

I Lived With The Eskimos

**by
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Chapter Eight - Native Guides And Families

It was a week after our ocean patrol that I begun to practice using the dog whips. I struggled with that seventy-foot length of plaited walrus hide until my arm seemed ready to fall off. I tangled myself in it, tripped and sat down flat. I hated to have the natives see me fail every time, so I went off behind the headland and practiced there and with not much better result; then I hit upon an idea. I decided to watch the small children at their play; they did not have toys such as we know; they knew nothing of football or baseball until we began to teach them later, but they could do almost anything the grown men could do with the miniature sleds and small whips which they made themselves. They did not seem to mind my watching them as long as I provided myself with a pocketful of candy bars or hard candies. I really started bringing the candy because I saw them sucking what I thought was a round, clear, boiled candy, each piece about as big as a small marble. They seemed to love it and managed to make a noise with it like bubble gum. It was not for a few days that I found out what their candy was. What those kids sucked so hard were codfish eyes. The thought of it made me sick, so I taught them the real candy habit to save my own feelings.

All the games the youngsters played were games that did in a small way what the grown ups did in reality. They had a regular sled that measured inches, instead of the twelve-to-twenty-foot length of the biggest sleds. The little boy we were to know later as Sammy was making a new sled. Just as in the large ones, there were two heavy timbers laid parallel, with a space between - on the large sleds a couple of feet apart. Since the Inuit country is north of the timber line, the timbers were even-sized pieces of driftwood the children had found and dragged up from among the rocks. They were sharpened in front and squared in the rear but, unlike the Alaskan sleds and those of the Mackenzie I had known before, these had no handlebars and no brakes. The whole control is by the main thong or coupling line put through a hole in each side timber and brought up to the front of the first crossbar, and from this it goes to the bridle line.

These children had the whole thing down to a fine point, and they knew how to ice the runners. When they brought up the furry puppies to harness them it was really a pretty sight. The youngsters were not more than six or seven years old, yet they handled the little dogs like veterans. The dogs, or kingmiks, are never used on a real sled until they are around five months old.

"Whee-at!" shouted the boy whom the others called Mik-iyuk, and the puppies commenced to run in a circle. I found half a dozen of the children answered to the name Mik-iyuk, so when I learned the language it did not surprise me that it means "little one," and does as well as any other pet name until the boy gets his character name when he begins to be a real hunter at thirteen or fourteen years, and takes his share in the dangerous work of the life.

The lead puppy was put on the longer leash, then they fanned out the others and had the boss dog in the right place, his line the same length as that of the lead, but his running position at the back of the team instead of ahead. Then the youngsters cracked their little whips. That was what I had been waiting for. I had been tiring my arm and shoulder to no purpose; for all that was needed was a deft twist of the wrist; it is a definite knack that anyone can learn. I practiced secretly at this and achieved the crack at the first try, snaking the long coil along the ground as though it were a live thing.

Later the lessons I learned from watching the children helped me more than I had thought possible, for a great amount of equipment must be carried while on patrol, and it must be packed to balance perfectly on the sleds. The country is terrifically rough except when one hits a long reach of river ice. There is less danger of upset when the dogs have a well-laden sled to draw. On this sled goes everything from a Primus stove and fuel to toothbrush and the favorite powder sent up in government supplies. After some weeks I was to learn to eat the dried seal meat and dried fish of the native larder, and to like it. I found I could travel farther and faster on a raw slice of fresh-killed game than on the canned goods of white civilization.

On the sleds go furs for bedding, with individual sleeping bags for each member of the party. These sleeping bags are made of caribou skin with the fur inside, except when not in use, when it is turned out. We take with us sacks of chopped seal meat for the dogs, the sacks being made of stretched rawhide. The grub box for the men of the party contains canned goods, salt, pepper and all things a white man must have, but the grub box is the last thing to be put on the sled. Once I packed a kerosene can atop my grub box, and ate kerosene-tasted food for the entire trip, for the can had sprung a leak and a quarter of the contents seeped through to the things below before the accident was discovered.

