

The Last of the Gentlemen Adventurers

Coming of Age in the Arctic



Edward Beauclerk Maurice

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Аннотация

In 1930 a sixteen-year-old boy left England to become one of the last of the 'gentlemen adventurers' – the fur traders of the Hudson's Bay Company. In the Arctic he found adventure, love and loss as he came to grips with Eskimo life. Beautifully written, inspiring and funny, this is a boy's own story that captures a world that is lost forever. Please note that this edition does not include illustrations. Every boy dreams of adventures, but few have the courage or opportunity to make them a reality. When the Great Depression began to bite straitened finances forced the Maurice family to leave Britain. Edward was faced with a stark choice: to follow his mother and elder siblings to farm in New Zealand, or pursue an uncertain future as an apprentice fur trader among the Eskimos. Preferring to make his own destiny, he signed up for five years at the princely sum of fifty pence a week, packing up the two spoons that remained of his inheritance to become one of the last ever 'gentleman adventurers'. Life in Baffin Land was harsh: there was no telephone, no radio communication, only one annual visit from

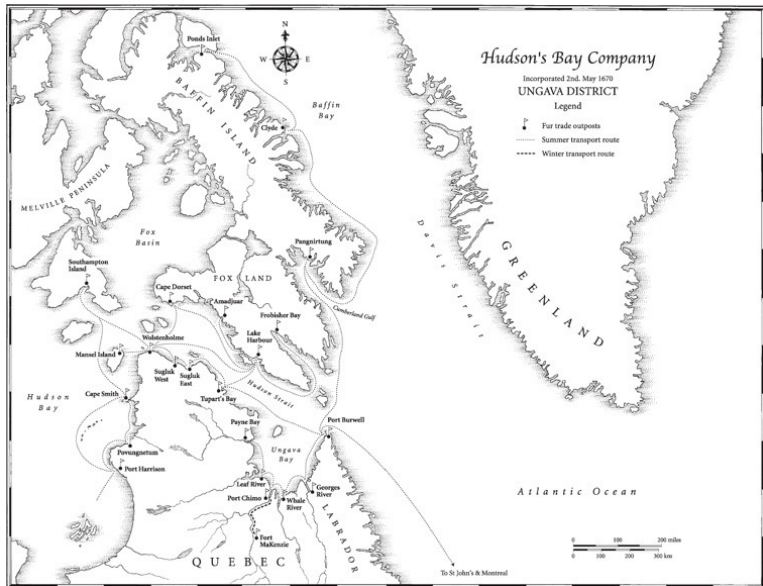
the supply ship to keep in contact with the outside world. But it was also one of tremendous excitement. Under the expert tutelage of his drunken boss, Geordie, Edward learnt to build igloos, hunt polar bears and survive the myriad difficulties of Northern existence. Despite Geordie's warnings against becoming too involved with 'the natives' (and Geordie had taken one for a wife) the young boy became fascinated with the mythic Eskimo culture, learning the language and forming close friendships. After three years, he was sent to his own outpost, where, alone, he had to save the community from illness and starvation, as well as teach them English and contend with the amorous attentions of the local ladies. In charming, timeless prose 'The Last of the Gentlemen Adventurers' transports the reader to worlds that are now forever inaccessible. It is at once a vivid portrait of a unique society and the moving, often hilarious story of an unforgettable young man determined to triumph over every circumstance.

THE LAST OF THE GENTLEMEN ADVENTURERS

Edward Beauclerk Maurice

With a Foreword by Lawrence Millman

Map



Praise for *The Last of the Gentlemen Adventurers*:

‘This is a great book about life at remote bases in Canada’s far north as seen by a young English boy who went there by himself to see the world and got more than he could ever have bargained for. Beautifully written’ SIR RANULPH FIENNES

‘A beautifully unadorned, homespun tale, with a lack of self-consciousness rare in travel literature ... Maurice recalls this faraway time without recourse to judgment of the alien world

that embraced him, and no doubt his ease with, and openness to, the world were qualities that the Inuit were quick to discern in him ... The book's greatest asset ... is [a] kind of purity. I was charmed' BENEDICT ALLEN, *Independent on Sunday*

'Maybe [Beauclerk Maurice] was exceptional, but the charm of his book lies in its modesty: he makes no claims for himself. His concern was to make a record of some amazing adventures and a vanishing way of life; these are woven into an eye-opening narrative that is suffused with kindness and an attitude to growing up more restrained but more humane than that prevailing today. A gentleman adventurer, indeed'

Times Educational Supplement

'Unlike many of its contemporaries, *The Last of the Gentlemen Adventurers* is not a tale of machismo by bearded explorers. In 392 pages of unadorned prose, it manages to live up to its title and simultaneously throw new light on the polar regions ... [Maurice] writes sparsely, preferring to let the landscape and people speak for themselves. His story weaves Inuit history, culture and beliefs, while all the time aware of the impact of the white man on the surroundings ... An important memoir of a time not so long ago, when the world was unexplored ... One to keep on your shelf and dip into again and again'

Sunday Business Post

Dedication

For a much-loved husband and father whose adventurous start to paid employment has inspired us all to take up life's challenges.

The stories that follow have filled many happy family times together and we hope this book will ensure that others also can share in a young boy's dream.

Pat, Jane, Sally and Victoria Maurice

WHITE ESKIMO

FOREWORD

by Lawrence Millman

EDWARD BEAUCLERK MAURICE almost did not go to the Arctic. His Hudson's Bay Company recruiter, George Binney, thought the seventeen-year-old boy's dark looks suggested 'Eastern blood', and in his not necessarily unbiased opinion, recruits with even a smattering of Asian, Semitic or Indian blood (Binney was at least egalitarian in his prejudices) did not have the right stuff to be fur traders in the Canadian North. If Maurice's headmaster hadn't assured Binney that the boy's brother was 'conspicuously fair', Edward probably would have emigrated to New Zealand with the rest of his family, and bookshelves would have been deprived of this remarkable memoir.

Yet if it wasn't for Binney, Maurice wouldn't even have been considered for employment with the Hudson's Bay Company. For the HBC – to use its popular abbreviation – traditionally looked to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland for recruits. The Company's thinking went something like this: a Scotsman, preferably a poor one, would be thrifty; he would be accustomed to uncomplaining servitude; he would be used to a rotten climate;

and, as a Celt, he would be not unlike the primitive people with whom he'd be trading. But Binney felt the Company needed educated recruits, what today might be called managerial types, if it was to keep apace with modern times. So he turned his attention to England and to public schools like the one in Sussex that Maurice was attending.

A more unlikely candidate for the northern wilds would be difficult to imagine. Maurice was naïve even for his age, his childhood had been quite sheltered, and his experience of rotten climates seems to have been limited to the draughty corridors of his school. An HBC evaluation refers to him as being 'inclined more to indoor rather than outdoor work'. But sometimes the least likely person turns out to be the most likely one. After all, Robert Peary was a mama's boy and his North Pole adversary, Frederick Cook, worked as a milkman.

Maurice started out as an apprentice clerk at the Pangnirtung Post on Baffin Island. Nowadays Pang, as it's called, is a mecca for Arctic tourists, with hotels, souvenir shops, and even an interpretive centre. But in 1930 it was hardly more than a huddle of clapboard houses surrounded by Eskimo (the then current name for the Inuit) tents. As befits such a high-latitude settlement, there were no trees other than those of the dwarf variety. A lad who'd arrived here from England's green and pleasant land might reasonably feel that he'd fetched up very close to the bleak end of the world (the actual end of the world was the HBC's Payne Bay Post, where it took trader Charles

Duncan two years to receive a telegram notifying him that his father had died). But not Maurice: he was exhilarated.

According to the oft-repeated joke, the initials 'HBC' stand for 'Here Before Christ'. But the Hudson's Bay Company didn't actually establish its first post in the Canadian Arctic until 1908 (the first non-Arctic post, Rupert House, dates from 1670). This relatively recent arrival in North America's attic can be attributed to two factors: (1) the over-harvesting of fur-bearing animals, especially beavers, down south and (2) the new global demand for fur from a more northerly animal. The northerly animal in question was the white fox (*Alopex lagopus*).

Before the HBC came, the Baffin Eskimos used the fur of the white fox primarily to wipe their babies' bottoms. They must have thought the White Man's obsession with this fur a little peculiar, at least until they became obsessed with it themselves. For a white fox pelt was virtually the only item they could trade for rifles, bolts of cloth, tools, sugar and tea. In a decent fox year, an Eskimo trapper would have enough trade goods to fill his tent; in a bad fox year, he would owe his soul to the Company store. Either way, that trapper would be at odds with his own past. In the words of anthropologist Diamond Jenness, 'the commercial world of the White Man caught the Eskimo in its mesh, destroyed their self-sufficiency and independence and made them economically its slaves.'

The Company took a paternalistic attitude toward the Eskimos, the better to increase its profits. George Binney (yes,

the same George Binney who was worried about Maurice's dark looks) summed up this attitude in *The Eskimo Book of Knowledge*, the official HBC guide for Eskimo trappers, when he wrote: 'Our trader has learned to bestow the care of a father upon you and your children.' The implication is that father, or the Company, knows best, and the Eskimo knows least.

But Maurice did not regard the Eskimos as an inferior race in immediate need of White parenting. Quite the contrary. In his relations with them, he seemed to be the child and they the parents. In fact, he was so young and inexperienced that they called him 'The Boy', but they could have just as easily called him 'The Bumbler', since he seemed to have a special talent for getting lost or falling off cliffs. However, he was an excellent learner, and all his HBC evaluations praise his ability to speak Inuktitut, the polysynthetic Eskimo language. Here, too, Maurice distinguished himself from most other traders, who usually didn't bother to learn anything other than a pidgin version of the language. His facility with Inuktitut also earned him high marks from the Eskimos and probably was one of the reasons why they ended up giving him a new, unequivocally adult name – Issumatak ('He Who Thinks').

During his Arctic hitch, one HBC man reputedly browsed through a catalogue that featured women's underwear and then wrote away for 'the lady on the far right of page 73'. Most traders were not reduced to such extreme measures, since they typically took what's known as 'a country wife'. Duncan Pryde,

who worked for the HBC in the 1950s and 1960s, sired offspring from this type of union wherever he was posted, declaring that 'every community should have a little Pryde'. Lest you consider the man a cad, I should note that his Eskimo friends would have thought there was something wrong with him if he hadn't fathered these offspring.

Maurice seemed disinclined to take a country wife himself, although there was no shortage of applicants. His background, he wrote, was the reason for this: 'My upbringing, both at home and at school, had run along very strict lines of morality.' But as he acquired what could be called a new background, he also began to acquire a very different sense of morality, one that was closer to an Eskimo's than to an upper-middle-class English person's. Meanwhile, he was falling in love, albeit with a culture rather than a woman, and when he at last decided to take a wife, you could say that he was consummating his relationship with that culture.

In the spring of 1934, he was put in charge of the Frobisher Bay Post at Ward Inlet. This post was considerably more isolated than Pangnirtung and likewise had no doctor or nurse. Soon he was dealing with an epidemic, which, although never officially diagnosed (there isn't even a mention of it in the usually thorough HBC records), was probably a virulent form of influenza. The stress of being forced to treat the sick and the dying more or less by himself seems to have taken its toll, and by August he was back in Pangnirtung with a condition described by the

local medical officer as ‘an affection of the heart’. I suspect the reason he doesn’t refer to this ailment in his book is that it was insignificant beside the deaths of those he had come to know and love.

