North to Adventure

by
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Chapter Sixteen - The First Supply Ship

"How's your Che-pot-itik?" called out Nick as the teams halted at the Post detachment on my return from one of my early patrols. "Come on in," Nick added, as we clasped hands at the doorstep of the headquarters. "The Trader's here ...he's a new fellow who hasn't been up at the Chimo trading post long, and I've fixed a party for him tomorrow night, - by the look of you you're going to need a new suit before the festivities begin....My Lord, man, it looks as if your keeool-ee-tuk's molting, and I've killed my first white fox."

The fact that Nick was incoherent with excitement told me more than any words that he was glad as I that we were to be at the Post together again for a while. He was right, my keeool-ee-tuk did seem badly worn in places, but not a stitch of the seams had given way.

So I set about getting a new suit for our second party. Old Jennie came up to the Post in the morning, and I stood still as a tailor's dummy while Jennie "paced" me off by the number of handbreadths across the shoulders and chest, and the length of sleeves and legs. I was taped to size, weight, height and all else. Old Jennie missed nothing, for in five and a half hours she was back with my completed garments. Beautifully sewn, beautifully soft, the pliable skin of the caribou eased with my shoulder muscle movements as no product of a Bond Street tailor has ever done.

Jennie was her own delivery messenger. Very shy, very modest looking, with drooping eyelids and downcast head Jennie came to visit "he who is almost an Eskimo." Under her left arm was a bundle of fur, the seamed side turned out. There was an elaborate etiquette about this reception of goods. The northeastern Inuit is a poor trader as yet, although he is improving. There can be no direct barter. In a personal matter of the kind which my suit was, the system followed is rather an exchange of gifts.

Now very definitely I had to pretend that I did not notice the fur bundle Jennie carried. It would not have been mannerly. I interviewed Jennie in the anteroom off the kitchen, and then brought her into the kitchen. We talked a while and then - although I am looking directly at her, and she knows I see what she is doing, she hides the bundle behind a chair and promptly takes her leave. As I am being

watched by Ee-ma and Essie, the house girls, I play the game through. I go round and round our rooms, and then suddenly "find" the bundle of furs where I knew they were all the time. I act out my amazement. I know the scene will be described by the two girls to Jennie in fullest detail.

All the same, I need my new suit to wear at once, and so I examine the fur and find many markings thereon which were not on my former and original keeool-ee-tuk. I do not understand these white lines of fur interspersed with the brown of the caribou, and neither does Nick whom I consult.

"Ask Nashula," he suggests, and so I lift my new clothing and prepare to visit the chief. He is gratified at my coming, and shows his pleasure. We compliment each other on the completion of the police patrol, and I tell Nashula what a fine traveler and hunter is his son Bobby, who has accompanied me, and who now stands by his father as we talk.

At last we get to the subject of my enquiry. I point to the two stripes of white on the hood of the suit, and the character marks which are on the back.

"One is a white man." Nashula traces with his finger along a line of white fur inserted around the brown hood; and "One is a policeman," he runs his thumb along the second and broader stripe of white. And then pointing to the character marks on the back, he says: "One is the white man almost an Eskimo"; and pointing to another, "Nashula is one's Eskimo father... Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak will put on his new marked suit."

I changed my clothing there and then in Nashula's house. I knew that I had become yet closer to the tribe than before. I was now wearing an insignia which would tell any Inuit whom I might meet at Port Burwell or whom I might encounter on the trackless miles of patrol, that I am almost one of his own people, and that I have been proclaimed a "son" of Chief Nashula. It would take many volumes written upon the plan of a dictionary to record the markings of the Inuit keeool-ee-tuks and muliks. Each mark means a certain characteristic of the wearer, and the well-marked outfit is truly a passport and a diploma from which he who runs may read. I memorized a few of these markings and checked them with what I could find out of the personalities of the wearers among the natives, and I found they were uncannily accurate. Months later I had sewn in a white border of fur all around my keeool-ee-tuk, an insignia of which I had cause to be proud, even more than of those I already had acquired. It was to mean that the wearer is "one who has been lost on drifting ice and who has returned." This automatically supersedes all other insignia of the "almost native."

