North to Adventure

by
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Chapter 10 - The Police Give a Party

An end comes to everything, and that first blizzard experienced by Nick and myself at Port Burwell was to sep up a standard of length and severity, for thereafter we never had another to last over three or four days, except one which went on for a whole week. But soon we had established ourselves on a normal footing of daily life, and so we decided it was about time to give a party. We also decided that before another blizzard might hit us there would be several changes in our preparations. We planned to have the natives throw up a rampart of shale and sand along the foundations of the post house, similar to the method of the prairie farmer who lives on the plains of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, or through the Dakotas, when he piles a bank of straw and manure round the foundations of his home.

But we had to give up the idea for that year, and when the time came the next spring we found ourselves confronted with another problem of native habit. He simply could not stand the work of shoveling. We thought the fellows were malingering.

"Here," called Nick to me one morning, "just watch those sons of guns taking a spoonful of earth up at a time."

My superior gift of the native language brought me this task of chiding the apparently unwilling spade handlers, although it was not earth but shale they had to lift.

"Hey, Eey-ay-tok, more heft to that shovel, there... this way, shovel much full .....get a move on."

The sole result of my directing was to have all the natives go on a species of strike. They leaned on the shovels as though to the manner born, and as if the implement had been native to their country, instead of an importation of a few months.

Tommy stepped forward:

"Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak, one runs all the way to Chimo and back rather than shovel," he informed me in his own tongue.

Now, Chimo was several hundred miles of the roughest going from where we stood. I knew the native is given to understatement, so I told the men to wait and I went in to tell Nick.

"Eey-ay-tok informs me they'd rather run to Chimo and back than shovel this rampart, Nick. What do you think is the matter?"

"Let you and me try it for a while, and set an example," was the solution arrived at by my comrade, and I agreed.

It did not take us very long to solve the question. The shoveling was as alien an occupation to us as it was to the natives. The muscles brought into use were entirely different from those used in hunting, fishing and dog-team driving of our general living. In an hour Nick and I would just as soon have started out on a trip with the dogs to Chimo, as continue with that rampart. The end of it was that we arranged with the natives to leave the shovel at a strategic point approaching the Post dwelling, and each man, incuding ourselves, threw a shovelful of the loose sand and shale every time he came toward the Post. Soon the rampart was built up, and when the second winter came our quarters were better fitted to withstand the storms. There seems to be a greater velocity of wind up in that sector of the continent than anywhere else, probably, in the world. Sometimes, roaring down the gully behind our Post, the gale became a hurricane, driving the snow before it. In the depths of winter long stretches of the rock surface are left bare, even with snow falling as persistently as it does; then the driving wind piles the snowdrifts and these are hard packed and solid as the rock itself.

Fortunately there was good weather for our party and we made preparations for it with some elaboration. The Inuit is a stickler for etiquette, and these Police parties are events which take place at more or less regular intervals. A general outline of how to conduct the entertainment had been given us before we left for the Arctic by men who had experience of other posts, and our natives, little used to the ways of the white men as they were, yet had had converse with other tribes who had been well entertained elsewhere. Nick and I had to watch our social steps.

It was quite sufficient for Nick to have me inform Nashula, the oldest chief in the settlement, that everyone would be expected at the detachment at a certain time. No invitations were expected individually, and acceptances were a matter of course. We knew everyone would attend.

The women dress for such festivities with as much care as the society lady of civilization. They put store calico skirts over their fur breeks, and bright Scotch plaid shawls are worn over their parkas. These things they obtain from the Hudson's Bay or independent traders, just as they do lanterns and enamel vessels to replace the household utensils sculptured from stone, or the stone and ivory weapons which, with the exception of the harpoon, are giving way before the coming of the rifle and the steel hunting knife. At this date I don't suppose there are more than fifteen or twenty licensed trading posts in the whole area of which I write.

For a party, the police at the detachment remove all furniture from the rooms, excepting a table which is left in the kitchen for convenience of the service, and two chairs in the big living room for the use of the hosts. White authority sits on chairs, while the native guests squat on the floor.

Nick and I watch the guests coming toward the Post from the native dwellings. Each woman was one step behind her man, and the children trotting along like any children of the world, and rather attractive little devils these Inuit children proved to be, too.

The guests enter and there are a succession of ceremonial greetings. With everyone arrived, then everyone becomes seated, and then the polack, or visiting, commences. Conversation is made, as for instance:

"One has good hunting this year."

"Yes, indeed, one has good hunting."

It is as formal as any drawing-room of Victorian times, and Nick and I wait patiently for this part of the party to end. Time is nothing, and this polack is liable to go on for hours. And then the chief's wife will say:

"One hears music somewhere."

This is a signal. The guest commence to move about.

"One must have heard music, one makes music and music makes one dance," this guest says, and another takes up the same rhyme.

And so the two policeman hosts politely withdraw to the kitchen for a space. The Inuit has his religion as a component part of his daily living. It enters into everything, and is not at all a thing apart, so a religious ritual must open the

dance. While the hosts, who are known to have a great invisible God which apparently is a Thing apart, and to whom they pray, will explain their polite absence from among the guests:

"Nashula, the white man would also talk with one's God."