Maurice’s narrative ends with his departure from Frobisher Bay, but his life with the Eskimos did not end there. After a year’s furlough in England, he returned to the Arctic to manage, respectively, the Sugluk Post in northern Quebec and the Southampton Island Post. At the latter post another epidemic struck. This new epidemic was almost certainly mumps – an indication that White Men were giving the Eskimos their diseases as well as their trade goods. At one point Maurice wrote in his journal that ‘every single man, woman & child in the place is now sick’. At least five of them died. But it could have been a lot worse. Thirty-five years earlier, the Sadlermiut, a Southampton Island tribe that had had almost no contact with the outside world, were wiped out completely by an epidemic of dysentery introduced by a single Scottish whaler.

In 1939, Maurice left the Arctic to serve in World War II. When the war was over, he did not go back to the geography that had claimed his heart and that now persisted in sending its ghosts his way. Nor did he ever go back except in the writing of this book. He died in 2003 at the age of ninety, and in his last year he worried that the use of the word ‘Eskimo’ in his soon-to-be-published book might be construed as patronizing. For he had nothing but admiration for the people now commonly referred to

as Inuit (the pejorative term for them in the 1930s was ‘Husky’, not ‘Eskimo’). ‘They have taught me so much,’ he remarked in one of his final letters, and this book is a testimony to those teachings.

If Maurice were to visit Pangnirtung today, he might see a cruise ship anchored offshore and its passengers eagerly looking to buy something, a soapskin carving or maybe foxskin booties, for their mantelpieces. At Ward Inlet, he would find a few scattered boards, all that remains of the old HBC post. In Iqaluit, the capital of the new Inuit territory of Nunavut, he might see one or two descendants of his Frobisher Bay friends shivering on the streets, members of the town’s burgeoning homeless population. The irony of a formerly nomadic people becoming once again, after a fashion, nomadic would not escape him. Nor would the fact that Iqaluit, despite its relatively small size (pop. 6,500), suffers from a number of modern urban maladies – drugs, muggings, auto thefts, gang fights. Picking up the local newspaper, the *Nunatsiaq News*, he might read about an eighteen-year-old arrested for dealing heroin and realize with a start that the boy was the grandson of a hunter he knew in another lifetime.

By now our visitor would have seen enough to know that what he had written is in fact an evocation of a lost world.

LAWRENCE MILLMAN

Cambridge, Massachusetts December 2004

‘... and when my fiord has no seals and

the flame of the lamps burns low,
I will visit my friendly Spirit
in his igloo behind the wind ...'

From the drum song of Padluapik, the Medicine Man



This Agreement, made this Seventh day of
April , A.D. 19 30 .

Between Edward Beauclerk Maurice
of Fulteny House, Fulteny Road, Bath
in the County of Somerset , hereinafter called "the party of the first part," of the first part
and George Binney, acting on behalf of
the Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay, commonly called
The Hudson's Bay Company, hereinafter called "the Company," of the second part.

1. The party of the first part, for the consideration hereinafter mentioned, agrees to enter into the service of the Company and to serve the Company at such place or places in North America as the Company or its officers shall direct, in the capacity of Apprentice and in such other capacity as the Company or its officers shall from time to time appoint, for the full term of five years, to be computed from the date of embarkation to Canada A.D. 1930 and for such further term as is hereinafter provided; and that he will, during the whole of such time, diligently, honestly and faithfully serve the Company and perform all such work and services for the Company as he shall be required and directed to perform by the officers thereof, and abide by all rules and regulations now or hereafter made by the Company and applicable to his employment.

2. That he will not (during the period of his engagement hereunder) engage nor be concerned either directly or indirectly in any trade or employment whatsoever except for the benefit of the Company and according to its orders, and that all goods obtained by barter with the Indians or otherwise which shall come to his hands or into his possession or within or under his control or direction shall be held or controlled by him for the Company only and shall duly be delivered up to the Company, its officers or agents.

3. The party of the first part further agrees with the Company that in case he shall not give at least twelve months previous notice in writing of his intention to quit the service of the Company at the end of the said term of five years (which notice shall be given to the officer in charge of the post where he then is, or in the event of his being himself in charge of a post, then to the officer in charge of the district where his post is) he shall remain and continue in the service of the Company for the further period or term of twelve months after the expiration of the term above agreed upon, on the terms and conditions herein contained.

4. The Company hereby agrees with the party of the first part that in consideration of the services to be rendered and performed by him, the Company will, during the time that he shall remain in the service of the Company, pay him at the rate of \$240 for the first year, \$300 for the second year, \$360 for the third year, \$420 for the fourth year, \$504 for the fifth year, to be computed from the day of embarkation A.D. 1930.

It is further agreed that of the above sums the Company may retain in each year an amount not exceeding 25% of the total payable in that year until such time as the cost of transportation of the party of the first part from the United Kingdom to Canada has been refunded.

Upon the satisfactory completion of the term of service set forth in this Agreement, the amount so retained will be returned by the Company to the party of the first part.

The Company will also provide for him board and lodging according to the usual custom of the Company's service, or will at the Company's option pay to him such additional sum per month in lieu of board and lodging and all allowances as shall be from time to time fixed and allowed therefor by the Company.

5. Provided always and it is hereby expressly agreed between the parties hereto that it shall be lawful for the Company or its officers at any time during the said term or any extension thereof to terminate this Agreement by giving to the party of the first part ninety days previous notice in writing or at the option of the Company on payment by the Company to him of three months wages in lieu of notice.

In witness whereof, the party of the first part and the Company have executed these presents at London on the Seventh day of April, 19 30.

Witnessed by

Laura Clifford

Address

1, Belmont

Bathwick, near Bath

Address

Hudson's Bay Co London

Approved

Jda. M. Maurice

Parent (or Guardian).

Registered

Approved

Chief Accountant,
(Witness)

Secretary.

Date of Birth

September 1st 1913

Place of Birth

Cleeve, Somerset

Married or Single

Single

Where last employed

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PART ONE

The Boy



I

AT TEN O'CLOCK in the morning of 2 June 1930 about forty young men gathered round a noticeboard set up on Euston station, which bore the message 'BOAT TRAIN, DUCHESS OF BEDFORD LIVERPOOL. HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY PARTY'.

The other travellers hurrying to and fro across the concourse, impelled to haste by the alarming pantings, snufflings and whistlings coming from the impatient engines, hardly spared us a glance, despite the flavour of distant adventure in that simple notice. For in those days, London was still the centre of a great empire and it was commonplace for parties to be seen gathering at railway stations, or at other places of departure, to begin their long journeys to far-away places. Tea planters for India and Ceylon. Rubber planters for Malaya. Mining engineers for South Africa. Administrators for the Indian and other civil services. Policemen for the African colonies. Farm workers to seek their fortunes in Australia, New Zealand or Canada. Traders for the South Seas. Servicemen for all quarters of the globe and wanderers just seeking sunshine or adventure.

We were to be apprenticed to the fur trade 'somewhere in Canada'. In age we were between sixteen and twenty-three. In occupation there were schoolboys, farm labourers, office workers, factory workers, estate workers, forestry people and even two seamen.

We had been told of the wonderful opportunities that awaited us, but what our informants had not known was that the worst depression the world would experience for many years was fast developing. Already the feverish post-war boom was collapsing. The sudden loss of confidence and the general insecurity of the world markets was soon to undermine the fur trade. Before some of us had finally reached our new homes, the whole department responsible for our engagement had been disbanded, with its members released to swell the ever growing ranks of the unemployed. Never again would a party such as ours gather in London.

An oriental philosopher once wrote that no matter how near or far the destination, every journey must somewhere have a starting point. My journey began in the June of the halcyon summer of 1913, to which so many thousands of women were to look back with aching nostalgia for all the rest of their years.

The shadow fell across my mother's life sooner than it did for the others. Six weeks before I was born, in the evening of a long midsummer's day, my father was brought home spread-eagled over a broken gate, dead of a terrible gunshot wound to the head.

Controversy, seemingly inseparable from the human state even in such tragic circumstances, broke out at once. The vicar refused my grandmother's request that her son's body should be brought into the parish church to await burial, on the grounds that he might have committed suicide. The coroner would have to give him earthly clearance from this suspicion before the church could

grant him asylum. The clergyman had mistakenly supposed his parishioner, my grandmother, to be a meek and pious woman, an error he was never to repeat. He was astonished by the ferocity with which she defended her son's right to rest in the church, and reluctantly gave way.

So my father, poised as it were on the very threshold of eternity, was brought for the last time into the cool, dim, silent shadow of the ancient building, perhaps there to find the peace he had been seeking. The following day the coroner decided that death had been due to misadventure, thus calming the vicar's disquiet and giving at least some hope of an onward journey to heaven. For those that were left on earth, and in particular for my mother, the problems were just beginning.

Aged twenty-three, with three children already and a fourth expected, her outlook was bleak indeed, for there was no provision at that time for disasters such as this. No help could be expected from the state, since there was no social security or child allowances. Those who fell by the wayside, whether it was their own fault or not, had to pick themselves up or, as a last desperate measure, appeal to the workhouse guardians for relief.

My grandmother then decided she was in need of a housekeeping companion and that her daughter-in-law could fill this position. There would be no pay as such, but food for the young widow and her children would be provided, sparingly as it turned out, and even more sparingly, clothes. Children's garments could be made from oddments, sewn, knitted and

handed down. As for my mother, now that she was a widow and would wear black for the rest of her life as Queen Victoria had done, she could inherit the old lady's cast-offs, suitably trimmed to size and shape.

This was how my family came to live in a large, cold Victorian house in a small township on the north Somersetshire coast. My mother brought with her all that she possessed in the world. A few items of bedroom furniture. A dressing table and a little jewellery, a few books and a Colt revolver with six rounds of ammunition. What desperate resolve prompted her to bring these last two items I do not know, nor did I ever inquire.

The year after our arrival, 1914, the Great War broke out. Perhaps the atmosphere of emergency and the heavy emotional demands made upon most of the young women of her generation helped my mother resign herself, at least temporarily, to living the routine of her elderly mother-in-law.

As children we were happy enough, fitting ourselves, as children do, into the circumstances that surrounded us, but mother had to suppress much of her natural jollity, acting as a buffer between her often noisy children at the top of the house and the solemn, easily disturbed downstairs of our grandmother.

Grandmother did not believe in the classless society. Indeed, so convinced was she of her own social superiority that there was not one single person in that Somersetshire township who could justifiably be invited to take tea with her. Ranged behind her in defence of her position were several dukes and other

aristocrats, closely followed by admirals, generals and the like, some of whom gazed down at us from the walls of the stairways and downstairs rooms. This meant that there was very little social life to enliven the dull days for mother.

A room at the top of the house was set aside to be used as a school, and armed with a selection of rather aged textbooks, the young widow began the education of her children, my eldest brother being already over four years old. The knowledge contained in these textbooks was rigorously drummed into our heads, for mother was aware of the necessity of obtaining an education of a higher standard than that offered by the free schools, if one was to prosper, and the only way to do this would be by gaining scholarships or similar awards.

One day a visitor called who had heard about a well-known boarding school that had been established with the sole aim of educating suitable children whose parents did not have the available funds. A great number of good people contributed money to the school, and if their contribution was sufficiently large, they were allowed to place an approved child there. I think mother must have written to every single benefactor in order to gain places for her children, and she eventually succeeded in obtaining one for each of us, three boys at the boys' school and our sister at the girls' establishment.