After this finding of my new fur suit, rigid etiquette of "trade" required that two days later I should visit Old Jennie in her igloo.

"Auk shu ni," I greet Jennie.

"Auk shu shay," she replies, for being a woman she uses the female speech, which is different in considerable degree from that of the male, and the white man is sometimes put to embarrassment in this regard, for he may repeat a word spoken by a woman, and bring upon himself a whirlwind of good-natured laughter from the natives. One must take this laughter good-naturedly, because the native will laugh just as heartily at some contretemps of his own. The native has a considerable sense of humour, although the quickest repartee and sharpest wit usually comes from the feminine portion of the company.

As Jennie waits politely, I begin to tell her a story:

"A strange thing happens to Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak, Jennie; he finds an Evil Spirit has left for him a beautiful new suit."

Jennie beams a broad appreciation of this beginning. Then I wander round her home with a casualness which equals her own attitude to my prowling. Quite well she sees that I have placed behind a fur piece a package of tobacco which I have been carrying in my hand until that moment. We polack again, and before I take my leave old Jennie does a bit of prowling, and in great excitement she finds the package. She exclaims over it:

"One finds the Evil Spirit has left one a gift." She smiles broadly once more, and the amenities are satisfied. I have my new suit; she has her payment, and the Evil Spirit has been eliminated by the exchange of gifts on both sides. Everyone is happy, with no crude language of barter, value, bargaining or attempt to "go one better," or to obtain something for nothing, although a first quality caribou-skin suit does not appear to be overbalanced in the scale of things by a package of pipe tobacco.

It was almost a year to the day of our landing at Port Burwell for the first time that our supply ship got in. This meant mail from the home folk; it meant newspapers, and it meant we would get the long-delayed box of books, and probably a second one. On the principle of "digging ditches," as the elders were instructed in a story in Holy Writ, Nick and I had used some left-over lumber from building the detachment home, and had made book shelves in our living room.

There was one book in particular which I hoped would be included in the official choice of books. This was a geography. Since I had been on patrol the first time, and since I had continued with the idea of writing down at least an outline of all that was happening to us, I had felt the need of knowing in greater detail the geography of our territory, and certainly I wanted to get it set straight in my mind in relation to the rest of the almost unexplored country which stretched from where we stood to the west coast on Bering Sea. I could not get it out of my thoughts that some day, and maybe not so far distant, man may control this surging rhythm of power which lies in the North. Of course, we who have lived in the North and have come to love her every mood and her hidden strength can really only conjecture. But within the next few generations history may be written of a new objective for man's migration. This may duplicate, it may even surpass, the settling of California, the land rush of the Middle West, the cattle days of Texas and the oil booms of the Soutwest. We now look to the North where a scientific war upon the elements may bring the great opening of a better life and living for a hundred million souls.

The geography was among the books, and I studied it with Nick laughing at me first, and later joining me in a really interested concentration.

From latitude 60 to the north pole, from the coast of Greenland to Alaska, the stretch of mountain, plateau, plain, river, lake and forest is generally known as the Polar Region, or the North Frigid Zone. This is the Arctic, which includes the sub-Arctic and the Great North.

First there is Iceland, a country which knows little ice; and from there one travels the imaginary miles to Greenland, the Arctic continent which was wrongly named by the Vikings in their endeavour long ago to attract settlers there, three-fourths of its area being an eternal ice cap almost one mile thick. This is the remaining continental glacier of the ice age.

Iceland is an independent country governed by a parliament whose organization has been held intact for a thousand years. Greenland is controlled by an able system of self-government and is under the jurisdiction of Denmark. On the other side is Alaska, the wealthy corridor of the Arctic leading to Russia, which was purchased at a low cost as values go in these days, and which was known at one time as Seward's Folly.