Over all this heap of equipment is lashed a sealskin tarpaulin, and a walrus thong is laced back and forth and loops in and out of the crossbars that hold the side timbers together. The snow knife is jammed in by the grub box, and the rifle laid under the lashings with the ammunition secured back by the kerosene, the plug tobacco and the extra pipes. An average patrol calls for supplies to last from

twenty to thirty days. In these will be about a pound of salt, a side of bacon weighing up to eleven pounds, which is cut in two pieces and removed from the can before the trip is started. I reckoned on taking ten pounds of lard with me on patrol, for lard will not freeze as does butter, beyond cutting or even breaking with an axe. Fifteen to twenty pounds of hardtack and two pounds of chocolate are what we call our iron rations.

The native seems to have a natural taste for tea, and the white man up north is helpless without tea and tobacco. Tea acts as a stimulant, but the man who craves hard liquor might just as well stay home. He is no good on an adventurous life. Alcohol and hard travel will not mix, nor will it do to drink liquor when one has to eat raw meat. The native Inuit never touches whiskey. As I gained experience, I learned to leave all bottled goods at home, since breakages were too frequent, and in weather at 50 degrees below zero and sometimes lower, we found cans froze so hard that a cap opener would not operate; to smash a can with an axe took the skill of an expert, since it was more likely to bounce away than to yield to the blow. I liked, too, to have with me some hundred pounds of beef tallow for the dogs.

It was the day I felt I had fully mastered the cracking of the dog whip and the loading of a sled that Peveril came to me. No one can make a pet of the kingmiks, which are unlike the malamutes or huskies of the Northwest; I had never been without a pet before and I missed the interest. Peveril came ashore in a dory brought in by some sailors who were going through the Strait to Hudson Bay in a trading ship.

"Take him, mister," said the sailor who had carried the pup in his peajacket pocket, and I took the round bit of black fur in my one hand, and it seemed little bigger than a kitten. I could not let the wee fellow go. Nick laughed at me, but all the same it was he who made a fuss about what we should call the dog. At last he wrote out half a dozen names on a slip of paper and I did the same; we tossed the slips in a hat, then pulled out one each, and a third one. The third was that on which I had written Peveril. I guess I had read every one of Sir Walter Scott's novels before I was out of high school, but why I should have thought of Peveril at that time I do not know. But Peveril he became.

From the first the tyke seemed to know he was my special dog, although he loved my comrade, who used to say to him, "You *would* be the only white man's dog up here two thousand miles from nowhere and you have to be black."

Peveril was a smooth-haired dog, and in a few months he shot up into a long-legged, lanky half hound and half collie, a faithful creature. He developed a

tremendous running speed, and it was well he did, since he wanted to live and the sled dogs hated Peveril. We rescued that tyke from fights a dozen times since he never seemed to learn not to tempt the kingmiks by going within their reach. We bandaged his wounds, cauterized his torn ears, doctored his lacerated chest and tried to teach him to respect the working animals around him, but he liked to take chances.

I came in from land patrol one day and halted a few hundred yards from the Post. Peveril must have seen me coming; he dodged through the kitchen door which the native house girl had left open, and dashed madly over the snow and ice-covered rocks and up the hill. My sled dogs saw him coming; the lead dog and the boss howled, and before I could get my whip cracked or yell "How!" for them to stop, dogs and sled careened down the hill to waylay Peveril coming up.

"Home, Peveril, home!" I shouted, hoping the dog would hear and understand my voice above the row. He did. He turned and scooted for the detachment house, his body low to the ground, his long stern flying, and then I was horrified to see him slowing up.

"Go on, go on - home, Peveril boy, home!"

