

I Lived With The Eskimos

**by
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Chapter One - White Frontiers

The dogs had been uneasy all day, and I'd had to shoot three of them. That worried me. First, because I hated to do it; and second, because it left harnessed to my sled only fifteen of the eighteen I'd started out with from the Police Post, and we'd only been traveling two days. So we were short of dogs, even though the second sled had a team of twenty drawing it. If we had good luck on the hunt we'd need every last ounce of dog muscle to pull the caribou home. Anyhow, I always tried to save the dogs if they went bad on me or the natives, but this time it became too serious.

"Shoot him, Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak, shoot him!" called Tommy, who had been running alongside me when the rebellion started. The trouble slowed us up, and, with Lukas as third man, we were quite a stretch behind One-eyed Bobby, Nashula and Troutguts, who were with the twenty-dog team, with Bobby driving.

"Shoot him," called Tommy again, but even at that I let the dog have his first snap and snarl, just flicking the seventy-foot walrus-hide whip the Eskimos use to control the dogs as they travel in the Ungava and Baffin Land areas, but the beast snarled again and tried to charge me, dragging the other dogs out of line. The lead dog did her best to keep going, only she hadn't the strength against that mass of growling, twisting fur and muscle. The boss dog on his loose line lit in to bite the heels of the rebel and force him back in line. But it looked now as if we might lose the whole team in a free-for-all fight. I lifted my revolver and got that first dog cold. The two nearest him shrank back a bit and pulled into line, but when I went to loosen the harness from the dead animal, they both came at me. I jumped back clear just in time before they made their spring; there was nothing for it, I had to finish them both - and quick. It was the law of the North, where you fight every inch of the way just to live.

But no matter what were the narrow escapes, the near-starvation, hardship, and loneliness, I would not now give up that six year's experience I've had in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for a million dollars in gold. That sort of thing teaches a fellow what it's all about, living up North there beyond the latitude 60 as I did for 3 years of my more than six years of Mounted service, with Eskimo natives as my friends; heathen as they are counted, it was they who taught me

there is a God, powerful and marvelous. It was up there I learned that just living can be fun.

There I stood, three dead dogs among the standing team, and the natives cracking their whips with a noise like continued rifle fire. We were on the ice - what we call the collar because it is attached to the cliff edge of the land, and rims out maybe twenty feet before you come to the ocean ice and the tide flow under it. I wondered what could have come over those dogs, for they'd certainly gone the worst kind of "bad." I could not stand there speculating, so I cut the harnesses away with the help of the natives, and with what was left of the team started up again. We were on ice patrol after caribou, getting a supply of fresh meat for natives and white man alike.

"Whee-at!" I called, and had the dogs going nicely in another mile or two, when I looked ahead where the team driven by Bobby should have been. I saw the tail of its sled go up in the air like that of a jack rabbit disappearing under a fence. There was a crash, the yowls of a score of dogs, and then the shouts of men; sled, men and animals disappeared before my horrified eyes.

I knew what had happened even before Tommy and I reached the spot, Lukus panting behind us, for he wasn't so quick since his accident. The first team dogs went panicky hearing the row amongst the team I drove, and the revolver shots. They knew as well as humans what those shots meant, and somehow they'd gone careless. The men could pull them round quick enough. The tide was out; the ocean ice, ordinarily level with the collar, had dropped on the ebb. There was a straight ice wall, fifteen feet deep, between the two surfaces. Sled, dogs and Eskimos had gone over that fifteen-foot drop like a plummet. I was scared to look over.

I hitched the dogs at a safe distance and padded over to the edge to look down. Well, things could have been worse. The sled had heeled over, but the lashings stayed taut. The dogs were crouched in the harness, too scared to do more than keen yelping. The three natives, Nashual and Bobby and the chap we policemen had rechristened Troutguts, were unentangling themselves, and feeling each other over for broken bones, but evidently nothing was broken, for the men walked about, and I could hear them say to each other: "Wheyanna!" which is their special word when anything happens. It means "It matters not." A native would say "Wheyanna!" to the worst thing that ever occurred. When he has said it, he grins and starts all over again. He wastes no time either wishing or regretting.

