

North to Adventure

**by
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Chapter Twenty-three - My Friend is Killed

"There," said Tommy one night to me when he had come almost as far as the detachment house door with me. "There," and he pointed with his finger toward the Big Dipper, which was brilliant in the night sky, "when that comes there" - Tommy designated a position several degrees further around the arc of the heavens - "then the tide will be right for sailing."

I was quite willing to leave the sailing hour to Tommy's good sense and judgment. I knew by this time that, to the second, as measured by white man's timepieces, the tide would be on the turn and the Big Dipper would have reached the point Tommy had shown me.

This was all preliminary to one of the most interesting duties, that of the sea patrol. I had one destination which I was determined to make during the second summer, and in this Nick joined me. We made a trip to Savage Island where I had had my experience of shipwreck and near starvation. We stayed a couple of days on that isolated wedge of high rock, and during the whole time never saw a trace of wild life, bear or otherwise. That a Nanook should have come there in time to save the lives of the natives and myself during the previous experience has always been seen in the light of a miracle by myself and I think it was by Nick also.

But there was another barren island, which I guessed to be about the size of the state of New Jersey, which fascinated me because of its strategic position at the entrance of the strait, and because of the forbidding blackness of its granite-like rock. There was a mystery about this place because the native refuses to touch foot upon its shore, declaring "It is evil, the white man will die if he goes ashore."

Akpatok, or home of the little auk, is the name of this island on whose broad plateau there are literally millions of the small auk birds from which the island was given its name. Its practical appeal to me as an ideal spot for a refuel depot and base along the route when planes can hop over Hudson Strait, Baffin Bay, and, via the ice cap of Greenland, drop down at Reykavik, the modern air base in Iceland, thence to Scotland or Norway. Our children may yet come to know the name Akpatok as casually and familiarly as today they know the names of flying fields in Europe and on the American continent. This island lies upon the edge of

a great northern empire which in time may support millions of people, and the island itself is well concealed and well protected at a safe distance from the North Atlantic seacoast, while it is not badly influenced by the tides and cold.

As Hudson, Selkirk, Forbisher, Baffin, Franklin and the other grand old pioneers of the ocean lanes, passed these weird shores, their thoughts must have gone down the centuries to those of us who are still wondering: what are the secrets of this strange land?

"Take the white man ashore," I directed my native companions as our patrol boat swung round the headland, and I saw a cove near a lower cliff that seemed to offer a landing place.

We anchored, but only after long argument did the natives consent to let me go ashore, and I had to go alone. I got into my kayak, and had Bobby and Tommy, each in a kayak, stand within hailing distance of shore in case something untoward should happen. But I waved them back to the patrol boat in a little while, for the first afternoon I spent on the island I found nothing but normal rock and a little sand, and of course the traces of many birds.

However, I returned to the island the next day, after sleeping on board the boat, and this time I made my landing at a point on the southern coast line. I walked for some distance inland, and in a low-lying declivity I found great heaps of human bones piled up. There were far too many to be merely the remains of a wrecked hunting party, but the majority of the bones appeared to be those of natives. I lifted two specimens with the intention of bringing them back to the Post to get Nick's opinion added to my own. I concealed these relics under my coat and went below decks on the launch to hide them in my own quarters.

A native accosted me:

"Did the white man eat anything on the island?"

"No, the white man did not eat anything on the island nor did he see anything that could be eaten."

There is silence for a moment and most evidently my questioner is turning over something else in his mind.

"Did the white man bring anything on the boat from off the island?"

As I have never lied to the natives and cannot begin now, I acknowledged my apparent indiscretion, for they have guessed correctly anyhow, but the men make no remark. At the Post Nick and I decided the bones are very old, not even of the preceding generation. And we have never yet been sure that one skull was not that of a white person. Not being anthropologists, the mystery of this island of Ungava Bay remains an untold tale.

It was during one of the sea hunting patrols that I lost by death my friend Tommy from whom I had learned so much.

I had nicknamed Tommy, Auk-shu-took, or the Strong One, and he really was an exceptional fellow. Like the other natives, he was a great mimic, and he could repeat what I told him like a parrot, but Tommy had really a quite wonderful power of mental concentration and memory. This memory power of the native no doubt has developed from necessity since they have no written language in which to record events or instructions, but they show no mental laziness such as seems to have overtaken the white man who must so frequently "make a note" in order to facilitate correctness and exactness.

Tommy, without having a written chart or using a compass, could sail his boat one hundred and fifty miles from land and bring it straight back to the point from which we started. He used the polestar as his center and navigated by that, but in daylight or when the sky was overcast and no stars shining, this feat was accomplished with equal expertness.

