

North to Adventure

by
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Chapter Seven - Evil Spirit Walks Again

The *Ah Chook* headed across Hudson Strait, and Nick and I were confident that another night or two and perhaps one more full day would see us making Port Burwell. But we counted without the vagaries of northern weather, with which we were not yet familiar. It was already late in October and the water was still singularly free of ice, while the sky as we sailed was unusually clear, and we could see the mainland of Northern Ungava loom up in the distance. Then as the afternoon advanced Nick and I began to watch the actions of the natives with interest, for they appeared to be becoming uneasy. First Lukas, then Nashula, next Tommy, who was to play a big part in my northern experience, would look over the sides of the boat.

"Puyee, puyee," the men would repeat, then each would shake his head dubiously.

There were not seals. I explained to Nick because I had learned a considerable number of words during my enforced exile on Savage Island. He and I agreed that it was surprising that since leaving the island and crossing the strait toward our own coast line we had seen no marine life. There had been no seals, no walrus and no whales, and it was more than strange that we had seen no bird life at all, for the eider duck is customarily flying in great numbers at this time of year. This day there appeared to be nothing over the ocean nor in it, not a living thing that came to our view.

"Bad," signed Lukas after Nick policeman and I had questioned him.

"Bad weather." I reported to Nick, but I was wrong despite my improvement in understanding the language. It was worse than bad weather.

Late in the afternoon we passed a place which had been named Omanek. If bad weather were coming I thought the steersman would have headed in to land at this point, but we scudded on, and without warning it became much colder. The natives were looking anxiously out to sea and it was Tommy who turned back to Nick and myself and said:

"Sea-coo."

Within fifteen minutes we white men were to learn, never to forget, what sea-coo means. It is ocean ice, and there it was, floating, drifting ice of the Arctic water gradually but swiftly closing in around our boat.

Immediately the native pilot turned the patrol boat directly toward shore, and by nine o'clock that night we had come within anchoring distance of the coast, with the natives seemingly choosing the most desirable spot upon which we might land. It was a place a long way from our home port, but the idea was to get our small craft out of the immediate danger of being crushed in the ice when the tide changed and the wind would turn against the tide.

This terrible pressure of ice against wind can sink steel-plated ships in the northern waters, ships much bigger and stronger than our slim craft. The natives with us dropped no anchor as I had expected they would, but they gave the boat all the engine power she had so that she was pushing large chunks of ice out of our pathway as they crept in more swiftly every second from the ocean. It was obvious the natives believed they could ground our boat at high tide.

The Eskimo, or Inuit - no matter what name we call him - is a remarkable mariner. When not overtaken by storm as we had been before, he can navigate in these dangerous waters, as though he some instinct fighting wind, fog, snow and ice with adverse tides. He always, given time, can manage to reach shore at the most advantageous point and there beach his boat, especially when the crushing danger of ocean ice seems inevitable. Great little navigators and seamen, these natives of ours soon had the police boat riding the full running tide far on to the beach. We could only be crushed by the closing ice if we had not made the boat secure before the tide returned again.

This experience of ours happened before the scientist had sent north the power to overcome the magnetic influence of the pole, for now ships are supplied with the gyro compass, and in this particular section where we adventured, there are now radio direction-finding stations, known as DF, from which are issued accurate positions as to shore line, that is, when the shore line has been well charted. Daily now the geodetic and magnetic surveys of the North proceed, for the scientist also follows the Mounted Policeman to the North. Briefly, the procedure is that the Mounted Policeman maps roughly the promontories he passes and marks each cove and bay along his patrol route. Naturally this cannot always be absolutely accurate in detail, as this charting is most often done when the policeman is afoot on ice and land patrol, so that he is battling fog

and blizzard as he goes; yet his rough maps are the basis upon which the scientist works.

Hudson Strait is the oldest waterway known on this side of the Atlantic Ocean. Without any of the modern aids of gauging time and tide and ice floe, there have come ships bearing the pioneers of Canada along this stretch of inland ocean even as far back as two hundred and sixty years ago. The old sailing schooners of a century ago and more "lay to" to await a favoring wind, and if they came within the ice pressure, the bones of men and ship mingled alike on the strait's broad floor. And only ice pressure now is still beyond control of the modern scientist. Barring unfavourable combinations of ice and tide and wind, a ship can now cross the Hudson Strait from end to end and side to side regardless of other phases of Nature.

