

North to Adventure

**by
Sydney R Montague**

Chapter Eleven - Things Come Thick and Fast

It was shortly after our first party for the natives that events came thick and fast on us. These things were called routine in a police report, but to Nick and myself the situations, met for the first time, opened up a whole course of psychical research, made for us a thesis on philosophy and displayed for us the whole gamut of human emotions, literally from birth to the grave.

Old Jennie's husband died. Old Jennie broke her arm; old Jennie's daughter, whom we'd named Harriet because we could never catch the exact intonation of her real name, had a baby and the infant was deformed. We attended the funeral of O-Shon-atuk and pretended we did not know there had been a funeral for the baby. I became the adopted son of Nashula, chief of the second tribe and a blood brother of Lukas; Sad-Wallah died too, and near-revolution threatened a mission station some three hundred miles up the coast.

Nick was setting the table for our midday meal; it was a Thursday, I recall, and it must have been fully three weeks since the party. I was at the stove frying eggs. This was before we had the disaster of the canned eggs freezing so utterly solid that not even our axe could penetrate the mass, with the result that I set the can on the warm stove overnight, forgot about it and there remained nothing but fried eggs en masse until the supply ship got to us almost a year later. We had yet to discover how good the bird's eggs of the region could be.

I was turning the eggs when there came a tremendous commotion at the Post back door. We had cleared a pathway on top of the snow, which had drifted rather to the sides of our detachment home instead of front and back; this, of course, had been back of our calculations when we decided on the site before putting up the post buildings. This narrow pathway, just enough space left between high snowbanks for a man and a dog to pass along side by side, was now black with a struggling mob of natives. It looked threatening at first sight, but in a moment I saw Ee-ma pushing her way to the front. I opened the door.

"Auk shu ni," I exclaimed, and the right arms of the twenty or more natives went up in the customary salute. That was all right. The visit was friendly, no matter how much clamour there was going on. Then Ee-ma, who was a very intelligent girl, explained. It appeared that Jennie's husband, O-Shon-atuk, had been taken

ill in the night, when an Evil Spirit had got into his chest, and he complained of fierce pain. His breath made a loud noise as it came, and his mouth stayed open. Ee-ma gestured rapidly, and imitated someone gasping for breath.

"Why did not Jennie send for the white man?"

Ee-ma lowered her eyes and would not look at me. I could understand that the company had been distrustful of the power of the white man against the Evil Spirit which caused distress of this sort. The truth was that Nick and I had not been at the Post long enough to have established the absolute faith in us which came later, and in our power to help ease pain, and in some cases actually bring complete cure to the sufferer. Ee-ma trusted us, her downcast look informed me, but the shrug of her shoulders told me, "These old folk, they like the ways of the clan best."

All this took but a few minutes. I set aside the half-fried eggs and called Nick, who fetched the black satchel of first aid appliances and simple surgical instruments which was our relief equipment. We started off for Jennie's dwelling, a snow house of considerable size. I think she had eight rooms besides the storehouses, for O-Shon-atuk was a man of substance with many children and grandchildren. Nick and I must have looked like a couple of country doctors marching along with our little black bag of mystery.

"Sounds as though the old chap has a bad bronchial cold," said Nick.

"It does," said I, and we wondered how he could have been infected with such a thing, because colds just don't happen in this northern climate. Infection germs seem to be frozen and sterilized before they can do any damage, supposing any should drift northward on the winter winds.

We got to the O-Shon-atuk residence just as Jennie came crawling out to the open. Her right arm hung awkwardly at her side, and her usually brown-skinned face seemed over shadowed by a ghastly green-gray. As she saw us, she pointed to a dark heap which lay twenty steps from the igloo entrance.

"One sleeps," she said.

"And how," was the laconic comment of Nick, as we now both leaned over the fur sleeping bag which had been the sleeping place of O-Shon-atuk and now was his shroud. He was lying face up, and on the man's chest there lay a rock so heavy that it took both Nick and myself considerable expenditure of effort to lift it clear of the body. And then we set about an examination. First, of the dead man,

to find that his ribs were crushed and his chest practically flattened in from the weight of the stone.

Then we turned to the natives. Could this be murder? Were we to be the first Police Post to log up such an alien event? For the Inuit does not kill deliberately except in punishment for lying or stealing.

Taking on our roles of prosecuting attorney, defence counsel, judge and jury, we shortly found that the stone on the chest of O-Shon-atuk was the "cure" for his disease. An Evil Spirit had gotten into the poor man, and it had to be pushed out. The rock was the obvious solution to the problem. That the cure was worse than the disease was also obvious; however, in the line of duty, Nick and I held an autopsy and found that stone or no stone, it would hardly have been possible to save O-Shon-atuk from death. His lungs were congested as the result of what must have been acute double pneumonia.