The week before the expedition on which Tommy was lost I had a thorough overhauling done on the engine of our motor boat. Tommy watched me dismantle and reassemble it. Something was still not quite right when we started the engine again, so Tommy begged to try his mechanic's skill which could have been developed only by his one period of intense watching all I had done in taking down and putting up the engine. Somewhere I had left something undone.

Nick and I stood by to watch Tommy. Without a word from either of us he dismantled that engine, and put it together again perfectly, and this time it worked without a hitch. It was really by way of reward for this that Tommy was taken on the police motor boat when we got a native party together to look for puyee. And the objective was not exclusively seal, but any other kind of marine animal would do. Some fresh food stuff was needed and that was all.

We put-putted out from the shore at Port Burwell, with several kyaks in tow and three other men besides Tommy and myself. Not far from Akpatok we sighted a tremendous school of sharks, but the Inuit will not eat shark meat, although the

ice-cold northern waters are thick with them. The native considers the shark has an Evil Spirit which not even killing and cooking can eliminate.

A few miles further along on this trip and closer to the coast we sighted a herd of walrus. These are dangerous when disturbed, but Tommy and I both were itching for excitement. We slowed down the motor and inched up on the beasts, which were in their accustomed circular formation. The cows and pups are kept in an inner circle by the males of the herd. The hunter must manoeuvre to segregate one bull walrus at a safe distance from the rest of the herd. As soon as this segregation is accomplished, the engine of the boat is put to use, and the hunter rushes the lone walrus. Rifles may be fired by the white man, but the walrus hide is half an inch to an inch thick, according to its age, and no rifle bullet will penetrate it. Even if he could be shot, the walrus would more than likely sink before the boat could be brought close enough to his side, and there is always the danger that the animal might not be dead.

The natives use the much more deadly harpoon which, the spear point once fixed in the beast, ties the walrus to the boat and the wounded but living mass of flesh is towed around for an hour or two until the walrus weakens.

At first he plunges desperately about, then he starts diving, doing anything to get rid of the stinging thing which has become embedded in his flesh. The walrus may head toward the boat in his fury, and the helmsman has to be proficient to save the vessel from complete disaster. At last the animal will come to the surface to rest and floats, apparently near death or dead. The native waits a little longer, and then goes out in his single-seater skin boat, the kyak, with a killing spear held in his hand. This is the most dangerous part of the hunt, for the spear must be thrown to pierce a vital part of the walrus.

In narrowing circles we now advanced slowly on the herd, and in a short time, Ee-ay-ka at the helm succeeded in cutting out a walrus which at first did not impress me as being extraordinarily large. Later, as he was successfully harpooned and commenced dashing and plunging through the water we saw we had spotted a very fierce beast. I confess that I had a momentary inclination to let the animal go, as an hour went by and two hours and yet another thirty minutes before the beast even began to give us a breathing spell between his plunges, dives and rushes that positively created a storm of swirls and waves through which our boat pitched. I wish now I had given way to the impulse which came as just a flash across my thoughts. I can't say that I had to dismiss the thought, because it did not take form with me for sufficient length of time. I just forgot it utterly until afterward and it was too late.

It was nearly three hours since the harpoon had lodged in the walrus's back, and the rest of the herd had disappeared. It was almost dark. The lot fell to Tommy, my strong friend, to finish the kill. I shall always be glad that it was I who helped him launch his kyak, and that I grasped his hand over the side of the boat as he was taking up his killing spear. Tommy smiled at me that broad and cheerful ugly grin of his.

Tommy's kyak darted off swiftly and reached the side of the walrus. A convulsive shiver went over the long back as it glistened up through the heaving water. I watched Tommy, and saw him back off a bit; evidently the brute was not quite as near death as we had supposed. I yelled and shouted to Tommy, but he could not hear over the souging of the wind which was rising, and the distance between our boat and his kyak was too great for the sound of my voice to carry.

The kyak advanced again, Tommy poised his killing spear, and to our surprise dropped it again and once more circled off and round the walrus, which was lying more quiet. I wished Tommy would be quick; the delay made me nervous. I spoke sharply to the other man that we should steer the motor boat closer in to where this duel between man and walrus was in action. Again I was too late, even if we could have done anything helpful. Maybe we should all have been killed in a futile effort.

As we came a little closer Tommy made a swift clean throw of his spear, and I saw the weapon lodge just at the base of the head of the walrus. It would be a sure kill, quick and merciful, but just as I eased my lungs of the breath I had been holding in my tenseness, the ugly length of that big beast reared almost completely out of the sea, and came down on top of Tommy and his kyak in a horrible death throw. It dragged man and light skin boat under the surface, and we never saw trace of Tommy again.

