I Lived With The Eskimos

by
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Chapter Seventeen - Wings In The North

Akpatok Island came into my view when on a sea patrol. I had gone out with the natives in Lukas' omiak, hoping to find seal. It had not been a very good season within our radius of responsibility, and our natives were fearing a shortage of foodstuffs; our own supply ship was delayed, so I determined that all help must be given the natives, who were still keeping their broad smiles on their faces but must have been a bit discouraged.

"Nobody lands on Akpatok, " said Lukas, when I insisted that I wanted to go ashore.

"Why?"

"There is an Evil Spirit there." I was getting tired of this Evil Spirit which is not anything but something handy to blame when disasters occur or when sufficient care has not been taken, or when one of the natives would rather do something else than the matter which is in hand at the moment.

"Lukas, you know Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak fools the Evil Spirit many times - he runs when the white man comes."

"But not on Akpatok," Lukas carried on his argument.

"But, yes on Akpatok." I retorted, for I was determined I was going ashore. I felt sure I would not have been the first to set foot on Akpatok; certainly some explorer, some government official of an earlier day, or even natives of an earlier time must have walked over that forbidding black-appearing rock. It was a grim place. Akpatok, I was to find out later, is fully as big as the State of New Jersey, and for the most part its shore line is sheer cliff, but I had noticed a couple of coves with ragged shelving rocks that would make a landing place. Later, when I was able to fly over Akpatok by plane, I found there were several more inlets or fiords which could not be seen readily from a small boat. Akpatok appealed to me as a place which could become a refueling station for cross-Atlantic air service, and it may yet when experts have surveyed that section of the continent more

thoroughly. But this day in an open omiak I had no wildest dream that airplanes would ever fly this way. I started in on Lukas once more.

"Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak will go alone."

Ha! Now I had him, so Lukas' scruples and fears were overcome. He let me take a kyak and paddle myself ashore. I realized, of course, that Lukas was genuinely anxious about me, and whatever he believed about the island was not nonsense to him. Tommy and Troutguts, stout fellows, each took a kyak and paddled on either side of me, making a sort of bodyguard in approaching the rocks, which became more jagged and harsh as we neared them. But the two men would not come any closer to the shore than a full three kyak-lengths away.

There was nothing strange about the beach at Akpatok that I could see. I climbed up from the water's edge, and followed what certainly did appear to be a trodden trail, so marked was the narrow pathway which showed along the cliff's edge. I followed this trail, marveling at its distinctness. I climbed steadily and more quickly until I reached the top. I drew a long breath and scanned the immediate terrain. There stretched for miles a flat plateau of rock, broken here and there by higher peaks. I brought my attention back to where I stood, and faintly I could trace the signs of a single-file path which curved as the descent began. I kept on, and the path entered a defile; high rocks closed in on either hand, fierce and jutting in overhanging masses. The rocks almost met overhead in places, so that I began to feel I was confined in a tunnel. A narrow strip above showed that the sky was still lighted by the sun. I stopped and shouted; I knew I must be alone, and yet there was an eerie feeling that I was being watched. I shouted again, and there came a whirr of wings and thousands of small birds flew from every rock and cranny. They surrounded me, they came so close that I could feel the wind of their wings against my face. I raised my arms to ward them off; they perched and hovered, but did not fly far. I saw they were little auks, which cannot fly because their wings are so short. It is from the millions of these birds making their home on the island that the natives have given it the name of Akpatok, which means Home of the Little Auk.

I curbed my interest in the little auks, for I had seen something else. Perched in an angle of rock I saw a white owl. I thought of stuffed roast fowl for dinner and I fired my rifle. The snowy bird fell, and a little trickle of blood ran over its plumage. It was plump and well fed, and must have spent the winter north as the owls sometimes do when the ptarmigan and Arctic mice are plentiful.

I cached the owl and continued down the trail, with my wonderment increasing at every step. That path was manmade, I am positive of it; a thousand human feet

must have trodden it, of that I am sure; and yet I knew, too, that such a thing must be impossible from what the natives told. I was thoroughly puzzled.

"No man steps on Akpatok and lives."

Well, here I was, stepping along and feeling fine, thinking of the fine dinner that white bird was going to make. It was a white owl I had cooked on Christmas Day and pretended that it had been turkey.

