

I Lived With The Eskimos

**by
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Chapter Twelve - Fin ---Land

When the last lash boat from the supply ship had been dismantled, in the second summer of our stay at Port Burwell, I took the ship's captain and first officer out to set the gill nets for the cod catch. The lash boats are plank platforms laid flat across a couple of small boats or dories. They bring in many more pounds of supplies on each trip, and are poled to beach or jetty for unloading. Most amazing things are brought north, ranging from airplanes to tractors; from steel needles for the native women, who are finding they do not break so easily when sewing skins for clothing or for kyaks as do the ivory needles they have made themselves, to chocoate bars which children and grown folks alike are given as rewards or treats at parties.

We'd been fishing down between the ice pans for several days and with fair success in our catch of rock cod, for it is always long about June and July that spring really comes to the Barren Lands. First signs of spring and summer are the longer days, the sun rises higher over the horizon and the cracks in the ice off shore soon split into good-sized squares and chunks. The natives can run these pans, leaping from one to another with ease, but it takes skill, for the pans move with speed in the tides and the fissures of black water between may widen in a few minutes too far for jumping. And there's always the added danger of suck-paw, the native name for thin ice which breaks off easily under the weight. But it's all good sport; I used to think it was like riding a flat escalator, with every now and then a missing tread.

Even after the first ice break there is the chance of sea-coo closing in for another cold spell, and this rubbery ice of the ocean will join once more to the collar ice at the base of the cliffs. Yet the first ice break brings hope of open weather, and there is activity amongst the natives. The last touches are put to new kyaks and omiaks; small boys who have made their models are eager to try them out, and young men who are around fourteen years of age have their first chances of being coming real hunters.

The temperature rises a little above freezing and gradually it becomes warmer until one can count on a midsummer day of fifty-five degrees, and the chance to get out of summer furs. I had had too much experience before the July day on which I took the Captain and the first mate on the codfishing trip, to take any

chances, so I outfitted the visitors in sealskin suits, much to their disgust. I made them stuff their feet into kamiks.

"Better be safe than sorry," I quoted when the mate protested that his own oilskins would be better.

"Have it your way, brother," I said, "but I'll tell you a little tale first." That was the first time someone from the outside heard of our shipwreck and near-starvation on Savage Island. The mate and Captain put on the furs without another word.

But it had been a full three weeks before the supply ship hove into sight round the headland that Troutguts came to me with an idea. The ice then was too thick in our cove to launch a kyak.

"Te-shua-yuk," said Troutguts, which combination of sounds let me know he thought the ice was out "below the bay." The wind was changing, and I agreed he might be right. Troutguts' idea was to carry our kyaks over the headland, launch them after the portage, and see if there was not a chance of getting the first fresh meat of the season by finding a seal. This is one of the big rivalries among the natives; it is counted a big honor to bring in that first seal.

This meant two hours of hard walking for us after we shouldered our kyak each. With spears and other equipment, this was no pleasure hike. We trudged over the rocky, rough terrain still patched with snow, and at the end were disappointed, for no sooner had we launched the kyaks on a open patch of water and had paddled out a few yards from the shore, than Troutguts yelled.

"Sea-coo tig-ik-puk!" That warned me the ice pans were closing in, the sea-coo sweeping inshore on the tide. But we swooped round in those single-seater streamlined canoes, fragile looking as though made of thin bark and tough as elephant hide, and balanced to a hair's breadth. I beached my kyak safely, then started as I heard a rifle crack. When I turned I saw it was only Troutguts, who had brought down an eider duck.

"Some meat," he laughed, for our project in humping those kyaks across the hill was to surprise the settlement with meat. Idly then I watched Troutguts paddling through the rocking ice pans to retrieve his duck. I threw myself down on a smooth-surface rock, smoked my pipe and wished we hadn't come, and then I heard the call that thrills everyone in the North, white or native.