I stiffened in horror, the natives gave the engine all the power possible and we chugged forward toward the walrus which now wallowed on the surface, the blood slowly oozing from the hole the spear had made. A little distance away the spear floated where it had been tossed when the beast's final convulsion had dislodged it.

We cruised around the spot for some time. I had a large flash light with me, and I scanned the now almost completely dark waters by its aid. There was nothing, and I knew, of course, that there was no hope for Tommy. We were hunting in Hudson Strait where the tide comes in from the North Atlantic at eight knots and swings out from Hudson Bay at ten knots. I forget now whether the tide was

coming in or out, but Tommy could have been swept away miles by an under-surface current.

At last I knew it was only endangering the other men and myself to linger longer at the place Tommy had gone down. I gave the order for another native to make certain the walrus was dead, and then we towed the brute in to shore. At high tide we beached him and Nick helped measure the brute and guess the weight. He weighed twenty-two hundred pounds. Tommy hadn't had the ghost of a chance. He must have been crushed and killed instantly when that mass fell across his kyak.

I truly mourned the loss of Tommy, and it took me several days before I could make up my mind to go out on another hunting expedition, but Nick argued with me, and naturally I knew myself that I should not give in to such a feeling. I had to go again, and that soon, too, otherwise my nerve might go back on me for sea patrols and hunting, much in the way an air pilot must go up again almost immediately following a crash or forced landing, that is, if he is not injured.

Tommy, of course, was my foster brother, for he was said to be Nashula's true son, although I could never quite reconcile that with the different type of features which he displayed and his much superior intelligence. But Tommy was a good native.

None of the other men appeared overwhelmed by the disaster to Tommy. They were quite philosophical about it, and if impatience were ever shown by a native, they did show some when I delayed return to shore so that we might continue to search for traces of the man. Nashula's only comment, although he was proud of Tommy's many achievements, and I knew it, was to explain to me that the dead have obtained their release from all Evil Spirit, and so Tommy was much better off and much happier than the rest of us who were left behind. Maybe Nashula was right.

Three days later Nashula came to me to ask that we have another hunt as walrus had been sighted again. We had not been out very long when we got a small bull away from the others, battled him and finally got him in tow with the harpoon well placed in his hide. He wallowed to the surface and went through the usual plungings and diving thither and yon while throwing up a great spray. It had never occurred to me that one day I might have to take the kyak and finish off a walrus myself. But this time the natives, headed by Nashula, let me understand it was the white man's turn for the kill.

There is no use hiding the fact that I was scared. I had the example of what had happened to Tommy, a qualified spearsman, and only a few days before. This was to be my first attempt at spear throwing. I wondered what would happen if I threw the spear and missed the walrus. How did one retrieve the spear which without a doubt would float near to the wallowing victim?

There was no use speculating. I stepped over into a kayak, for the white man's prestige could not be allowed to falter before the native. I must confess that I have never found a thrill in facing danger deliberately. The thrill always comes to me when, realizing the danger is passed, one know oneself to be safe and the deed accomplished.

I now approached my prey with a circumspection that could be best described as gingerly. The beast made no move, just floated in careless abandon, and I wished I could feel careless also. I edged up closer in my kayak, and a little closer, and then threw my killing spear. I did not wait a second to see whether that thing hit a vital spot or whether it just splashed into the water, but paddled away as fast as I could to a respectful distance from my prey.

Nothing happended, the walrus wallowed calmly in quite smooth waters, and as I turned to look I saw the spear was stuck securely in the rocking body.

That walrus was dead; I swear it had been dead for ten or fifteen minutes before my spear ever reached it. And I haven't the slightest doubt that this was one of the native methods of testing a white man's courage. It might have been some obscure reasoning on the part of Nashula to make sure that my nerve had not suffered by seeing Tommy killed. One never knows about these natives. Maybe it was a joke on me to see if I could "take it"; but no native ever hinted to me that my spear thrust had not caused the death of that heroic mass of blubber and blood.

I returned to the Post feeling rather proud of myself and my walrus, which weighed only about a thousand pounds. I speared several after that, but the first one stands out in my memory as a real achievement.

Professor Soper was at the Post with Nick when I got in from this trip, and I found they were planning an island exploration which I should have loved to join, but when Nick was away the duties of the Post fell to me, and I had to take the story of their adventure secondhand. That the two men turned up two days after they started out was sufficient to arouse my curiosity when I saw them coming in on foot from a totally different direction than they had started out in the small boat.

