North to Adventure

by
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Chapter Twenty-Seven - Lost On Ungava Bay

When I had left the leaking cans of gasoline in the snow shelter, I suppose a more logical proceeding would have been to return to Port Burwell, and from there outline another plan of search for the missing men, but the night before I left with my native party I had talked with Nick, following another of those futile conferences with the personnel of the air base. I said:

"After all, Nick, these chaps have only been up here a month or so; you know how green we were ourselves when we came in two years ago, and there's not a damn one of them can even guess at conditions on patrol; the whole helllish mess is right here for the police to clean up. I'm the Mountie at the air base, and there's nothing for it but the regulation patrol for missing men."

Nick saw the point. The police were the ultimate authority, and similarly there lay with us, too, the responsibility of all others at the post. I certainly did not want to have any deaths of those I had in my care chalked up to my record.

"Auk shu ni," I called to Nick that morning, when at half-past four in utter gloom, with snow falling and a wind blowing, Lukas, Nashula, Bobby and Johnny and the others had the dog teams ready on the ice, and we left the Post. The deep, heavy, drifting snow made the hardest kind of travel in the North, and if lives had not been at stake, conditions were such that we would never have ventured out.

I was convinced that the "infallible" compass had been followed by the men in the plane, and that they had gone out over the Atlantic. However, Lewis' radioed reports of his position were fairly convincing, and the idea of caching fuel on Ungava had to be carried through. It was the first time since I had been North that I started out without really high spirits, and that depression stayed with me. I was in a grim mood.

The natives and I crossed McLellan Straits on the ice, facing the head wind on the way, and we traveled hard for twenty-eight hours without camping, to reach mainland. The ice of the McLellan Straits is continually moving out toward the Atlantic, and it would have been quite disastrous to attempt to camp there. We made the first camp at Omanek, and we slept for twenty-four hours in the snow houses the natives made, which brought our energy and powers of resistance back. It was slow and heavy going, for the drifting snow persisted. We pushed on until the leaking gasoline cans forced the abondonment of them. The plan of a fueling depot was far-fetched in the first place, and I became more iritable and nervous as I realized the slim equipment which was left us, since the greater part of the loads had been taken up with the gasoline cans.

Now our route lay over the hills to the North Ungava. There was another white man's Post at Fort Chimo. Many times on other trips I had suggested the idea to the natives that it would be a tremendout saving of time if it were possible to short cut out by Cape Cah-tak-teeook, and travel over on ocean ice. Each time I had suggested this before, the natives with me had persuaded me it would be too dangerous to attempt. There was always the risk of an offshore wind breaking up the ice field without warning, and, once started, this drifted with great speed out to the ocean. The present patrol was at a dangerous time of the year, the ice and winds most treachorous, and yet, evidently because of the lost plane and the fact that the three men's lives might depend upon our efforts, the natives turned as though we prearranged the route, and we plunged down to the ocean ice field.

Nashula and I did not discuss this change of the usual route, but we both knew we were taking a considerable gamble. However, I felt that my luck might hold, and everything possible had to be done to trace Lewis, Terry and Bobby.

For three days as we traveled over the ice field, we knew we were making progress, but on the third night the wind changed to offshore, and the natives became unhappy. Lukas took Johnny with him and went out. His return was a confirmation of what I had begun to suspect myself. Our ice was drifing, and going at a fair pace. There was nothing to be done but stay where we were and hope that a change of wind would turn the drift and bring us up against shore ice. The chances were slim, but I had found, after the first experience of shipwreck, that once an actual emergency is upon one, the situation never appears as black as the anticipation of disaster.

We counted our assets, the natives and myself. We had started out with approximately eighteen days' supply of raw meat for the nine men of our outfit, and this had been rapidly dwindling. We had seen no game, and now that we were on drifting ice, we knew there would be no game. At once Nashula, old-timer and veteran of the Ungava, with experience of being lost on drift ice and being saved, suggested that we cut down on rations both men and dogs.