I reached the bottom of the ravine to which my path had led; a small stream chattered in and out of the rocks below me; they were round rocks, very much smaller than any I had seen before; they were smooth and whitish, where all others had been so dark a gray as to appear black.

"Fresh water," I said to myself, and at once began to feel thirsty, but there was another five minutes of swift downhill walking before I stood among those round white stones.

They were the dried skulls of men. A score lay in a group. I looked further; there were leg bones and bones of arms, hands, fingers and feet, scattered and tossed about, smoothed to the appearance of old ivory by years of exposure to hard weather. Here, I thought, are the remains of some unsung heroes of the north. Or, can they be the dead left on some battlefield of which no one has heard before?

I picked up a skull, and I could not tell whether it was that of an Eskimo or white man. I only knew it must be very old. I crossed to the other side of the ravine and penetrated over the rough rockbed half a mile inland, and every few yards there lay skeletons. I felt myself shiver, and I kept turning my head with a strange feeling that there was something behind me. I came back, fog drifted in from the sea, and I knew I must not linger too long, for the path I must retrace was narrow, the cliff exceedingly steep, and at its base the waves battered and snarled without ceasing. I concealed two of the skulls under my seal keeool-ee-tuk, and walked back to the shore the way I had come. My kyak was just as I had left it. Out beyond the waves I could see Troutguts and Tommy waiting, their kyaks held away from the land. I had a hard time climbing into the canoe, for I feared to lose the skulls; if they fell with force against the rocks they might smash into powder, or into pieces too small to put together, for they seemed brittle. I settled into the kyak, pushed off, wielded my paddle and called to the two natives as I came abreast of them. Then carefully I climbed over the side of the omiak. I was awkward; I had to keep stooped over so the skulls would not slip, but at last I

stepped down to my sleeping quarters, apart from the bunks of the men, and I concealed what I had found under the bedding furs.

Lukas met me as I came on deck.

"Did Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak eat on Akpatok?"

"No, Lukas, the white man did not eat, for there is nothing to eat there."

"But Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak fired his rifle."

"Gosh!" I said, and raised my hand in a guesture that deplored my own stupidity, for it was only then I remembered my snowy owl which I had forgotten to take from the cache. Maybe it was as well, for the natives might not have shared the food. I had sense enough to say nothing about that owl to Lukas, although I hated to miss the good dinner it would have made. Neither did I say anything about drinking from the fresh stream of water. It was clear, glacier water, pure as any untouched mountain spring; no matter what the native superstitions may have been, I had no fear.

"Did Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak bring anything away from Akpatok?" Lukas had me now for fair; I never told the natives a lie, and I'm opposed to lying anyhow, for it can get one into bigger trouble than any from which a lie may get one out. The natives trusted me; deceive them once and I might as well give up trying to influence them for their own good.

"Some old bones, Lukas," I said as carelessly as I could; "just specimens for study." I doubt very much if Lukas knew what I meant; he looked glum. "White man's bones," I added, even though I was not sure about that, but Lukas never looked round; he was peering through the twilight as our craft scudded over the choppy sea on our way to Port Burwell.

"Just old bones," Nick and I decided when I had shown my comrade the skulls. I had brought them from Akpatok. But I took the skulls out to a corner of tundra and gave them decent burial. We never could be sure whether the bones were those of white men or of natives, and of course no one will ever learn how the bones came to be on the island which is shunned by every native. There must be a story about it. It was from that time I became interested in two differing aspects of the North; the birds because of the millions of little auks I had roused on the island; and the lives, as far as they are known, of the men who sailed these strange seas hundreds of years before the Mounted Police were ever thought of.

First, there were the birds, for I had to wait until I got out from the North before I found the histories and the old stories to read about the first explorers. The birds were right with me every day. Akpatok Island is the home of myriads of little auk. This bird is about the size of a robin; it is web-footed and belongs to the duck family. The back feathers are sleek and black, and the breast is white. It is a noisy bird and sometimes difficult to catch, but it makes good eating, although there are not more than two bites to each one. Its brother, the great auk, disappeared altogether, according to scientists, about the year 1844, when the last record was made of any being seen.

In all my reading I have found no written mention of Akpatok, the mystery island, nor of the skeletons, nor why the natives are afraid to land upon the rocks round which seagulls swoop and scream, wheel and dip, and where they make their nests in the crannies of the rock face.

