

Lived With The Eskimos

**by
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Chapter Fourteen - The Ice Breaks Up

It was in 1928, according to government official records, that WHB Hoare was assigned to investigate the wild life of the Thelon Game Sanctuary, which is an area fifteen thousand square miles lying east of Great Slave Lake, along the Thelon and Hanbury rivers; one can count it as being almost due north of the Cold Lake district and Edmonton, where I had received orders to join the northeast Mounted Police draft.

Mr. Hoare was accompanied by AJ Knox of the Warden Service, and when they came on the dramatic scene of musk oxen fighting, the two men had with them also Constable Burstall, who was taking up supplies to cache for summer patrol planned to investigate the Hornby tragedy. This was the starving to death of three men, marooned by blizzard in their cabin; for the country in which Mr. Hoare operated is not out of the timber line, as is that section which I know so well.

It took the party hard travel from February to June to find one musk ox; but after seeing one, Mr. Hoare saw a herd of ninety-three of the strange beasts which are supposed to be related to the Asian goat-antelope. The musk oxen are as big as bison, thick and heavy; the bulls have horned heads and black curly hair so thick it almost hides the tail and head, and so matted on the back that it gives the appearance of a hump. It was at this same place Mr. Hoare saw the historic bull fight.

He tells of its being nine o'clock on a fair June evening, so far north that the sun was hardly over the rim of the horizon at sunset before the colors it had left were mixed again with those of the sun rising. Mr. Hoare, alone for the time being, rested his pack on a big rock three miles along the Hanbury river bank; grazing in meadow land across the water he saw three large musk oxen. They did not see him, and he hid behind a rock, rolled in his sleeping bag, and made himself comfortable while he watched the three animals. In a short time they stopped feeding and went from the low wet meadow to higher ground. Here they circled each other with lowered heads as though getting ready to do battle. When the circling ceased the third bull withdrew, the two left put their heavy, horn-protected heads together and each tried to force his opponent back by main strength. This ended in a draw and, disgusted, each animal now backed a few paces, then ran with lowered heads, coming together with a heavy shock. They did this three

times and neither gave way. They backed again, twenty paces apart, bounded each at the same instant, gathering speed as they went, so that the collision knocked both oxen back some staggering steps, and one bull plumped hard on his haunches. The winner glared at his vanquished opponent, and the grounded bull took the count; there was neither fight nor ambition left in him. In a few minutes both were grazing quietly beside the third bull, which had paid no attention to the battle.

Although there were no musk oxen now on the eastern rim of Hudson Bay and above the timber line, it could have been possible that Chief Nashula had seen them and hunted them. He was an intelligent man with whom one could talk for hours. I used to spin the globe of the world for him, up at the detachment home, and point on its surface to the countries of the world; Nashula in return told me the legends of his race and how his ancestors had come, from no one knew where, to the Great Lone Land. He had a strange, mixed-up tale of a white man who came "many thousands of years ago," and I thought he might mean Sir Martin Frobisher, who is known to have seen Eskimos in the days of Queen Elizabeth.

Yet, for all his intelligence, it was old Nashula, my foster father of the North, whom I had to take away and comfort after he had a fit of sheer terror. It was the first time he ever saw a colored man, who had come in on a trading ship. The Eskimos turn almost black on death; Nashula thought the negro was a dead man walking round. That the darkie should have been a big, tall, good-tempered chap from the lower Georgia, who laughed with a ringing "te-hee", rolled his eyes until only the whites showed, and bared back thick lips until the gums shone above his gleaming white teeth, made it a lot worse for poor old Nashula, who shook and shivered and chattered his own yellow teeth, worn down with their years of chewing kamiks to keep them soft. I never told on Nashula, and I have kept this awful secret locked up in my heart, for I had a great affection for the old Chief who made me one of his tribe; and I still hold in reverence his memory and think of him as one of the unsung heroes of the North, for he gave his life for me and others.

And although he laughed at my idea, it was Nashula who came with me on a summer patrol when I wanted to revisit the place where I had killed the five caribou.

"Are there caribou there in summer, Nashula?" I asked, but Nashula would only answer:

"Maybe, Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak; maybe."

"Come with me and see," I invited, and the Chief laughed again; but he helped me to sail the small police boat to the mainland, then leaving Bobby and Sammy in the boat, the old man and I trekked on foot as nearly as we could recall to the bluff where the caribou had appeared.