I've watched the ice breaker bursting asunder the shore ice, - the ice breaker that is made of wood reinforced, because wood gives as steel will not, and with a shifting ballast to augment the frontal weight; but I have seen the ice breaker helpless before ocean ice. This ocean ice is rubbery in consistency, and if a ship mounts it, the frozen substance bellies up on either side of the vessel so that she lies within a hammock that sways beneath her but never breaks, and the ship is comparatively safe until thaw. But loose ice, squat chunks, squares and rectangular blocks float; they careen against one another, they grind and grate, slew off and come together again at great speed. The tide and wind drives against them, thus the ship between pressure of ice and pressure of water, is ground to kindlings, small pieces of timber which the native may find and utilize later as the shaft for a harpoon or in his own ship-building.

But the natives now had maneuvered our boat ashore with cleverness, and we clambered over the small vessel's side to land. The water had disappeared behind us, and there was now to be seen only a vast acreage of ice, with here and there a break of black surging water that narrowed by the second.

I sighed. We were a long way from home yet, it seemed, and I heard some of the Inuit mutter, "Wheyanna." What matter indeed! This adventure was child's play to what we had been through already. We were now on our own side of the mainland and the natives knew where we were; we had supplies in plenty, and there were two white men, although that, I knew, could not be for long. One of us would have to head an expedition overland, traveling light, to send out from the Post relief sled with dogs, to bring the others back.

A few yards inland from where we beached the boat there was a small fresh-water pond, and we chose its bank as the camp site. The natives brought from the ship all portable properties which had been aboard: our rifles, ammunition, harpoons and the kyak which we had carried on deck, and then there was the tent which was immediately pitched to provide us with shelter. Into this we all crawled to rest the few hours until the tide would rise again and our patrol boat could be moved still further into a somewhat precarious 'dry dock.'

Once more, I thought, these Inuit friends of ours had saved the white men's lives. It was the clever manipulation of the boat by the steerman, the clever guidance by Lukas and Nashula, who had combined their judgment of the speed of the running tide, and had succeeded in jockeying *Ah Chook* around a small headland which helped to keep off the greatest pressure of drift ice at least long enough until the patrol had been breached. I felt these natives were really a wonderful people, honorable, self-sacrificing and courageous.

Refreshed by sleep, Nick and I ate a hot meal for which we used the Primus stove, and then as the tide rose again all hands turned out to tug *Ah Chook* up to greater safety. We propped her up with rocks as best we could, and then turned in again for a much needed and unbroken few hours of sound sleep.

"Four sleeps (days) from the Police Post," Lukas made known to us on our enquiry as to how far we were still from our destination. Nick and the natives held conference, and I took no more part in it than to clear up the meaning of a word or two. I was feeling rather groggy yet after the island experience. However, without my aid, a decision was taken as to who of the party should go for relief and who should stay behind in camp.

Nick policeman go with natives back to the Post; but Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Kasak, with wounded Lukas, Eey-ay-tok, Tommy and two others shall stay behind."

That, in effect, was the result of the brief conference, and as morning dawned, "Auk shu ni" was spoken by white man and natives alike, and we three, weakened by privation almost beyond the point of endurance, watched the procession file away from us, while standing guard over us, as one might have thought, were two of the natives who had accompanied Nick aboard the patrol boat.

Headed by Bobby, one of the best guides we had at our Post, the little expedition made its way across the hills to follow a valley beyond. We looked after them as they tramped across that rocky country, and I stared in the direction they had taken long after they were out of sight. Each man had his rifle slung across his

shoulders; one native carried a harpoon, and each one of the party had enough seal meat to last him for four days; two carried hunting knives and two carried snow knives, while Nick was equipped with rifle and revolver.

As the last traces of our companions disappeared, I felt a bit lost and alone again, but I turned at a soft sound which came from behind me. It was Tommy, who was shuffling as though in a dance step; he had a broad smile on his pleasantly ugly face and looked so cheerfully satisfied that everything was to be all right that my melancholy could not last.

I felt a bit dazed about the whole series of adventures. It had been a gloriously bright and beautiful day as we left the barren island of our previous refuge, and now we were in the middle of winter with a tremendous field of ice blocking our waterway passage. Our rescue party was already on its way afoot, and here on icy terrain we were destined to remain another seven or eight days while our deliverers reached the Post, got a team together and sent back a sled for us. A desolate land this was, and surely there was nothing but the roughest type of travel.

