getting into native dress. We had summer outfits made, and gave instructions for winter garments to be got ready. At the Post we continued to wear our long service underwear of pure wool, but soon found in this, as in most other things of living when on patrol, that the native is wiser than we, and for health and comfort we were forced to adopt the native method of wearing fur next the skin. It was not unpleasant, but following the morning chore of breaking off the ice particles in the fur, the plunge into the caribou garment had all the sensation of getting under a needle shower of ice-cold water.

Nick and I had our "tubs." Bath night for us was merely a question of heating a plentiful supply of water on our stove. The government had sent with us literally bushels of soap, just as they had supplied us with tons of coal and all other fuel, excepting the driftwood with which our fires could be started.

There was one thing upon which both Nick and I determined when we laid out the plans for our Post house. I suppose traditionally it was in our blood, but without discussion we had marked a spot on the plans for the sitting room for a fireplace. To sit by an open fire when the day's work was done, or to stand, as our ancestors must have done, with our backs to that open fire when some knotty problem was under discussion, was a sure instinct for our race. The outline of the house building plans used for the police post of the North had carried no detail of fireplaces when we had studied this part of our problem for living in the training period at Ottawa, but with a couple of failures which involved tearing down both the fireplace and the chimney in order to make the latter draw correctly, we rigged up for ourselves something which later became the envy of all those who exchanged visits with us, or who sojourned with us for some considerable time, storm bound or on business. We built the fireplace of rough native stone, and we contrived a mantelpiece. On either side of this fireplace we placed our comfortable armchairs, which were upholstered in a dull shade of henna; our couch occupied a place by the side wall, and our dining table was ornamented with a crocheted centre mat. Nick must have supplied that, for there had been no fine needlework in my baggage. But there lay on that mat our entire library for the first year of our service in the Northeast. It was a Bible, and this did happen to be mine, a book which had accompanied me on all my travels because it was given me by my mother.

I cannot say that I have ever read this Bible much before, but now both Nick and I read it from end to end, even to the "begats." We got so we could repeat long passages from memory, and did so. We discussed meanings and argued as to possible translations. Nick was a fair scholar in many languages. He spoke Hindustani fluently; he knew quite a bit of Arabic, we'd both had Latin at school, and since I had been brought up in Montreal, I spoke fluent French.

During one enforced incarceration at the Post because of a blizzard which lasted for thirteen days without let-up, we hit upon a plan of removing a page from the Bible, then when the current reader reached that point he was required to write in from memory the missing verses or chapters. We made up cross-word puzzles from the Bible also, and caused confusion to each other since we, unfairly enough, used words of languages unknown to each other. It was over a biblical crossword puzzle that Nick and I came the nearest to a quarrel during our three years up north. There was a four-letter word meaning "nothing, literally and figuratively." Nick had made the puzzle. For a long time that word stuck me because I thought it must be in his favourite Hindustani; while all the time it was a word he had picked up from my own frequent use of the French "rien."

That near quarrel taught us a lesson. The problem of two men living together for months and even years in a country hostile by nature to every instinct of the

white man, is one of delicacy. The authorities provide for this, and indeed the system upon which the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is run in this regard is almost down to a fine science. In Northland posts the two police are contrasts in men. One is usually chosen because he is unusually tall, heavy and with a magnificent physique. This man will become largely the executive. The comrade policeman to this first type will be a few inches less in height and several pounds less in weight, this because he can travel faster with a wiry physique. He requires less food, this smaller man, which is a vast consideration where every supply must be brought two thousand miles by water and hauled by dog team and packed upon the person as a journey is taken overland. This difference between Nick and myself was the reason that I went on the greater number of long patrols.

When volunteers are chosen for service in the Barrens all rank differences are forgotten. Nick was a Corporal, and I was plain Constable Montague. In ordinary service he would outrank me, but on Northeastern service neither superseded the other; but both ranked in authority over any civilian, and when officers of other branches in government service eventually arrived at our Post, they, in the last analysis, also became subject to the Mounted Police as representing the Law.

Congenial spirits are chosen, too, in so far as possible, and the powers that be will endeavour to place those known to be close friends in Posts together, just as Nick and myself had been assigned to Port Burwell, not only for the difference in the physical but also in the mental, and perhaps one can say with propriety the spiritual build. The sending of three men to isolated posts has been experimented with, and it has always ended in mental disaster if not death for one of the three. No matter what steps have been taken to avoid it, invariably one man gets to a point where he believes the other two are aligned against him. He broods, he becomes suspicious of what the two men may be saying should they speak together, seen by him but not heard. He suspects that they are talking about him, and then he suspects they are plotting against him, and that is the end.

The loss of the new books which would have been in our library box, and the old favourites, the magazines and reviews, was a real tragedy for us. "Take this volume of Shakespeare's works and a Bible," directs the commanding officer in the police training school; and he continues, "There is nothing in life or law or on disobedience to the law, the code of which is not in one of these books for the solving of your problem." And in the police libraries there are always to be found copies of Confucius and of philosophy. When our first supply ship reached Port Burwell a year later, our first thought was of the mail and messages from the home folk; then the newspapers, magazines, books, the two pieces of printed matter, Bible and Shakespeare, which may be listed as textbooks of the Mounted

Police, and good old Confucius, for Nick and I enjoyed the philosophy of the great Chinese.

To eliminate all traces of feeling from the crossword puzzle episode, Nick and I simply reversed our hours of duty and sleeping times.

"I think I'll take a spell of night duty," said Nick, and since specifically there was no night duty required of us, I knew very well he had hit on a method by which the strain on our nerves would be removed. It was very simple. Nick slept while I was awake, and vice versa. We planned it that we even did not see each other, although our sleeping cots - single beds of the iron, hospital variety with extremely comfortable spring mattresses and equipped with the best of sheets, blankets and coverlets - were in the same room.

Nick continued to sleep through that whole first day of divided duty. I got up and set the house to rights. Ee-ma and Essie, our native maids of all work, were unable to reach the Post from the native dwellings when a storm raged such this first of the bad blizzards we had experienced. I enjoyed a lonely breakfast; wrote my log and diary, and with that feeling of the "whole day before me," I rooted out socks to darn. I found twenty minutes had gone by when that piece of housewifery was completed. I went into the kitchen and assembled the ingredients for a cake, as culled from the special cook book of my mind, which was to rely upon my memory as I had watched my mother's cook proceed on many occasions when I had smuggled myself into the kitchen at home to wheedle cookies or to be allowed to scrape the batter bowl. The government cook book was in the missing library. Strangely enough, the cake was a success, and I celebrated by eating it all. This necessitated making a second one, for I thought of Nick.

The gale howled with increasing ferocity, and I went to the kitchen window to look out. Snow swirled and twisted down the narrow gullies of rock which split like a canyon at the back of the Post. I went to the sitting-room windows, first one and then the other, and looked out. There was snow swirling and twisting, and all sight of the ocean and the headland toward which the Post quarters faced, was blotted out as though it had never been. I went back to the kitchen window. I trimmed the kerosene lamps and lighted them. Then it came time for dinner and then for supper, and I cleaned up the kitchen and sitting room again, so that there should be an immaculate setting for Nick when he awoke and got up. I laid his breakfast covers, and left him a note of explanation on top of the cake.