North to Adventure

by
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Chapter Twenty-two - The Northern Lights

It was when with Tommy on the Lost River patrol that I acquired some of the native ideas about the northern lights. The English language provides a pitiably inadequate range of words with which to recite the saga of the northern lights, which is the greatest phenomenon of powered light known to the earth-dweller.

The man who has never been beyond or even close to the Arctic Circle immediately remarks somewhat scathingly of "sentiment and romanticism." The northern lights must be seen to be believed.

Of course, I'd seen the northern lights shooting across the sky, since I was a child in Montreal. And I had seen them in even greater beauty at Edmonton, and north of Edmonton in the Mackenzie region, but until I got into Baffin Land, a few hundred miles inland, and found myself standing motionless by the side of an awestruck native, I can truthfully say I had never realized what the true beauty of combinations of color can be. I don't pretend to understand it.

There the colors come, lying close to the horizon, fanning out and shooting up the heavens like giant searchlights from the watch tower of the Almighty. They pale the white glory of the moon.

There they come again like legions of soldiers marching, parading across the sky. They seem to pause, turn and salute, and then march back again, a radiant host that suddenly is caught up in a forest of flames. There will be a clear white gleam across the sky and then a gold; advancing curtains of blue are flung across vivid green. The whole fades and there comes a slash of deeper blue, a veiling of rose, a sweeping cloud of shadow, and from out this shadow comes a crashing crimson.

"Aurora borealis," says the white man, sonorously sounding words that do not explain what it is.

"Auk shu nak," says the Inuit native, which may be translated into "the Strong Light."

I rested one night on a pallet of furs in an igloo with a group of other natives and Tommy. I awoke to find a red gleam coming across the dome opening which is always on the lee side of the snow house. This is the advance guard of the heavenly host of color. I saw the natives were awake too, and becoming uneasy. The magnetic pull of the lights apparently is quite irrestible, for everyone immediately rises and puts on outer clothing; further sleep is impossible. One follows outside the four or five dark shadows made by the natives who are already standing outlined against this huge stage of panoramic spendor. This marvel of the heavens is looked upon by the native as sinister, and it is just as awesome to the white man.

To the native it comes as an omen and a warning; it is a sign of displeasure of the Evil Spirits who are visiting the earth and making a prophecy. This may be for a change of weather, and the Inuit lying in his igloo watches constantly the signs of the weather through his six-inch peephole to the outer world. Weather is the only thing which baffles his ingenious intelligence to overcome.

Usually the appearance of the Strong Light presages wind, and wind is a dread thing which may reach a speed of one hundred and ten miles an hours.

Often the colors in the sky will last for weeks, and again they may not appear during an interval of months. The native contends that the Strong Light is always there, but that man can only see it when a warning is intended. Once I stood with my natives and watched a flaming crimson eagle flutter its wings across the sky. It was a part of the lights.

"One shall have a child," the natives whispered, for the eagle is his emblem of race and fertility. On return home we found the Post rejoicing, for the chief's wife was the mother of a girl baby, and the father was the man who had spoken when we were watching the eagle light in the sky.

Some think the auroras is caused by radium in the earth acting upon the electrons in the atmosphere; a Canadian scientist maintains the northern lights are caused by the cosmic ray, and science generally believes the cause rests with spots upon the sun. And again, certain movements of ocean ice cause these lights to appear, according to another school of thought, which is now being disproved.

That the native should have a legend for the "Loss of the Sun" is understandable in a primitive who is wholly poet in his unusual way.

There is not a full six months of darkess in the section of Baffin Land and on the Ungava plateau which I know, nor is there six months of all light. The sun leaves the north pole about the middle of winter, and for twelve weeks only the limit of complete darkness - or during the summer complete light - is experienced at the north pole.

Many years ago, the native legend goes, the earth had different kinds of day. There were twelve hours of light and twelve hours of dark, and there was no cold weather, nor were there blasting winds. However, the difficulties of hunting became great, since darkness would overtake the hunter before his day's trail was covered. An able chief thought over the problem and decided to take the people's case before the sun. To do so, he must first pay a visit to the Monarch of all Light. The chief set out upon his journey, and reached the dwelling of the Sun God.

"Majesty, our people are not satisfied with light and darkness as they are," he said as he knelt before the sun.

"And your people desire what?" the great Sun God enquired, patient with these earth beings who can never be content with things as they are.

"We believe," said the chief, "it would be better to have it dark all winter when we cannot hunt, and light all summer."

The chief never returned to his people, but presently the sun was blotted out complete for a day, and the sacrifice of the chief brought the desired result.

No doubt this day of darkness records some eclipse of the sun. The Inuit does not worship the sun, but he does pay tribute to the memory of the suppliant who went as a messenger to the Sun God, and never returned.

