

North to Adventure

**by
Sydney R Montague**

Chapter Five - Lukas Kills A Bear

I was very anxious to find out from the natives what was the species of creature which left footmarks such as we were examining. I wanted to be reassured that perhaps it meant human beings could be in the vicinity, and that through them our rescue could be effected. But none of the men seemed to understand my gestures, and later I found out that the Inuit is not made that way. He, as an individual, will rarely look for help from another individual. His one definite idea when he finds himself in a tight palce is to overcome the Evil Spirit that has tried to frustrate his plans, so he sets about finding some way in which to help himself. I was getting horribly impatient and irritable, restless in mind and weak in body. By my reckoning I knew it was the fourth day since we had been marooned. That very morning I had been thrown into a panic of childish emotion which I had had sense enough to hide from the natives, or at least I thought I had hidden it. For my wrist watch had stopped running, and that seemed to snap my last link with the outside world. Now, except for daylight and dark, there was no way of counting the passage of time. There was not so much daylight, for the sky was constantly overcast, and I guessed time as I could by the direction of the sun when it made a watery appearance, which was not often. But on two nights there had been a brilliant show of stars, and late one evening the northern lights awed me with their grandeur, but the display lasted only a few minutes, which I thought strange, and it really seemed to upset the natives.

By the end of the third day in this experience I noticed all actual sensation of being hungry was gone. The pangs suffered during the early hours without food had been excruciating. Now that feeling had disappeared, and a horrible sensation of sleepy sickness kept stealing over me. I could see that my companions were fighting off the same thing, but they seemed able to endure more. They were tougher bodily, inured to the life of the North, and much slower mentally, which must have been a help. I was to find this time and several times

more that imagination can prove to be too much of a good thing when the larder is empty. But these footprints were a stimulus to action.

The short discussion which had been going on among the Inuits came to an end. Lukas waved us all off in a general inland direction, and stayed on the beach himself. This time Nashula took my arm and we went part way up in a fairly high hill which jutted abruptly from the beach a short distance away. As we stopped and turned our faces to the sea, I noticed Lukas was preparing to lie down between two small rocks that rose like breastworks on either side of him. He held his bared hunting knife in his hand, keeping it high and close in to his chest. He lay almost flat, front down but with his head raised. I crouched beside the other natives a hundred yards from Lukas, and I held my breath as I kept my eyes constantly trained on the man below.

I have no idea now how long we lay among those rocks. It must have been an hour or two but it seemed to be an eternity. Every bone in my body ached. If I had known what we were waiting for the tension might have lessened, but I did not know, and if I made to ease my position Nashula or one of the others would nudge me to keep still.

Then there came movement. Slowly along the ocean front there rolled an object of appalling size. It swayed in ungainly magnitude, traveling at an easy gait. Wholly unconscious that it was being watched, the animal sometimes proceeded near the water, almost swimming at times, then up on the shore it would come and walk to and fro, the small head wagging from side to side as it moved.

The beast was a full-grown polar bear. Outside of several zoos, I had never seen such a brute before.

Now I understood the pebble-throwing done by the natives. They must have been testing the wind direction, and the wind was with the bear for his scent was being blown toward Lukas and toward us who were strained with watching.

God was good that the wind was favorable to us. The polar bear is almost blind; his keenness of smell and acuteness of hearing are what he depends upon for finding food and detecting danger to himself. We watched and could see presently that the bear had sensed the presence of something strange. He must have detected Lukas lying with the knife clenched in his taut fingers and with his body held motionless. All the time the bear was advancing toward the prone man, its tremendous body was rolling from side to side, the long neck was swaying and arching. Every little while the beast reared his head and made an audible sniffing.

The animal was within a few feet of Lukas - God, if I'd only had my rifle, or even my revolver! What nerve that native was showing! My heart leaped into my mouth; the natives on either side of me gripped me hard so that I continued to lie still.

On stalked the bear and Lukas lay as though dead. Then when the bear's head weaved almost over him, I opened my mouth to shout a warning to the man, but Nashula rammed his mittened fist against my lips.

The polar bear was now sure of man smell, but since there was no movement he backed away a few paces, watchful and curious like all wild animals. The bear moved up nearer; he was going to make a closer inspection, sniffing within touching distance of the native's body.

And at that moment, as though sprung from a catapult, Lukas jumped to life and action - how can I describe it? There was the knife the native had held close to his chest, its steel shimmering as the poor length of its six inches was slashing into the bear's throat. There came a spurt of blood and Lukas struck again, but the animal reared on its hind legs and started reaching out with enormous front paws. The polar bear battles like a boxer; it cuffs its enemy and does not hug as does its brown cousin. With certainly twelve inches spread of paw from one side to the other, and with tremendous reach, I judged this brute must weigh all of six hundred pounds. Lukas could not have been more than five feet in height at most, and his weight was no more than average; the native as a rule turns the scale at one hundred and forty pounds for a full-grown man.

Split seconds passed, and what a fight! If I'd had to move I believe now that I could not have done so, so tense was my every muscle. Lukas stood to face the bear and he dodged those flailing paws; he darted under and stabbed his knife into the thick furred hide of the huge brute. There came a terrific roar from the wounded animal, and before I could get to my feet, cramped and muscle-bound and weakened as I was, the four natives had left me. Without making a sound they staggered down the small declivity and started at once to slash with their knives at the bear.

But while they were yet a yard or two away, the bear's paw caught Lukas a slashing blow. The man fell, torn, bleeding and groaning as he crumpled on the bloodstained rocks.

I became terrified with terror. Then as feeling seeped down into my limbs, I ran over the scattering rocks to see if I could rescue the native. He had rolled over twice from where he fell, and Nashula, Eey-ay-tok, Tommy and the other native

had the bear down now. They were chopping, cutting and slicing to get its head off. I went over to Lukas and found him alive and conscious, but his right arm was badly crushed. This was where my little cache of first-aid kit did some service, and I made the injured limb as comfortable as possible, while I was able to bring Lukas water in the kit container.

