I Lived With The Eskimos

by
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Chapter Three - Nothing Ever Happens To Me

Getting into the Police really was a surprise to me. There's always a waiting list for enlistment, and the requirements are pretty rigid, while the training is more so. I had several advantages besides being ambitious, having the right height, being the right age and physically fit. I could speak French as easily as I could English, for I had been brought up in Montreal, and I had as good an education as the schools could give me. It wasn't any hardship for me to be alone for lengths of time, although I enjoy good company, but I could entertain myself and I was never without a book in my baggage. I could ride anything with four legs and stick on. I could drive a car, sail a boat, run on skis or snowshoes, skate and swim. And I could say with honesty that orange juice was the hardest liquor I ever drank. But the riding meant the most. I arrived at the training barracks at Regina in Saskatchewan province, and found Jeff assigned to me - Jeff, that grand old mount of mine. I felt like a king of the world when astride him, spick and span in my crimson, blue and gold uniform, my fair hair slicked as smooth as brushes could make it, my blue eyes gleaming with the excitement of it all. I thought myself something, and no mistake.

Jeff did not remain Jeff long to me; somehow I rechristened him, and the new name was not elegant. He knew very well his official name was Jeff, but I had to call him "Guts" before he'd answer a pull on the bridle or the tap of my heel. Guts was a great horse.

I think, in a way, it was because of Guts that my comrade and I gave the native the name Troutguts, which also used the sound of the name his comrades called him. No native Eskimo gets a permanent name of his own until he is around fourteen years old, when he is considered practically grown up and starts in earnest to take his place as a man among the hunters. The natives give the names according to a characteristic of the person. If they lived down our way and one of them shaped up as an exceptional baseball player, ten to one they'd have him go through life called "Back Stop" or "Very Fine South Paw". Any of them called Johnny, Willie, Stevie or whatnot have been given such names by white traders or police who could not pronounce the native names. There are no Eskimo family names, and if there are tribal names I do not know them.

Well, poor Troutguts got his moniker through no fault of his own. It seems some winters before the Police Post was established at Port Burwell by my comrade and myself, Troutguts, an only son, and his parents were all out on a hunting trek, and were overtaken by blizzard. The meat supply gave out; the'd eaten two of their dogs - as many as they dared, for by the dogs is the only sure way of getting home to a native settlement after a blizzard clears. A blizzard wipes out all landmarks and leaves the landscape entirely different from the way it appeared before.

This particular blizzard ceased; the group of three, badly weakened and more than half starved, started for home. There was no sign of game anywhere. It might be a day, two days or a week before they reached the settlement. The party faced death, as all the natives do daily, but they fight their way out if it is humanly possible to do so.

A hungry eye sees far, goes the old proverb. The young son, still without a given name, with keener eyes than his parents noticed a hummock of snow ahead. He crawled on all fours to reach it and dug around a bit, then shouted as he found a cache of frozen fish.

"Nuk-kuo," said the family after eating, and saving a poriton of the fish for later meals. "Nuk-kuo," echoed the little boy, who understood that was "Thanks for the meal." which is said by all of the Inuit after eating, and is the equivalent of our grace before meat.

But the youngster was still hungry. When his parents were busy building the snow shelter for the night, he crawled back to the fish cache and ate the entrails which had been put aside to be given to the dogs later when they were out of harness.

"Trott-gut-tee," said his mother when she found out what the boy had done, for that means eater of refuse. So Trott-gut-tee the poor chap became.

"Trott-gu-tee," said I when I was learning the native names:

"That's a fine name, young man, but you're Troutguts to me," and somehow at that very moment there flashed across my mind's eye, a picture of my horse, his satin coat highly polished, his hooves glinting, his head tossing with pride as he carried off some trophy for me in exhibition riding. It was surely a change of scene from the picturesque grouping in the ride of red tunics, blue breeches with their broad gold stripe down the legs, molded and fitted by the tailors until it seems the men are poured into their uniforms; the highly polished boots, the

