

North to Adventure

**by
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Chapter Six - Living is Such Fun

I was horribly disappointed. I could see only the side ocean tumbling and tossing to a wide horizon; then dark clouds which had gathered swept on, and I could see a harsh, incredibly clear and high ceiling. That was all, and the visibility should have been perfect. I gazed out seaward and then back to look enquiringly at Lukas. He smiled, danced around several times, then went over to Nashula and patted his back enthusiastically. Lukas turned toward me, - had I got his meaning?

Nashula took a turn at my enlightenment. He went through the motions of raising a sail, and again those of paddling. I understood. There was a boat out there. I applied myself to penetrate beyond those tossing waves with eyes which, I must confess, were suffused with an unaccustomed moisture.

There was a thin dark line showing up against the sky. And it was a mast, so presently my straining eyes picked up the gleam of a shaft of light across a sail .

We were saved. I felt joy and relief, and I find it impossible to convey in words those feelings I experienced then when realization came that this was a sailing boat, that we were in contact with the world again, that this meant salvation, safety.

The boat was now in full view, a one-master, the sail full and running before the breeze.

Then doubt protruded its ugly snout upon this miniature paradise that hope had created atop a barren rock. What if the boat's crew did not see us? What if we failed to attract the attention of the men aboard?

The natives began to caper up and down and to shout. I joined them, leaping as though crazed and reaching a point of near-frenzy with yelling. Presently Lukas and Nashula ceased and bent over the signal fire, which was burning mostly bear fat. They built up the flame with more fat, and then they pulled off parts of their clothing, their sealskin boots and the hoods from off their keeool-ee-tuks, and these they added to the fire. I guessed the objective and added my contribution

so that a high column of smoke would ascend into the air, which unfortunately was not still. The wind was strong, and there was danger that the smoke might be dispersed without the boatmen catching glimpse of such a strange emanation coming from a barren island.

It was Eey-ay-tok who took the initiative again, for he tore a part of his skin parka and started a second fire a few feet away from the first. As the smoke began to rise the natives took measured strides, back and forth, veiling the fire on the ocean side at each passing. They were intent on breaking the continuance of the fire and smoke to cause wonder in the minds of the men who we hoped would be our rescuers.

The sailboat was now within a quarter mile of the shore and still heading up the strait. Suddenly she veered sharply out to sea again, and my heart sank. Was this to be a disappointment, with rescue apparently so near - could it possibly be that the men aboard had not seen us? I glanced at the natives standing near me, but they were smiling still and quite confident, certain that our rescue was at hand.

Soon I realized the boat was in some difficulty as I watched it tacking back and forth. Old Lukas made signs that told me the strength of the tide running was the cause of the delay in their getting closer in to land. He sat down, as did his comrades, and calmly they waited.

It was fully two hours later as I could guess time, and allowing a good margin for my impatience, that the boat turned to race shoreward on the change of tide. It was not until the small vessel had anchored, and I saw my companion policeman from Port Burwell prepare to jump ashore, accompanied by a native, that I jerked to life and realization. Then only did I move to reach the water line from our hilltop lookout station.

Nick reached out that great strong hand of his and clasped mine. Then that imperturbable six-foot-four-inch, raw-boned, dark-haired Englishman stooped and lifted me to a fair height off the ground as he grasped me by two elbows. Then he set me down.

"How's your Che-pot-itik?" he asked me, smiling as casually as he might in greeting me after a separation of half a day on ordinary patrol. His question meant no more than "How's your tobacco supply?" - a native expression which we had learned early and which we had adopted as our own private greeting.

"None," said I, and as Nick took out his pouch I knew we had experienced one of the great moments of deep feeling between men who are good friends.

"I stopped by," continued Nick, "to see if you wanted to go fishing," and then he signaled over his shoulder to the other men aboard the boat to bring up supplies. It was just like that. Nick, for at least ten days of our sixteen day's disappearance, had been scouring the coast line, tracing the ocean surface in a boat just as he might have 'traced' the lush stretches of Peace River country for a strayed child, with his horse lifting hoofs delicately so that the weary and small body of the child should not be stepped upon: just so had Nick lifted that small boat over the choppy seas, running in and out of small bays and coves, and always hoping he would find some evidence of our omiak to give him a clue. Casually now Nick was saying to me, as he was to say several times again:

"Well, old top, they must be weaving a rope to hang you for you'll never die any other way."

The natives aboard the police boat who were now bringing supplies ashore, greeted Lukas, Nashula and the others with a casual "Auk shu ni" (Be Strong). This is the hail and farewell of the northeastern Eskimo, and he accompanies his greeting by a gesture of a stiffly outstretch right arm, the palm flattened outward and the fingers held close together. The idea back of this is to ward off approach of the Evil Spirit which haunts the walking Inuit and which speaks to him in dreams. It is a primitive counterpart of the modern Fascist salute.

These narrow escapes in the lives of the men of the Arctic are a part of their daily living. Always fiction and fact stories recall the dangerous adventures and escape of the white man in the North, but stoical and irrevocable as fate, to the native Inuit such escapes are all a part of his day's work.

To Corporal Nichols and myself, although no word has ever passed between us on the matter, this rescue was a thrill which amounted to a miracle. Casual in his way as an Eskimo, I knew this big Englishman who had fought and bled for his country in India and in Palestine, was just as emotionally stirred as I. In the years we were together up there I was to see him time and again challenge fate and death with the same nonchalance as I have seen him since accept a dinner invitation to "dine with me, old chap," from a compatriot in a London or New York club. Nick was a strongly built man physically, and mentally he was a giant. His executive ability and administrative power never ceased to call forth my admiration. Stern with the recalcitrant native at one moment, at the next one could find Nick bending over the rough fur pallet of an Inuit woman going for the first time to the dark valley from which she would bring a new life, as he gently

eased her pain with one of the white man's magic "wafts of air," that put her into semisleep.