The four other natives kept talking excitedly as they worked with the bear carcass. I could see they were skinning it, and later, when we found strength through eating the flesh, they stretched the skin in bright sunshine which shone suddenly like an omen to cheer us. They cut up parts of the heart and liver of the animal and we ate of the warm, raw flesh, but first we cupped our bared hands and drank of the blood. Lukas, propped up by a rock, was able to swallow some of the blood, and presently he ate the flesh with the rest of us. We were saved from starvation.

Horrible? Perhaps; but starvation is much more horrible than the eating of raw meat. It is surprising how quickly the white man, faced by a lingering death, will turn wild and savage and become a raw-meat eater like any native. And even this first time, as the stinking blood-beverage stung my throat, I could feel strength returning as by magic. We ate and drank and then slept - satiated.

And now the whole world looked brighter, for a full stomach has a tremendous influence on the mental outlook. The only dark cloud was the condition of our injured comrade, whose courage had saved us so far, and it was astonishing to me how Lukas stood with stoicism what must have been excruciating pain. Now we used the bearskin, which had dried out considerably in the sun, to make a shelter, stretching it taut with rocks as anchorage; and crawling beneath we found it large enough to form a roof for all of us. We slept again, and in the night it rained and then the rain turned to snow; but as daylight came the snow melted, for the weather was still counted warm. I woke that night restlessly, thinking that all that bear meat lying on the ground would surely attract foxes, wolves, or at least birds - perhaps hawks and owls and crows. Yet for the eight days the carcass lay on the beach, while we ate sparingly of it, nothing of wild life approached. That the bear had come to our island was a miracle.

With some strength and energy coming back with the supply of food, we explored the island with greater exactness. We knew now for sure that safety could only come from one of two sources. My police partner, in sending out a searching party, hit on the right direction to follow, and this would be just another stroke of luck or fate or chance; or we might attract the attention of drifting omiak with natives out on a hunt. To that end the natives with me gathered some moss which we found on the further end of the island, and with small portions of bear

fat, using flint and rock to obtain a spark, we lighted and each day tended a fire which we hoped might attract attention of some passing ship's crew.

Nothing exciting happened. Nothing happened. There was weary, dreary monotony and aimless waiting, a suspense - and for what? We had been on the island now for eleven days. There was still quite a supply of bear meat left, but our appetite for it was rapidly growing less. We ate because we wanted to live, and sometimes I doubted my own wisdom in this, for I began to get turns of horrible retching.

On the twelfth day, there came a severe snowstorm, - what I would have called a blizzard. We woke to find our camp almost buried in snow, and I knew we would have to cache the meat at once. For many days we men had traveled over the island foot by foot and had carried loose rocks of fair size to the camping ground. we had constructed an Eskimo type house. This was not big, as white folk count dwellings, but the shelter was comfortable of its sort, while the bearskin was still used as a section of the roof. Lukas did not often move from camp, but his arm was healing over.

The natives decided the meat must be put under shelter. I soon caught on to their need for more loose stones, and the parade of rock carriers started in again. It was more difficult in the snow, but not so much rock was needed for a larder, and even gathering rocks into a pile was something to do. We could take no chance on our food being buried in the snow of the rapidly advancing winter.

It was still snowing on the thirteenth day. I remembered tales of my childhood of how Eskimos could build snow houses; igloos they were called. My companions made no move to do this, and in this they were a lot wiser than I. That snow had disappeared three days later, and the sun had appeared again.

It was the morning of the sixteenth day since our omiak had been dashed on the rocks. There was a bright and beautiful sun, a clear sky and a stiff wind. The whole atmosphere made me full of hope, and I could not believe that we were to die ignominiously on this upheaval of rock on the top edge of the Atlantic Ocean.

The usual tasks of the day were being gone through, our little bit of meat had been eaten, and we were on the rock pile once more. We had organized lookouts, and these men had already set off, going in opposite directions, to climb the two highest hilltops and there stay as long as daylight lasted watching the ocean for the boat which never seemed to come.

This was my day off from lookout service, for I took my turn with the others, but this sixteenth morning when I had done what I could to dress the wounds on Lukas' arm, I wandered along the beach; then, as my muliks were wearing thin and the beach stones were cutting into my feet, I sat down and thought a while. This experience of mine was teaching me a humility such as I had not believed possible. I was a white man, a member of one of the leading races, product of a land whose pioneers had penetrated the furthest reaches of land and sea, and here I was, dumb for all the use of thoughts and ideas of my comrades in this disaster. That the Inuit still had hope was obvious. They must certainly be persisting in these periods of sentry-go in the hope of seeing a ship or more game, or maybe both.

For some days now old Lukas with his wounded arm hanging limp by his side, had spent much time on the hilltop. The whole man showed a tenuous grip on life and strength after his mauling by the polar bear which astonished me. It was high noon by the sun on this sixteenth day of our island life when I heard a shout from Lukas. He came running down the hill, his squat figure wobbling as his arm swung idly, and his stubby legs and feet pounded over the shale and rocks. The other men rushed to greet him. There were shouts and gesticulations. Then the five men cantered up the hill again. I followed, overtaking them with my longer strides. Lukas pointed oceanward with his good arm. I was thrilling with the infectious excitement of the small men around me. There must be a boat out there and it meant safety for us, friends coming, maybe another white man, a trader perhaps, or it might even be Nick in the police boat.

I looked far out to the horizon, sighting along Lukas' outstretched left arm and hand, and I could see nothing, nothing but the surging gray-black waters that seemed to heave against a gray-black sky.