A groan from Jennie brought our attention back to her. In the general fuss over the dead man, neither Nick nor I had remembered the condition of the woman's arm. We brought her up to the Post, and after considerable persuasion we succeeded in getting her to allow us to examine it. The arm was a pitiable sight and another evidence of the stoicism of these people. There was a break both above and below the elbow, and a piece of bone, sharp and jagged, protruded through the flesh.

That Nick and I were nervous goes without saying, as we faced this first trial of what surgical skill we had mastered in the short training in this sort of thing before leaving Canada proper. The arm was terribly swollen, the whole wound ugly-looking in the extreme. We commandeered Ee-ma and Essie, and turned the kitchen into an improvised operating room. Nick was surgeon. Of course, we went through the usual processes of sterilization, and although this was to be our first experience of such a thing without supervision from a medical man and surgeon, both of us had had experience in actual performance of such things as this during training days.

The suffering and probably also the sorrow at the loss of her husband had dazed Jennie. She gave us no trouble as we let her have a whiff or two of ether.

"It's bad," muttered Nick as I handed him the sterilized instruments, and he pushed the splintered bone into place. But we set that bone, and that Jennie's arm was saved is miraculous. Twice more Nick had to operate, for the inflammation seemed to be spreading over the shoulder, and each time Jennie's gratitude became greater. Once a trading ship came through the narrow passage

of black water which is always unfrozen through the strait, and when, as custom's inspector, I took my dog team and went out on the shore ice to pass her through, I found aboard a man who claimed to be a doctor. I took him back to shore and had him look at Jennie's arm.

"Take that arm off," he said brusquely. "Here, get me a knife and I'll do it myself."

I don't know who he was, but his roughness of method would have appalled one, had one seen an animal subjected to it. Nick looked at me and I looked at Nick, and quietly we told Jennie to cover up her arm. Fortunately for all of us, the so-called doctor included, his captain signaled that the ice was closing in and if he wanted to rejoin the ship he'd have to come at the double across the ice. I drove the team myself and took the man back to the ship. Nick lanced Jennie's arm again, and in the course of a number of weeks it had healed over. The only evidence of her injury and our surgery was a stiffness which was left in the elbow joint. Jennie found she could sew as well as before, and she was one of the best of the tailoresses among the women. It was never cleared up for us exactly how Jennie smashed her arm, but I believe it must have been in connection with getting the rock cure which finished O-Shon-atuk.

O-Shon-atuk was buried. Three days after his death, Nick and I attended the last rites, and this was the way in which we found the native of the northeast latitudes does not fear death, although he loves life. He reasons: "Is not sleep pleasant? Then one sleeps long, which is death, and that is pleasant."

As far as the white man can understand, I have found that the Inuit native believes he dies each "darkness" (night), and lives anew each dawn. He is not at all sure that he is the same individual he was yesterday, and he may not be the same entity tomorrow. The white man going among the natives has to realize that the native has eliminated the ego. The "I" of civilization has become with him the impersonal "one." He identifies himself with his race, and there are no individuals, as we understand the word.

O-Shon-atuk's remains, wrapped in their fur sleeping bag, the face thongs drawn tight, were carried several miles away from the Post and the native village, the procession of men of the tribe going in single file and the corpse coming last, drawn on a small sled. Kee-waka, grown son of O-Shon-atuk and Jennie, headed the procession. Kee-waka halted at the summit of a black, flat-topped rock where the unceasing wind had swept the surface quite clear of all snow, and over which snow particles, frozen hard as fine steel pellets, swished in a continuous undertone of sound.

The body of O-Shon-atuk was now lifted and passed from the end of the line of men, from hand to hand, until each of the tribe had touched him. His son laid the body upon the cold rock, face down.

Solemnly then there was passed up to Kee-waka a beautiful rifle, the letters BSA (British Small Arms) etched upon its well-oiled side. I knew its worth in hunter's fur skins had been one hundred and seventy-five dollars as we count values. O-Shon-atuk had not owned this longer than sixty "sleeps" (days). O-Shon-atuk is dead, and Kee-waka is his son, a likely-looking young man, just the right age for hunting strength. But Kee-waka lays the rifle beside the body of his father, likewise the man's harpoon, his hunting knife and his discarded clothing. Everything "one" has owned and used, excepting his wife, his omiak, kyak, dogs and team, goes into the grave with O-Shon-atuk. Over all this the members of the tribe lay heavy rocks until a cairn of some size is erected. Then meat is fetched and placed upon the topmost stone and left there. Three days O-Shon-atuk has lain since the breath left his body, and now another three days will pass, and at the end of that time all the meat will have gone from the topmost stone of his burial place, then the spirit of O-Shon-atuk will also have gone.