We took a thorough survey of the piece of ice on which we found ourselves. It was rough and hummocky, and approximated in size an island six miles long by eight miles broad. We stayed where we had been camped, and none of us ever went very far from the main party. When ice is drifting, there is a possibility of the large piece splitting into smaller sections; we examined our ice at intervals and within a short radius with close scrutiny, but were fortunate in seeing no indication of a break

Setting out as we had on a rescue patrol, I had not brought my usual deck of cards, nor even slipped a favourite book from our library in among the sled load, something I had made a habit of doing on previous patrols. Time hung very heavy on my hands. I tried to sleep a lot, and I used up my tobacco more quickly than I should have done. The natives gave themselves the same indulgence.

At the end of the tenth day on the ice island, Nashula, to whom I had delegated the task, distributed the last piece of blubber and meat. We ate nothing on the eleventh day, and on the twelfth the natives killed one of the dogs. We had still some of that meat three days later. They killed a second dog. The meat of that lasted the same length of time, but we dared not kill any more of the animals. If we should make shore ice, the dogs were the only salvation for getting back to the Post. We still hoped.

In a few more days there was nothing to eat, and for the second time I began to go through the pangs of hunger. I had hallucinations of masses of food, then the terrible nausea and retching, and there commenced the dead weightiness of the limbs. with the desire to remain absolutely quiet.

But this time I noticed the activity and clarity of my brain. There seems to be an unusual translucence of thought. As one looks back it seems as though this must be some severing of the spiritual qualities from the entanglements of the flesh. Had one the power of hand to guide the pencil, great thoughts might be recorded under such circumstances. I filled my police notebook and diary with ideas on all subjects about which I had ever known anything. One of these books I lost somehow during this patrol, but in the other, as far as I can make out the now blurred writing, I wrote many things which show me this experience on the drifting ice changed much of my outlook on living.

It is quite true that, in facing possible death like this, one looks back on one's experiences. One is supposed to repent sins committed. I suppose I had sowed as many wild oats as most youths of my temperment and upbringing, but my regrets in these searchings of my thoughts while my body was weakening again because of not enough food, were not for the things I had done, whether the actions would have been considered sins or otherwise. The only regrets I had were for the experiences I had not yet had. There were a dozen things which, when I had been out West, and before I joined the Mounted Police, I had had the opportunity of doing, and did not. Natural inhibitions, the way I had been reared, a flash every now and then of my mother and father, or of my sisters - these held be back, and I regretted now that I had not yielded then to inclination. I suppose in those incidents it could have been said of me that I had not yielded to temptation, but as I sat and thought and thought and thought, surrounded by native Inuit comrades in a snow house laboriously built from the small amount of snow there had been on our six-by-eight-mile island of drifting ice, I wished I had yielded to temptation, if thats what temptation meant:

We killed two more dogs. As the meat was distributed I was startled to discover that I seemd to be the strongest of the party. Lukas addressed me:

"Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-Nook Ka-sak will share his sleeping bag with Nashula?"

Nashula had become very weak and very tired. It became necessary to bend close to him to hear what he said. One could see the aged Nashula shrinking before one's eyes, and I was glad that the men chose that I should be he who would try to bring warmth to the old man's shrunked frame. He was my foster father, and he taught me a great deal.

That day, feeling stronger because of the dog meat, I had taken a survey of a part of our drifing ice field. There was no change in the outlook, and when I came into shelter I had shaken my head despondingly when Nashula had beckoned to me. I felt the old man was near death, and I turned away. I took off my revolver and, standing there thinking, I kept turning the weapon in my hands, then, more from habit than any definite thought, I took up a piece of rag which lay near me, and stooping down I began to polish the gun. The idea of suicide as a way out did not enter my head but Nashula must have believed I was contemplating self-destruction. When I fastened on the revolver again Nashula spoke once more:

"One dies, Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-Nook Ka-sak; if the white man's true father dies as proud of his son as Nashula, then he dies happy."

