

I Lived With The Eskimos

**by
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Chapter Six - Playing Tag With A Walrus

"Ivik-am-ah-shoot! Avik-am-ah-shoot!" I heard the cry and watched half a dozen of the natives run by the headquarters, which by now, in the third week of August, my companion policeman and I had in nice shape, although not so good as we managed later. The shingles were painted green, the walls white, and inside we had a living room with a fireplace that had not been on the blue prints the government supplied us with for setting up the lumber as it came from the ship. I'm always willing to try most things once, and my buddy had the same ideas, so we tried building this open grate and chimney. It was a great success, and the envy of every visitor we ever had during our stay in the North. We had a sort of office, too, where we interviewed the natives, a kitchen, and a bedroom fitted with broad comfortable hospital cots, and the storehouse was shelved so that we could get supplies in the dark when we learned where we had placed things.

I'd been down that morning to old Lavinia's to get measured for a summer fur suit. It was getting too cold for the police uniform, and the work we had to do spoiled the uniforms anyway, even though we wore our oldest with overalls over them. The native keeool-ee-tuk and pants are made of fine-haired sealskin, and the pattern is just the same as the warmer winter outfits of caribou skin. Lavinia proved to be a fine tailor, but how she obtained such a good fit from a haphazard method of measurement puzzled me. I put the outfit on, just as that peculiar call echoed from the beach, "Ivik-am-ah-shoot!" I took no notice at the moment, but turned in front of Nick:

"Say, Nick, did you ever see the equal of this? It fits perfectly; I can do anything with the arms and there's no drag anywhere."

"What did she do? I'll have to get mine."

"Do? Why, that's it - the woman did next to nothing that I could see. That old lady simply took her hand and spanned across my shoulders and chest, got my height the same way, and the arm lengths. She spread out three or four skins and started to cut into them with a knife. That's seven hours ago and here I am in the suit! Matched sealskins, each seam is windtight and watertight, and old Lavinia's gone off delighted with about a quarter of a pound of the strongest tobacco. The trader told me that was the correct payment for a suit."

"Ivik-am-ah-shoot!" The sounds came nearer, and I heard a pounding at our back door. It was Chief Lukas, who had learned a word or two of English, and what he couldn't say he made me understand by gestures. I understood at last that "Ivik-am-ah-shoot" means "A lot of walrus."

Suddenly I felt just as excited as the natives, for we already had found out that ivik is a mighty factor on Inuit life. Every inch of the big animal is used after it is caught. The native eats the blubber, feeds it to the dogs, and melts some of it down for oil. First, the women must flay off the almost inch-thick bristly hide and cut the blubber blanket into chunks measuring three or four square feet each. A walrus will weigh from eight hundred to over a thousand pounds. The hide is used in clothing, in boat-building, in house-building, in plaiting those seventy-foot whips that control the dog teams; it makes the dog harness and the sled lashings, and a hundred other items that aid life in the far Northland.

I turned into the detachment room.

"Nick," I said, "there're a million walrus out there from what I can make out - I'm going out after them."

It's was really a piece of good luck that I had my native outfit on, for the men were already loading up the native boat with their kyaks, and some were handling the sail on the omiak. This omiak is a schoonerlike craft patterned on the old-time Viking ship, only there is no ornamental prow, and it is primitive in construction. The framework is made of driftwood or ivory pieces, and over all is stretched sealskin, stitched watertight at the seams by the women, who use stretched sinew from the caribou neck as their thread. On the deck of the omiak lie the kyaks, made like a streamlined single-seater canoe, sixteen to seventeen feet long, and propelled by a front action paddle. The omiaks will carry several kyaks on deck and a good-sized hunting party. I waved to Nick on the beach; the one square sail bellied out with wind and we were off. We ran before the wind for an hour and I watched the sea as I saw a splashing and surging in the waves ahead.

"Ivik!"

Chief Lukas motioned me to silence. I chuckled to myself for I had not been able to say much and was just trying to imitate the sounds that make up the unwritten Inuit language; a grand exercise for a bad speller, for one spells the words just as they sound to each person individually. With marvelous skill the helmsman tracked and circled the herd, creeping nearer with each evolution. He was like an ocean cowboy, jockeying his craft until he had cut out a young bull walrus from

his fellows. The herd travels in a ring formation, the pups and females always kept in the center, then the young males on the outer circle, and a big bull patrols the area like a policeman, with assistance of two or three strong young bulls. We had cut out one of these.

I saw, of course, that my wild idea of millions, or even thousands, of walrus was all wrong. There may have been a score, but I was too much taken up with this new experience to think of trying to count. A walrus hunt is full of risks. A scared, infuriated beast will charge a boat which will smash to powder under the eight or nine hundred pounds impact. No man can live in those freezing waters, even if he could swim in the combrous fur outfits; and strange as it may seem, there are numerous shark in northern waters.