"What got my dogs?" I asked the first thing, for I knew that was really what had panicked the other outfit.

"Ate something," said Lukas, who had joined Tommy and me as we peered over the ice wall. Lukas, like Nashula, was one of the chiefs of the Inuit tribe that had a settlement near the police headquarters on the island known as Port Burwell. But it was Nashula who had adopted me as a foster son, and that's why the men called my Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak. That means "White man who is almost an Eskimo," and I'm very proud of the title. It meant a lot; it meant these natives of the Baffin Land and Ungava areas of northeastern Canada, trusted me then, and would trust me if I ever go back and any are alive whom I knew well before, although they do not live to a very great age. It meant that they counted me as a friend, and I knew any one of them would have given his life for me. That really was how Lukas lost the use of his one arm, because he fought a polar bear with a hunting knife the time we were shipwrecked on Savage Island shortly after I was detailed as one of the two Mounted Policemen at Port Burwell. Anyhow, it's a great feeling to have such trust and friendship.

We could not do much while the natives picked themselves out of the mess beneath, but as soon as they were on their feet we saw that the trouble had just begun. The powdered peat which they call sill-mik-sah had broken off the sled runners. This meant we were in a bad spot, for we had not extra dirt with us, having counted on getting a supply when we turned inland to the caribou country. The natives usually carry a good-sized sack of this powdered peat. Its really the earth scooped out of the tundra, and tundra is the name given the marshy places in this north country which most people think of as the Barren Lands. I take it that this tundra is really the beginning of a sort of top soil. The formation of it is a matter for the research scientist; but at any rate, moss grows on these stretches of tundra - a sort of gray-colored moss on which the caribou grazes. They eat nothing else, as far as anyone knows, and they wander from valley to valley to find it. That's really, I think, why caribou are so scarce; there may be larger herds than we think, but they live among the hills and are difficult to track.

This certainly was a bad spot we were in. One team - mine - with three dogs short; the other team unhurt we hoped, but in a mused huddle and still fifteen feet below us. There was nothing between us and the North Pole but snow and ice, and nothing between us and death but the quick intelligence of the Eskimos with me. I'd been up among them long enough to know what should be done now; the question was how to do it, and in an emergency the greatest need was quick decision. Before I had had time to think all this through, Tommy was back

by the dog team, beckoning for me to come, and ramming the team lines into my right hand. I still held my own whip in my left hand. Tommy loosened the longest lashline of our loaded sled, and as we backed up the team, he threw this over the edge of the ice cliff. I held the dogs taut, and Lukas eased a bundle of fur between the ice and the line so it would not cut through with the friction. Somehow Tommy swung out on that walrus line, and scrambled down the fifteen feet of sheer ice; then he ran to control the fallen team of dogs until Nashula, Bobby and Troutguts had pulled themselves together. I had the team well in hand and turned them to face further in on the collar ice. With the team hitched, the walrus-hide line now hung so that the men below could hang on and be pulled up by dog power, while I controlled the speed, and Lukas stood by to watch the line. It was a bit of a struggle, especially with Chief Nashula, who was an older man. Bobby hitched the team below a considerable distance from the upset sled, for there's always the danger that the dogs will eat the thongs and lashings. Then we used the same line and method with my team pulling, to bring up the furs and supplies from the broken sled. Bubby shinnied up the last thing, and we lashed our line into place again.

"Sill-mik-sah," said Tommy, who never wasted breath on more words than were needed, and I knew that someone would have to take my team and drive inland to a freshwater lake or to a valley and there find tundra. It could not be myself, that was sure, for I did not know enough about the country even yet, and a white man might miss the signs showing tundra lay beneath the snow. The men consulted together; Tommy, Bobby and Troutguts volunteered for the chore. They might be gone only a few hours, a day, or two days, so they took my sled with the supplies lashed under its tarpauling of sealskin. That left Lukas, Nashula and myself standing on a few thousand miles of ice, with a pile of loose furs, some food and our rifles lying beside us, a broken sled below, and a team of dogs hitched fifteen feet down on ocean level and quite a mile from the place they had gone over. We hoped they would stay put until the tide turned and the ice came level again.