I questioned Chief Charlie later about the burial of the goods with O-Shon-atuk.

"Charlie, why not give the rifle of O-Shon-atuk to his son, Kee-waka? He can use it; he can hunt much more with it, and getting so many furs become rich with the trader's goods."

And Charlie replies: "But that is the rifle of O-Shon-atuk; he hunted and traded many furs for it; the son of O-Shon-atuk must attain for himself." It was here I began to realize that what we possess is actually nothing, but the attaining of it is all. I learned a great many lessons from these natives; I did not realize their worth at the time, perhaps, but these things stick with one, and meanings become clearer when there is more time for thought, and one is not engrossed in the business of preserving life as we were in the Barren Lands.

Nick and I had serious talks with Jennie. At first, before Nick became more proficient in the language, it was up to me to convey to the woman the sense of what Nick and I had planned she should be made to understand. We were careful not to frighten Jennie or the others, but somehow we had to convince the community that putting a rock on the chest of a sick man was not the way to effect a cure. We dared not use the word murder. The natives had just two commandments, and by those two they regulate all law and order in their settlements, and the interchange between tribes. The two commandments when translated into English mean:

"Thou shalt not lie," and "Thou shalt not steal."

It was Chief Nashula and later my friend Tommy who enlightened me somewhat on the peculiar religious outlook of the native.

Speaks Chief Nashula:

"One, the white man, has a religion?"

I answer: "Yes, one, the white man, has a religion. It is a religion of love; the great God is the God of love."

"And one," comments Chief Nashula, using "one", as they all do, to express himself alone or the tribe as a whole, "one has not a religion of love; one has a religion of fear and hate. One fears everything in which the Evil Spirit has found lodging; one hates the man who lies, he has an Evil Spirit, and one hates the man who steals, for he has an Evil Spirit."

"But Nashula, I, Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak, the white man who as been made a member of your tribe, he believes love can send away the Evil Spirit."

"No," argues Nashula, "the Evil Spirit breathes in that man, and talks to that man; one must kill the Evil Spirit and it is in the man, so that he must die,"

"Do you know," I opened a conversation with Nick one evening, "I'm beginning to think civilization has complicated living for us and things generally."

"Why the philosophy, my dear Watson?" said Nick.

"It was Nashula; he's been in to the mission station on his last trek, and he has asked me why we have ten commandments when two would suffice. He asked me if I could guarantee that the sun would rise tomorrow, and when I told him I couldn't, except that I just knew it would rise because I had faith in my God, he asked me why, when I went hunting for meat, I killed more than I needed for the one day's food...hadn't I faith that if the sun rose then there would be food also? That sunk me."

"H'm," commented Nick. "Can you have forgotten Solomon and the lilies of the field so soon after Bible study we've been having?"

As a matter of fact the Inuit belief seems to boil down to: "The Good Spirit provides, and if the Evil Spirit gets hold of things, it's just too bad!" The Eskimo is

very much of a child of Nature, and he is a child now getting bemused by the complications of the advancing civilization which he cannot quite understand. For instance, a white trader may lie to him - no more than the prevarication of the white man which is used every day as a mere social amenity. The trader may say:

"Nashula, I shall see you when you eat supper." Then the white man does not come until the time for eating meat has long gone by. That is telling a lie. Nashula is equally puzzled when he goes to the mission and hears from the Book, "God is Love," and when he goes the next time he finds the Book also says: "The Lord thy God is a jealous God...Vengeance is Mine."

Nashula is quite confused. He has a simple understanding. To him good is good, and bad is bad. The white man is good when he does not lie and does not steal; or the white man can be bad and have an Evil Spirit. But should Nashula and his comrades attempt to remove the Evil Spirit from the white man, then comes the policeman and he is very angry. In fact, so angry is the policeman that Nashula eventually discovers that when one of the tribe oversteps the white man's law, that man is punished.

Nick and I evolved a system of punishment for misdemeanors among the natives which proved to be most effective. We issued a decree of banishment to one of the many islands in the strait, and the culprit was soon chastened following his enforced exile, with only far-spaced visits from the police to break his loneliness. Those visits were twofold in purpose. We wished to see that the man was all right, still with provisions and shelter; and also we wished to get him to give some sign that he had recognized his fault or guilt and was sorry. Among the natives our guidance became much more of the paternal than otherwise, and we found that by establishing absolute trust in us we made greater headway than by giving a show of anger.