"Puyee, puyee!" I could not believe what I heard, but there was Troutguts yelling and jumping with excitement. He had found a seal lurking among the ice pans,

overtaken by the swift run of the rising tide. He had wielded his spear from the kyak, and there before me was the dead puyee. It must have weighed two hundred pounds, I judged, as I helped Troutguts haul it ashore. Overjoyed, we hid the kyaks by balancing them high from side to side of the miniature ravines inshore, so that dogs roaming from the settlement could not reach them to eat off the sealskin covering.

Feeling chipper, Troutguts and I dragged that seal behind us on the way home, and then, in sight of the Post, something struck us as strange about the place.

"Ill-lun-atik-nan-tima?" asked my companion, meaning, "Where is everybody?"

No wonder he asked. We could not see the bay from where we stood, but we stared over the detachment home and away in the direction of the trading store where usually people gathered. There was not a soul to be seen. Even the native settlement was deserted, except for a few children playing with puppies. I left Troutguts to cache his seal, and hurried up Ship's Hill, our lookout station. What a sight met my eyes! While we had struggled with incoming ice on the water below the bay, the wind's change had cleared our home inlet at Port Burwell, and left a shining expanse of water, with hardly one ice pan to be seen.

"The whole settlement must have gone sailing," I spoke aloud although there was no one within hearing; and sure enough, rounding the headland, her sail well filled, I could see the white police boat just clearing the Strait with Nick at the helm. In his wake sailed a flotilla of omiaks, and I could see kyaks dancing atop the choppy waves. Troutguts came up behind me.

"Wheyanna," he said, as the natives do on all occasions when something happens unexpectedly or mysteriously.

"Wheyanna!" I repeated, because it is polite, but I knew it did matter, for Troutguts looked sick with disappointment. He was sure his big seal had been the first catch of the season, now this procession of boats could only mean many seals being brought in by the others. I thought the same.

"Auk shu ni!" called the men from the leading boats, for by this time Troutguts and I had reached the jetty.

"Any luck?" I called as the police boat hove to, and the sail came down.

"No, not a seal in sight."

I laughed. "Run, Troutguts, run," I yelled, and Troutguts ran as fast as a native ever does when not with his dogs. Troutguts knew what it meant, and I called Tommy, who was already ashore, to follow him. I explained nothing as we waited, for this was to be a triumph for Troutguts, who was always a good man. I saw him tugging that two-hundred pounder, ten steps ahead of Tommy who had been quick to help bring up the surprise of the year. There was much rejoicing.

That was really why I chose Troutguts to come with Tommy, Ey-ee-tok, Nashula and Lukas when we took the visiting sailors on the coding trip.

The gill nets were set ready the night before, for they are used to catch surface running fish which come first in the season. These first fish are chiefly cod, although at the entrance to the river mouths it is not unusual to catch salmon in the gills. Sailing inshore, we secured by a length of rope one end of the long, four-inch-mesh net, fastening it to a jutting rock. We brought that rope out to a point where an anchor of a large-sized rock was sunk, and there we formed an angle of net with a keg tied to it by way of marker. The cod, following the current round the headland, swim into the net, catch their gills in the meshes and in the effort to get free suffocate.

We left the nets for a day, and then sailed out again to bring in the catch. There was much excitement as we sighted the first keg. It was pulled under the water, which meant a heavy run of fish, maybe even salmon.

"Ee-ka-look," sang out Tommy as he started to haul in the net. I thought he was right in calling that we had salmon, for that fish is a fighter and this net was giving the men a tussle. First they had released the stone anchor, then the keg was brought aboard, and with the land rock leash still in place the men, three to the job, began to heave the net on deck. The first man hauls in the net, the second clears it of fish, and the third coils the meshes into a neat heap.

Thoughts of fresh salmon cooked to a turn were going through my mind. I could see how the Captain, who loved to eat and showed it in his protuberant frontispiece, would smack his lips as the succulent pieces came off the rock-built fireplace, with a fire made of blubber and moss to heat the flat cooking stones. I carried matches with me, which the natives call Ik-kom-mim-ik, or white man's little sticks. They use the same word for a Primus stove or for the home-made variety of this stove which we constructed from old tins that hold fifty pounds of flour a peice. These home-made stoves, however, burn out quickly.