It was just a few days after my first landing on Akpatok that I watched a battle rage between an ocean eagle and a seahawk. I was not surprised, for Lukas in his stories had told me of this latter bird and its viciousness.

"One call the hawk the wolf of the air," explained Lukas, and I found he was right in this opinion, for the hawk will attack anything, even to an airplane, that huge new man-made bird which astonishes the denizens of the Northland.

The eagle ducked and dodged, the hawk hovered high, swooped, dipped, struck and missed. The eagle climbed steeply in the endeavor to get above his enemy, and perhaps fly to safety. The hawk was too quick and strong.

"My rifle, Tommy," I called, for Tommy watched the air fight with me.

"Not shoot," said Tommy, "one might kill the eagles." That made a difficulty, for the native will kill on sight each hawk that comes within bullet reach, but the eagle is a sacred bird to him; its feathers, found in the nests and sometimes dropped among the rocks, are used in ceremonial dress for certain of the native annual festivals.

The hawk was on top again. Strong and ugly, it power-dived and struck viciously. I saw one wing of the eagle droop; the bird fought madly to keep its balance in the air; the hawk circled, darting in close and darting out again. The eagle was weakening. I could not stand idle and see that eagle die. Tommy must have sensed the thought, for he shoved my loaded rifle into my hand. I raised it to my shoulder. The birds were hovering low, the eagle tired, its wings moving slowly. If the hawk would fly just a few yards from its prey I felt I could catch the brutal

fighter, but it came nearer; slowly, surely, it was making a creeping flight upon the wounded bird. I determined to fire, and take a chance. The eagle dropped another few feet in the air, recovered, fluttered its widespread wings desperately, and this was the signal for the end. The seahawk soared high for a moment of time, turned, swooped and dived again. I got him as he touched the agonized eagle. The two birds fell together. The hawk was dead. The eagle, sorely hurt, with feathers ruffled, its body panting, its lidless eyes terrified and glazing, plunged and fluttered on the rock. None of us dared approach it in its mad struggles for freedom from the dragging wing that held it close to earth. Tommy brought a tent pole; we pushed the hawk away from its enemy, and the eagle stilled its frantic struggling.

"One will care for it," said Tommy, and I left the natives to their kindly task. They protected the bird with a fence of rocks and over all they stretched gill nets, then they threw in food, and placed a vessel of water. In a few days that king of birds was flapping both its wings, the wounded one apparently quite healed. In a week Tommy flipped away the gill nets, and the sacred bird flew, well and strong, to the furthest mountain crag. I think the shooting of that hawk brought me back into any favor I may have lost with Lukas because of my daring in going to Akpatok and bringing away the bones.

I have watched a seahawk chase and capture a young puffin. The hawk caused terror in the flock of these queer little birds, known as sea parrots because of their red and blue colored head feathers. The body feathers are black and white, and the beak is developed just as is that of a real parrot; but I have never heard a puffin talk. The biggest puffin I ever saw was nor more than thirteen inches in length.

Web-footed like the puffins are the birds we call Lords and Ladies, while we also had the snowbird or, as the natives call it, Hoop in Auk, a cute little imp that chirps and comes up close in rain or fog or sleet, and sings a song for a piece of meat.

"What is that little boy doing?" I asked a native one day shortly after I had mastered enough of the Eskimo language to be able to put questions. I saw the youngster sitting on the rocks by the water's edge; in his hand was a stick and to it there was a line attached. He had stayed so quiet for so long a time that my curiousity was aroused.

"One catches seagulls," was the reply, and so I investigated. The boy had a trout hook on his line, and on it a piece of cod liver as bait. He kept this floating on the surface of the sea, and stayed quite quiet and silent. Soon a seagull landed on

the water, swam and circled, came closer and gobbled down the liver, and so was prompty hooked. The bird was caught; the boy stooped over, pulled it up, wrung its neck. Of course the natives must hunt for everything they eat, still I thought this too cruel a method for catching birds, and I forbade the boys to "fish" for birds. They obeyed, but a few days later Lukas asked me:

"Why does the white man catch foxes in steel traps, and why does the white man make steel bullets to kill other men in war?"

"We just do it," I said, and Chief Lukas replied:

"Then the Inuit boys just catch seagulls on a hook!"

I felt really ashamed of our white civilization. Until the white men tell them of it, the Eskimos have never heard of war. They do not fight the white man, nor do they fight among their own tribes; I've never even heard children disagree with one another or quarrel with loud voices, much less come to blows. I have never seen a grown native punish a child, and this spoiling does not seem to hurt the youngsters.