The schooling provided was sound, practical and aimed at producing adaptable adults, able to use such common sense as they possessed. Aware of the undoubted benefits of such an

education, I would like to be able to record that this was a happy period of my life. Alas, this was not so. From the very start, the school was like some sort of prison. On my second day I quite unwittingly broke some obscure rule, for which the housemaster, no doubt a brilliant mathematician, but lacking in any noticeably human attributes, accorded me a public beating. A suitably sour start to a relationship which was to lack warmth for the next seven years.

As time went by, my mother began to think increasingly of escape from the situation which had trapped her for so long. The atmosphere in the old lady's house was not a happy one and my mother longed to go to the other side of the world and start afresh. We had no money, but could work hard and New Zealand sounded like a land of opportunity.

My brother blazed the trail by setting off just after the General Strike of 1926, helping to stoke the boilers of an ancient coal burner as it steamed across the Pacific Ocean. He was to work on farms in New Zealand, and two years later my other brother followed him. The three of us who were left at home were to wait until I had finished school, then set off together.

As the time loomed near, however, my prospective life as a farmworker lost its appeal for me. We wrote letters to everybody we could think of to see if they could squeeze me in somewhere else, but the reply was always the same – too young and no qualifications. Christmas 1929 came and went with the problem no nearer solution, but early in the New Year, a chance happening

at school provided a possible answer.

A week or two after the start of term, a visitor arrived to take up a long-standing invitation to spend a weekend at the school as a guest of the headmaster. He was the archdeacon in charge of the missionaries working in the Canadian Arctic territories. The news that the clerical visitor was to give a Saturday-night talk was received with some resignation by the boys, but the archdeacon, whose diocese spread from the tree line right away up to the last few humps of ice at the North Pole, had brought reels of film with him and caught our interest and attention immediately when his operator put the first one in backwards. It was the run of a visit by some Hudson's Bay officials to a post above the Arctic Circle. A solitary white building crouched beneath towering black cliffs. A door flew suddenly open and two portly city executive types marched smartly out backwards, skilfully negotiated a short but steep slope then performed an incredibly agile backward leap into a motor boat waiting at the water's edge.

After this entertaining start, the film's chief interest centred on the activities of the Hudson's Bay Company. Incorporated by Charles II in 1670 as the 'Gentlemen Adventurers trading into Hudson's Bay' and led by Prince Rupert, they had been inspired by the thought of getting into Hudson's Bay and establishing trading posts ahead of the French. In this they had been successful, so they later extended their field of operation over the whole of Canada and later still to the islands north of the mainland. The remote Arctic establishments could only

be supplied by sea and it was the voyage of the tough little *Nascopie* that the archdeacon had recorded on film. There were hunting scenes, trading scenes, pictures taken under the midnight sun, of polar bears and walrus, of far-away places and people, enough to titillate the imagination of any schoolboy. Moreover, from what our speaker said, it was fairly obvious that this great company employed young people who did not have any special qualifications. I summoned up my courage to confront the authorities and request further details. An interview was arranged with the archdeacon himself. It was to take place in the headmaster's study on the Monday morning.

The missionary was looking out of the window at the boys scuttling about in the quad on that wet and windy February morning when I crept into the holy of holies. I thought that he looked rather surprised when he saw me. He said:

‘You wanted to see me I believe?’

‘Yes sir,’ I replied, not knowing quite how to develop the conversation.

‘How can I help you?’

‘I wanted to ask about the Hudson's Bay Company and what age the apprentices have to be,’ I blurted out. The archdeacon looked at me in silence for what seemed to be a very long time. It was fairly obvious that he did not consider me to be the stuff of which ‘Gentlemen Adventurers’ are made. Then he said slowly:

‘I think they do sometimes take boys of sixteen if they are suitable, mostly they are rather older. Why do you ask? Are you

thinking of applying?’

‘Yes,’ I replied. I knew that I should expand my answers but somehow dried up in the face of what seemed to be disapproval. The missionary sensed my nervousness.

‘What makes you think you would like the life up there?’ he asked. ‘It’s not an easy place to live in you know. Many of the posts are just one man among the Eskimos and Indians and no other post near enough even to visit.’

The slight softening of the archdeacon’s attitude released my tongue sufficiently for me to explain our dilemma. He listened in silence. When I had finished he actually smiled.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I can understand your anxiety to help your mother and I can probably help you with the company, but you should understand what it is you are doing. What about your exams? Have you taken School Certificate yet? Even if the company ignores such things, you may need some qualifications later in your life.’

‘I should take School Certificate this summer, but that would mean waiting until next year. Things would be very bad at home by then.’

‘Do you know anything about northern Canada apart from what you heard in my talk?’

‘Only what I have read in books.’

‘It’s a very lonely life as I have said. The supply ship comes up once a year. At a small post it may only stay for a few hours and that is the only contact with the outside world until the next

year. There is just a small house and a store. You will have to forget about cinemas, theatres, dance halls and everything like that. The ship brings up a small amount of fresh food but after that has gone you have to hunt for yourself. There are just six posts on Baffin Island, which is three or four times the size of England, and about fifteen Europeans. The weather is generally cold, except for a week or two in the summer. Sometimes in the winter the temperature goes down to forty below zero. Some posts have a wireless receiving set but they don't work very well because of the distance from the stations.'

The archdeacon made this little speech as though determined to counteract the favourable impression created by his film show.

'What about doctors?' I asked, more from nerves than for any other reason.

'On Baffin Island there is just one doctor. Usually if people become ill they have to do the best they can with their medicine chest.'

I was more careful with my next question.

'What sort of animals do they hunt?'

'Seals,' he replied without enthusiasm. 'Some deer. Ducks. Polar bears. Fish of course, salmon trout mainly and cod further south. Walrus and the larger seals for feeding the dogs.'

It seemed pointless to ask any further questions. After all the months of searching for a way out of our dilemma, the providential arrival of the archdeacon with his news that the Hudson's Bay Company would probably take me on right away

decided the issue.

‘I would like to go for an interview if it can be arranged.’

‘Very well. I will see what I can do. In any case, you will have time in the next week or two to think about it all.’

So ended my first meeting with the Archdeacon of the Arctic.

Within a few days I was summoned to an interview in London. From my point of view it was a great success. They gave me a closely printed contract to take away and study. I never did find out what it actually said for it was written in legal jargon well above my head. Everyone was very friendly, they gave me £1 for expenses and even suggested that I should go to the cinema before returning to school. Perhaps they were thinking of the years that I might have to spend without cinemas.

The second interview was more intimidating. I had to wait half an hour in an ante-room before I was called in to the departmental manager's office. It was a splendid office with a thick red carpet and leather armchairs. The manager gave me a very earnest talk. There wasn't any Mr Hudson's Bay, he said, so that every hard-working apprentice had a thick carpet and leather chaired suite within his sights, or at the very least a chief trader's certificate to hang on the wall, if he could survive forty years in the backwoods.

Eventually the talking was over and they produced the official contract, now with all the details filled in. I was to bind myself for five years to the company, serving wherever they might decide to send me. They would keep me and pay me 10 s. (50p) per week,

though should I rise above the apprentice level during the period, some modest increase in salary could be expected.

The terms did not appear unduly harsh. The money did seem to be a little on the short side even for those depressed days, but that was a fairly common complaint at the time, so I signed the document and even light-heartedly agreed to become a competent bookkeeper and typist during the few weeks of waiting before they shipped me off to Canada. Such is the foolish optimism of youth.

One immediate benefit arising from my decision became quickly obvious. I was no longer an inconspicuous monitor of my school. An aura compounded of snow, ice, dogs and polar bears separated me from my fellow boys, even those who had reached the dizzy heights of the First XV. To my astonishment, this also actually clouded the vision of some of the masters. I exploited this situation to the full so that my last few weeks were the happiest of my years at the school.

My housemaster, for some reason or another, was the last to hear of my new status, and when he called me in to go over my end-of-term report he appeared to think that I was still just an ordinary schoolboy. It seemed that my progress in scripture had only been rated as 'fair'. He did not feel it to be satisfactory that the word 'fair' should appear on the report of one of his monitors and he might feel it necessary to demote me.

I quickly set his mind at rest by telling him my news. A curious expression came over his face when he heard that I was off to

the wilds, rather as though I had opened some door in his mind that had been closed for a very long time. He wrote to me in the Arctic several times and I later heard that my replies had been read out at prayers, a signal mark of distinction.

At the end of term a special train came to the school station to pick up the boys travelling to London or beyond. The train left just after 6 a.m. in order to avoid the morning rush, so it was very early one spring morning that I discarded my school uniform and, puffed up with sufficient false pride to still any lurking doubts, set off to prepare myself for my life among the Eskimos.

Some years previously, an old great-uncle of ours had died, leaving my siblings and me £52 each. As I was shortly to become an earner in my own right, I dipped into this money to equip myself for my new life and at once purchased a colourful shirt, riding breeches and a horsey jacket. This gave me, on such occasions as I actually appeared in public in my new outfit, a sufficiently bizarre appearance to cause one of the more spiteful of our neighbours to remark: 'He looks quite colonial already, doesn't he?'

My mother, still under forty years old, had hardly dared to even think about the day when she would finally be released to live again, and now suddenly it was within sight. Already she and my sister were filling up the forms necessary to obtain an assisted passage to New Zealand, where they would join my brothers.

Shortly after my arrival home, an important-looking letter came from the Hudson's Bay Company. It reminded me

rather sternly that I had undertaken to achieve competence in bookkeeping and typing before leaving England, and warned me that I would have to produce certificates to avoid being left behind on the quayside. A visit one afternoon to an established business college in the town indicated that this was not going to be as easy as it sounded. They smiled pityingly and showed us the door. We journeyed round all the other colleges in the town. The answer was always the same. They did not undertake to turn out typists and bookkeepers in a matter of weeks. Finally, to my horror, mother unearthed a girls' college willing to attempt the impossible task.

My frantic efforts to spare myself this frightful indignity were unavailing. In these days of the easy mixing of young people of both sexes it is hard to credit the conditions that prevailed seventy years ago. At school no females were allowed. Even the maids, unless they were grey-haired, had to operate out of sight of the boys. Consequently, unless there was a good social life at home, boys and young men were awkward in their relationships with girls, even singly. Now I was to be put in with a whole college of them!

Like some rare oddity, I was placed at a desk facing two rows of girls and was so busy watching for slights and suspecting all kinds of indignities that I never got to know any of them. I was to become aware before leaving that these girls had a much better idea of natural behaviour than I did.

The women in charge of the place had pulled a few strings,

and a few days before my departure presented me with an official-looking but vague document. This declared me to be indoctrinated, both as to the keeping of books and typewriting, though not accepting any responsibility for the outcome of my activities.

After the presentation, one of the other pupils, a small plain girl whose nose was slightly flattened as though having been pressed against a window pane too long, rushed forward and pushed a small package into my hand. It was from them all, she said, to wish me well in whatever outlandish part of the world it was to which I was going.

This sudden expression of goodwill from my contemporaries, and girls at that, quite overcame me. The unexpected kindness never faded from my mind and the gift, a small silver propelling pencil, remained one of my prize possessions for many years.