Tommy and I examined the *Ah Chook* at our leisure. She was entirely sound, and when I explored the hold I discovered Nick had no ideas along the line of "just enough for present need." I found many more provisions than I had anticipated, in addition to those which we already had ashore. There were two more rifles, and we had two already in camp, while Nick had brought my service revolver, which I determined, duty or not, I should never go anywhere without again. There was plenty of ammunition, enough of other supplies to last for several weeks, and there was no possibility of starvation. I had a Primus stove too, and so got hot food. This was a different outlook from that which we had faced on Savage Island.

We were on the mainland now, and there were big chances of finding game. I felt a lift of spirit and some excitement. I decided I must look out for the little white fox which lives mostly on the drift ice, and during our first morning in camp I watched old Lukas, using his good arm, spend a lot of time making a snow trap in which to catch a fox. His method was ingenious. First, there is scooped out a hole in the snow in which is placed a piece of bear or other kind of meat. This is covered lightly with snow, then a piece of hard-packed snow, shaved wafer thin, is placed over all. The hole is probably four feet in diameter and shaped like an igloo inside wide at the bottom and narrowing at the top to form a dome. The fox, attracted by the smell of meat, walks on the wafer of snow across the narrow open dome, he falls in, eats the meat, then tries to dig out, and digs down instead, so he dies in the process. I did not see Lukas' trap work this time, because aboard the boat I

had found five steel traps with the other supplies, and I set these traps, so that we caught three white foxes. These animals are scarcely bigger than a cat, but the northeastern Eskimo values the little animal for his hide, which is used in the making of clothing, and the flesh is good for food. The native prefers to hunt the prey rather than trap it. Perhaps he feels that man with an intelligence which can manufacture a trap of metal, takes an unfair advantage of a creature which, although running on four legs, is also a part of the scheme and unity of things.

While we waited in this camp bad weather came up on us. A howling blizzard blew for two days and we dared not venture an arm's length beyond the shelter of the tent. First, we noticed that peculiar warning of the atmosphere which comes before the high winds in the Northland; then the temperature begins to slide to bottom as the snow and wind blows harder and harder. During this blizzard the natives decided we must have a snow house, and it took them only a couple of hours to complete their temporary igloo, with the two stronger natives using their snow knives to cut blocks from hard packed snow. On the fourth day of the camp we moved our belongings with us from one dwelling to the other. On the snow divan in the igloo the natives stretch the skins of six foxes we had caught, and on these we laid the sleeping bags which had been brought for us aboard the *Ah Chook*, so that now we were able to face the winter even if we could not get back to the Police Post for some time. But luck was with us, and the weather cleared to brilliance.

Each day, of course, I had a private lookout session, believing some miracle might happen to bring us the dog team more quickly, yet before it came we had some excitement.

Tommy sighted another Nanook (polar bear), that extraordinary animal of which I had eaten, the beast which swims more than it walks, which cuffs its enemy instead of hugging him, which is a meat and fish-eater, and which may be found on shore or a hundred miles off shore. This would be the second Nanook I was to see, if Tommy were right, and after little I was to become quite familiar with bears.

This polar bear meant fresh meat. The natives showed some excitement, but at the thought of eating bear again, I can't say I became enthusiastic at the moment. There was some fuss about getting out rifles and hunting knives, and I was all set to travel with the party. I had no such luck, for, as if I were a child, Lukas informed me that I must stay behind with him in camp. I was tempted to disregard this wish of Lukas', but I learned later that safety for the white man often lies wholly in following to the letter of the advice of the man who has always lived in the Arctic. If for no other reason than this, as we penetrate northward to open up the natural resources which are there, the greatest of these natural

resources which must be protected is the native human himself. By no other means can the white man live in Arctic wastes than by adopting and adapting native methods of living when he is away from his own immediate, settled headquarters, and by no other means can there be tapped the tremendous hidden wealth of the so-called barren lands. We must adapt ourselves to the conditions up there rather than attempt, at this early date, to force conditions to conform to our ways. The native must show us how.

I did as I was bidden by old Lukas and let the natives go after their second polar bear without the added burden of my care. And late that night as Lukas and I lay in the snow house, I found virtue does have its own reward.

I heard a stealthy sound outside the igloo as I turned in my sleeping bag in a restless half sleep. I awoke fully and then woke Lukas. He jumped from his sleeping bag, grasped his snow knife in his good hand, pointed for me to take a rifle and signed for me to follow him. Lukas cut a way out of the igloo, while I peered after him into the darkness of an Arctic night. I was all a-jitter, and I hope this might be a polar bear - what a laugh that would be if we, the keepers of the camp, should shoot the bear which the hunting party had gone after!