But luck was against us; no big haul of salmon appeared above the water surface. An ominous gray back and black fin cut through the water. We had

netted a shark. How the natives hated them! This was a six-foot mud shark, the scavenger of the ocean. It was not dead, but fought savagely, with the tail hitting like a battering ram against the boat's side. There were a few cod in what was left of the tangled and torn net, for the shark must have smelled dead fish and had gone after his favorite meal.

"Shoot him," shouted Captain Edmund, and I drilled the ugly head with a bullet from my revolver. It was the quickest and safest way to be rid of him. "A shark has an Evil Spirit," say the natives. Everyone was gloomy as we towed the horrid beast on a gaff line and dropped him ashore. The birds would have a feast, for, unless driven by hunger, even native dogs object to shark meat. It is a sort of mystery fish, for shark have never been captured and kept alive in an aquarium although there is a growing market for the skin. Commercial shark hunters operating in warmer waters than those of Hudson Bay use nets and baited lines, but a metal chain must be attached to the hook, for shark's teeth are razor sharp, easily able to bite off a rope, just as they can bite off the arm or leg of an unwary fisherman in one snap of steel-trap jaws. Small boats can be capsized by the thrashing tail of shark. All the time I was north I never saw the natives attempt to salvage any part of the shark; and although many of the natives have as slanted eyes as any Mongolian, they never heard of using shark fins as a food as do the Chinese, to whom the fins are a luxury, nor did the Eskimos know anything of shark oil. The hide of a shark is quite an inch thick; it is tough and covered with sharp spines, but those who handle them for market become adept in skinning off the hide and dissecting the carcass.

Our second net yielded several pounds of fine codfish, and we began to feel better. The silver skins of the fish gleamed as they slid down into the hold, and there would be a feast for everyone, since the natives waste nothing. Everything of the fish from above the tail to the nose tip would be used, and the eyes would be saved for candy balls; the entrails and the tails are dainties for the sled dogs.

We circled the place where we had placed the third net for an hour, and found no trace of it. We had used white man's cord nets, seasoned in brine, for they stand up better than the seal-thong nets of the natives. Now we bewailed the loss of our net, but nothing could be done about it. It was in the third year of my service north that I found a white whale stranded high and dry among the rocks, with the huge carcass knotted in parts of a torn fish net. That might have been the one we lost, or it might have been another one coming in on the currents from Chimo, Leaf River, Payne Bay or many another inlet of Ungava Bay where there were fishermen. Although the Inuit are excellent boatmen there was no whaling round where I was stationed, but there was whaling at Cumberland Sound, and whales with bone ten feet long are taken which yield as much as fourteen tons of oil. The

bowhead whale is the most common up there, so called because of its arch-shaped head. These measure sixty-five to seventy feet in length.

Once only did I see a narwhal, which is one of the small-toothed varieties averaging fourteen feet in length. The male of this mammoth is distinguished by having a six-to-eight foot tusk projecting from the proportionately small round head.

"Codfish!" exclaimed the Captain that night when we'd finished supper at the detachment home. "Don't ever let me see another codfish."

I could not even induce Captain Edmund to hold his ship over a few hours so he could try his hand at jigging codfish, which is quite another sport. As the season advances the fish travel in thick schools deeper in the water, massing themselves while they travel slowly. Jigging is best done from a dory, and it seems simple until one discovers it needs a real knack. A line is used to which the lead jigger is attached. This is five or six inches long, and weighs maybe a quarter of a pound. On either side of the lead is a sharp hook, like those on a spear. I watched Troutguts throw over a jigger the first time I went out in the dory. He let the lead down easily, cutting the water but not splashng.