The Hudson's Bay Company apparently expected me to transform myself from a schoolboy into a practical handyman in the few weeks available between leaving school and the departure for Canada. They sent a list of the more important arts which it would be wise for me to cultivate. Apart from the bookkeeping and typing, it was desirable, they wrote, to gain a knowledge of the combustion engine, some idea of first aid and experience of simple cooking.

The far northern districts of Canada, being so isolated, were totally dependent on sea travel by motor boat for summer hunting. There were no mechanics as such, so it was important

that as many people as possible should be capable of keeping the engines running. The lack of doctors meant that the post staff would have to deal with accidents and illness and a knowledge of basic first aid was vital. Apparently, few Eskimo women had any idea of cooking, so we would have to do our share of preparing the meals.

As the list of necessary accomplishments grew, doubts began to creep into my mind. Had this apparently ideal solution to our problem blinded me to the reality of the situation in which I was going to find myself? Not even my mother, always prepared to believe the best about me, would have claimed any practical virtues for me. Yet it seemed that it was practical people who were wanted. Of what use would it have been to be top of the German class when the motor boat broke down? How could a sound knowledge of history stop me from being sick when someone came to see me with a bone sticking out of their arm and blood everywhere? Would the promise that the form master had assured me I had shown in English give me any confidence to prepare a meal for the weary traveller?

These fears subsided when the final documents arrived for my mother and sister to sign for their passage to New Zealand. Amid the excitement at the prospect of an early release, my natural optimism reasserted itself. When the last day came, it seemed unlikely that we should ever spend time together in England again, so the three of us took a picnic and hired a boat to laze down a river through the quiet Somerset countryside, where we

had passed many happy hours in days gone by.

That night I said goodbye to my grandmother. She seemed much affected. She said that she wished that she had had more money so that we could have stayed in England and not gone so far away, but the family fortunes had dwindled and there was nothing she could do. She gave me a little package wrapped up in tissue paper. It contained two spoons and a fork, silver with her family crest stamped on the handles. This was to remind me of all those people who had stared down on my childhood, and how well some of them had acquitted themselves.

Mother and I set off for London early the next morning, my sister having already gone back to her job in Bristol. We stayed at an old-fashioned hotel, and went to a theatre, and after breakfast the next morning made our way quietly to the ten o'clock rendezvous at Euston station. I remember thinking back to our first parting, on the day that mother had taken me down to start school. The tears had streamed down my face then and she had tried to console me by saying that it would only be a few weeks before the holidays. This time the tears streamed down her face as we began to move, and I did not know what to say.

Five years suddenly seemed a very, very long time.

*

I remember little about the voyage across the Atlantic. Being a summer passage, it was calm and uneventful I suppose, with little to do except eat, sleep and play deck games until we reached the St Lawrence river and had our first glimpse of our future

homeland. We had a brief run ashore at Quebec, just enough to say that we had set foot in Canada, then the next day docked at Montreal, where our posts would be assigned.

Our accommodation on the ship had seemed almost luxurious, so our temporary home in the city was something of a let-down. The public rooms were sparsely furnished with trestle tables and wooden chairs and there was little attempt to reach any standard of comfort, but the people who ran the place were good-hearted souls, who kept our spirits up with an ample supply of good plain food.

The Hudson's Bay Company offices in Montreal were in McGill Street, and though half our number had taken the train westward, there seemed to be quite a crowd of us milling about in the comparatively small office space. We met the men in charge of our areas and most of the apprentices were told where they would be going. Another boy, Ian Smith, and I were 'odd men out' for whom a home would be found during the course of the summer travels.

To relieve the congestion, a party of us were sent down to the docks to work on the *Nascopie*, the ship that the archdeacon had told us about at school, now loading up for her annual trip with the year's supply for the distant posts.

After the majestic liner which had carried us so smoothly across the Atlantic, the *Nascopie* seemed very small and insignificant. Her decks only just rose above the level of the wharf, whereas the liner had towered up above the dockside.

Her paintwork was dark and workmanlike whereas the *Duchess* had gleamed and dazzled in white. None the less, many of us were, in the years to come, to form an affection for the little ship which no ocean liner could ever have inspired. Sometimes she was naughty. In rough weather there were few tricks that were beyond her, particularly when coming down the Labrador coast with only a few light bales of furs in her holds. She would then creak and groan in the most alarming manner, but survived the worst hammerings the North Atlantic and the Arctic seas could serve up, to return each year, like a faithful friend, to keep us company for a few hours or a day or so in our northern solitude.

More than once the *Nascopie* took on a double duty, when lesser craft than she gave up the unequal struggle against fog and ice. The old ship had been built during or just before the First World War, and was one of the finest steel icebreakers ever constructed. During the war, she was employed smashing the ice in the White Sea, and according to all reports was well ahead of the Russians in this field. Once, in a convoy in heavy ice, the huge Russian icebreaker leading the convoy got stuck. The *Nascopie* bustled up alongside and hailed the Russian.

‘Shall I go ahead, sir?’ shouted the captain.

‘How the devil can you go ahead when I’m stuck?’ roared back the Russian.

‘Shall I try?’

‘Oh, go to hell if you want to,’ snapped the Russian.

The *Nascopie* broke through the ice jam to lead the convoy

into harbour, and for good measure, on the way home, she sank a submarine. Small wonder that she grew on us almost as though she were human.

On that first Monday morning, however, we were not greatly impressed. In fact by the time we had finished carrying the heavy mail boxes – and it is extraordinary how heavily a year's mail can weigh – we were not sorry to see the last of her for the day.

We soon made friends around our temporary home. One Saturday night, a French Canadian family held a wedding reception in the building. Two or three of us were hanging about so they invited us to join the party. During the evening, we were approached by a rather unsteady-looking man who, after casting a glance at a priest standing near by, said in a deep but penetrating whisper: 'H.B.C. eh? Do you know what that means? "Here before Christ," that's what it means!'

He told us that he had been trading with the company for over thirty years. Ian asked him if he had retired and the man roared with laughter.

'Retired?' he shouted. 'I'm never going to retire. They'll find me one day somewhere along the trail and I hope they'll leave me there.' He waved his arm round the room then went on.

'This sort of thing's not for me. I only came because she happens to be a niece. I'll not be down this way again. Victor's my name. They'll know me up the river. I don't have much in this world but I'm free. I go where I like when I like and I'm off home in the morning.' He waved his arm and marched off

towards the table where the food was set out. I was often to think about Victor in the years to come, his boisterous good health, his obvious contentment with the life he had chosen, and his best clothes, which looked as if they had not been worn for many a long day.

We met three sisters at the wedding too who had come from Three Rivers and had made the trip down with their father and mother. They were good fun and Ian Smith and I and another chap took them out for a picnic the next day, as they spent the weekend in the city. It was the first time that I had ever been out with a girl other than my sister, and one of them, Laurette, said she would write to me. I rashly promised to write and send her a fur from wherever I was. She did write too but alas did not receive the promised fur.

By the end of the next week, so far as we could see, the *Nascopie* was just about fully laden. We were not surprised to be told to pack up again in preparation for moving on. Then at the last minute, because of the shortage of accommodation on the ship, Ian, myself and three others were told that we were to take passage on another freighter, which was going up as far north as the Labrador coast and Ungava Bay. Somewhere up there we should join up again with the *Nascopie*. This meant that we should be sailing a few days later.

The evening before we parted we all clubbed together to buy some beer and had a small party – at least we sang songs and were generally very noisy. Now that we knew that we were to be

northerners, an air of easy comradeship settled over the gathering and it seemed likely that we should have much to do with each other over the next few years. Such is the remoteness of life in the Arctic that I was only to see three of the dozen or so present after that season.

The five of us that were to be left behind went down to the docks to see the rest of our party depart. Prepared for laughter and banter, we had not expected the sailing of the little ship to be so stirring. The vessel was bedecked in pennants, apart from the Red Ensign at the stern and the Blue Peter at the mainmast. A detachment of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, in their scarlet uniforms, was drawn up on the deck for inspection by a high-ranking officer. There were priests, government officials, traders, doctors and scientists. In her holds, we knew, were the supplies for a territory ten times the size of England. We shook hands with our friends. Some of the ladies farewelling their nearest and dearest cried, while another group was singing.

Then the siren sounded out in long blasts, the propellor churned the water and she was away. A nearby harbour tug blew her a rousing farewell and more and more sirens sounded their good wishes. Black smoke belched from her funnel and as she moved out into the stream we could see clearly all the things lashed to her decks. Boats. Canoes. Drums of gasoline. All sorts of queer-shaped things covered with tarpaulins.

Ian and I watched her manoeuvre into midstream and then head out of the harbour, the white pennant of the Royal Mail

slapping in the wind at the top of her mast. Down river, the Canadian navy, in the form of two destroyers, dipped flags in salute as she steamed by. Just beside me somebody's friend had forgotten a last message, bawling out 'Happy Christmas' in the forlorn hope of being heard on the ship. We began to understand why they had told us that to think about the Arctic without thinking about the Hudson's Bay Company was like writing a book about sea without mentioning ships.

A few days after the departure of the *Nascopie*, the remaining five of us set off quietly for the docks, taking with us all our worldly possessions. By ten o'clock that morning we were assembled in a rather gloomy shed at the city end of the wharf, where the van had unloaded us. The ship on which we were to take passage, the *Ungava*, was alongside the far end of the wharf, so we had a fair way to go with all our baggage.

One of our party could hardly move, so heavily laden was he with cases and packages, and his crab-like motion attracted the attention of a passing wharfie.

'Why didn't you bring your bed, boy?' the man guffawed. 'Where the devil are you off to with all that load?'

'I'm going north for five years,' came a voice from behind the parcels and cases.

'Well in five years' time you'll either be dead or carrying twice that much on one shoulder,' shouted the man amid his laughter as he went on his way to the dock gates.

There was no glamour attached to the departure of the

Ungava. She was just a rather rusty old freighter, and an ugly one at that, setting off on a more or less routine passage along the Labrador coast. She was heavily laden. Her well decks were completely filled in with drums of oil, so that care had to be taken when passing across them to avoid falling overboard.

There was no one to see us off, apart from a couple of officials from the office, so without any fuss or palaver, about an hour after we had come aboard, the crew cast off the lines and, belching black smoke, like the *Nascopie* we set off down the river.

The old ship had no licence to carry passengers. We had had to sign on as crew, deckhands, stewards, stokers and the like at a token wage of one dollar per week. I was allocated to a job as ‘assistant purser’, which did not please some of the others, for they considered it to be a cushy task compared to theirs. As it turned out that I had laboriously to type out page after page of bills of lading while they had little to do after a slight scurry of activity in the mornings, they were quite pleased.

Ian and I went out on deck that first evening, making our way perilously over the oil barrels to a space on the stern, from where we could watch the muddy waters stirred up by the propellor and the coastline dropping behind us. We were somewhere between the two cities of Montreal and Quebec, the former just a distant glow on the horizon, the latter not yet visible. Above the hills, the summer lightning forked and flashed and the thunder rumbled distantly. A few lights twinkled on both shores.

A small township, stretched along the bank of the great river, drifted by and dwindled into the distance.

We did not speak much. I think we both realized at last that before long the lights of our accustomed world would have faded behind us. Ahead would stretch the vast empty wilderness of the Arctic to which we had so lightheartedly committed ourselves.

