

North to Adventure

**by
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Chapter Nineteen - Feather, Fish and Fur

The Inuit, or Eskimo, is a nomad. He roams constantly in search of game.

The Inuit must follow the big game herds which are also nomadic, going from one feeding ground to the other. And there is also considerations of season. The length of days gets gradually greater from March 21 until June 21. The ice usually shoves off, aided by offshore winds, warmer weather and high tides and is almost all gone by July. Natives then do much fishing by net, and they trap fish also in a construction of rocks which they build in the rivers, and much fish is also caught by spearing, the spear being a weapon which is quite different from the harpoon.

First in the season comes a heavy run of cod, this fish which is always cooked by the native before being eaten because it has an Evil Spirit. The Evil Spirit actually is the *Dibrothriocephalus latus*, a parasite which if consumed raw might cause anemia to the human, but the codfish is considered a very valuable food and the native eats much of it. Sea trout come next and then salmon in August. There are seals, white whale, walrus and polar bear, all a part of the harvest of the sea. The weather at this time is rainy, foggy and cold while the ice is still close to the shore, and sometimes there is a hot sun. There are no insects known except for the parasites on the caribou hide, and there are no snakes.

The caribou herds travel in hundreds and exist on the little green-white wiry moss that grows in the lowlands of tundra or muskeg. As the caribou herds go so goes the fortune of men and all the animals of the North. Following the caribou herds are the Arctic white wolves that tear at the throat of the caribou, and then eat the entrails, leaving the carcass which is later devoured by the foxes. The white fox population of the Barren Lands is plentiful, while there are also black fox, silver fox and the not so frequent blue fox. After all these, then there comes the crows and ravens which pick the caribou skeleton clean.

But the most extraordinary animal in Arctic America today is the little white mouse called the lemming, a rodent which lives by burrowing into the moss and grazing upon the scant lichenlike vegetation. When hunting on one of my earliest short patrols I noticed the native hunter was looking very closely at the snowdrifts. I said:

"Why does one look so close to the ground for big tracks?"

The native laughed as he replied:

"One looks for very small tracks, the tracks of the lemming." And in turn I laughed and suggested it would take many lemming to give us sufficiently large supply of meat.

"If," said the Inuit, gently overlooking my ignorance, "if one finds lemming tracks, there then one finds caribou."

Later as we tried to sleep in our overnight igloo, my native friend explained that where one hunts caribou and other big game there must first find the tiny lemming. Their busy process of burrowing, which is done during the short summer, makes more moss grow. The lemming is the first agriculturist of the Northland; he digs and aerates the moss, and luxurious moss brings caribou; the caribou brings the wolf, the wolf brings the fox, and where the fox lives there also lives the Inuit. Where the Inuit is, there then follows the white man, and back to the original cycle of existence. Perhaps our civilization's attempt to crank the wheels of progress faster is not even gaining on Nature's premier plan, and the only thing which one does not find among the Inuit in a primitive way, is the wheel. They have never felt the need of it.

"One finds this also in the ocean," my native mentor continued: "Where one finds the jellyfish there one will find all forms and types of marine life." The Eskimo himself is a true child of Nature.

Important as the lemming is to the land life of the North, every seven years the curious little mouselike creature enters a race of self-destruction for which science has found no explanation. The native believes the lemming's diggings are the foundation of tundra and muskeg, which are either the remains or the beginnings of new soil. It is supposed that when the year of destruction approaches the lemming has overeaten himself with too rich moss and has started a fever in his system. The only means his instinct tells him for cooling this fever is to reach water, and it must be the ocean. The lemming cannot be sidetracked by river and lake. When he gets to the ocean he plunges in, swims out too great a distance for his puny strength and drowns. Science is now convinced that the dead lemmings replenish the ocean life with a supply of meat. The native insist, when questioned as to why the lemmings always return in another year:

"One or two old ones always remain behind, and they renew the species and the race."

Still the lemmings in their race to the open ocean let nothing stop them; they do not detour, but climb, swim and crawl over any possible obstacles which loom in their way. It is very strange.

There is the Arctic hare in Baffin Land, an animal which never jumps in this land of contradictions. In a trap at one time I came upon a Canadian lynx (wild cat), but that was not a usual thing. There is musk ox up here which has no musk, and is an animal not related to the ox.

Nanook, the polar bear, is yet another anomaly of Nature. When the baby bear is born it weighs no more than eight ounces; at full growth, attained in five years' time, the beast stands six hundred to one thousand pounds in weight. This animal, which is a true mammal, does not hibernate excepting during a severe storm. It swims more than it walks, and it cannot see beyond eight to ten feet. Its paws, flexed to furthest reach, will spread more than twelve inches by actual measurement. Yet the polar bear is a playful creature and may be seen rocking on a piece of drift ice, apparently enjoying its sail. I watch Ee-kalak sit for hours one day studying a bear "acting up" upon an ice floe some distance from shore, but not beyond rifle shot.

"Why does not one kill Nanook?" I asked.

