

North to Adventure

**by
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Chapter Eighteen - And More Guests Come

There was one visitor who came frequently whom neither Nick nor I could stand. I'll mention no names because it would not be kind, but this man seemingly was always on our doorstep. Nick ended his coming by the simple expedient of using a pair of the smallest and most extraordinary of animals, as our first line of defense.

I was away on long land patrol at the time, and the visitor arrived as usual. My bed was vacant, of course, in the sleeping room. This visitor made a move to occupy it.

"No," said Nick, "I've developed a superstition: I never let anyone sleep in Monty's bed when he's on land patrol; I'm convinced Monty would be lost if I did - here, use this cot in the living room."

And maybe Nick was not drawing the long bow so much, because Peveril, too, had developed an antagonism to anyone who attempted to occupy my bed when I was not there. Anyhow, Nick conceived the idea of scaring out the visitor so that he would camp at another Post than ours in future, and where he might not rasp the nerves of the resident police quite so much.

I had tamed a couple of lemmings. They were playful little things, tiny as white mice and perfectly housebroken. But this visitor did not like them. The night of his last visit to our detachment, Nick laid a trail of oatmeal from the lemmings' nest in the storeroom to the cot. It was a winding, enticing pathway which ended at the good man's pillow. Then Nick left the storeroom door open a bare inch. It was a tale of "mice and man," for we never saw that visitor again.

Maybe 'Uncle Smith' was our most persistent guest, but we did not mind him. He was the self-invited trader's clerk who deserted his factor at Hudson's Bay Trading Post, and hid himself to Port Burwell at frequent intervals. He liked our ration tobacco and never brought his own supply with him. So after a while his greediness got beyond a joke, and when it came time for him to go back to his headquarters, the parcel of tobacco he took with him was native "twast." He went

away quite happily, but on his next visit he had a supply of his own tobacco with him.

He produced this piece as the natives stood round, so I put out my hand and took the tobacco from his. He was so surprised that he said nothing, not even when I told the natives that Uncle Smith had brought them the tobacco as a gift, and I divided the good-sized cut amongst them.

Poor Uncle Smith. That was a funny joke...to Nick and me. Maybe we should not have played it on this modern representative of "The Gentlemen Adventurers of England trading into Hudson Bay," that picturesque company which had its own navy and its own army, and which still has its own flag under which it has done business in the Northland continuously since the year of 1670. The company which carries in its charter the clause, "the company though holding possession of its Canadian lands in 'free and common socage,' must yield and pay to the King and his successors whenever and as often as they shall happen to enter into the said country hereby granted, two elks and two black beavers."

Today the ramifications of the 'Bay' are quite as potent as in an older time, but in conformation to the order of advancing civilization the descendant managers, factors and clerks, submit to the processes of government regulation and Canadian law. The Hudson's Bay Company declares in its ships of trading supplies with the Mounted Police, who are also the customs officers, and declares out its cargoes of valuable pelts. We had many good visits with the Hudson's Bay men, and enjoyed them all.

Herbert Hall was an independent trader who passed by our Post at intervals. My first personal contact with him was in the way of bringing an admonishment. A native at Port Burwell reported that a schooner had passed through the strait without stopping for customs' declaration, and that she was scudding hard before a following wind.

Nothing may pass the Police Post unchallenged; but often, as we were to find out, Hebert Hall was a law unto himself.

"I was blown through your strait," said he, as I arrived with my dog team on patrol to his neat little trading post at Sugluk Inlet. "And, damn it, man, I was coming out in spring to report my coming in, cargo and all - and there's what happened to me ship."

He flicked a careless hand seaward. I looked. There lay the remains of a pretty boat, now a wreck, battered and a hulk upon the ice. He'd met another blow, and

was wrecked upon the treacherous coast line. Well, I was Commissioner of Wrecks also, so this report was but another added to the official score.

Herbert Hall was a huge man who came from a family of traders in the Northwest. His father was later to become Fur Trader Commissioner of the Hudson's Bay Company. Some years before, Herbert had decided that new frontiers offered him more scope in the Northeast, and no sooner thought than acted upon, his next move was toward Hudson Strait and Ungava Bay.