II

THE LABRADOR COAST runs in a north-westerly direction, pointing at the top like an outstretched finger across Hudson Straights toward Resolution Island and Baffin Island. The Torngak Range, mountains of the devil, high and menacing, jut out into the straight above Ungava Bay. Straggling still further beyond the mainland, the islands Killineck and the Buttons jostle each other, desolate and barren as if the Almighty, coming to the end of a coastline with a few black and unproductive rocks left over, flung them in one despairing handful into that grey and uninviting sea.

The other end of the coast is less daunting, but still hostile to anyone used to the gentle countryside of southern England. It begins just above the Gulf of St Lawrence and curves round into the Straits of Belle Isle, the strip of water which separates Labrador from the island of Newfoundland. Here, before we had even really entered the northern seas, the elements served up a warning of what we might expect in the higher latitudes.

During the afternoon of the fourth day out from Montreal, the heavy clouds massed threateningly from the north. Slowly

they grouped and crept across the darkening sky toward us, then suddenly, just before nightfall, launched their attack. The wind roared down at us, flinging gouts of rain like pieces of metal into the faces of those foolish enough to stray out on deck to see what was happening.

At the height of each gust, the old ship seemed to waver and stop, shuddering helplessly on the crest of the mounting waves, unable to force a passage through the strength of the storm. Then, as the gust slackened, the vessel slid down into the deep beyond, shaking itself free of the holding wind.

Those of us quartered in the after part of the ship were effectively marooned, since to reach the dining saloon and forward parts we had to cross over the barrels with a near certainty of being flung into the sea. The other apprentices did not seem to mind about this, because the pitching and tossing of the ship had removed their interest in food, but I felt deprived at having to content myself with a bar of chocolate for the evening meal.

Any feeling of superiority was quite dispelled during the night, however, for my bunk, which had not been fastened properly to the wall, gave way with the strain of the ship's movement, flinging me down on to the deck with the mattress and spring on top of me. First aid had to be administered to a gash on my head, necessitating a rather unsightly, bloodstained bandage. My friends thought it much funnier and more undignified that I had fallen out of my bunk (as they soon persuaded themselves) than

that they had suffered a bout of seasickness.

Within twenty-four hours the storm calmed almost as quickly as it had risen. We had turned the corner from Belle Isle and were now steaming along the Labrador coast, heading for our first port of call, a settlement called Cartwright.

The harbour was just inside the entrance to a fairly wide bay with an island slanted across the mouth in such a way as to make it almost landlocked. We thought at first that the captain had stopped the ship and dropped anchor to wait until the visibility improved, for all round the vessel there was a low mist stretching to the horizon. Then we noticed straight ahead of us, apparently suspended from the sky, the familiar flag of the Hudson's Bay Company. Shortly afterwards the fog dispersed sufficiently for us to see that the captain had placed the ship directly in front of the post buildings.

The scenery was not inspiring: a long deep stretch of flat land which looked like marshland or swamp, as if there ought to have been a river delta just ahead of us. We could see no river though, just the flats with some low hills in the distance and, further still, blending almost into the clouds along the horizon but breaking through here and there as a peak or crag, the higher hills of the interior. Just below the buildings, at a jetty pushed out into the bay for about fifty yards or so, a nondescript group of people appeared to be waiting for the *Ungava* to start unloading.

Dotted across the flats were numerous shack-like erections, with larger single-storey buildings here and there, such as a

school and a hospital. The whole outlook was as grey and dull as the day itself, but we soon found that we were not there just as tourists. The group we had seen waiting at the end of the jetty was to come aboard and work in the holds, while we were to go ashore to handle the supplies as they came off the lighters.

Our job was to carry the goods down the full length of the jetty and then across to the store, which was situated beyond the dwelling house. It was hard work and a very long way to those not used to carrying heavy weights, which seemed to be most of us. Under my first sack of flour I nearly sank to my knees, but managed to hold up, much to the disappointment, I am sure, of the first mate, who was standing near by with a grin all over his face waiting for one of us to make a fool of himself. Adding considerably to our discomfort was the fact that the place was infested with vicious mosquitoes, which descended upon us in veritable clouds to sample the blood of the newcomers, so that our first day's work on the Labrador coast was misery endured rather than a brave step forward.

The apprentice at Cartwright had come out from Scotland two years previously and he warned us not to expect any home comforts. On the evening of his arrival, he had asked the manager where his bedroom was. He had been taken down to the store, shown a mattress squeezed in behind the counter and told that that was his bedroom. He warned us too that a greenhorn in the Arctic was fair game for everyone, especially the old-timers. During his first winter, he had slightly frozen his big toe and

had in due course lost the nail. An apparently knowledgeable colleague at the post told him that he must strap the black nail back on to his toe for at least three months, after which time it would have grown back on again. According to our friend he had done this at very great discomfort and not until several weeks later did he discover that his leg had been pulled. I think most of us thought ourselves too clever to be caught out like that, but it was not easy to resist the insistent advice of experienced people, however bizarre it seemed.

The unloading took about twenty-four hours, working quite late into the night and resuming again at daybreak. The mosquitoes attacked relentlessly, but our loads seemed to get less heavy as our muscles became more and more used to the strain, although we were all glad when the last case had been safely deposited in the store. The *Ungava* did not sail at once, so we had an opportunity to look round our first Hudson's Bay Company post.

We visited some of the shacks dotted about on the flats. It was rather like stepping back in time, for these homes could well have belonged to a much earlier era. The first thing that met the eye were the outsize texts hanging near the entrance and at other strategic points inside. 'THE WAGES OF SIN ARE DEATH', 'GOD IS LOVE', 'JUDGE NOT THAT YE BE NOT JUDGED' and other sombre messages set the tone. The occupants sat in their homes, prim and formal, surrounded by their possessions as though they were relics of the Victorian peasantry somehow

strayed into the twentieth century. They appeared to be of European descent, with perhaps some intermingling of Indian blood and possibly Innuït as well. They understood some English, but could not be drawn into anything but the most conventional conversation.

During the morning of our departure from Cartwright, the man in charge of our group summoned me to his cabin and told me that I was to become the apprentice at a post called Fort Chimo, a small but long-established settlement situated at the head of Ungava Bay. He advised me to seek the advice of a passenger who had just joined us to travel along the coast and who had spent several years at Chimo. Ian Smith was to go to a nearby post, so he joined me in seeking out this man, Bill Ford by name.

We found Bill asleep in his cabin and at first he did not seem to be too pleased at having his rest interrupted, but he mellowed when he discovered we had brought a couple of bottles of beer with us. He sat drinking the beer and dangling his legs over the bunk.

‘Years ago,’ he said, ‘Chimo was almost a small township. The post staff was much larger than it is nowadays. They had people to make barrels, carpenters, interpreters. There were opposition trading companies, a school, a hospital and government officials.’

‘How did the company people get on with the opposition?’ asked Ian.

‘They didn’t have very much to do with each other,’ replied

Bill, 'they didn't fraternize. If anything went wrong for one of them, the other was always very bucked about it. I remember once that during a gale a boat belonging to the French company Revillon Frères broke away from her moorings. It was a big boat too, about five tons, and the company chaps gathered along the river bank to cheer as she drifted past. The thing went right out to sea and it was several days before they got her back again, with a hole stove in her bow just above the waterline where she had hit a rock.

'There aren't many opposition posts left now though. There hasn't been enough trade for more than one company for the past few years at Chimo and rumour has it that Revillon Frères will be pulling out before long.'

I asked him about the natives in Ungava Bay.

'The Eskimos live around the shores,' Bill replied, 'and the Indians have their camps inland. They're quite friendly and don't really come into contact with each other very much. There's never been any trouble as far as I know. Round the bay, where the Eskimos live, the land is very flat – sometimes I used to wish that the hills were a little higher. The wind comes down from the interior and whistles round the houses during the winter. We had some fair old blizzards. In a real blizzard, you have no idea where you are, the wind can keep changing and you can't see a thing. One of the Chimo missionaries got caught once coming back from a visit to his flock. He and his Eskimo driver dug themselves into the snow, after struggling as far as they could.

They were miserable in what was little better than a hole in the ground for two days. On the third day they were amazed to hear the sound of church bells coming from near by and they struggled out of their holes to find that they had camped almost alongside the missionary's own house. The bells they had heard was his assistant ringing for the morning service.'

We soon found that Bill Ford, who had spent most of the previous winter alone, inland from Cartwright, needed little persuasion to launch off into his stories of the Labrador coast and Ungava Bay. Sometimes it was quite difficult to stop him, but both Ian and I felt that he never did try to make fools of us, a pastime to which many old-time northerners were willing to devote a considerable amount of time.

We made several stops during our voyage along the Labrador coast. At Makkovik, my star did not at first seem to be in the ascendant. Wearing a new beret, purchased under the French influence of the Montreal shops, I felt quite jaunty as I reached the bottom of the gangway and prepared to climb into the first boat ashore. Unfortunately, at that precise moment the fastening, or whatever it was that held the bottom step in place, broke. The step tilted up into a vertical position, allowing me to slide, quite gracefully they told me, into the water. My efforts to grasp something as I went down simply resulted in me pulling the step back down into position over my head. I was able to tell my friends later that although the water looked calm and inviting enough for a swim, it was really too cold to be enjoyable.

Later on during the afternoon, I rejoined the working party on shore and they kept up their ribaldry at my expense for the rest of the day. We finished the work before teatime and a pleasant surprise awaited us, for the post manager told us that his wife wanted us to go and have a meal with them instead of going back to the ship. His wife, a jolly, cheerful person, did not seem to mind how many of us came. She had cooked a huge dishful of cod steaks in batter and on the table was what looked like an old-time washbasin full of crisp chips. She just stood back and let us help ourselves, laughing with delight at our obvious appreciation. When the fish had all gone, the lady produced an outsize apple pie, then cake and bread and jam for any unfilled corner. She seemed much concerned about my plunge into the sea. Had I dried myself properly? What about my clothes? What was the Hudson's Bay Company thinking of, bringing children up into the Arctic? I rejected the suggestion that I was a child at sixteen, but she shook her head and said that it was a hard life and a very lonely one.

After we had cleared up the mess and done the washing up, we gathered round an old piano that had been retrieved from a wreck along the coast. The manager played familiar tunes and we sang and laughed and played silly games until it was time to go back to the ship. When we tried to thank them for everything, they said that they hadn't had such a happy evening for a long time and hoped that one day we might all come back.

Early the next morning we sailed from Makkovik to steam

along the central part of the coastline. The scenery improved greatly. There were dozens of islands large and small, where the sea wound in and out in twisting passageways, curious-shaped cliffs and rocks, worn down by time and sea and weather. Birds of all coastal types abounded, from the hungry, cawing gull to the lively little arctic tern.

By the time we reached Hebron, a few days further down the coast, the land was even more impressive, as it rose high and rugged toward the desolate mountains. The weather was fine and sunny and a morning spent on deck was as good as anything an expensive cruise ship could offer.

I found Bill in a cozy spot one morning, behind some boxes, quite sheltered from the slight breeze. He smiled when he saw me.

‘So you tracked me down, eh?’ he said, but showed no reluctance to talk.

‘You wouldn’t think that a fine new ship was lying just beneath the water over there, would you? Not that she would be new now of course.’ He pointed over to the coast and continued.

‘The *Bay Rupert*. I don’t suppose you ever heard of her. The company had her built after the war. She was a fine ship, much larger than the *Nascopie* and everything brand spanking new. They put in special accommodation for bringing tourists up here. It was more like travelling on an Atlantic liner than coming up north.’