One-eyed Bobby, for all of his lop-sided vision, had a reputation for finding tundra quickly. I hope luck would hold now, for delays in the North are bad. Blizzards are something that may come up at any time, and blizzards are bad medicine in any situation, even in the comfortable surroundings of the Police Post itself.

We waved good-bye to the men as the team got under way. Before they were out of sight round the first hummocky ice, I could see Bobby and Troutguts bending over the snow and looking for lemming tracks. "Find lemming and you'll find tundra and caribou," is the belief of the native, for it is thought those little mouselike animals start all tundra with their diggings; anyhow tundra is where they make their burrows, and tundra is where the caribou come to find the moss,

so it seems reasonable in theory. The natives has a second chance of finding tundra in winter, since he watches the qualities of snow, whether it lies over softer ground, over ice or over rock. It is this wisdom of the native that is so essential in the enterprises which await the men of morrow in opening up the enormous hidden wealth of the new Northland.

"Igloo," said Nashula, and I brought my attention back to where I was. I stood by the furs and equipment and thought this would be as good a place as any to get a lesson in snowhouse building. I did get the lesson, but although I've made myself many a snow shelter of sorts, I've never mastered the art and perfect architectural skill needed to make a snow dwelling.

"No good," said Lukas as he crawled about on the snow surface when we had moved inland a short way, and he kept jabbing his snow knife in and out of drifts. It was the knife I watched. If it jerked a bit as it went into a drift, that meant there was a layer of soft snow below, and snow must hard-packed all the way through or it cannot be cut into house blocks.

Nashula had more good luck. Two hundred yards further along he found a fine place, for his knife went to the hilt in one long, steady pressure of the whole narrow eighteen inches of blade. The more I watched the building the more I wondered. It's only above the timber line of the continent that igloos are built at all, and the oftener I saw them constructed, the more I was to wonder later when I saw the Indian hogans of the Southwestern states; for the shape of an igloo and an adobe hogan is much the same, yet scientists have proved that the Eskimos are not Indians, and have no connection with them.

It was Nashula who with the greatest ease marked off a perfect circle and dig out a surface hole from the drift, three feet in diameter. He cut round this to the depth of his knife, and then across the corner, and very carefully lifted out the three-cornered piece of snow thus obtained. The opposite corner of the round was cut out in the same way, lifted and laid by the first, and then the centre cut was taken up last.

This gave the native three blocks eighteen inches high, three feet long and six inches thick, with a partial curve on the outside. Nashula continued to stand in the hole, and cut his blocks always with a slight curve, then set them round the hole. I watched until he had reached the point where he started, when he used the second of the first two three-cornered pieces and with it started the next row of blocks on top of the first, using a spiral shaping with each block getting into a

circle, and narrowing in toward the top until the builder had closed himself inside the igloo. the third of the three-cornered pieces is pushed through the roof hole, shoved round in place, mortised with the knife and fall into place.

Lukas on the outside was filling in chinks with snow slices, and I took a hand to keep my circulation going, for there's no loafing on a job when the thermometer, if you had one, would read fifty or sixty below zero.

"Ho!" called the muffled voice of Nashula from the inside, and Lukas tested the wind direction before the tunnel could be cut. This tunnel entrance is built on the wind side of the igloo because the snow piles up on the lee, and it is rare when there is a stoppage of drifting snow swooshing hard ahead of the everlasting winds of the Northland.

With Lukas directing, I helped to dig in toward the igloo as Nashula dug out, keeping, as he did, deeper than the floor of the snowhouse proper. Sooner than I expected Nashula crawled out; then the tunnel was built up and covered over, swung around a little in an S shape, for the older dogs will sometimes shelter in its first bend.

I'd timed the building of the snowhouse, for the men gave no appearance of hurry, yet it was just an hour and a half from the time Nashula scratched the circle until I began to hand in the floor furs to the men for spreading in the space which had been constructed large enough for the six of us, since we hoped luck would hold and Tommy and the others would get back before the day dawned.