Nick and I smoke in the kitchen and listen to the muted thrum of the sealskin drums, and we can hear the shuffle of moccasined feet going round and round, somewhat in the double-step rhythm of the more southerly Indian. Subtly one realizes the rhythm changes, which means that there will now commence the social dance to which the hosts will be expected to return and take part. We hear the raucous wail of an accordian. The nearest trader has introduced this musical instrument, and with the power of concentration and exercise of an extraordinary memory the native grasps its mechanism and play's by ear tunes for "white man's dancing," and those other airs mimicked from hearing gramophone records, for what appears to be figures of amost old-time country square-dance type. Nick and I hop around with the rest, and the dance becomes uproarious when the calico skirt which Ee-ma has put on, becomes unfastened and lands around her feet as she dances with Nick as partner. That Ee-ma has also removed her fur breeks before putting on the skirt is a little unexpected, but Ee-ma is the least perturbed of anyone; a skirt more or less is not of much moment in the scheme of things. It gives everyone a good laugh, so she hitches up the skirt and Nick finds a utility pin somewhere and has to show her how it fastens.

Presently the dancing begins to pall, and the hosts now introduce games:

"Let's blow out the candle," Nick suggests, and we show the natives how to be blindfolded and to participate in the childish game. It comes to an end when everyone screams with laughter as Nashula burns the fuzz upon his chin. Of course, all these exercises require an award given as prize to the winner. To this winner is handed first a small piece of chocolate, a candy or a small cut of tobacco. But as in Baffin Land there is none greater or none better than the other, the winner merely gets his piece first, and consuming whatever it is, watches each guest thereafter receive a similar bit.

That was the party at which we introduced the macaroni game. Nick and I had boiled yards of macaroni, then we placed two pans of it on the floor, and had one of the older women tie two of the girls' hands behind their backs, where upon the game was to see how quickly the macaroni could be consumed by using the mouth alone. Taking it with their teeth, for the Eskimo uses his teeth a great deal, the game goes on. But Ee-ma, quick as a flash in the uptake, catches a signal from Nick. She has found she can inhale macaroni with a sucking motion of the

lips. Alas, that the game had to cease, with Ee-ma winner it is true, but a sorry one suffering an agitated misery. The Eskimo stomach rebelled at this unmasticated flour and water paste, and Ee-ma rolled upon the floor a tormented mass of heaving, eruptingly nauseated femininity. But she soon recoverd, and we eliminated the macaroni game, and welcomed the next move in the party ceremonial, which had to come from the native side.

"Kah par," the Chief's wife simply announced, with her hand moving suggestively round and round the surface of her belly. That meant the company wanted to eat. The lady guests hasten to the kitchen where on the tables are laid out huge containers of bully beef, basins of boiled rice, hard-tack, steaming kettles of well-stewed tea, which the Inuit loves sweetened with molasses, because he dislikes white sugar. Now the pans have been brought to the living room floor, the guests have cleansed their hands before meat, as they will again afterward, and are dipping into the vessels and stowing food away with champing teeth. None of the company eats until each child is filled and satisfied. Then comes the turn of the women, who always eat before the men may start, and each sex is seated in separate groups at either side of the provisions. When the women are satisfied it is the men's turn to eat, and the women bring out their pipes and tobacco.

But only the married women smoke, and of all our guests only old Lavinia is faithful to the pipe fashioned of native pipe-stone which is found in the local terrain. Long before the advent of the white man and trade, the native smoked. His tobacco, largely discarded now in favour of the trade smoke, was an ingenious mixture of seaweed and moss obtained by stuffing the ingredients firmly into a small sealskin pouch. The skin was drawn closely on this and the whole left to dry. Turned out as from a mold, the contents took on the appearance of plug tobaccao, but with an unholy kick. Powerful as is the bite of this smoking mixture, the native will not consume food which is very hot. Tea, while it is served steaming hot, will be cooled by addition of "slices" of snow before it is drunk.

"Ouk ah may tok," is what the policeman's serving girl will say when she lifts a hot pan from the cook stove. Literally this means "too heavy," and it is said by way of a joke. Good food or drink which is too hot is said to be "Oh nook took."

Fortunately, the native abhors liquor in all forms. When he sees the men on the ships coming through the straits affected by drinking, as once in a while he has seen them, the native says: "That's the crazy water." The native is a very wise man. A paternal government supplies the Police Post with a store of good liquor, but the policeman does not drink. For one thing, liquor and a raw meat diet will not mix, and the policeman may often find himself, as I did, having to sustain himself with raw meat; so by no means crazy, we also leave the liquor alone.

And by now the first zest of the party spirit was waning. With the courtesy common to the race, the Chief has left the room, to re-enter and say:

"The moon looks good, - good hunting weather."

This is the "we must really be going" signal; so the company files out and home, the men ahead, the women as step behind, and the children capering around them. The natives will not light their way with the barn lanterns which trade has brought to them and which they often use in their homes now in preference to the blubber lamp. "White man uses a light which lets the white man be seen, but does not let the white man see," is the way the natives explains it when we attempt to steer a path with flash light or stable lantern. And again he is right for his part of the country, for the eye adjusts itself to the lack of light and eventually better progress is made than with artificial aid.

Now my policeman companion and I are left to have the house servants clean up the remains of the party. We will put the furniture back in place and sit down to "talk the party over."

"Tommy has a new bob to his hair," remarks Nick. I laugh.

"I noticed that, too; he's been copying Ee-ma's."

For Nick and I have been teaching some of the women how to bob their hair, which hitherto has been the fashion for the men alone, the women customarily turning up their long straight black locks into a tight twisted knot that is stabbed with ivory pins.