‘Did you ever sail in her?’ asked Ian.

‘I did indeed,’ said Bill. ‘I got off just before she went down. It seems that there’s a rock along the coast, somewhere hereabouts, which sticks up under the sea but doesn’t break water and there was no buoy there to mark the spot. We were coming along the inside passage in beautiful weather, just like today, with a pilot who was responsible for the navigation. The story was that one evening this man made out the course that they were to follow and the captain said that if he did as the pilot wanted, they would run smack into a rock about breakfast time next morning. Some people said that they had a great row about it, but that the course stayed as it was. The next morning, I was just getting out of my bunk when there was a terrific bump and, sure enough, the skipper was right. I’d never been shipwrecked before and it wasn’t anything like what I had thought it would be. We just got into the boats and they took us ashore, rather as if we were going for a day out, but the ship sank quite quickly and as the water isn’t very deep, it became a kind of treasure trove for all and sundry. Most of the homes along there have to thank the *Bay Rupert* for some item or another.’

‘What did they do to the pilot?’ I asked.

‘I don’t think that they actually did anything to anybody. There was a great deal of argument as to what had really happened and nobody seemed to know the whole story.’

‘It’s a good thing that it doesn’t happen very often up here,’ Ian said.

‘Oh, round about that time there was a jinx on the company,’

said Bill. 'Another of the bay boats was lost, the *Bay Chimo*, but she didn't sink, not at first anyway. She was trapped by the ice and it seems that she got frozen in during the winter, after they had abandoned her. Later on, she was sighted drifting about in the pack ice, like a sort of ghost ship, somewhere up in the Beaufort Sea, and for all I know she may still be held together by the ice of the Western Arctic!'

Almost as soon as we left Hebron the weather changed and during the night a thick fog closed about us. The captain groped his way at half speed, with frequent blasts of the fog horn, in case any of the wheat boats on their way to or from Churchill were in the vicinity.

We awoke in the morning to find the fog cleared and heard the rattle of the anchor chain going down, signifying our arrival at a post. When Ian and I went out on deck to see where we were, we did not at first believe that we had arrived anywhere. All we could see of the land was what resembled one humped black rock. Bill Ford put us right.

'Port Burwell,' he said, 'and I hope that I never land here for my sins.'

We could see what he meant. This was one of the islands where the Labrador coast straggled off into the arctic seas. Bleak and inhospitable even on a summer's day, one could well imagine that in the dark grey of the stormy winter the elements would combine to make life as unpleasant as possible.

For once there was little activity, and the dullness of the

morning was only enlivened by the arrival of a boatload of Eskimos from the shore. They pulled alongside and one or two of their number came straight aboard the *Ungava*. The crew made them welcome, then the rest came pouring up the gangway, gabbling away to each other and beaming all over their brown faces. A few of the women wore red or green tartan shawls wrapped around their shoulders, but mainly they were clothed in parkas with deep hoods in which to carry their babies. Underneath they had on ordinary summer dresses made of coloured prints of various designs. Many of them looked as though they had got straight out of bed to come to the ship, and a few as though they had worn their clothes all night. The men all wore parkas with coloured braid round the edges; some had bright knitted head coverings, while one or two sported naval caps with gold straps. The chief man of the boat handled his craft very efficiently.

The stewards produced a large kettle of tea and a box of biscuits and another of the crew brought up a carton of mugs. In a moment the Eskimos were squatting all over the deck downing their tea. Some of the women had brought their babies in their parkas, and every now and then one of them would suddenly run to the side of the ship, to hold baby out over the sea to relieve itself.

They were a happy, cheerful lot and looked to me to fit somewhere between the American Indians and Chinese. When the tea was all drunk, they surged back down the gangway to their

boat and chugged off, disappearing round a point of land a few moments later.

Ralph Parsons, the district manager for the whole of the Eastern Arctic, who had himself established most of the posts in the district, arrived in his own Peterhead boat about midday and the ship came to life. Ian and I were sent ashore with the first scowload and were surprised to find that the harbour was just on the other side of the point round which the Eskimos had passed. The little cove was only about a hundred yards in depth, but the opening was quite narrow, so there was good shelter from the open sea.

There was not a lot of cargo to handle as the *Nascopie* had already unloaded the main supplies, but the goods had to be carried up a long winding walkway as the store had been built on a rise some way back from the shoreline. By now we were becoming quite experienced stevedores and did not provide the ship's personnel with many laughs. We were also much more speedy, finishing the work in time to go back aboard the ship for a meal.

A surprise awaited us. Ian, myself and another boy were to pack up and go ashore to await further instructions. One of the men who had come up from Chimo with Ralph Parsons gave us the explanation the next day. Ian would not be required as the outpost to which he was to have been sent had sufficient staff, and when the Chimo manager, a Scotsman, heard that I was supposed to join him, he became quite angry and said that

he did not want any damned English schoolchildren. Not until much later did I discover that a year or two previously this man had been landed with an English apprentice from a public school who had gone off the rails. At the time, this brusque refusal of my services really upset me for it had never occurred to me that I might not be wanted anywhere.

It was quite obvious that we were not wanted at the Burwell post house either. A small house, built to accommodate two people, it now had to shelter twelve of us, and quite possibly this manager would also have refused us as his 'guests' had not Ralph Parsons come ashore to straighten things out. He directed that Ian and I should sleep on the kitchen floor in sleeping bags. Our thoughts went back to the poor apprentice at Cartwright with whom we had commiserated; at least he had had a mattress to lie on.

Next morning we started on our first shore job, painting the fish house. At that time, a considerable amount of dried fish used to be exported to the Catholic countries for food on Fridays and fast days, particularly to those countries which had a peasant population who could not afford to buy fresh fish. Just outside the harbour, round the southern shores of the island, codfish abounded, the Eskimos often gathering a dinghy full of fish in quite a short time. They sold the cod to the company, who employed women to cut them open, dry them and pack them in barrels for shipment overseas. This processing took place in the shed that Ian and I were about to paint. Neither of us had ever

handled a paintbrush before, and it was perhaps unfortunate that the colour of the eaves, where we began, was bright red and not some duller colour which might have blended in better with our overalls.

In the evenings the post manager took me out jigging for cod. This simply meant fixing a double-sided hook to a long length of cord, pushing on a small piece of pork fat for bait, lowering it to the seabed, then pulling it up about a foot or so and jigging the line up and down until you hooked a fish. Sometimes we caught a large fish on each barb of the hook, and even on the poorest evening we collected twenty or thirty fish. All the best cod were thrown into the shed for servicing by the women; the rest we took up to the house or used for dog food.

Eventually most of the visitors left Burwell, until we were the last remaining guests, and actually able to sleep in beds. One day Mr Parsons told us that Ian was to stay at Burwell as the apprentice and I was to join the *Nascopie* when she arrived, to continue my journey northward in search of a home. Ian was sad about this. Burwell was not much of a place, serving more as a summer junction point between Hudson's Bay, Baffin Land and the far northern islands than as a trading post. There was one consolation. He would be among the first to see the *Nascopie* the next year and would no doubt be able to get himself moved somewhere more interesting.

The *Nascopie* arrived one afternoon in late August. The captain intended to waste no time, for there was already a touch

of autumn in the air. Once the year's supplies had been landed, I was told not to delay in getting aboard with my belongings.

Ian helped me down to the jetty with my cases. We had become firm friends through the trials and tribulations of our summer's journey and saying goodbye to him was harder than I thought it would be. I cannot imagine how he ever came to apply to the Hudson's Bay Company for a job. He was a timid, gentle sort of person who hated to see suffering either among humans or animals, and it was no surprise to hear a couple of years later that it had not worked out and Ian had gone back to his old Scottish home. I did write to him but he never replied to my letters. Perhaps he just wanted to forget the whole incident.

We steamed away from the island well before dark, heading due north toward Davis Straits and Baffin Bay. At the very top of Baffin Island we were to turn west towards Pond Inlet, at that time the most northerly of the Hudson's Bay Company posts.

Before the light faded altogether, I went to the stern of the *Nascope* to watch the ship's wake streaming behind us, just as Ian and I had done that first evening out on the St Lawrence River. There were no little townships drifting by, no comforting lights twinkling along the shore or summer lightning forking above rolling hills. Here was only steely grey, incredibly cold-looking sea surging behind us, tipped with long ribbons of hostile foam, while abeam of us the last of the Button Islands passed, black, jagged and with no redeeming feature. I wondered where those other apprentices who had gathered at Euston station that

June morning were now and mourned the loss of my friend. Then the captain altered course slightly and a chill damp wind, probably from the northern ice fields, drove me back to my cabin.

The cabin was above a propeller, and as the ship rose and fell to the motion of the sea, so the shuddering vibration swelled and faded in an uneven rhythm. As by far the most junior person on the ship – for there were no other apprentices or post staff of any kind – it was reasonable to expect that the worst cabin should be allotted to me. Somehow, though, the shuddering noise served to increase my growing conviction that nobody really wanted me in this arctic world and the probability that a home would be found for me at the very last post, only because there was nowhere else left, did nothing for my self-esteem.

Our route between Baffin Island and Greenland was one which had been followed by seamen and navigators for more than three centuries, probing restlessly northward then westward among the islands, searching endlessly for the passage which would take them more easily to the riches of India.

Some people believe that the Vikings reached the shores of Baffin Island twelve hundred years ago, but if they did, the expeditions were not recorded and nothing has been discovered to suggest that they ever lived there. It was not until the idea of a short route through to the orient began to exercise men's minds that serious exploration of this inhospitable area began.

As far back as 1497 Henry VII of England commissioned John Cabot to search for a passage, and the explorer is thought

to have sailed along the Labrador coast. Forty years or so later, Jacques Cartier attempted to succeed where Cabot had failed but found only impenetrable ice. Sir Humphrey Gilbert, who felt strongly that the journey was possible, inspired others to try by his writings, but was himself drowned while making the attempt in 1583.

Also in the sixteenth century, John Davis made a study of the strait which separates North America from Greenland and joins Baffin Bay to the Atlantic Ocean, though he did not try to push through to the west. The strait now bears his name, and possibly as a result of his findings, Martin Frobisher, a noted navigator of his day, believed that he could find the elusive passage. He became sidetracked when, turning westward too soon, he entered a deep bay in Southern Baffin Land, which took him nearly three hundred miles inland but ended in a range of steep hills. From this bay Frobisher saw some rocks that glittered in the sun. He thought it was gold, and although his find turned out to be iron pyrites, it did not discourage him from arranging two later expeditions to explore the other arms of the bay. He never did find the gold which he had thought to be there, but he did much useful work mapping the bay which was subsequently named after him.

Henry Hudson considered that the navigators of the sixteenth century had all sailed too far to the north, and to prove his theory decided to aim westward between the mainland and the southern coast of Baffin Island. At the western end of the straits, he came

out into a wide sea. His crew, superstitious and apprehensive of some unexpected disaster, did not wish to go any further, but Hudson, confident that he was already in the western ocean, insisted that they continue on his course. The men's fury when they discovered that he had led them into a wide bay which had no exit was such that they mutinied, and Hudson, together with his son and seven loyal members of his crew, was cast adrift in a small boat to perish in the icy waters of what became known as Hudson Bay.