"We do not fight," explained Lukas, who told me so many things, "because everything belongs to everybody, since the Good Spirit gives it to all. He leaves it there for us to take." A very fine gentleman is the little brown Eskimo brother whom we call a heathen, and although many of his race cannot read nor write nor figure, he can teach much to those of us who have learned to know him and his ways.

I think the loon and the crow interested me most of all the birds. The loon is known also as the great northern diver, and sometimes goes by the name of ember goose. It grows to almost three feet in length; its feathers are black and white. It has a wild and lonely cry resembling the howl of a wolf, which can make one shiver on an eerie night traveling over the Barren Lands. The story goes that once the loon and the crow had a mortal fight; the loon, a tricky bird, daubed the crow's white winter feathers with black, so that now the crow remains always black and does not change color with the seasons as do most of the other birds. In revenge for this insult, the crow beat the loon upon the feet so that no loon is able to walk, but only swim or fly, and to this day the loon and crow are bitter enemies.

I went hunting for wild bird's eggs with the natives, and saw that they are always careful to take no more than one or two eggs from any nest. The eggs are good to eat, with a fishy flavor, just as has the flesh of all ocean birds. The women and

the children collect the down of the eider duck, a bird which is now preserved by law, since formerly hunters ruthlessly destroyed nests and eggs without thought. The summer clothing and sleeping bags for children used to be made of the eider down quilted cleverly between thin skins, but now the trader has brought in flannel stuffs and wool blanket material so that the white man's ways are proving more simple for the Eskimo and he is quick to take advantage of them. The real eider down come from the soft spineless feathers which grow on the underside of the bird. The king eider seems no different from his lesser brother except in size, and there may be fewer in the flocks; also the king eider, like those outside the royal circles of duckdom, migrate in winter to open waters further south.

The Arctic tern flies from pole to pole. Later, when I flew in a Fokker plane, streamlined and swift, even this appeared to be clumsy and slow beside the marvel of the tern, which flies eleven thousand miles each way in a round trip and without a halfway landing place as yet known. The terns are called sea swallows because of their forked tail and their habit of irregular, hovering, swooping flight. If some young student of research and engineering can copy in greater size the bodies of these migrating birds, their wing mechanism and the amazing power plants that make them go, he will have solved the secret to "man with wings" as nearly as it can be done.

Of the grouse family the North yields the ptarmigan, a foolish, stupid bird. It can be lured to death and the frying pan by its own curiousity. For this, the Eskimo sits as though carved from his own rock seat, in his hand he holds a small stick, from the stick hangs a line, and at its end there is a knotted noose. The ptarmigan minces forward on its feathered toes, twitters, goes back and comes again. Not a nerve jerks in the native's arm, the line hangs quiet; the ptarmigan comes nearer, pushes out its neck, shoves its beak and head through the noose.

Poof!

The native has jerked the string, the noose is tight and another far northern lynching is checked up in the bird world. None of the birds learns sense from the fate of a brother or sister ptarmigan, and each one seems to make a tastier bit of eating than his fellow.

Professor J Dewey Soper is the authority on bird life who, when a Canadian Government official, discovered that the famed blue goose has a nesting place in the far northeastern areas of Baffin Land. When the spring call comes there's a stirring in the bayous of Louisiana where the blue goose spends each winter, and from there, it is supposed, the goose make direct flight to the Arctic regions, though blue geese have been shot down in the border states and in Manitoba.

Sometimes the natives will spread their gill nets on the rocks, put bait of food beneath, and thus catch the geese as the flights pass over head. Attracted by the food, the goose comes down, sticks its head betwen the meshes of the net, and cannot get free. There are thirty known types of wild geese, but in addition to the blue, it was the brant or Canada goose that we saw most frequently. The brant seems never to grow bigger than twenty-six inches in length. It makes its nesting homes among the Arctic islands, and comes south along the Atlantic coast for winter. The cackling and snow geese are others of the feathered life that come to tell us in the far northeast that the spring follows their flight fast. It is always a day of rejoicing for native and white man alike when the first flight of geese is seen overhead, and their strange "honk, honk" is heard above the wind.

The birds have long known the secrets of the North, and now that man has found his wings in planes, the wonders of a new country are opening up for the pioneer of tomorrow.