

North to Adventure

**by
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Chapter Twelve - Sad-Wallah Plans to Die

The Settlement had not long gone back to normal routine following the death of O-Hon-atuk and the operations on Jennie, when Nick and I were to have our first experience as obstetricians. Nick had had experience of emergencies of this kind when with the native tribes, but always in the tropics, and there was nothing difficult for us here until we came up against a matter of ethics and traditional native custom.

Harriet's baby was born at the turn of the night. The natives came for us, since Jennie, now wise in her generation, had given the word of the something we had told her to smell which put her to sleep so she felt no pain from her injured arm. Evidently she and the other women figured out that if this 'smell' prevented Jennie from knowing about her arm operation, it might also aid Harriet. Close to Nature as these people are, the normal birth of a baby does not appear to harass a mother greatly, but when we got to the igloo where Harriet lay we found her to be in great distress, and we administered the whiff or two of ether which was sufficient to numb the pain but not enough to bring complete unconscious, which we knew might retard the delivery. It was easy to know that something was wrong, and Nick showed no surprise when we found the baby was deformed, and that rather badly.

We were sorry, and the midwife showed disappointment, but she handed the baby to the mother as is the custom, and intimated to Nick and myself that as we had completed our task of humanity, we should leave. Next day I went over to Harriet's igloo, and I found her calmly stitching on the seams of a new kyak which Ee-ay-tok, her husband, was constructing. And there was no baby to be seen.

It was to Chief Nashula I went for information.

"Where is Harriet's baby, Nashula?"

The Chief was entirely surprised by my question. He explained quite simply. Of course the tribe could not let a deformed child live. At birth - in fact, we had seen the midwife do it - the deformed baby is handed to the mother, who has the task of releasing that scarcely breathing spirit into the void of space again. A

malformed child is not allowed to live, if the malformation is at birth, as in this case.

"You should not let the mother take a life, Nashula," I argued to the Chief as representative of white man's law. "The white man doe not approve; that is wrong."

But Nashula argues back:

"There is an Evil Spirit; it is not made straight, that child. The Good Spirit forms the perfect hands and feet and head, so the thinking (brain) of that child was not good (normal)."

There was just nothing we could do. Nick and I determined that we must be exactly vigilant in all birth cases which came under our notice. Fortunately, it is very rare to find deformity from birth among the natives, and in the nine other deliveries at which we helped with ether during the three years of our sojourn in this land of strange contradiction, each child was perfectly formed and well nourished.

Sad-Wallah died on a Sunday. I remember, for Nick and I had instituted a "church" service for ourselves. It seemed to mark the week for us, and he or I would read the lesson for the day and repeat the psalms appointed. For the first year we had to choose the psalms ourselves, since the prayer books were among the lost books. Lukas came to the Post door just as we were repeating the last psalm that day, and he asked for our help.

Sad-Wallah was not the young man's name at all. He was a melancholy youth whom we had noticed from the start of our stay at the Post. He kept himself apart from the tribe, although he lived with his family - father and mother and several brothers and sisters.

"Sad-Wallah that," said Nick to me one day shortly after we had got our detachment home into order and, having gone on an exploration hike around our immediate headquarters, had come upon this youth, whose true name we found was Ash-atuk. He was sitting on a rock with gloom written large over his features and in every dejected attitude of his body. He did not look up when we spoke in passing, which as unusual. "Wallah," of course, means "fellow" in Hindustani, and Nick was merely commenting, "Sad fellow"; but the name stuck and, until we helped officiate at Sad-Wallah's burial, he answered to that name when we spoke to him.

Lukas told us the story. It appeared that Sad-Wallah had disappeared from general view for some days, so we were not entirely surprised when we found he had made an igloo for himself and had withdrawn from the life of the settlement.

I am quite convinced that the Inuit can "will" death to himself. Sad-Wallah wanted to die and he had lain down in the igloo for that purpose. There was some abnormality in his make-up which, when he was living, we policeman could not diagnose. We tried to rouse the youth by various expedients and stimulants. Sad-Wallah lay in what was apparently a state of coma; his eyes were open but unwinking, so far as we could see, yet his pulse, although slow, appeared to be steady, and his heartbeat, a bit sluggish too, still seemed normal enough for anyone who had been as lethargic as we had known Sad-Wallah to be. He had no temperature.

I shook my head and turned to Lukas. "Better try your way," I said.

Lukas called one of the older women of his household and while we all withdrew from Sad-Wallah's igloo, she went in. This is a last resort of the native as a test of dying and death. A wife, facing the death of her husband, will endeavor to rouse him by the intimacies of sex. Death is certain to their primitive minds when the woman is thus ignored.

The older female came from Sad-Wallah's igloo; she hung her head in misery, and pulled wisps of hair across her face.

"One is no longer young," she said. "One is no longer attractive; one fails to rouse Ash-atuk."

Sad-Wallah lingered another two days, and in the end it was Ee-ma who solved the problem for us. She offered, being young and quite comely, that she should attempt the stimulation of this young man. This was a real sacrifice, as we recognized, for Ee-ma was of the elect among the tribe, destined and being trained from babyhood in the ways of the council, where eventually she would take her place in the deliberations of her tribe.

She came out of the igloo and shook her head sadly:

"Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak, one finds Ash-atuk has not been as other men; he desires to die."

Sad-Wallah had suffered an abnormality, which did not appear until his years of adolescence. Death, after all, was the kindest end for one of his sort. He died and was buried.

This deliberately willed death made me less skeptical when Lukas informed me later that the native solemnly believes that the spirit of a departed "old one" will often lodge in the body of a newly-born baby.

One of the oldsters of the settlement, probably quite sixty years old and thus living much longer than most of the men, who wear themselves out early with their strenuous life, had a most disagreeable habit of snuffing. It could have been the result of a growth in the nose. In the later months of the first year of our Northeastern service this old man died.

I had avoided to him to some extent. "Snymp, snumph" is the nearest spelling by which I can convey the sound of this extraordinary and nerve-wracking repetition of his. Now, fairly early in the second year of our service there was born to the "Snuffle" family another member, a son to one of the grandchildren of the old man who at this time had been dead several months. Another year went by. One day on the beach I met the mother of this child with the baby, just twelve months old, and now about to enter upon its separate life from the mother. I spoke to the woman, but before she could reply, I heard with a horrified start a sound, "snymp-snumph," and there, peering from out of the woman's parka there was looking at me a baby face, but such a face! Ugly as a gargoyle, and producing with its stub of a nose the identical sound of the dead grandfather!