They had been using a small fly boat, and set out in good weather with a kicker and sail. They were out several hours, it seems, when a mishap overtook the motor. This was attached by thumb screws, and somehow they had come loose. It was too late to do anything, Nick had to see the kicker go with a quick jerk overboard into ninety feet of icy water. Nick dropped sail at once, since the boat was racing before a rapid tide. It was a danger spot for the two men, as the current could easily carry their boat through the strait. However, they were close in to shore, and while Nick shinnied up the little mast, Dr. Soper steered closer to the coast line. Dr Soper told me that Nick didn't waste time or breath to explain his plan of rescue.

"There he was," said Dr. Sooper, "shinnying up that mast, clinging with one hand, and carrying in the other the twenty-pound anchor, and all the while shouting to me to keep the boat inshore, and straight as I could steady her against the current. It was a ticklish few minutes, for I saw what Nick meant to do - to wait until the exact moment in the movement of the small boat and then fling the anchor in among the rough rocks of the shore.

Nick did it. The anchor held, snubbed the small boat and both men were able to jump to land. It was a close call and Nick's hands were badly torn, but the two men struggled up the rocks to higher ground, and hoped they would see some natives. There was a Hudson's Bay trading post not far from the place they landed, and a native who had been watching the small boat's plight from a headland ran and reported to the Bay clerk that Nick policeman was in trouble. Quickly, and without stopping to send word to me at the Police Post, the clerk went to the rescue of Nick and our well-liked friend, the "bug snatcher." Later the natives retrieved the boat, which was minus its kicker for all time.

That summer Nick and I thought up a new pastime for ourselves, one which was not altogether lacking in getting some valuable information. We "rode" the icebergs. We used the police motor launch as a parent ship, and then using small boats we investigated many of those floating masses of ice that looked like skyscrapers of glass or crystal.

First we jockeyed the small boat up to the lowest terrace of the iceberg on which we planned to make a landing, then with the aid of ice chisels held in either hand we would climb up the slippery surface. There, following a line of clambering march which offered us the least resistance, we were liable we thought, to discover anything. Naturally, only one of us at a time boarded a berg.

I climbed a broad expanse of ice on one berg and when I gained the top discovered a deep lake of purest fresh water which lay a quarter mile to banks of

ice on the further side. I walked the full length of another berg and measured it as being half a mile, and yet another one proved to be a mile square.

As the icebergs plunge out to the ocean when the spring break-up begins they "calve," which is the technical term for the split-off of little bergs, which in turn are called growlers. These heave and toss and careen in the water as though they were alive. We could never forget that the iceberg had three-quarters of its extent under the water, even when we could barely see its topmost peak as it reared from the surface of the waves. Nick and I attempted to dynamite an iceberg and looked for a dangerous adventure. We merely succeeded in chipping off a few slivers of the outside ice.

Nick was the hero of one of our humorous adventures in the berg-boarding entertainment. He got on a rather narrow ledge of an extremely pointed berg. There was not a great deal of space for walking between the up-swing of the peak and the rim of the iceberg where the water churned round it. It was a beautiful morning which saw the sun very bright, but the sea seemed to be heaving a little more than usual. I watched Nick closely as he stepped rather more slowly than was his custom along this glinting, sparkling and gleaming parapet, which was really like a solid length of highly polished crystal. Nick was within calling distance of the launch, but he did not heed when I shouted to him, and continued to examine what he told me afterward was a small lake which opened up between two peaks of ice.

Then one of the natives in my boat pulled my sleeve:

"Nanook," he said, and pointed toward Nick. I was absolutely appalled, for there was Nick bent absorbed in a fruitless idea of plumbing the lake, and coming up behind him was a fine-sized polar bear. Almost as quickly as one native had spoken, another of those with us sighted with his rifle and dropped the bear just a few yards from where Nick stood.

I was convinced there was nothing on earth or sea that could ruffle the cool efficiency of that Englishman when, apparently unstartled by the rifle shot which sent repeating echoes through the iceberg peaks, he turned round and then walked over to the place where the bear lay. He looked at the dead Nanook, then came over to the edge of the berg and yelled to me in the boat:

"A hit!" He said it just as casually as he would have done to a fellow marksman on a rifle range.

We had quite a time getting that bear off the iceberg, but by dint of roping him securely, we managed to slide the huge body over the edge of the ice, then towed him to shore behind the big police launch. The skin made a mighty fine rug, and the natives were delighted with the supply of fresh meat.

The icebergs are a menace to travel in this part of the continent's waters, but science, with the aid of modern international ice control, is making vast strides in the study toward protection from its hazards to shipping. Supported by the participating nations, and with the work done under the direction of the United States Navy, thanks are due and much admiration to those intrepid men who patrol the ship traffic routes and avoid any repetition of such a tragic disaster as that of the *SS Titanic*, which occurred close to a quarter-century ago.