Snow was still lying in deep patches; it was not registering much above freezing, and I was wearing sealskins. We found the bluff, rising now as sheer gray rock, with the ground beyond it tundra. This tundra must have been the smooth frozen stretch over which the dogs and sled ran easily when we brought them up to carry back the bag of game.

"Come on, Nashula," I said, "I suppose you are right as always. Caribou do not come round here in July as they do in February; let's get back to the boat." I was some distance ahead of the native, and called back to him, and in the next second after I had spoken I was to get one of the worst scares I had in the North.

There came a peal of thunder, the first and last I was ever to hear in that country. I stood stock still, afraid to move before that most unusual of sounds in the Barren Lands.

"An earthquake!" I exclaimed, and laughed at my own foolishness; and then I was scared. I could swear there was something living near me, and it was not Nashula trudging fifty yards behind. The echoes of the thunder came back from the rocks that faded in the gray horizon of mountains in the distance. I forced myself to take another dozen steps forward, rounded the corner of the rock and came face to face with a large buck caribou. Instinct tightened my hand on the rifle I held; I raised it, sighted and fired - into the air. The caribou turned so fast I could just see the fleck of white that was the underside of his tail, and then Nashula came loping to me.

"A caribou!" I said, and Nashula could hardly believe it, but the tracks of the cleft hooves were in the softening bank of snow. I shivered - maybe it was a ghost animal, one of the five I killed in February. And we never cleared up the mystery of that lone caribou. An hour later I found a patch of delicate pale yellow flowers which blossom on the tundra at rare intervals, although there are four hundred and seventy-four known specimens of plants which have been collected by scientists, explorers and police from the part of the American continent known as the Northwest Territories. I bent to the flowers; it was so wonderful to see them, and they made me homesick.

"Do not touch," said Nashula, and I remembered Inuit natives will walk long distances to see the small flowers, but even the children will not pluck them. They

are living things, made by the Good Spirit, but not meant for men's food, and so they are allowed to grow.

A little farther along I came on a patch of the small berries we call "bake-apple," because they have a baked-apple flavor, Nashula joined me in eating these, and we gathered enough to take some back to the men who waited in the whale boat.

Chief Nashula was the only man I saw kill a bear with a whip and stone. This is a skill of the older natives, for now the rifle takes first place as a weapon, except for those times when a harpoon is needed. It came about in this way.

In our endless efforts to find entertainment for ourselves when not on patrol and when local duty routine was finished, Nick and I thought up the idea of building an ice-auto. There was the twenty-foot-wide ice collar along the base of the cliffs, which seemed a smooth speedway going to waste. All we lacked was a car. I went to the trader and explained the idea: we needed a sled, an engine, something to take the place of a steering wheel, a tank for gas, and there would be the car complete. We had only to make it.

Even the earliest boneshakers would have blushed with shame to see the contraption I wired and spliced together, with Tommy helping me; but it went, as much as twenty feet, without a breakdown. I had dreams of speeding over the smooth ice in the first automobile manufactured north of latitude 60. Someone may do it yet.

Meanwhile the day of the big tryout came, and Nashula volunteered use of his dogs to haul the auto-sled to the smoothest point. Wrapped in caribou skin and goggles, but without the usual sled equipment, the party left the Post. All went well, except for the engine breaking down every five minutes. Nashula stood, whip in hand, watching the dogs, which were left some distance from us.

"That's it now," I muttered as I twisted another screw, then turned to mount the made-over sled.

"Don't move!" The call came to me sharp and clear. I recognized Nashula's voice. Ahead of me and to the side I could see Sammy going in toward the cliff which jutted. I stayed as I was and nothing happened. That warning must have been for Sammy; cautiously I turned my head until I could see where Nashula stood facing the cliff, his attention not on me at all. Something was happening to Sammy. I turned my eyes toward the place I had seen him. He was no longer there; he was running toward the settlement, and behind him a polar bear lumbered steadily gaining on the man. We had no rifles, and I watched this new

drama between man and bear as Sammy zigzagged in his flight to throw his half-blind pursuer off the scent. Maybe the dogs had angered the bear. Now Sammy stumbled, fell, rolled over, and just as the bear stopped, I heard the crack of a dog whip and the yellow-white animal went over on its side.