I was mighty glad when I saw the rifles stacked at the tunnel opening, with butts stuck in the snow. The rifles are kept outside for two reasons, the most important being that in case of sudden alarm the native crawling out can grab a weapon as soon as he reaches the tunnel opening. The second reason is that the native fears if there is a child in the igloo he or she might monkey with the firearms. Now, although we had no children with us, the habit held, and only my police revolver, which we are supposed never to be without, went inside the snowhouse for the night.

Now the caribou, seal and fox furs were spread on our snow floor, hide side down, the floor being eighteen inches below the level of the original snowdrift. Being a careful Eskimo, Nashula rolled over the floor a couple of times to pound down any bump that might feel like a mountain if lain on all night. The sleeping bags, carried inside out on the sleds, were turned fur side in again, after the frozen caribou hair had been beaten to remove the ice particles frozen on them, and now these were laid in circular fashion on the furs already spread.

Before we could settle down a hole had to be cut for the food supply, and another one to hold the harness, lines and whips. I've seen a few dogs get hold of a seventy-foot plaited walrus-hide whip and eat it clean to its ivory handle in part of a night, so there is no mistake that these dogs are the scavengers and garbage collectors of the North. They keep an Eskimo camp or settlement clean of any contaminating substance.

"I'll feed the dogs," I volunteered, and took up a sack of chopped seal meat, bones and all. Nashula crawled out with me, since a second man usually holds the dogs off with his whip so they will not rush while the feed sacks are slashed with the six-inch hunting knife and the contents hurled as far as a good arm will throw. This time there was no need of Nashula, for the dogs were on the plateau below.

As I crawled back through the tunnel, I took a last look at the star-spangled sky, and wondered if that white moon was shining down as clearly on my home folk; then I wriggled out of my caribou winter clothing and squirmed into the sleeping bag. Nashula was the last man in. He cut a six-inch hole in the igloo wall against the wind side for ventilation, and blocked the tunnel entrance against dogs and other animals. Then he handed round a chunk each of raw seal meat and we all began to chew. This was dinner and supper in one. I chewed and listened, for the North is never quiet. There's the thin crackle of ice and the sigh of wind, and the swish of drifting snow particles; there may come the pad, pad of a dog just outside the igloo; and always there's the howl of some distant wolf, although these beasts are hard to catch.

I swallowed my last bite of raw, dried seal meat and rolled over; I brushed the tickle of caribou hair from my face and prepared to sleep. But instead of sleep there came the yowling yelp of traveling dogs who sight the finish of their trip. That meant Tommy, Bobby and Troutguts were back with the tundra dirt. A fast trip and a lucky one! I hauled on my fur coat, which the native call keeool-ee-tuk, and got to my feet after the men who had already crawled out to greet the travellers. Tommy grinned from ear to ear.

"Your dogs ate a dead whale," said Tommy, and added, "very dead whale."

That accounted for the trouble, then. Frozen very dead whale would be enough to upset the temper of most humans let alone the kingmik, that strange dog of the northeast Arctic and sub-Arctic regions, half Arctic wolf and half dog, the origins of which nobody knows, and which never seems to respond to an offer of friendliness from man. It's an entirely different animal from the husky dog of the Northwest, which is half timber wolf and half dog, and which may be made a pet.

The men had found the dead whale, or what was left of it, washed up far into a ravine, evidently stranded from the short summer season before.

"Kow putt," said I to Tommy and the others as they started unloading the second sled. I meant "tomorrow" in the Eskimo tongue, for the way I was yawning made me feel that tomorrow was plenty of time to commence getting that mess of dirt on the sled runners. I needed sleep before I craved the caribou our patrol had started out to hunt, even if it was to be the first hunt on which I was to stand trick alone, meaning I'd go out to one point without a native guide when we reached the caribou country.

"Kow putt," said the men, one after the other as they finished bringing in the furs and supplies, and I saw they were glad of my lack of enterprise. Anyhow, we all went to sleep.