"One awaits better luck," Ee-kalak answered, and I sat down to watch the native in my turn. Presently a seal broke water; the bear darted after him, cuffed him dead, and then swam back to the ice pan to push the seal up on it. With the free paw the bear crushed the seal's head. The native smiled at me as the echo of his rifle shot died away, and he spoke:

"With a little patience one obtains both a Nanook and a puyee with one bullet."

The polar bear will never attack a man unless it is wounded or when it believes its young to be in danger. It is the roaming white monarch of the whiter wastes, and it is a true native, silent, strong, secretive, steadfast, friendly to a friend, and deadly to an enemy. The polar bear to the white man is the outstanding emblem of the whole region, but the Northern ocean eagle claims the obeisance of the native Inuit.

I took Nashula with me on an ice patrol on one occasion. Our dogs smelled fresh meat, and in consequence immediately went wild on us. The only safety in such

a situation lies in cutting the main bridle line and letting the dogs go. Then we leave the sled behind, tilted upward, and with the rifles lashed in place. With each man carrying a dog whip we follow the claw marks of the dogs in the snow. This time, half a mile away, Nashula and I found the dogs just finishing the little white bones and fur of a baby polar bear. If there is a baby bear about then there is usually a Nanook mother in the neighbourhood. We were just getting the dogs in order and heading them back to the sled when Nashula touched me on the shoulder, saying:

"Nanook Tigik pook" (the polar bear is arriving).

There was a big bear charging along the ice.

"Wheyanna," sighed Nashula; and I muttered, "It may not matter to you, old boy, but it makes the hell of a difference to me. I want to live."

But apparently there was nothing to be done. Our rifles were still with the sled. I stood quiet as I noticed Nashula fumble in his clothing. He found therein a small stone perhaps the size of a hen's egg. This he tied to the end of his seventy-foot dogwhip, and as the bear crossed his line of vision a hundred yards distant, Nashula flicked his wrist and cracked the whip. The bear fell. The other natives whom we had left with the sled, and who now had joined us, advanced upon the bear with their hunting knives drawn. I saw that the thrown stone was buried deep in the skull of the dead brute. With the mere flexing of his wrist, his native ingenuity and his native art of the whip, Nashula had saved our lives and secured for the Post seven hundred pounds of meat.

Of other sources of supply that populate the northern waters there are the sea otter, the white whale, grampus, black fish and killer whale, mud sharks, salmon, weak fish or trout, - a touch of descriptive naming in the "weak," for a scratch will be enough to kill a trout. We have sculpin or tiger fish, and clams which sometimes are found under the ice as well as when open water comes. There are mussels too, and in the rivers many varieties of fish. The fresh water lakes are well stocked with many kinds of marine life. One of these is a peculiar fish, no more than six inches long, which "hibernates" beneath the ice for the winter months and then reappears as a swimmer when the spring begins the break-up.

Of feathered life there seems to be no end. It fell to our lot to have the privilege at the Post of playing hosts to J Dewey Soper, Federal Bird Officer, the ornithologist whom we dubbed "bug snatcher," as we did all other scientists who visited us.

In 1929 Professor Soper discovered the nesting place of the blue goose in the interior of Baffin Land. For centuries this secret had been sought, a secret well kept by these migratory birds which scorn the Central States, spurn the cities and the empirical domains of man, and spend their winters in the salt marshes and the bayou country of Louisiana.

There is up in the North too the cackling or snow goose, and the lesser snow goose. There are the "Lords and Ladies," a type of duck; the Auk pa or little Auk, sea pigeon and puffin, the last sometimes called the sea parrot with its yellow and green feathers; and sea gulls and the Arctic tern. This tern, which is a species of sea gull, is the greatest flier known to man; it wings its way from pole to pole, and has no resting place between.

There is the snowy white owl, and the ptarmigan which is brown, but only in summer time, for I shot a straggler one February and found its plumage to be white. There is the spruce partridge found in Central Ungava on the northern edge of the timber line.

As strict conversation law preserves the wild feathered life, although for the native this law is not needed. He will never denude a nest of eggs, taking only one or two from such a treasure trove. Millions of nests and billions of eggs are found on the islands, and as the native demands a change of diet, the need of food overrules the law as far as he is concerned. However, the mother bird is never frightened and never disturbed, and game laws which are made for the white explorer forbid the wanton destruction of eggs.

The Inuit likes his eggs to be a little stale, and because of his peculiar "tastes" he really has no "taste." He never seasons his food, and when the need for salt comes to his system, he drinks a little of the salt ocean water. The native obtains iodine and phosphorus in the seaweed, of which they eat quantities.

"Who's for eggs and bacon?" I chanted one day as I returned to the Post with a find of fresh eggs, and discovered visitors had arrive. The fishy flavour of these eggs can be reduced the the removal of a small black speck within the egg. Begging Nick to refill the dish more fried eggs, he neglected the simple preparation of taking out the speck.

"Nick," said I, as he returned to the table and set the dish down, "you forgot to remove the eyes from the eggs."

This, unpremeditatedly but with complete success, the Police secured the remaining fresh egg supply entirely for themselves; the visitors would not eat any more eggs, eyeless or other wise.