The sled dogs were gaining; I prayed, for I saw what was happening. Peveril's paws were freezing to the ground. It was late winter and deadly cold. Nick was not in sight; Peveril had dashed out without his boots! We'd had Lavinia make him rawhide shoes to be tied on with a drawstring, just as the native dogs have shoes tied on to protect their pads from needle ice.

And then my prayer was answered; the sled dogs, heedless of where they had been going, overturned the heavy sled. The sudden drag of it stopped the dogs, they started to snap at each other, the natives came on the run and I hurried to the detachment home. Peveril was safe under one of the beds; he was whimpering with fright and pain and licking his forepaws. I picked him up, big animal he was, bathed his paws and bound them with a soothing ointment. That was the night Peveril learned to sleep in a white man's bed. Even with furs spread on the floor it was cold. Nick and I got up half a dozen times to pour more lotion of the poor fellow's burning paws and to bring him water.

"Nick," I said at last, "I won't get up again," and I turned to Peveril: "You come in here with me!" I spread an extra fur on top of the quilt, put Peveril down and crawled under the covers myself. That fool pup took that as an amendment to our rules of living; every night he waited for the special fur to be spread, and every night when his paws were better he'd hop up, curl himself into a small space and

prepare to sleep. As the night advanced and his sleep became deeper, he'd stretch and heave until the bed might have been his and I the visitor.

But Peveril did not stop there.

"Do you know what that fool dog did the first night you were gone?" asked Nick on my return from the seal hunt that was to give me one of the narrowest escapes of my experience in the Police.

"Wait until bedtime and watch him," said Nick.

Well, Peveril had figured the situation out. When I had left he stood looking from his fur cover to Nick, and as plainly as anything could be conveyed without words, he was telling Nick to move the cover. When Nick spread it on his own bed, Peveril hopped up to sleep. I wondered if I was to be deserted. My return put Peveril in a predicament, but he was equal to it. He started the night's sleep beside me, four hours later he was over by Nick's bed tapping for him to move over. Thereafter Peveril divided his sleeping hours between us. I took Peveril out on the *SS Montcalm* when I came south and left the Mounties. He's an old dog now, but he is ending his days on a Saskatchewan wheat ranch and may dream of the days he mixed it with the Eskimo kingmiks. Late in September of that first year up north there was still open water in the bay at Port Burwell. Despite the sea-coo we had seen when out sailing, the natives were going out daily in their boats. It had not become cold enough to put on winter clothing, the sun shone and the half-dawn, half-twilight that makes a northern summer night was hardly perceptibly any longer when the urge to go places and see things came upon me again.

I watched the natives preparing an omiak to go on a four-day seal hunt. I wanted to go badly, but I was not sure how to make the arrangement. I knew a few native words but I could not carry on a conversation.

I'd had the skin cured of the silver seal I caught on that picnic which turned into an ocean patrol. I meant to bring it home with me when the two years of Arctic service was over, so an idea struck me. I took Chief Lukas by the arm and led him up to the Post.

"Me go," I said as soon as I had him in the room where the sealskin hung on the wall.

"White man goes for puyee," said Lukas, and he put a harpoon into my hand. He'd caught my meaning all right. I wanted to go sealing and Lukas was willing.

What the Chief decreed usually went with the other natives, so I made my gear ready, counted on my fingers with Tommy and Lukas standing by, to find out how long the natives expected to be gone.

"Four sleeps," Lukas held up his hand and hid his stubby thumb; then he picked up a skin from the floor and rolled it very small. I understood that too. I was not to bring much equipment; all room possible on the boat was wanted for the seals they hoped to bring in.

Not every year is a good one for seals; the natives had to take them while there was a chance. It was the light equipment which nearly caused the death of all of us, plus, of course, the weather. In stowing goods about my person I laid aside my revolver which a Mounted Policeman is suppose to carry at all times.

"I cannot shoot a seal anyhow," I thought; "if I did the seal would sink." Besides, my objective was to become more expert with harpoon throwing, for the seal I had killed on the ocean patrol could only be considered as beginner's luck. I had watched some of the larger boys among the natives making themselves each a harpoon; it was the ambition of each one to have a small-sized harpoon that would work, and to have a kyak as well.