"Pull the jigger up about three feet after it touches bottom," Troutguts explained in his own language. As he spoke, he twisted the line securely round his mittened hand, and he kept his hand and forearm in a steady, rhythmic up and down movement, very slow and very gently, looking as though it took no effort. He used no bait on the hooks. But if there are fish at all one is sure to be snagged, and if the level of the thickly packed, slow-swimming cod can be reached exactly, a clever jiggerman has been known to snag two fish at a time, one cod secured on each hook. An open rowboat with several expert fishermen aboard will come inshore loaded with many hundred pounds of cod jigged up within a few hours. Troutguts was an expert, rivalling Tommy in the art.

Another fish easily caught is the little sculpin. These are only seven or eight inches long, but make delicious eating. They are equipped with hard, thorny spikes on the head, which cause many bad cuts when the fish are being handled. The fishing season is one of much bustle round the Eskimo settlements, women and children join in getting in the sea harvest. Even a stray seal left on the early spring ice may find himself overtaken by a strange figure wrapped in a long white garment and made to resemble a moving ice hummock. Under the white sheet will be a man or woman creeping up on the unsuspecting seal, slowly and quietly. The open-water season is so short that supplies of fish must be taken when they can. I found spearing salmon a good sport, and of course like all the others only

done for necessity of food. To spear a salmon there is call for a strong wrist, with a quick eye and perfect coordination.

I had fun one day with Markey, the small boy, when I went out before the ice break-up intent upon spearing a salmon through the crusted surface. I really did not know much about the art, for art it is, but went ahead and cut the hole, rearing the customary little snowhouse over it. I crouched with spear poised, and snagged a fish. The fish was too big to come up through the hole. I tugged and the fish struggled; I dared not let go to make the hold bigger, and at last the fish won. I turned to find Markey holding his sides in laughter.

"Maybe the fish wanted the spear points," the youngster said in a quiet voice, and I could not scold him for his laughing. Maybe the fish did want spear points; I went back to the detachment minus fish and minus spear and in not too sweet a temper, but it was Markey whom I rescued that summer when he had a battle with another salmon. The lad had built a rock trap in a small creek that flowed around the settlement from the higher ground. I heard cries of distress, listened a second to get the direction, then ran around the bluff. No one was in sight, but the cries continued:

"Ee-ay-lak, ee-ay-lak!" I knew some youngster was calling that he had a salmon, and then I stumbled over a high silver fish lying on the creek's rocky rim, and as the call came again I peered over the edge of the low-hung rock. Markey had managed to get the big fish out of the water, but I had to fish Markey out of the creek. He had stumbled in backward from the bank.

Much the same was the adventure with the pretty little girl we called Tuk-ah-pik, meaning Little Round Moon Face. She was a smart lassie who stood by one day while I explained to her mother how white men caught small fish from a boat by putting a baited hook and line over the side, in the manner of jigging, or by dropping a line, hook and bait into the sea from a rock big enough to have deep water at its further side, yet not covered at high tide. The woman grasped the idea quickly, got a piece of driftwood on which to wrap her line and started in.

Two or three days later I saw Tuk-ah-pik industriously fishing from a rock. I watched the child as she scooped in a fair supply of sculpin beside her. I had to leave, but returned an hour later in my boat. Little Round Moon Face was still fishing. Her round face beamed with a wide smile as I came alongside, her brown eyes glinted with the success she had had, and then there came from her a wail of anguish which made me stop rowing and stare back. The piece of wood which Moon Face held had snapped; half was still in her pudgy paw, the other half bobbed up and down fiercely on the calm water. I leaned over from my boat and

caught the wood as it passed, then jerked myself upward with astonishment, for the little girl had a fish on that line which was not a tiny sculpin. I shipped my oars and played the fish for thirty minutes, with Moon Face hopping up and down on her rock like some small sea gnome in a furry coat. At last I was able to get the gaff into the fellow which had broken the holding bar. Little Round Moon Face had caught a twenty-two-pound salmon. She clutched it to her chest, hugging it like a doll, as I paddled her inshore and helped her take her sculpin haul to the settlement. I met her late that evening sucking a round and shiny candy, and I knew full well it was an eye from that same salmon. I hoped she had not saved the other eye for me; I could see it held tightly in her fist.