Tommy was staring at the brilliance of these myserious signals of unchained power, and I asked him:

"Tommy, one has told the white man that the world is round; one has told the white man the earth is forever turning, where then are these lights and stars, above or below?"

And Tommy, ignorant heather Inuit, who has never heard of stratosphere and never will, and at this time had never seen an airplane, replies:

"The little daylights are not up or down, they are away!

As we watch the northern lights there is a sound of crackling ice, and with that sound I am reminded that there is another fallacy about the North. It is never silent. There is always the small crackle of ice and the great roar of icebergs, the rush of the river, the waterfalls, the swell of the tide, and there is always the wind.

But Tommy and I are still watching the colors race like notes of visible music all around and about us, and we see the culmination of this brilliance in a cone which appears at the apex of the sky. Then the lights quiver and fade, and we are left in a world which seems blacker than before; on a glint of reflected light picks out a hummock of snow, and there come the reaching howl of a wolf. Tommy turns slowly into the igloo and I follow him.

If any depths of emotion are plumbed in the native northeastern Inuit, it must be when he stands rigid before the Strong Light. Always smiling when at his daily tasks, and even smiling when overtaken by disaster, the native becomes serious before the lights and his expresson is entirely solemn. He cannot understand why the white man who has chained the lightning so that it becomes electric light, as he has seen it aboard the ships that pass through his northern waters, cannot explain to him the secret of these northern lights.

Awesome and glorious is the aurora borealis, and perhaps man may yet solve the story of creation and of spirit as he stands upon the threshold of this northern world.

Somewhat comparable in silent grandeur to the Strong Light is the beauty of the icebergs as they pass along the straits when spring break-up signals the coming of the short summer. Immense and majestic these silent sentinels of the coast; the quiet is rent when a monster portion of ice slides from its parent glacier. There is the rocking, swaying mass gaining a stately equilibrium before the forces of wind and tide. Like some Viking in his flaming ship, one watches the invevitable return of ice to its native element; there is fog, rain and snow and this peculiar etherealized mist, all of them returning to the sun, an eternal and unending circle which must have its beginning and end in the Strong Light.

That the northern lights have seen strange sights is no idle phrase, but perhaps the strangest of all now is man, like a dot on the surface of a vast expanse, contemplating the conquest of another hidden power.

As we returned home from this patrol Tommy and I were joined at a cache by Ee-kalak, Bobby and Troutguts. It was a great reunion and we set off for the Post at a good speed which was soon to be halted, for when we made the ocean ice I

demonstrated the foolishness of the white man when he defies the superior knowledge of conditions as known to the natives.

We were only two or three weeks out from the Police Post. The teams were about to leave the ocean ice for land again. Sometimes the heave of tide beneath the ice at the water's edge will cause what we call an overflow of tide. Dogs avoid this water on ice and the natives warn against it. I jumped from the sled to run alongside the dogs, and fetched up short with water almost to my knees. The weather was about forty-five degrees below zero, not the sort of temperature in which to get feet wet. The natives wanted to stop at once and build an igloo so that I might change my boots. I refused to do so, to learn to my regret that such obstinacy does not pay. I found shortly that there was no feeling in one heel. And when I examined my foot I saw it was badly frozen. We made camp and we were forced to stay there almost a week.

I was amazed to find that the natives did not rub my heel with snow.

"Snow is bad," explained Tommy. "It contains too much frost. Dip the frostbitten part in water or in seal oil, and never let the warm human hand touch the frostbitten area."

While we lay around the snow house getting my circulation back into shape and giving my foot rest, the natives and I played cards and told stories. I noticed that Tommy often occupied himself with his knife on the snow wall. I did not realize that in this way he was recording a story which was to seep back to Port Burwell by moccasin telegraph, and to bring my comrade policeman at least in part the story of my present misfortune. It seems, as I heard later, that Ee-ma begged leave to speak with Nick, two weeks later:

"Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-Nook Ka-sak dies of frosted foot," she wept, for the Inuit woman often shows emotion before events of less importance to herself. In the case of death of her own people she rarely cries. Nick was not very worried, but at the same time he was so much impressed by the story that he marked the date of its telling on the Post calendar. On my return we found the dates tallied exactly.

But we soon solved this message mystery. "Moccason telegraph" is simple enough after all. Tommy had told the story of my frostbitten heel in pictures on the snow wall. When we had left a native, traveling swiftly, had read the message; he found another native bound for Port Burwell and told him the story, so eventually it reached the Post before we, taking longer to get there, had arrived. Even as in white man's sociiety, the story gained in the telling, for I had

not been near dying. It was this way that we learned about the power of communication between native and native at long distances. It is a well-reasoned-out, but roundabout system.