The native harpoon is simple, but so perfectly balanced it is really a work of art. The natives call it Oh-tue-tec, or the instrument that kills. First, in making a harpoon, they must find a four-foot length of driftwood, and to this at one end is fastened a fine piece of ivory to act as one part of a knuckle joint; attached to this is a bull walrus' tusk about nine inches long, and at a distant curve this is attached with a sealskin line in four strands to hold it, so that the piece of ivory may fall off the joint easily. Now fastened to this is the actual spear, another piece of ivory about three inches long on which is a sharp end of steel, which has been used since the white traders have brought in supplies of metal. The native is quick to realize the use of white man's goods. The sharp end has a cutting edge, and the hole in the tip fits into the ivory tusk; shielding the hole is a little sharp point on the ivory itself. The spear has a sealskin or walrus line attached, and halfway down the wood shaft the line is made fast by an ivory peg, the line continuing for many feet; at the end of it is fastened a seal bladder blown up with air. This acts as a float in the water.

When the harpoon is set, one finds the spear is now actually off center at the joint where the spear and the spear's point meet. Under pressure as it is thrown, the eccentricity will, after the spear hits the seal or walrus, make in penetrate the hide of the animal, bury itself in the soft fatty mass known as blubber and the shaft will fall apart, releasing the line as this happens. The curved piece of ivory

tends to turn the spear at right angles in the blubber under the hide, so as the hunter pulls in the line the seal cannot escape. When the spear and line are in the seal he is only slightly wounded. He dives trying to escape, the bladder hinders his progress down and he comes to the surface; when he cannot get free he breathes water instead of air and drowns. All that is left for the hunter to do is to pick up the bladder float and haul in his catch to kyak or larger boat.

I was having quite a bit of good luck in harpooning after the first and second days on the omiak, although privately I was still burning up over the undignified start we had had from the dock and which had not done much for my pride. It was this way. The omiak was riding at anchor some yards from the small jetty we had found, where traders or missionaries who may have been previously at Port Burwell, had had a landing place. But these people, except for the Hudson's Bay trader, were long gone from there. We patched the jetty up, and now I waited on it while the natives stowed the last of the equipment, and came back for me in a light dory to which we had attached a kicker engine. The motor was all right, but it had a jerky way of starting and balking which was awkward, as it always came when least expected. As the engine jerked, the dory leaped her own length. I stepped high along the jetty, turned at the end of it to wave at Nick, who was standing on the beach. I took a step forward and down, meaning with one easy stride to take my place in the small boat. As I stepped the motor jerked; I went ahead, for I was much too late to pull back. I grounded on the hard rock bottom, right side up but soused to my neck in icy water. It was my second bath in Arctic waters, and I did not relish it.

"Come back and get dried out, you idiot!" yelled Nick, but with a couple of natives hauling I climbed into that rocking boat and waved the man at the motor to get ahead to the omiak. What made me mad was the way the natives laughed. They meant no harm; they were just like children who see a grown-up person sprawl on icy pavement. They roared and chuckled. But when they saw my scowling face they commenced to baby me, and it made me madder. One leading, one on each side of me, one behind, I was hoisted and eased over the taffrail of the omiak. Lukas was below decks already and had a dry suit waiting for me. I did not feel good at all.

I was soon to learn how entirely helpless the white man is in the North without the aid of the native. Ignorant heathen as we may think the Eskimo, I was to find out he is a kindly man, and one who will be a true friend. He believes all men are brothers; he knows no differences of race and beliefs. Everything that breathes is One because the Good Spirit created it. They will laugh when the white man fails to do something they can do well, but they are always ready to help so that the white man tries again. They cannot understand any person who gives up trying for success, once something is started.

And now aboard the omiak, for the first time, I was miles from anywhere, entirely alone with natives.