

North to Adventure

**by
Sydney R Montague**

Chapter Three - North to Adventure

It was early April when I left Edmonton for Ottawa. There the men for the northeastern draft reported for the period of intensive training which is given before any unusual service. What is given in this training must be explained as my story evolves, for service in the untrodden places means that although we young policemen might be thought jacks of all trades, at the same time we must be masters of the majority. We get some idea of first aid in surgery; we know the elementary requirements for becoming an obstetrician, and we can set a broken limb. We learn enough of minerology to recognize the signs that valuable minerals are hidden beneath the earth; we must know a bit about geology and of meteorology, and the ways of the stars are not to be hidden from us; in fact, we learn a considerable amount of simple navigation, and by land we must follow terrain without landmarks, and where a compass is just so much make-weight added to baggage which is never light when we are out on patrol.

Just near the end of the training period I was given a few days' leave to go to Montreal and say good-bye to my mother. That time passes swiftly, and it was hard, too. My mother - well, it is always worse, when partings must take place, for those who are left behind to the same daily round. Once I got "in" to the Northland, there could be no communications and no letters for at least a year. I would have left all that we count as civilization far behind. A one-way radio was all the the Police could count upon to hear from outside, and that was largely experimental at the time, for as it turned out Nick and I were assigned to something that was entirely new. We were about to open up a new Police Post.

It was mid-July, and a week after the last member of the draft had returned to Ottawa from his farewell leave, we were aboard the special train bound for Montreal and the ship bound for the North. We embarked aboard the *SS Bay Rupert*, a Hudson's Bay Company ship which had just been completed and was now on her maiden voyage. She was northbound on the annual round of ice-bound outposts of the Police, and was heavily loaded with the annual renewal of supplies. For the first time, the *SS Bay Rupert* would cast anchor in the natural inlet which was to be the harbour of Port Burwell, Hudson Strait, where the new Police Post was to be established. Nick and I were to be entrusted with this establishment and the friendship-making with the natives of that section, whose

only touch with the white man hitherto had been one or two Hudson Bay traders stationed far up the strait.

I was aboard the ship early at Montreal, for I would not have had time to visit with my people; besides the good-bys had already been said. And I knew that modern, square-built city with its queer flavour of modern Paris, as Quebec had the flavour of the Paris of an older continent. We were already well down the St. Lawrence River when a mighty hand descended on my shoulder as I leaned against the deck rail.

"Hey," said a familiar voice.

Yes, that's right! In high spirits, not only ready but anxious for anything that might happen, it was Corporal Henry George Nichols.

He and I were to be the "law" at Port Burwell. And that was a far cry from G Division of the RCMP which was at Edmonton, Alberta, our last headquarters. It meant that we had come four thousand train miles from Edmonton to Ottawa, and one hundred more from Ottawa to Montreal; and now the *SS Bay Rupert* was making headway up the St. Lawrence, that spacious waterway that flows north and east, laden as it is with many islands that we could see as far as the eye reached, and looking, as Nick said, "as though some archangel had spilled a heavenly necklace of green jewels on the water's top." I didn't laugh at Nick, hard-boiled policeman though he might be with thoughts that bordered on sentiment and poetry. No one should laugh. We police in the North live very close to Nature. We see the grand loveliness of the earth as well as the stark terror of her strength; we see beauty in these lands of ice and snow, as well as menace and danger. Sometimes, in our loneliness, we come very near to the breast of Mother Earth. No one need be surprised at anything we may do or say or think.

Poetry and even sentiment - perhaps that should give a laugh, for its written by a man who is going to tell how he has eaten raw meat and drunk the warm blood of a slain beast. But that was when starvation looked me in the face and grinned, and 'tis a cold, dry grin, that of the hunger god of man.

Our first port of call was to be at Cape Chidley and the place named Port Burwell, both on a little island in Hudson Strait. This was where Nichols and I would spend the next nine hundred and seventeen days or thereabouts in each other's company, surrounded by Eskimos, a race of people which was as yet an unknown quantity to both of us. We were to participate in a kind of life and living we had not known before, had hardly realized existed.