Not once but many times I was to feel a deep throb of emotion as, on return to the post from patrol, I was to see Nick busied about some daily duty. I remember one time getting back to the detachment and finding Nick perched on a ladder and painting the eaves of our home a brilliant green. As he twisted on the ladder to watch our arrival, it slewed around under his weight, and Nick slowly settled to the ground in a miniature avalanche of green pigment. Then he rose to shout a greeting mixed with a stream of descriptive invective against ladder and paint, while two native children stood by in rapt amazement and too great attention. Two days later Nick was to greet the same small youngsters with the usual "Auk shu ni," and to hear an echo of his own speech piped in childish treble, "Damn the ladder, policeman!"

But we were now still on what Nick had told me was Savage Island, and he was directing the making of camp on the stretch of rock where our omiak had been wrecked a fortnight before. As I watched those natives rear the tent that was well made even though grounded on a solid rock base, I began to realize what comfort could mean even if it were only comparative. I began to see the light of that philosophy of the white race which we call "security for the future." I think it boils down to a belief in materialism. And I wonder sometimes if it is better than the philosophy of the Inuit which makes no provision for a future he may not experience. The native kills only the amount of meat he knows his tribe will eat in a given period. I remember one time when hunting caribou with Chief Charlie and we had completed our trek; the "larder" was filled. Just as we were about to leave I saw a huge buck caribou against the sky line, and I could not resist the shot.

"Why," asked Chief Charlie, "does one kill another caribou? One has enough meat."

And I answered, "But Charlie, we want plenty of meat, more than enough, one never knows what may happen--"

Then Charlie interrupted me to say in his softly-pitched monotonous tones, "So, one may never need meat again, one may take the long sleep."

In good time there was brought ashore from the police boat provisions that were positively regal in their deliciousness. First, Nick lit the Primus stove and brewed me hot strong tea. I had bread and bacon, biscuits and cooked beans. Lucullus never dreamed the half of such luxurious living; nevertheless, after an exclusive

diet of raw polar bear meat, I had a time getting my digestion whipped into line and normality.

We had to wait a whole day ashore and another night before a favoring wind came up on which our boat could sail again. Nick and I had named this police boat the *Ah Chook*, which in English means, "I do not know." It was the first Inuit phrase he and I had learned, and we christened the trim craft *Ah Chook* as a jest, but *Ah Chook* she remained until we were relieved three years later by the police who came north to take our places at Port Burwell.

Although the water was decidedly rough and the weather a little threatening, we knew we must not delay longer on Savage Island. The five natives who had been my comrades on the island and especially Lukas, the wounded man, were in a very weakened condition, as I was myself. Then duty called. Unless under such dire emergency as this, a Police Post is never left without one of its two officers being in residence. We not only represent the government of Canada in these so-called Barren Lands, but we *are* the government. A Mounted Policeman may arrest, try, convict and sentence a miscreant, and all within a space of time it takes him to apprehend the evil doer. But criminal catching is the least of our duties. We are the Customs officials for these outposts; we are the Commissioners of Wrecks, the adjudicators in dispute as between native and native, and, as civilization pressed in on us toward the end of our term of service in the North, as between native and white man. In fact, the policeman at the detachment headquarters is the supreme authority.

At last, still feeling a bit weak and rocky as to my digestive capabilities, but decidedly cheerful, I stood on the deck of the *Ah Chook* as she spun on the tide away from Savage Island. I was to pass and see those angry rocks many times on later sea patrols, and I was even to fly over the island in a plane, and maybe all this was accomplished successfully because as I turned to take a last look at the rocks which had so nearly caused my death, I raised my right arm in an ironic salute: "Auk shu ni," I said, and warded off the Evil Spirit of the place the natives call "Killinik-Kusak," which means "Almost the end of the earth."

I turned then to seek Nick, for I wanted to talk with him, but he had gone to the other end of the deck, and instead of the white man I encountered the gaze of old Lukas himself. He beckoned me to come within a semicircle formed by himself, Ee-ay-tok, Nashula, Tommy and the other natives who had been in the wreck with us, and also those who had come to our rescue in the police boat with Nick. I was placed standing and facing the natives. There was much talking from one

to the other, and ritualistic form was gone through in pantomime. Lukas then stepped closed to my side and placed his hand upon my shoulder. He looked me straight in the eyes:

"Kad-Lou-Nok," he said, and all the natives repeated the sounds after him. This was my rechristening, and the greatest compliment I had received in my life up to that time. It meant, "White man who is almost an Inuit," and was to be my new name among the Eskimos in the future.

This was my reward for having gone through two weeks of hardship and virtual starvation as an Eskimo or Inuit with other Inuits. I had been cared for and protected by them; Lukas had shed his blood in my behalf as he had for the others. But because I had eaten of the raw meat and stretched my length by theirs in that nightly "death" of sleep in the shelter of a rude stone hut, they now gave me one of the greatest honors in their power. It was my first insight into the really deep feeling of the native Eskimo which so seldom reaches the surface in expression.

Then I joined Nick and explained to him what had been going on, and told him something of the experience of the days on the island. The sails shone white in the brightness of the late October sun as the *Ah Chook* danced over the waves and the small boat seemed to chatter, "One is safe, all cares are gone."

I laughed for the very fun of being alive, and sauntered along the deck of our boat, looking out in the direction where lay Port Burwell, to which we were headed and which was now "home."