We had had clear weather for the first two days and the ship, headed now into familiar northern waters, made good speed. The district manager, who was travelling with us and who hated to see anyone unoccupied, took me on as a temporary, very junior office boy, to sort out the files and account books of the posts which had already been visited. The other people still on board were mainly specialists in one line or another, who seemed quite keen to fill in my remaining spare moments with lectures on a variety of subjects. An anthropologist, an archaeologist, an ornithologist, two scientists, a representative of the Canadian government and two R.C.M. policemen were among those I can remember being on board. From some of them I gathered an amount of useful knowledge, but was never quite sure whether my leg was being pulled or not.

The archdeacon, who six months previously had introduced me to the Arctic, was making the rounds of his widely scattered missionaries and obviously felt under some obligation to take

me under his wing. I think he had it in mind to give me a warning as to the possible moral dangers that lay ahead of me, but after two quite lengthy sessions, could get no further than giving me a bar of chocolate and some advice as to how to avoid becoming constipated during the winter months, because of the effort needed to visit the outside lavatory on cold draughty days.

The ice fields were not far away from us. Over towards Greenland, visibility ended in a long line of grey fog, behind which, they told me, the ice blocks were grinding their way steadily southward.

On the morning of the fourth day out, we steamed through a bank of fog and came almost immediately into a large field. The massive blocks crunched against the side of the vessel, but the *Nascopie* pushed them aside. Every now and then we came up against a solid pan which had not broken up into pieces and the captain had to force the ship through by reversing a little way, then rushing back at the ice at top speed. The solid iron bows with the full power of the engines behind them usually sufficed to smash a path through but we made slow speed.

Early in the afternoon, a lookout sighted black objects in the ice ahead of us. Out came the binoculars and the telescopes. 'Walrus,' said the more experienced northerners. Two of the passengers, unable to resist the temptation of trying to kill the inoffensive creatures, went below to fetch their rifles, but were restrained by the older hands, who told them that they would be wasting their time and ammunition, for without proper harpoons

with which to secure the walrus the bodies would just sink to the bottom of the sea.

Reluctantly the would-be hunters held their fire. We came closer and saw that it was quite a large herd. A huge old bull, seemingly the leader, lifted his head to look round every now and then, obviously checking on the safety of the group. He must have seen us, but as our approach was not particularly noisy, he did not raise the alarm until the ship steamed up to the very point upon which the walrus were resting.

We had a wonderful view of the herd and those who had got their cameras out were well rewarded. The old bull who had been so vigilant during our approach took charge. As the *Nascopie* ground into the ice not so very far from them, the leader raised his head again to let out the most enormous bellow, so that they all scrambled and fought to get back into the water. The large bulls, with their great ivory tusks sticking downwards from their jaws and their fierce bewhiskered faces, were a fearsome lot. The cows with their young looked less belligerent, but together they made an awful noise, barging and pushing each other along. For a moment, they appeared to be contemplating an attack on the ship, but suddenly swept round to make off down a lane of open water.

About an hour later, as though we had not had our money's worth for the day, a polar bear, large, grizzled and yellowish against the ice, came out from behind a mound on a small iceberg to stare gravely at us as we passed by. This time our hunters

were not to be denied. Three of them rushed down to fetch weapons. By the time they had returned to the deck, the bear had moved off a short distance, wisely having his doubts as to our intentions. The fusillade that followed confirmed his doubts and the animal, now thoroughly alarmed by the noise, raised himself on to his hind legs and dived into the sea, finally disappearing among some nearby ice blocks. He had been wounded though, for we passed a streamer of his blood in a patch of open water. The archdeacon took the marksmen to task for having caused the creature unnecessary suffering.

We then had a spell of fine weather after leaving the Hudson Strait, and although the days were shortening and the breezes cooling as we came north, we had not realized that the summer had really ended until the fall burst unheralded upon us.

The archdeacon was conducting a Sunday-morning service in the *Nascopie* dining room, when the captain turned the ship westward to come out of Baffin Bay toward Pond Inlet. The vessel began to roll as we caught the wind sweeping down the channel through which so many of those early explorers had passed in their search for the passage.

Before the service was over, the storm had really blown up. The congregation swayed all over the place during the final hymn and the archdeacon called a halt to the proceedings when a group on the starboard side collapsed into a most undignified heap. I forced my way out on to the deck, but was nearly blinded by the hard sleet slapping into my face and the stinging spray driven

by the violent wind. Sheets of spray streamed across the bows to mingle with the sleet while the ship alternately plunged down into the huge waves, then reared swiftly up toward the clouds, swinging from side to side as the sea took her.

The Sunday lunch was ready to be served and the chief steward was determined not to be beaten by a storm. They put up the sides of the table to keep the dishes from falling on to the floor and they damped the tablecloths to keep things as steady as possible. The chief officer stamped in on a fairly even keel. With great difficulty, one of the stewards managed to get a small amount of soup in a bowl on to the table, but almost at once the bowl leapt into the air, turned upside down and poured the hot soup into the officer's lap.

There was really no time to even think about food as the ship pitched, rolled and corkscrewed. One moment we were clutching on to the table, the next being thrown against it, but we might have managed a little dry food had not our side of the table come apart and those of us to starboard, having lost our support, subsided into an untidy muddle on the deck, closely followed by a shower of plates, knives and cruets. As if to add insult to injury, the wall cupboard above us, which contained the reserve supply of sauces, seasoning and the likes, flew open and a shower of pickles, sauce bottles, salt cellars, sugar bowls, mustard pots and jugs crashed down upon us as we slithered about on the floor. Furniture, passengers, stewards, soup, sugar, salt, tomato sauce and even some milk scrunched and squelched over the deck,

swirling about with the motion of the ship.

Some time later, when order had been partially restored, those of us who had recovered their composure and still had any interest in food ate sandwiches in the galley, but few attempted any liquid. Before we had time to finish our meagre repast, a bulkhead door, not properly fastened, was forced open by a huge wave. The sea poured in, sweeping pots and pans off the shelves, extinguishing the oven fire and thumping one of the cooks heavily against the side of the ship. This was the final blow that the storm had to deal us, for after that the wind began to slacken, and though the heavy swell continued for a day or two, we were able to resume our normal routine.

At Pond Inlet, our northernmost call, the scene was dramatic. The tiny buildings almost disappeared into the vastness of the surrounding hills, but there was a bustle of activity as soon as we dropped anchor for there were supplies to be unloaded, not only for the company, but also for the Roman Catholic and Anglican missions, both of which had establishments here.

My assistance did not seem to be required in dealing with the cargo so the ornithologist took me ashore for a walk and told me not only about the birds but also all about the general flora and fauna. His lecture was delivered in such a booming voice, however, that my head was spinning by the time we returned to the ship.

A gentler and most informative chat was had with the anthropologist. He told me much that was to prove useful

about the Eskimos I was soon to be living among. I learned that the Innuít (the People), which is their own name for themselves, almost certainly came from central or northern Asia. The physical type, language and culture all tend to confirm this and that they migrated to North America via the Aleutian Islands, starting about 1000 BC. Reversing the usual direction of migration, they travelled steadily from west to east, moving along the northern coastline of the mainland, spreading out into the arctic islands, keeping close to the sea, until finally coming to a halt in Greenland, where the massive ice plateau of the interior blocked further movement.

The development of their culture and of their social life was greatly limited by the severity of the environment, which precluded any attempt at food production. Apart from the blueberries which grew wild on the hills during a short season and a type of edible seaweed, there was no useful vegetation. Hunting of one kind or another was therefore essential at all times, and because they only had the simplest of equipment, cooperation between the hunters was vital.

He also told me about the Eskimo religion, which was based on the belief that everything and everybody had a spirit. A rock, a fish, a polar bear or a human being were all equal in this respect, and it was the activities of these spirits which controlled events and people. They could move about at will. If a person became ill, it might be thought that his spirit had deserted him, or it might be that an ill-disposed one had taken up residence within his body

and would have to be conjured out.

This belief provided a continuity of life, softening the reality of death with which they were all too familiar. It was known that although the body became lifeless after death, the essential person remained close at hand, even if invisible. So firm was this conviction that the children, being guarded by the spirit of a dead relative, were allowed to wander into dangerous situations without causing any great anxiety, because their parents felt secure in the knowledge that the spirit would keep them safe.

The shamans, or *angedkok* as they were called, supplied a link with the supernatural world by having the ability to transfer themselves, on suitable occasions, into the world of the spirits and by gaining control of one or more of them. Dependent upon the ability of their subject spirits, they would thus hope to have some control over the affairs of everyday life.

The *angedkok* did not apparently depend on the miraculous. Generally, it was a shrewd, calculating type of man or woman who was most likely to become a shaman. In a real crisis, matters would have reached a fairly desperate state, from which they could not get much worse, before the *angedkok* got to work. So, not infrequently, their incantations were followed by an improvement in the weather, or travelling conditions, or whatever it was that was bedevilling the camp.

As we set off once more, the manager of Pond Inlet, who was due to go out for a holiday, joined me in my cabin, considerably brightening the rest of the journey. When he told me that he had

his entire worldly possessions with him, I expected to find the cabin filled with his luggage, instead of which it seemed that his belongings barely filled one small cardboard case, which lay at the bottom of his trunk.

My companion began at once to settle my future.

‘You’ll be going ashore at Pangnirtung,’ he said. ‘Geordie Gall will take care of you. He’s very strict though you know. Prayers every morning at eight, the youngest apprentice reads the lesson.’

I laughed at this and said that I was sure that he was pulling my leg. He became indignant.

‘Indeed I am not,’ he said. ‘You ask any of the other managers, they’ll all tell you the same thing. Geordie is a fine God-fearing man.’

‘Well, he must be very different from the other managers up here,’ I said.

‘And just what do you mean by that?’ asked Jimmy threateningly.

‘Oh, nothing,’ I replied.

‘You’ll have to be careful about swearing. Geordie doesn’t like it and you’ll be fined for using bad language.’

I really did not know whether to believe him or not, for he was very convincing, and the next day even produced two witnesses to corroborate his story.

The district manager confirmed his prediction that I would be going ashore at Pangnirtung the next morning. There was nothing very remarkable about this, however, as that post was the last

port of call, and short of taking me back to Montreal there was nowhere else for me to go.

Cumberland Gulf, on the east coast of Baffin Island, was visited more than once by explorers hoping to find a sea passage through as far south as possible. They soon had their hopes dashed, but gathered an amount of information about the area. They were later followed by Scottish and American whalers, who for a long period formed the only link the Eskimos had with the outside world. A trading post was not established in the area until the 1920s. The site selected was in a fiord almost at the head of the sound which was reasonably centrally placed for all the camps in the vicinity.

We entered the gulf one morning at half speed, for there was a very dense fog and the captain's wisdom in deciding to travel slowly was soon confirmed. Half-way through the morning, the fog began to lift, drifting away from above the *Nascopie* to reveal a cloudy uncertain sky, a small patch at first, then gradually clearing so that what looked like a darker cloud appeared almost directly ahead of us. Not happy about this odd-looking cloud, the captain altered course about ninety degrees, which was just as well for soon afterwards the fog dissolved altogether and the darker cloud turned out to be a rather solid headland.