I jerked to attention, but Nashula was smiling, and I went to sleep beside him. But he became very cold, and I roused the other natives. Nashula was conscious. He whispered "Tah-bow-ah-tay," which is the last earthly sound a native makes, and the last he hears before death takes him. Lukas and the others repeated: "Tah-bow-ah-tay," and I said it with them.

Nashula was dead.

"Everything is all right," said Lukas, and he fastened the hood of the sleeping bag over Nashula's still face. And it was then I remembered another of the native beliefs. It is that when there is danger and starvation threatening, the Evil Spirit demands a life.

"Everything is all right," I repeated to Lukas, as I helped to lay Nashula aside from the others of us who were living, and I touched Lukas' arm which had remained useless since he had fought the bear on Savage Island. The blood he had shed then had propitiated the Evil Spirit, and we had been saved.

It was no more than six hours later when Lukas, who had gone out on survey with Johnny, reported back that he could see shore ice ahead, and we were drifting toward the land. It seemed incredible, but it was so.

We made camp on land ice for three days, and during that time we were able to kill several white fox. This gave us enough strength to go further inland, but we kept the camp by the coast line. A herd of caribou passed in the distance, and two of the natives and I went after them. We killed two, and the next day were lucky enough to kill two more. We cached the meat and brought back to the encampment as much as we could handle. It was now time for the burial of Nashula.

It was already late March. We had been drifting for forty-eight days on Ungava Bay, but the natives had a fair idea of our present position, and after consultation we decided that we would attempt to get to Chimo.

There was no snow falling the day Nashula was laid to rest. We laid him on a pinnacle of rock above the sea, passing the body from hand to hand as is the custom, I with the others, for I was his foster son. The old man had sacrificed himself for those others of us who stood around. Lukas knew that Nashula had given up eating several days before the rations were finished. Lukas had argued with him, but Nashula said he was old, that he had lived his life, and perhaps the food he refused would eke out the waning strength of the younger men.

I watched the ceremonial, and then Bobby turned to me:

"Will Nashula's son, Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-Nook Ka-sak, also bury his father?"

I knew that this was a greater honor even from the natives than the initiate rites I had undergone before. Over the last resting place of this old "heathen" of the Northland, I was being asked to repeat the service of Christian burial from the white man's Book. I was thankful then that Nick and I had not even skipped the burial service in our endless reading of the Bible during our first year of northeastern service, and I said the words in English: "Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.....I am the resurrection and the Life," and then "Our Father which are in Heaven." As I stood by that heathen grave I felt all reference, pathos and real sorrow, as if the dead man had actully been of my own kin. And I brought my Christian prayer to an end, knowing that if there were a God at all, this heathen was already in the white man's heaven, as surely as any baptized believer of the church.

The ceremony was not complete until the head, antlers and internal organs of one of the caribou had been placed on the top stone of Nashula's grave cairn. According to Inuit belief, the spirit of the old chief would return and take these trophies to the happy hunting ground, there to show that Nashula, the great hunter, lived on in the body of his son. We stayed another night and part of a day at the same place, and although I kept watch I saw no animal or birds come near the cairn. Yet as we started out for the long trek to Chimo, there was no trace left of the meat and bones which had been placed there.

To me Nashula is one of the great heroes of the North. He died as the Inuit lives, for "one," which means his people.

After two days' travel we were overtaken by a blizzard and had to shelter. We had plenty of meat, and I was no longer concerned for our ultimate safety, but I said to Lukas:

"If the storm doesn't stop soon one is lost again, and one does not know the direction."

"Oh, no." Lukas showed much anxiety that I should grasp his point: "One is not lost, one is here, the police igloo is lost, for it is not here."