Our brave little ship took us through the Strait of Belle Isle, and skirted the North Atlantic coast of Labrador. Cape Chidley lies at the northernmost point, so that it took us over thirteen days of sailing to get there. As the ship anchored and the unloading of supplies began, I did not actually realize the sort of place we had reached. We still slept on the ship, and the small boats plied back and forth, forth and back the whole long day of that Northern July, carrying everything any man might need to last him several years without replenishment, including lumber to build the Police Post, and coal to keep us warm indoors for twelve months. And, of course, there was a strong tent pitched for our occupation until we had the permanent dwelling made ready.

Nick and I came ashore on the last trip of the small boats and stood there as the *SS Bay Rupert* sailed away. As she disappeared beyond the horizon we realized that our next contact with civilization would be when the supply ship, the *Rupert* or another, came the next year with our mail, newspapers and more supplies. Our period of service here was to be not less than two years; we did not know then that it would be half as much again. Of course we had sent letters back on the ship so that our families and friends would know the situation was - well - so far, so good.

And then we turned our attention to our immediate surroundings. My first impression of Cape Chidley and Port Burwell was nothing less than awful. Within me was awe and misgiving. The landscape showed me bleak, low-lying mountains, ranges of them stretching as far as vision could reach, the whole thing a panorama picked out in gray with patches that were black, and although it was full summer there were drifts of snow heaped up in places on the terrain near us. There was neither tree nor bush, nor leaf nor flower, to be seen. There was no color.

I have no words in which to describe my first thoughts of this lonely island of the North. It made me feel as though we had been transported over tremendous distances and through space, only to be dumped on the wastelands of the moon. Later I was to learn that the Inuit speak of their sojourn on this earth as being "hell". I have an impression sometimes that they are not altogether wrong.

There was no sign of life as Nichols and I turned from the sea which was the only pathway to our homes, and faced the land on which we were to attempt to make another home. Yet there were little dark dots rising from the whiteness of the snow patches, and we knew perfectly well that they were the sealskin tents and summer dwellings of the natives. We knew, too, that each one was chockful of native families, and we surmised that there was probably an eye to every crack

watching what we might do. The weather was warm enough for Nick and myself still to be in our regular uniform clothes.

"Here we are," said Nick, an observation that seemed obvious.

"Here we are," I replied. "If we should fly in a straight line west from where we stand, you and I, we would come up against the mountainous region of Alaska and the Yukon territory..."

But first you would have to cross Hudson Strait, then go along the rocky coast line of Hudson Bay," Nick interrupted me; and then I took him up until we were chanting back and forth as though in antiphonal anthem:

"You might think of hundreds of thousands of square miles of barren lands, - tundra and muskeg, a great treeless plain in parts. It's the no man's land of North America."

And Nick chimed in: "Then we come, still traveling westward, to the Great Bear Lake, where close by is LaBine Point, called for that Gilbert LaBine who, eight years ago, with Charles St. Paul, prospectors working together, was set down from an airplane, flying out from Edmonton, and, dragging a sled thirty miles a day, examined five hundred miles of the lake's shore line. And then they found pitchblende, twenty-eight miles below the Arctic Circle, and pitchblende means radium, and radium means a lot more to the world than actual wealth: it means health to thousands and millions of people, when there is enough of it found and the price of it is lower than now, low enough to match the pocketbooks of the mass of the people, like you and me, my dear Montague, with our monthly pay checks that will be piling up nicely in the bank against our return, one day less than two years from now."

But I went on with my recitation. I was interested; I was thinking of that little old lady in France, Madame Curie, whose soul must shine like radium itself, wherever she may be, and I was thinking of those miles of pitchblende that lie eleven hundred miles from the nearest railroad, with only planes for transport of men and supplies, and for the four hundred and fifty tons of the ore which must be flown out to the refineries to produce but one gram of the radium. And I thought, too, that up at LaBine the "law" would be found, in the person of Corporal David Slinn.

"Come on," said Nick. "We've got to get a move on this lumber and stuff. Get your sentimental journey over with; from the Great Bear Lake you'll cross more tundra and more muskeg, until you come up against the Mackenzie River, and

then you go a few hundreds of miles more, and you cross the Yukon Mountains, - you are in Alaska, by Jove, and your next open water will be the Bering Sea and your next land Russia, - so what?"

I knew there was work to be done, but first I just had to savor the thought that up here in the Arctic regions we police are the vanguard of civilization. There sure was work; we had to learn the country and the ways of the natives (they were beginning to come out of the tents now and were coming closer); it was up to us if this new country was to be opened up for trade and commerce, and in these days of fast travel, with fleets of airplanes coming and going, we would have to work with double diligence.