But outside the igloo there was nothing, so we went back in, got fully dressed and now, each of us taking a rifle, we went out and paraded in widening circles around our snow dwelling. Again we saw nothing, and, disappointed and disillusioned, I crept ahead of Lukas into our igloo once more. But we did not sleep. Lukas closed our way of entry with a snow block; I prepared tea on my Primus and we had something to eat, and then just sat.

In my best Eskimo I said to Lukas:

"Nanook!"

Lukas threw back his head and laughed. It seemed to be funny that I should expect a polar bear to come prospecting around a camp. But in a moment Lukas and I had frozen to an awful stillness, as the air was pierced with a rending and horrifying scream which made the blood run cold.

Old Lukas jumped to his feet and reached for his snow knife. Again he cut us an exit from the snow house, but this time we did not leave its shelter; we just sat in front of it and waited for that weird, unholy howl of the Arctic to come again. There was no mistaking the animal from which the scream came. Although I had never heard the sound in the Northeast before, I knew it must be an Arctic wolf, the shyest animal in all of the North despite his bad reputation.

I thought of the many stories that wolves are plentiful in the Arctic, but my experience with wolves is just the opposite. They are the most difficult animal not only to hunt, shoot or trap, but also to locate or even see in passing. One hears them, one knows they must be in the vicinity, for that plaintive piercing yell echoes over wastes and around the ice mounds, but the wolf will detour for many mile to avoid man, whose traces come to him upon the wind, unless there is the attraction of team dogs about the camp, and then he approaches, but warily.

I clutched Lukas by the sleeve of his keeool-ee-tuk. Before us it seemed a dark shadow passed across the open space that lay between us and the bow of our beached boat. Lukas restrained me from moving. Then, but fifty yards away, there came again that slinking shadow. I raised my rifle, fired and the shadow halted, dropped. At once Lukas went racing down the slope toward the boat and I followed. My heart beat hard, for this was the first rifle shot I had fired in the Northeast that had killed an animal. As we had guessed, the beast was a white Arctic wolf, a beautiful brute, it lay there five feet long from the tip of its tail to the end of the snout, a handsome thing to see with its coat of rich fur. Lukas reached downward and with his strong arm started dragging the wolf back to camp, a job in which I helped. I was thrilled beyond all telling, and so excited I could not get to sleep again that night. Smiles and handshaking were my portion next day when the polar bear party returned to camp, coming empty-handed to find that "he who is almost an Eskimo," had killed a wolf, so I was thrilled again.

The wolf was skinned; the heart was removed and my admirers gave me one of the hardest tasks in my experience. I was to eat a portion of the wolf heart, and eat it raw. I was not even hungry, much less starving as before. I had all kinds of white man's provisions to my hand, but for all that I got a piece of that raw heart down my throat and qualified for the future as a hunter, because it stayed down, much to my own amazement. The immediate reward of this initiation was that I could go next day upon the renewed polar bear hunt.

Tommy and I started up the valley after Nanook, the bear. I had my rifle; I had a slice of seal meat for food like any native, and Lukas handed me his own snow knife. I didn't like to think what sort of igloo I would construct if I tried, but I recognized the honor intended, and took the knife. But Tommy and I were no more than a couple of miles from camp when a rifle shot split the silence round us. Tommy stood stock still in his tracks, and then there came another shot, rapidly followed by two more. Tommy turned and motioned that we should start for camp at a run. We came over a hill, looked down at our snow-house home and at the beached patrol boat, and there, quickly approaching over the drift ice which now made a roadway close to the shore line, was a sled and a team of thiry or more dogs.

This was the expected aid from the Police Post. Nick was not with the party; however, he had sent me more medical supplies with which to treat Lukas's arm, which I used quickly, hoping this belated attention would mend the almost totally helpless limb; but never while I stayed in the North did Lukas get back full use of that arm.

Nick had sent block and tackle too, and this we attached to our boat, anchoring the equipment firmly to a solid rock and using the dog team as power. Within two hours we had our boat a number of yards away from the highest tide line; it was well beached, and we could leave *Ah Chook* secured in a blanket of snow until the break in the spring when once more we would come to launch her on the open Hudson Strait. In five more days of travel - for I found I had to rest often, as has had Lukas - we sighted the Police Post, and I confess that was one time when I repeated honestly from my heart a prayer of thankfulness. It was something to be alive. And from there Nick and I took up the daily routine where we had left off that bright day on which I sailed off so gaily going after puyee.