"Now," whispered the Chief in his own language, as we made the last tack and sailed slowly within throwing distance of the animal. Each native was poised with harpoon ready for the throw. I stood with my rifle raised, but not to shoot unless the animal charged. In that case the noise of the rifle might scare him from his course, but a bullet could hardly penetrate that thick hide; if it did, it would be buried harmlessly in the blubber blanket.

The harpoons are thrown, and none misses the mark; the sharp ivory and steel points have bedded into the hide and blubber; the toggle point has taken its grip, and the tough line holds. There's not a sound from the men on the omiak as they watch the now tethered and maddened brute thrash about and dive in its fight for freedom. The steersman handles the boat, the sails fill, we are off before the wind at incredible speed. We have to tire the big mammal out. He quiets, starts up again, quiets, and after an hour or so of this the quiet spell lasts. Away in the distance we can see another omiak circling round the herd; for walrus herds are not always to be found, and the native must reap his ocean harvest while the waters are free of ice in the few weeks of the summer.

Tommy, a native who was to become a good friend of mine as the months went by, was the man chosen to finish the walrus with a killing spear. Bobby went out to help him fix the tow line when the spear thrust had been made. Tommy was taller than most of the natives, who do not grow much above five feet four; he was heavy, a mahogany color as to face and hands, his cheekbones were high, and he kept his hair cut shorter than most natives, who usually have it bobbed. His eyes were brown, small and always smiling.

Cautiously Tommy lowered his kyak from the boat deck. He had his spear at hand and paddled slowly toward the walrus to within easy throwing distance with this new weapon. Heaving up and down on the waves, Tommy had to be sure to

strike a vulnerable spot and to do it the first time. It is sheer suicide if by chance that spear should miss and the walrus by some miscalculation still have enough strength left to rear and charge.

I held my breath and watched intently, then wondered how I had ever complained that the natives were slow, as I did when they carried the goods from our supply ship up to where we built the detachment; for now Tommy let the spear go in a split second. I could not see it spiral at curved angle over the rollers, but I could see him stand to throw, and then the spear was standing upright in the back of the walrus' head. I came to with a start when I saw Bobby, who was lithe and small, launching his kyak and speeding out to the trophy.

Bobby leaned over from the cockleshell skiff and cut a hole in the walrus hide opposite that which Tommy had already made with his hunting knife. They reeved a thong through, did the same with cuts in the flukes of the beast's tail, and then with the men and kyaks once more aboard we made for home, the big walrus flopping in tow behind our sailboat.

Nick came to the beach with me at high tide to see the men bring up the walrus. We guessed its weight, judging by the length and circumference, as around nine hundred and fifty pounds, and I felt as proud of it as if I'd caught the thing myself; but it was to be almost two years before the natives would let me try my hand at spearing a walrus from a kyak, and then I think they had planted a dead one on me.

But those Eskimos are wise. There'd been an accident; a man was killed when a walrus not really dead had reared as the spear struck home. The animal came down and crushed the kyak and native so that they were never seen again. I saw it happen, and it made me sick.

"Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak kill ivik," said Chief Nashula, who had been with me that time when they let me try my hand, and he pointed to a kyak and a spear. Nashula by then had made me his foster son, and that was how I had the name Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak, which means "White man who is almost an Eskimo." We had been through some tight places together and the natives looked on me as one of their own. I could not let the white race which I represented down; somehow I knew the natives realized the best way to get back nerve after a shock is to go right in and do the thing again.

Sure, I was scared stiff. I don't think anyone is not scared who goes into danger open-eyed, anyone who has imagination. There's nothing to be ashamed about

an honest scare; the thrill comes to me anyway, when the feat is accomplished successfully, and I always try to figure things and chances well out ahead.

I stepped gingerly into that rocking kyak, took up the paddle and moseyed up where the walrus lay. It looked like a mountain as I got closer. I picked up the spear, and maneuvered round as I'd seen the natives do - then let fly. The spear teetered and stuck. The walrus never moved, and I wondered whether I was being spoofed a bit. But the natives congratulated me and made a fuss about it, so I felt better.

Now, however, with the first walrus I had seen being killed, I watched with Nick at low tide when the women swarmed to the skinning and cutting up of the queer creature which seems to be half fish and half animal. I did not go out again that season, but as long as the herds were running the natives worked day and night. There was no wasted time nor effort; everyone worked, even the children. "No work, no eat," says the Inuit of the Baffin Land coast, for he hunts to live; and no white man may kill the animals in his reserves, except the police, who turn the fresh meat in to the natives to increase their food supply.

I learned to throw a harpoon that next week, getting Tommy to show me the stance, and using a chunk of blubber as the target. My aim seemed good, and I caught the action without much difficulty; still I wondered what would happen when I threw at a moving object. I was soon to find out.