Between Greenland on the east and Alaska on the west lies the country, misjudged, misunderstood and misnamed the Barren Lands, which approximates two million square miles, a vast domain of untouched resources. There is timber, there are furs and fish, fowl and big game and there are the smaller mammals,

and great quantities of food. There are coal and oil, there is the deposit of hundreds of years, and there are known and unknown minerals. There is water power and there is wind power; there is the power which may yet be derived from the northern lights, there is hidden strength in the cosmic ray, and there is a supply of radium waiting to be tapped.

For thousands of miles of shore line the ocean tides are not yet harnessed to man's use; those tides that move a billion tons of ice in their rise and fall twice daily.

Then there are the political districts of the Labrador; the areas of Ungava, Franklin, Keewatin, Mackenzie and the Yukon. These may be the names of five great provinces yet to be added to the Canadian Federation and now known merely as territories.

The Arctic islands must be counted too, the majority of which through the work of the Mounted Police have been made by Act of the Canadian Parliament into a vast game preserve. These islands are an empire all their own and as yet uncharted. Five hundred thousand square miles is not too great an estimate of their aggregate size.

Then comes Baffin Land with its two hundred thousand square miles, little of it trodden by man and that only a few hundred miles of coast line. There is Victoria Island, eighty thousand square miles, and Ellsmere, seventy-eight thousand; and these are only three of the largest islands of the many. Of the lesser islands one may count Melville, Axel Heidberg, Southampton, Prince of Wales, Somerset, Devon and Banks.

There are great rivers that flow, not on the islands but on the mainland, draining the great North from the south, and yet excluding the already known provinces of Canada - British Columbia, Albera, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. This is the great north stretch which is almost a third of the whole continent of North America.

Then there are great rivers flowing northward; the Yukon with its twenty-four hundred miles of length; the Mckenzie, called the Mississippi of the north, for it drains an area with watershed almost as great as that of the Mississippi itself, and it is twenty-five hundred miles from source to mouth, and navigable almost every mile of the way. No bridge crosses it, no railroad runs along its banks, no city as yet has grown where now scattered settlement and trading posts are found. Perhaps these will be the metropolises of the world of tomorrow.

There are the lesser rivers, the Slave, the Athabasca, the Peace, the Liard, the Nelson, the Churchill, the Thelon, the Coppermine and the Backs. Into South Hudson Bay there flow the Severn, the Albany, the Moose, the Abitibi, the Great Whale and the Whale; the Rupert flows here, as does the East Main, the Chimo. and the Koaksook, while the Hamilton drains east in Labrador.

This is all unscratched territory, and great portions of it are even unmapped.

Perhaps the largest of all the lakes is the Great Bear, where already radium is being found along its shores, and with the radium are to be found in the same general area silver, zinc and lead. There is the Great Slave Lake, which, like the Great Bear, ranges near twelve thousand square mile in size.

Baffin Land has the great inland sea, Lake Nettilling, the edge of which I was yet to see on my patrols, and all of this great inheritance of the Canadian people comes from the controversy between Great Britain and France, when a fine American of his day advised France to choose for possession, instead of the Northland, the island of Guadalupe in the West Indies.

Nick and I sat back many evening in sheer amazement at the extent of the country. We had not realized the half of it.

"Nick," I said one night, "if history is to write of the North as the goal of man's next great migration, today we need all the strength and power of youth to be brought up here. We shall have to have young men with the pioneering spirit: we need miners; we need young men and women who count hardship as little if the reward be conquest, a conquest of peace by peace, and not a conquest by war against humans."

"You're right," Nick agreed with me, and he had thought and read along with me." We shall require private enterprise with vision and imagination and determination."

It was a great prospect as we two men worked it out to our own satisfaction and it gave us a real sense of power. Already up above latitude 60 we had the government and law in our own persons, and already there was the power awaiting its release. In this land in which Nick and I were serving a mere apprencticeship, the sense of power was breathing and seething all round us; we could feel it as the very heartbeat of the North. Yet this Northland is a sentient thing which demands work and love and sacrifice. I believe the white man can coax even the Barren Lands to "flower as the desert," and eventually to make a new home for his children and their children.

The whole new idea which had opened up before Nick and myself fired us to a greater zeal, I do believe; anyway, things seemed to go better.