I have been snowed in by blizzards before. There was nothing to be done but wait. I hoped, of course, that the blizzard would not last many days, because it is easy to starve to death in a blizzard once supplies give out. There is never any game, and if there were, it would be quite impossible to see it. On a clear day on land the native picks out certain landmarks which he has made his own, although these frequently change; and a white man who has been long in the North may begin to recognize landmarks too. He will make cerain ones for himself, but on the ice or when a blizzard is raging, the human, native or white, is quite helpless.

Attempts have been made to find a way through the blizzard by going in widening circles from the centre of the snow shelter, but very shortly there is no way of telling whether the circle is being followed or not. The native waits out a blizzard, and when the white man is there, he does the same thing.

We were still a half a day out of Chimo when we met the Trader traveling with his dogs and a couple of natives. He had good news for us that Lewis, Terry and Bobby had been saved and had arrived back at the Post. The Trader also told us that Nick was badly worried over what might have happened to my natives and myself. We rested a day at Chimo, but before we left the Trader told me the natives were telling it as a joke on me that "the white man is right, one can go from Cah-tah-teeok to Chimo by the ice!"

"Noo na kay youk," I retorted, meaning that some day the white man's auto would come and travel from Cah-tah-teeok to Chimo in two days, but I am not very sure that the white man's automobile will solve the problem of transportation in the North. Perhaps it is not speed that is needed yet above the Arctic Circle.

We made the last lap of the trip to the Police Post at Port Burwell without further adventure. Nick and Terry, as it happened, were at detachment headquarters when our dogs swung to a stop.

"I told you he always comes back all right...they're weaving a rope to hang him," said Nick to Terry, and then, in the same breath he shouted to me, "How's your Che-pot-itik?"

Nick and I clasped hands as the men from the air base came crowding round us. "Your damned lemmings spied a Pied Piper, they've done themselves in...must be a seventh year," said Nick, and we shook hands again.

I didn't know it would be the last time I was ever to clasp that strong right hand of his, but so it was. A few weeks later duty took me out on an ice breaker, and on my return I was to find that by an accident Nick had had practically the whole of his right hand blown off.

I never cleared up to my satisfaction how the accident happened. Nick had taken two natives and two white men of the *Raider* crew who were still at the Post, out in the police launch for a short pleasure cruise. Nick had his shot gun with him, but he was a most careful man with firearms, and assured me he was confident his gun was not loaded. As I questioned the two white men they merely corroborated each other that Nick had, without turning his head stretched his right arm behind him for his gun, and that it had gone off, the charge of both barrels going through his hand, and blowing a portion of it off. The natives, with their story same to that point, insist that by some means the trigger of the gun was entangled with the anchor chain, and as Nick pulled the shots were fired.

Nick had a native tie a tourniquet of seal sinew which was in the boat round his wrist, and they made for the Post. The air base doctor operated, but it was thought wisest to send Nick out on the first vessel which passed through the strait. It happened to be a government steamship. Terry and I put poor tortured Nick aboard, and returned to shore. There I found a crowd of natives gathered round a shapeless bundle which lay on the ground, It was old Jennie. She had been at the shore line to see Nick, whom she worshipped, leave for the outside world. We had her carried up to the post, and I called the air base doctor, but Jennie died. Before she breathed her last she instructed Ee-ma that I was to receive the skins of two of her puppy dogs, "to keep the arms of Kad-Lou Nok, Ee-Nook Ka-sak safe from all hurt." I carry these skins with me always.

"They say it is not possible," said the kindly doctor as he gave me the result of his post-mortem on Jennie, "but I believe the old woman died of a broken heart."

With a faithfulness which we had not realized, Jennie, who had given Nick a devotion from afar, had mourned for his wounded hand, and her lost friend, unto death.

As mysterious as is the mysterious homeland of the Inuit, Terry and I stood by the grave cairn of old Jennie's body and said:

"Ta-bow-ah-tay," the long farewell.