We started construction of the Police Post and its store-houses at once. It had to be completed before the short summer months had gone. And this was where we would put to the test of our smattering of engineering and carpentry and painting. We impressed a number of the local Inuit in on the construction job. They were slow - Lord, how slow! - but friendly little chaps, and more than willing to help. Everything was new to them, and everything was examined fore and aft before they touched it. But by the use of the sign language we soon became acquainted, and by the end of September Nick and I had mastered at least half a dozen word sounds of their tongue, and we got on well. At first I was far from fluent, and it looked as though Nick would have to be our linguist, but suddenly the whole phonetics of the language came to me, and in the end it was I who grasped more easily the intricacies of speaking. I expect it was because I started out with a definite prejudice against the native. I had thought of him in the popular conception, as being dirty, diseased and immoral. And I was entirely wrong, wrong on every count.

It was mid-September when Nick and I moved our things from our temporary dwelling in the tent, and it was a mid-September morning when we first ran up the Empire's flag, and thereafter every morning when the weather made it possible, with another ceremony at sunset. There has to be discipline, whether it is of two men at an isolated Post, or one alone at some place where other white men are likely to arrive and stay. These apparently unimportant things keep up the morale. It's like the unwritten law that agents in outposts of the Empire in the tropics should dress for dinner each evening. That's not so absurd as it might strike one on first hearing. The man who goes slack about shaving and general appearance begins to lose the respect of the native, and the touch of authority and superiority which is his personal safeguard. Nick and I always saw to it that our dining table was laid carefully with clean napery, and that other items of our living were made as nearly homelike as possible, that is, when we were at the detachment headquarters. Out on patrol made another story with a different setting.

We were already training a couple of Inuit girls to become maids of all work for us. They developed a natural aptitude for brush and broom and dustpan, and they didn't mind washing dishes. They even mastered the intricacies of the fine cook stove with which a paternal government had supplied us, but we didn't let them cook our food or bake the bread; and of course their service was "daily and sleep out."

One oversight on the part of the agents of the government nearly broke our hearts, but at that it was to help in giving me a slant on Northland living which otherwise might never have appealed to me. The box of reading material placed in the hold of the *Bay Rupert* for Port Burwell somehow or other had been overlooked, and Nick and I found ourselves facing an Arctic winter without literature. If there had been books, it is possible I would not have embarked upon the close study of the native as I did, and it is not likely I should have mastered the phoneticisms of his language. As it was, by October of our first period at Port Burwell, Nick and I already had a fair insight into the life of the Inuit in his summer residence.

I like to emphasize that Baffin Land is the country I know and write about, and the native here is entirely different in custom, tradition and habit from the native of the central, the western or the Russian Arctic. Life is just as different in great stretches of geography as it may be between New York and Miami, or London and Capetown.

The Eskimo - he who likes to be called Inuit, because Eskimo is actually an Indian word - is probably one of the most primitive men on the face of the earth. The Baffin Land native is practically still living in the stone age. He still uses stone utensils and stone and bone and ivory weapons, except for those things the traders have brought in in comparatively recent years. But the native Inuit is highly intelligent, and has a fine system of self-government. Yet he is quick to adopt and adapt white man's tools to his own use when these things come within his reach.

But we were to find that to live successfully in the country in which we found ourselves, the white man must adopt in large degree the native ways of living. Thus it was that I took part in one of the first seal-hunting expeditions of the year, for the winter larder had to be stocked with meat. Maybe Nick and I could have lived on canned goods from our shelves, but the cans did not contain fresh meat, and the natives depended upon it. Anyhow, much of our canned goods froze so solid in our storehouse that first year that on attempting to unfreeze it, the food was lost.

The only way to get fresh meat was to hunt it. I proposed to Nick that I should go with the natives and see how it was done. I must confess that many a time in the North I thought of Bobbie Burns when I got my teeth into a bit of bear, walrus or seal meat:

"Some hae meat that canna eat it;
Some hae nane that want it
But we hae meat, an' we can eat;
So let the Lord be thankit."

It was in the getting of the meat that, as a white man, I felt myself helpless without the intelligence of our small and wiry brown brother of the snow wastes. Surely he is the unsung hero of the Arctic, without whom the white race could not attempt to traverse the Barrens for the sake of exploration, scientific research or mission work. We need the assistance and the guidance of this little man who makes his primitive home in stone-age fashion.