clinking silvered spurs and the tossing lances with their pennants flying. I was looking out now at a barren waste of snow and ice and rocks, and still I could feel the warm heave of Gut's flanks between my knees, could hear the clank of chain and bit - it all seemed a hundred years away. It was as if I had never known anything but snow and ice and storm. And strange it was that Troutguts, a young Eskimo native, should remind me of Guts, my horse, although Troutguts had never seen a horse in his life, and probably burrow himself into a snowdrift if he did. And yet I don't know; neither the Eskimo nor that horse of mine was the sort to stop at any obstacle; both liked to be first, and Troutguts, the Eskimo, would grin and laugh at praise, just as Guts, my horse, would whinny and toss his head with pride, then nuzzle my pocket for sugar in reward for a fine performance. Troutguts would look for a piece of chocolate or tobacco, the small rewards we gave the natives for especially good work.

I'd already served three years in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police when I received my transfer to the far Northeast, which was one of the big surprises of my life, and like many other things in that life, came because I had missed something else I thought might be bigger. I always craved change and movement; I believe that is why certain of the men were chosen for the exhibition work, as well as for their horsemanship. The officers are very wise. I know it was the change, movement and action I expected that made me file an application to get into the Royal Mounted in the first place. It was both surprise and pleasure when I found out that at the end of my training I was one of the two or three dozen men chosen for exhibition riding. It was hard work. We drilled continuously and nearly always to music. Our exhibitions included the jumping single, in double, in fours and even by eights and sixteens. It was difficult, but the horses loved the crisp perfection of it as well as the men. In the musical rides they throw their feet to music with the precision of chorus girls and with just as much grace, sometimes more, in their way; and as the training of the men gives poise and ability to meet people, so the horses get poise and surety, and they become quick to see a way out of a tight place.

Then we had tent pegging and lance drill. Tent pegging needs a good eye, a steady arm and a horse under perfect control, with absolute timing. Lances up, the exhibition riders stand ready for the gallop; the pegs are placed loosely in the ground a certain number of yards apart, and are made of pieces of wood not much larger than clothes pins and about the same shape. the signal is given, the lance is pointed, the horse put into a thunderous gallop, the rider stoops to one side, rams his lance and picks up the peg on the gleaming point, then rides off as the crowd applauds.

That's really an exciting feat, but not as much as lance drill, for in tent pegging each man and each horse is on his own. In the drills one depends each upon the other, the whole group of men acting as one.

It was a Sunday evening just before the Saskatoon Fair when Mason, another of the men in the rides, and I got at outs with each other over some fool thing we both forgotten long ago. Both of us were scheduled to be in the lance drill at the Fair Show. It was not a good thing to be on non-speaking terms with a comrade, and the worst of it was that we kept that up for a week with no point to the quarrel.

The second Tuesday following the disagreement, we were out under the flares, the crowds seething round the stands and massed up on three sides of the ring. It had been a dry, hot, dusty week, the temperature each day keeping round a hundred, as it does in a prairie summer. Some of the management officials had the bright idea of having the arena dust laid with water, and they doused it just before the lance drill ride. As we men rode in from under the grandstand I hear the lead men whistle in dismy at the appearance of the track. It was a mud bed and slick as ice. The drill is complicated and takes skill for horses and men; sometimes the horses have their four feet bunched together for a turn and that is tricky. Round and round the thirty-six riders of us went, with lances held aloft, the pennants hardly moving in the breathless air. And all went well until the grande finale, when we wound up in a tight circle. I felt Guts jerk under me and his inside feet slip on the slick mud, churned now to a broth by the horses' hooves. I could not save him, and he couldn't save himself. If I struggled in going down, my lance would be sure to catch my neighbour in the throat, we were just so close; and that meant sure death, for those spears are not phony weapons. I slanted the lance, and managed to get the spear end into the ground where it broke off at the sudden weight behind it. As the lance went down it only tore the tunic sleeve of my comrade rider, and that rider was Mason. It was a near thing. Guts got on his feet almost at once; I jumped to the saddle and went on with the ride. Hardly a score of the audience even knew there'd been an accident, almost a fatal one. But that taught Mason and me a lesson. We were billeted under the grandstand, so when the show was over and the horses stabled, I went to find my comrade. I met him coming to look for me.