As we talked I noticed Herbert was glancing at me speculatively.

"I have an auxiliary boat," said he. "Do you know anything about engines?"

He put the question crisply and I acknowledged that I did know a little about them.

"Fine," said Hall. "I'm too big to get into my engine room; you'll do it just fine."

I parted with Herbert Hall reluctantly, while his last words called to me were:

"I'm going down town in spring to buy another schooner."

And in spring, sure enough, he turned up at the Police Post equipped with dogs and sled. He was on his way "down town," two thousand miles overland with his outfit, to Winnipeg first, then to Montreal, a feat to be accomplished for the first time by a white man.

Of his dogs Hall traded some for food; two died in Cochrane, Ontario, where he joined the transcontinental railroad for Montreal. Two more dogs died in Montreal, and one died aboard the new schooner he purchased. As Herbert Hall cleared customs with us on his second trip in with supplies, to sail through the straits, he counted that he had seven dogs returned of the twelve he had taken out. There today, snug on the west side of Ungava Bay, this scion of a trading ancestry breaks the trail of new centers of commerce. Beginning with the white trapper, then the prospector, the trader and now the airplane, the West is conquered. The same system of conquest is taking place in the East, for "Northward turns the path of Empire."

If our white visitors from time to time were varied, especially during the brief summer months, as greatly were those of our small brown brothers who trekked long weary miles over glacier, river, tundra, muskeg, ocean ice and wind-swept rock to visit with the white policeman. We were new "servants of the people"

whom the natives knew they could trust, and eventually one of the white men, myself, became an Inuit, adopted into the deepest traditional secrets of the tribe. Nick and I felt the great responsibility, and valued the trust put in us both by our government and by our native charges, for all our light-hearted plans for getting through the days, apart from our duty.

That first summer Nick and I managed to play "bowls" frequently. We used the smooth round rocks we found on top of the nearest headland. The game was not to make a goal, but to roll these huge stones prodigious distances and to end up with their making a mighty splash into the ocean. We found that we had to be occupied with something, and to have a variation as much as possible, while a reduction from the seriousness to the merely silly was absolutely necessary to preserve sanity under the conditions of those very early days in the Northeast.

Our calendar, a perpetual reckoner of man-made time, had been sent us by a Chicago friend, and that told us of the march of time. We marked off the days "until Christmas" like any youngsters, and then, after the first supply ship reached us, our daily newspapers, one year late as to date, informed us of how little variation there is really in the constant record of human events from year to year. We were very precise in reading the "day's" news on the correct date, and did not let ourselves skip ahead into the next day's paper.

The government had supplied us with an eight-tube superheterodyne NE radio set which we had erected with two radio masts sixty feet high for an aerial. This was largely experimental, for it was before the days of the chain broadcast, and was not for getting orders from our headquarters, but to find out the extent of the usefulness of radio within the Arctic Circle. Apart from a few weeks of totally blank reception during our three years up north, the radio was very good. One of our most exciting programs was to hear the description of the welcome to Colonel Lindbergh at Le Bourget flying field in France. It came in in French and I translated it for Nick. We were greatly interested and speculated freely on the possibility of airplanes being used up where we were at the time.

Occasionally the radio nearly drove us crazy. There was one evening we turned it off, for the announcer at the Savoy Hotel in London, which we had picked up, began to describe a banquet course by course and, worse yet, then commenced to describe the gowns of the lovely ladies, "layer by layer," or so it seemed to us. That was too much. We choked off the man as he spoke by turning the dial, and we contemplated with glum faces the next appearance of Ee-ma, Essie, Old Jennie and Mandy!