"He's dead, Nashula!" I shouted, for I had run hard toward the fallen beast, drawing my revolver as I ran.

"He's quite dead, look!" There was a round wound in Nanook's head, bigger than a bullet hole, but just as clean.

"Shoot," said Nashula, who came up with his whip still in his hand. I fired the revolver, but there was no need of it; that bear had been killed before I used my service weapon.

"What did you do, Nashula - how did you kill him at such a distance? I only heard the whip and then the bear fell."

"Stone." The old Chief wasted no words, and later it was Lukas who dug the piece of rock from the bear's brain cavity, and told me that Nashula had been known through many settlements for his skill in coiling the lash tip of a dog whip around a small stone, and with the customary flick of wrist, send the stone to a bull's eye as accurately as a champion rifleman with his modern weapon.

"Marvelous!" I praised Nashula.

"Lucky," said the Chief.

We loaded the unexpected fresh meat on the auto-sled, harnessed the dogs and drew it home in triumph, and I never bothered with my car-building again, for too many events began to happen too quickly, and duty piled on duty. It was in the line of volunteer duty that Nashula gave his life. It was time for the spring break-up of our second year in the North in point of season, but it delayed. Nick and I were anxious for the coming of our supply ship, the second since we had come in ourselves aboard the *SS Bay Rupert*, and she was the vessel we looked for daily as summer advanced and the water of the Strait became more open. The ship did not come.

"Something's happened," said Nick, who was uncanny about things at times. "There's trouble brewing," he said two days later. "I feel it in my bones." I laughed, but on the next day his words came true. A finely built government

icebreaker sailed along the Strait, and I went out to meet her as a Customs Officer of the district.

"Surprise!" said the Captain as I stepped aboard and faced what to me seemed a throng of men, after the solitudes of the months which had passed.

"We're the personnel of the new air bases," explained the officer commanding the outfit. "Are you Montague? I have orders for you."

I read the official paper; I was to be attached to No. 1 Air Base establishment about to be constructed at Port Burwell. A third of the boat's passengers were landing here; the others were to go on to Nottingham Island and to Resolution.

I looked a bit bewildered.

"Air surveys," said the officers; "the planes are in those crates, knocked down, and we'll reassemble them here."

I listened then.

"Our supply ship?" I queried, and heard that the *SS Bay Rupert* had met with disaster. It had gone ashore a total wreck off Labrador; the *SS Nascopie* was steaming north as quickly as she could to bring our overdue mail.

Days of hectic duty followed; tents for the personnel must be raised for their use until the house was built, the equipment must be brought ashore. There were the airplanes; small tractors struggled on caterpillar feet over our sharp-toothed rocks; there was lumber for the Air Base headquarters and the material with which to build a generating station, for the Air Base was to have electric lighting and radio service far more developed than the one-track sound wave with which Nick and I had foreborne in stress of snow and blizzard.

Then when the Base was built, when it seemed as if airplanes had always been part of our northern life, sailing high over hummocky miles which I knew so much about through hard travel on foot, a near disaster occurred. An air pilot and his mechanic, with one native aboard, were lost. They were long overdue, with other planes failing to locate where a forced landing might have been made, even with the last faint radio message coming from the doomed plane to say "headed West." The weather turned bad; we dared not risk loss of more planes and men. I spoke to the Base Commanding Officer.

"We shall go afoot."

This was to be a lost-man patrol, but like none that had every been before. Where a sled-equipped native might run thirty miles from his camp in a day on the ice surface, an airplane could travel three hundred miles.

The fliers were gone; I was Mounted Police officer attached to the Air Base, and it was up to me to find the missing men. It was vile weather, with sudden squalls and thick snow falling steadily. I could order no man to a task which meant taking his life in his hands. The natives were now up at the Base, for we'd kept huge bonfires burning, hoping the fliers might sight the flames blazing on Ship's Hill and thus find their direction.

I called Tommy. "Round up the men, Tommy; we're in for a rough patrol; I shall ask for volunteers." And then:

"This may mean Tah-bow-ah-tay for all of us, men," I said, and without hesitation six natives stepped forward from where they stood. They were willing to take a chance on Tah-bow-ah-tay, their long farewell, or death.