There was not one word spoken, but we two clasped hands, forgot we'd ever been at outs, and from that moment became fast friends.

Friday night the Fair was closing; all day the heat had stayed well over the hundred mark; we were tired and maybe a bit ready for mischief after the discipline of our performances.

"We're going down the Midway," said Mason; "come with us?"

I was always game for a bit of fun, so three of us, Sergeant Oakes being the third man, went along the Midway. Most of the shows were closing, but we secured some hot dogs. Now this was a private idea of Mason's. He'd told me about it before, and I really thought he was spoofing, but he wasn't. Mason wanted to feed hot dogs to a lion and see what the lion would do. There were two lions together in a cage not far from the refreshment stand. The keeper let us go right up to the cage; I suppose he thought three Royal Canadian Mounted Police would not be afraid of anything, not even two lions.

Mason threw in a hot dog to that cage. One of the lions pounced on it and growled at the other who sniffed around to see if there was something coming to him. I threw in my contribution, and he caught it between his paws, then picked it up as gently as a mother cat would lift a kitten in her mouth, carried the hot dog to a corner of the cage and buried it under the straw bedding. Then the dusty, shaggy beast strolled round where his brother lion was doing the same thing - burying a hot dog. They buried and ate, buried and ate, until we had no more left to throw, but they always ate the other fellow's "dog".

Mason's joke had not proved so much of a joke, but we did stand there fascinated, watching the fool animals. Both heaved up and were horribly sick at the same time.

"Gosh!" said Mason. "I'm glad the lions ate those hot dogs and not us."

The flares were going out now one by one, the dark was getting darker outside the lion's cage, and we could hardly see each other; then Mason clutched my sleeve.

"What was that?" he hissed.

"Pistol shot," said Sergeant Oakes, and two more sharp reports rang out. We could not quite place the direction from which the sounds came, but Oakes was the senior man and we looked to him for guidance.

"We'll go round the wagons," he said. We loosened our revolvers in the holsters, although each Mountie is trained to work without shooting unless as a desperate resort. Instructions are "If you must shoot, shoot to kill." Criminals know that and respect the order. That is how it is that I am one Mountie who can report that in all my service, which had as many adventures as most, I never was shot at by anyone, and no one was shot by me.

But we are always ready. The revolver is swung at the end of its lanyard which is worn round the neck. If there's gun play and the Mountie's right arm or hand is injured so the revolver drops, it still swings by the cord and can be caught up at once by the left hand, for we must be able to shoot with one hand as dead certain to the bull's eye as with the other.

So, here on the dusty, hot Saskatchewan night, the three of us crawled to the family quarters of the Midway folk. We combed up the wagon steps of the midgets:

"Any weapons here?"

A squeaky, terrified voice quivered up from under a sort of davenport:

"No sir, no sir, no SIR!" The words became higher and squeakier as each of the three policemen appeared.

We pushed our way into another wagon. Sergeant Oakes, a big man, got half way across the floor, with the place apparently empty, and then from behind a curtain there came a screech.

"Don't come in here - don't come in here!"

"Have you any concealed weapons?" shouted the sergeant.

"I'll throw soap at you," yelled a woman , and we went out backward, quietly and quicker even than we had come in. That was the home of the fat lady and she was taking a bath behind that drape after her hard day at the Fair.

At last we found the culprits. At the back of the water circus some of the Midway attendants had been having a game of dice.

"Aw, I meant no harm," said the young chap who had the gun. "I won, see, guv'nor, and I wanted to celebrate, see - just celebrate, guv'nor!"

That was all right with Sergeant Oakes, but the young man had forgotten the most important thing. He had committed a breach of the peace; he was a visitor to the country and visitors are not allowed to carry a gun without a permit. He had no permit.

"Hand it over," said the Sergeant, "a gun's a bad toy, anyhow - go get something else to celebrate with."

And then the city police came puffing up, for the shots had been reported.

"A bit late, buddies," said Sergeant Oakes. "Here's the gun, we've had it an hour. The guy we got it from, gosh, he's just a lad with no sense - lost his gun and got a fright, that's enough. Maybe he'll call for the gun when he's leaving town - here, take it with you."

Gee, those city police were sore at us.