The Inuit of the Post listened intently to the radio. Of course they could not understand the speaking, but, being such musically inclined people, they enjoyed the musical programs a great deal. So did we, but even that became monotonous after a while, and occasionally it got on the nerves to know we were so many thousand miles away on the outside of all possible gaiety. We found it quite impossible to explain the modern invention of radio to the Eskimos. They could not understand communication by wire, and much less could they understand communication without wires, although once I thought Tommy began to understand when he and I were on a long patrol and a particularly fine Aurora Borealis started me off trying to explain to him what I thought the northern lights might be in light waves or that, if we had ears to hear, they might even be visible sound waves. The Eskimo is stolid, so when I asked Nashula his opinion of radio, he simply said:

"One calls it Nah lou tay," meaning the thing that listens.

We had a gramophone too, but it is impossible to imagine how quickly even high quality records will pall when played too much and too often. The Inuit believes that the spirit of the white man talks through the little black disc of this instrument. It took a good many weeks for them to grasp that the gramophone could also make music. I think it was more wonderful to them than radio, because, after all, they believe that the Evil Spirit can be heard talking to them literally out of thin air. I tried but never could get any of the natives to touch the release catch to start the gramophone without my help.

It was during the first bad blizzard of the second winter, coming shortly after the ice closed in, that Nick and I, being particularly bored, thought up the idea of having a "formal" party for ourselves. I hope our sanity will not be questioned for this stunt, nor that anyone will suppose we were not quite right in the heads at the time. The absurdities we indulged in at times, in the telling, do seem near to lunacy now.

Well, this time we determined to give a party, and such a party!. We sent out formal invitations, wrote them all, and deposited them in the storeroom by way of its being the post office, and there they remained until we were clearing out our stuff in the third unexpected year of our stay in the North. These invitations were addressed to Colonel and Mrs. Jones; Mrs. Smith, Miss Jane Doe and her brother John Doe, and half a dozen other imaginary residents of our isolated detachment headquarters.

I prepared the exceptionally good meal, caribou meat and a succession of canned vegetables, with my masterpiece of a custard pudding made from a

packaged powder, which was to be eaten with canned peaches as the finale. We had lots of liquor in the stores, but neither Nick nor I ever used it, excepting once or twice in the case of illness and emergency and we brought some out when visitors came. There is a lot of danger when a man takes to drinking in the Northland. I never had an inclination to drink, and orange juice is my strongest beverage to date.

Mrs. Jones and the Colonel and all the others accepted our invitations. We made place cards and put out the best napery, silver and china. We welcomed the guests as they arrived, and carried on conversations with them until we collapsed into laughter at ourselves and each other. I remember Mrs. Jones was abominably dressed, having chosen a particular shade of magenta silk which upset both Nick and myself. I suppose it was idiotic, but it seemed at the time something different and broke the monotony. Nick and I can look back on this foolish and formal party with lots of private amusement.

The second Christmas at Port Burwell we were able to give a real party, for two of the Hudson's Bay men were marooned by a storm and stayed some days with us. Our shelves were groaning under every kind of canned provisions then available, but I determined we'd have turkey for Christmas dinner. Before the storm came up I'd had the good luck to shoot a plump white owl, which masqueraded as the turkey. The two Hudson's Bay men, and I enjoyed the really succulent white-fleshed bird, a bit fishy in flavour maybe, but tasty for all that. I had stuffed and roasted it in true turkey style. But Nick refused any of my dietary sacrifice to the Moloch of festivity.

"That pure white skin," said he - fortunately long after the dinner was over - "and those short, stubby legs, made that fowl look much too much like a baby."

We never roasted a white owl again.

We had a synthetic Christmas tree among the stores, so we loaded that with presents for each man of the quartet, extra tobacco, chocolate bars and such like. Everything was very gay. But even on Christmas Day there was a duty, for the blizzard had let up enough to allow a scheduled native council meeting to be held. This took place at noon. Then an Inuit dance followed the private "owl" dinner, which had been served around four o'clock of the important day. That Christmas really wasn't so bad. Time had softened the edges of our separation from families and close friends, and time too, was bringing us closer to the reunion which we expected to be within the regular term of service in the Northeast, which is two years. But Nick and I were reckoning without a lot of things before we were to see ourselves on the homeward trek.