"If Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak goes, I go." The flame leaped from the gas drums and the driftwood on the hill, and I saw a flash of light illumine the scar across the face of the man who spoke first. He was Sammy, the native who only a few months before had been rescued himself, the man who at first had not trusted the white man. Lukas came next, his left arm hanging useless since he had saved our lives on Savage Island, and then there were Tommy, Troutguts, Hungry Bob and, from the shadow, Chief Nashula.

"Nashula goes," the old man spoke.

"Tommy," I turned to my foster brother, "is it right that your father and my native father go? He is old - "

Tommy interrupted, "Nashula is old, but Nashula knows well the ways of ice and storm."

It was a driving snow when we left the detachment house; it was driving snow as we waited for the tide to rise, bridging the steep cliff from collar to ocean ice. We bumped the sled down, not daring to delay until the junction was fully made. Mile after mile we went, day and night, until I knew we must halt for a rest. We were crossing Ungava Bay, the season was late and the ice uncertain. But there was snow, and the men built an igloo shelter of sorts. Then in the night we heard an ominous roar. No one spoke, for we all knew what it meant; the ice had broken. We were afloat on an ice island, the current surging below us, and carrying us

through the Strait to the open ocean. A faint daylight penetrated icy fog. Tommy and I crept foot by foot around our ice prison; I judged it to be six miles long, and maybe four miles wide. We walked carefully, and the ice seemed firm, but chances of this giant pan breaking into smaller pieces made our position all the more precarious.

"We must go on rations," said Nashula as I reported the result of our survey. "Yes, Nashula," I looked at the old man. "There will be little to eat - I wonder are we to starve again?" And then I asked the Old Chief to serve us our portions of food as it lasted.

Daily we watched our ice field for game which might have been caught unaware by the break, as we had. I shot an Arctic fox and we made a stew on the Primus stove. We saw no bear, no seal, and our attempts to catch fish were useless. We melted pieces of ice for water, and prayed the hammering of the hummocks would not weaken the major mass of ice.

We killed two of the dogs; the live animals were suffering now for food as we were, yet we dared not kill more of them. If the miracle occurred that our drifting desert sweep on the tide to land ice, the dogs would be our only hope of reaching home. I wondered what had been the fate of the airmen we had set out to find.

The days went by, and the nights until the forty-eighth day had passed. We caught fish, two of them, but there were seven men and six dogs to feed. But the fish catching made me hope and at the same time despair. If fish were in the water it meant the spring break-up might soon be complete; the solid surface beneath us would go.

"Nashula, our father, is a very sick man." It was Tommy who spoke, and he had no need to tell me. For more than seven days Nashula had shared my sleeping bag, and such a thing is done only when the strongest must give of his bodily warmth to keep life in the weakest. Different from the first experience of near-starvation, it was now I, the white man, who was strongest of the party. Perhaps I had most hope of rescue.

That night I awoke from sleep. Nashula was very cold beside me; I got up to chafe his limbs. I could heat no water, for the fuel for the Primus was used long since, our tea was finished, and there were no more matches.

"Tommy, I said, rousing Nashula's real son.

The old man spoke just once. "Tah-bow-ah-tay, my sons, it is well with you - the Good Spirit hears!"

We covered Nashula in his sleeping bag.

"He would not eat," said Lukas, who had been moving around the igloo where Nashula had stored the supplies he distributed. "Look, Nashula saved his share of each day's food."

Lukas was right. Nashula had cached his own rations; there was some food for each of those who was left.

Tommy and I lifted the body of Nashula to a place outside the shelter. The old Chief's son was sad, and then I saw a look of wonder come over his face. He had seen the gray of a jutting rock more quickly than had I; our ice prison had drifted in to land. We were safe, but the old Chief was dead.

The food Nashula had refused to eat stayed us as we got the dogs and sled ashore. We found a fox, made fire with flints and cooked a broth. We shot a second fox, and found a cache of fish. In four days of travel we came on a native settlement and they had news. The missing airmen were saved. Nearly starved, with feet frostbitten, weary and discouraged they had found themselves on Atlantic ice; the plane had been flying east and not west as they thought, with their compass gone haywire. They had been found by some traveling natives, who had helped them to the Air Base. All was well.

Yes, old Chief Nashula, hero of the Northland, all is well.