Later on the sun came out and seemed to be spotlighting a high and distinctive hill, shaped like a huge man's cap, which they told me marked the entrance to the fiord that was to be my new home. We passed this landmark early in the afternoon and came

up the inlet to a point opposite a group of buildings, where we dropped anchor. A quarter of an hour must have elapsed before a boat put out from the shore and a queer party came aboard headed by a man wearing a brightly coloured shirt and a large sombrero hat. His movements were made with such extreme care and his expression was so pleasantly vacuous that it was obvious, even to me, that he was drunk. I thought to myself, so much for the morning prayers and all the rest, for this indeed was Geordie Gall, my new boss.

My grandmother, herself a devotee of the *chaise-longue*, frequently expressed her firm belief that it was better to wear out than to rust away. Comfortably enveloped in rugs and shawls and bounded by hot-water bottles, she rested her own ageing joints while exhorting others to ceaseless activity. At moments during my first three days at Pangnirtung, I had cause to remember this conviction of hers. Once the cargo started to come ashore, the goods came off in an endless chain. While the tide was high enough to unload along the water's edge (there was no jetty), one boatload after another came bustling in from the ship. When the tide had dropped too far back over the rocks and mud for the boats to be able to come in from the shore, the boxes had to be carted up the bank to be piled near the shore. There was a short spell during each tide, at slack water, when it was possible to get some rest, but I was so exhausted that it never seemed more than a few minutes before someone was waking me up again.

The supplies lay scattered about over the flat at the top of

the bank, where it was wise to tread carefully. There were cases of all shapes and sizes, bales, cartons, lumber for two small houses to be built for the company's Eskimo employees. Supplies labelled for the Oxford University Arctic Exploration Society. Barrels of oil and gasoline, kegs of molasses. Lengths of steel for sledge runners. A bath loomed up in front of me and I very nearly fell in it. Sacks of coal and flour. Crates of cheese, drums of potatoes, kegs of oatmeal, bags of sugar. Innuït men and women struggled up the bank with vast loads, children with smaller burdens. White men bustled backwards and forwards importantly, missionaries appeared and disappeared, and sometimes even policemen. Always of course the dogs, snuffling round the cases and using them as lampposts.

Suddenly, it was finished, just as it had seemed unending. One of the mates came up the bank shouting that as he had brought the last load, he would accept a drink if anyone were to offer him one, and he went into the house where the last-minute conferences were in progress. The captain decided, however, to get away at once. Although darkness had fallen, the tide was with him, so he blew three blasts on his siren to summon all those who wished to sail. Everybody except Geordie, who had lost interest in the whole thing and was now fast asleep, rushed down to the boats.

We were not allowed to linger on the *Nascopie*. I said goodbye to my friends, including my cabin mate, who was beaming all over his face at having pulled my leg. The ship's engines were turning over and as soon as all the post staff were back in the

boat up went the gangway. The little ship swung round toward the gulf and swished past us in a swirl of foam as we aimed for the shore. A group on the deck of the *Nascopie* broke into a spirited rendering of 'Will ye no come back again?' A stern, authoritarian voice from the bridge shouted, 'Not at this time of night.' Last-minute witticisms were bawled backwards and forwards across the water until the captain turned about so that his vessel was stern on to us, blew another blast on his siren and with gathering speed vanished into the darkness.

Alan Scott, the other apprentice at Pangnirtung, had arrived the previous year and had obviously not expected that there would be an addition to the staff. I explained that the district manager had had no option but to leave me here before the ship headed south, but it was too late to go into all the details, so we made the boat secure, climbed the bank to the house and went thankfully to bed.

It was broad daylight when I awoke next morning, but the house was quiet, so I took the opportunity to have a look at my room. It was small and square with a plasterboard ceiling held in place with rough wooden slats. The boards had not been painted but the walls had been done, though some time ago by the look of them, for they were now a dingy sort of white. There was one window looking out over the fiord mouth. Apart from the bed, there was one piece of furniture in the room, some kind of multi-purpose unit. The top did duty as a stand for a washbowl, underneath were two drawers to house my clothes and there was

a shelf for anything else at the bottom. The unit appeared to have been home-made, but did not seem to have been constructed to any plan so much as from the random inspiration of the maker, and it was tilted slightly forward, as though the front legs were slightly shorter than the rear ones. There was no other furniture, no chair or wardrobe, and nothing on the walls. The room had a musty, damp odour rather like that of an unused, unheated spare room we had had at home. The whole effect was dreary in the extreme and I could see that it was going to be necessary to do some brightening up before the start of the long winter.

A patch of colour in the doorway suddenly caught my eye. It was Geordie Gall's bright striped shirt. He had drifted up from somewhere and was leaning against the jamb, clutching a bottle in his hand. He gazed at me in silence for a little while with a puzzled expression, as if wondering what to say to me now that he was here. It occurred to me that his shirt, although quite cheerful, did not really suit him. Embarrassed by the silence, I said, 'Good morning.'

Geordie levered himself away from his support and waved his free arm in a broad gesture round the room.

'Not the Grand Hotel, is it?' he said, slurring his words. 'Roof leaks like hell. Doesn't rain in the winter though. Spring's the time when the snow melts on top. You'll have to get some oars then.'

He put the bottle to his lips and took a long swig, gazing sadly up at the offending ceiling as he did so. Belatedly he began

to chuckle, perhaps at the thought of me sculling round the bedroom. Then a fly buzzed in near his face and he tried to knock it away with his hand but the effort caused him to lose balance. As he staggered backwards, he jerked the bottle in his other hand, so that some of the liquor slopped on to the floor. He forgot about me, looking angrily down at the pool on the linoleum.

‘Damn flies, what the hell are they buzzing about here for?’ he muttered to himself as he lurched out of the room.

I did not quite know what to make of the incident at the time, but afterwards realized that Geordie had really just come to introduce himself and welcome me to Pangnirtung. He was a Scotsman who had drifted over to Newfoundland and not having any real trade had moved from one job to another. Then, when the Hudson’s Bay Company opened up the posts in the northern islands, he joined the company and had been managing posts on Baffin Island ever since. He was normally a good-natured man with a liking for order in the post routine and good organizing ability. The Eskimos respected him, but his periodic bouts on the bottle meant that he was never likely to advance further in the Hudson’s Bay Company’s employment.

Geordie had no hair on the top of his head and the Eskimos, who liked to be able to call everybody by a name which distinguished them personally, christened him ‘Shiny Top’.

Shortly after my first visitor had gone, Alan Scott came in to say it was time to get up. He too was a Scotsman, coming from up Peterhead way, where he had been working on farms. He was

a few years older than me and being a practical young man had picked up the ropes quickly. This was very fortunate for me as he went to considerable trouble to pass on the lessons he had learned during his first year as a northerner. Alan must have had great patience because I did not at that time readily assimilate knowledge of a practical nature, but he succeeded in teaching me the basic essentials of Arctic life and this stood me in good stead for all my years in the Arctic.

On my way to fetch water from the kitchen I studied the house. It was more or less a square, bungalow type of building with the two apprentices' bedrooms at the far corner being separated by the office between them. From the office, a passageway led down the centre of the house, on one side of which was the manager's bedroom, while on the other was an enclosed space which served as a combined store and bathroom, though to take a bath was a most complicated procedure. The guardroom was situated across the house at the end of the passageway. This name for the sitting room came from the frontier days, when the personnel of the post had to be ready to defend themselves, keeping their weapons at hand in case of attack. Fortunately there was no danger of attack at Pangnirtung. The ceiling and the walls of the guardroom were painted white with green slats, so the room was not quite so dull as the bedrooms. In one corner there was a large pot-bellied heating stove and from the other wall a door led into the kitchen.

An Eskimo girl by the name of Ooloo had a room at the end of the kitchen. She was supposed to be a sort of housekeeper and

did the chores but only had the slightest knowledge of cooking. In fact she was what would nowadays be accepted as Geordie's common-law wife. They had a baby son but were a most unlikely pair. They could not speak each other's language beyond a word or two and perhaps this was just as well, for I found later when she got cross Ooloo could deliver a stream of abuse and insults which would have left Geordie in no doubt as to his shortcomings.

My upbringing, both at home and at school, had run along very strict lines of morality, so that anything that deviated from the straight and narrow was not to be contemplated and certainly not to be mentioned. In my grandmother's house the assumption was that only the lower orders indulged in the sins of drunkenness and immorality, no matter what evidence there was to the contrary. Obviously I now had to emerge rapidly from the Victorian world which had hitherto enclosed me.

In time I was to realize that in fact Geordie and Ooloo's relationship was quite proper among the Innuits, the only anomaly being that he was a foreigner. Marriages were not arranged between families, the young being free to choose as they wished. A girl might pair with several men before marriage, without any obligation on either side; indeed, she might cohabit with several young men at the same time. If the girl had a child, it was likely, but by no means certain, that the association would become permanent.

Hunters might have two wives, and it was quite common for a man to permit unrelated persons to have relations with his wife,

usually, but not invariably, on a reciprocal basis. This was partly a practical arrangement, as the hunters frequently passed through different camps on their hunting expeditions, but it might also be the basis of a very useful friendship.

The Eskimos tended to become interdependent by utilizing each other's skills. If a man was a good carver, he carved; others might have good organizing ability and be called upon to organize expeditions; some would be especially able at making hunting weapons or kayaks, while all who had any flair for hunting went after seals or deer. Each man had to be able in some direction and when there was overduplication it would be normal for a man to leave his group, deserting his wife and children to find another home where he would be more useful.

The effects of this attitude to coupling and marriage were that relationship could be claimed on a fairly wide basis. Apart from the immediate family, if a husband or wife had children not belonging to their present partner, such children would form a link between all the people on both sides of the family. This meant a greatly increased number of potential friends and of camps at which a hunter would have what might be termed residential qualifications, since the camps were organized on a strictly family basis. Family ties were flexible so that a hunter could move from one group to another. Provided that the new group was within the wide family circle, he would at once be accepted as a proper member of the community.

It was sometimes thought that the Eskimos practised some

sort of communism, but this was not so, for the foundation of their society was the family grouping in the broadest sense, which resulted in collective responsibility and cooperation with the relatives with whom one was resident at the moment. Thus the whole camp shared the successes and failures, the good times and the bad.

There was a clear division of labour within each home. The men were the hunters and it was they who made the tools and the household goods and built the homes. The women cooked, dressed the skins, tended the oil lamps used for heating and cooking and made all the clothes, using their own tools. Sometimes exceptional women would stray into the men's world, but the men, even though they might be totally incompetent as hunters, did not take on the women's tasks.

The bleakness of my room, as well as the very changed conditions to which I had to adjust myself, had depressed me considerably, but my spirits started to revive as soon as I stepped outside. The house door faced up to the fiord, where the high black cliffs swept round in an arc, rising steadily to a point at which the inlet turned sharply northward. On the far shore, the hills fell slowly away again to a pleasant green valley, just opposite the house. From above this eastern valley, the sunshine spread across the water, picking out the kyaks and boats of the few Inuit who were taking advantage of the calm morning to go seal hunting. The panorama of the high and moody hills, the green valley, the sunshine sparkling on the sea and the

kyaks flashing to and fro across the water, lifted my depression completely. Here was a timeless scene from long ago which had somehow managed to remain unchanged in a changing world.

The Pangnirtung fiord settlement of 1930 was one of the largest on Baffin Island. The Hudson's Bay Company post, centrally situated among the buildings, consisted of a line of four houses spaced along the coastal flat just before the land dropped about thirty feet or so to the edge of the reef. There were two storehouses, a main dwelling and a secondary dwelling which had been used as an interpreter's home. The woodwork was, as was usual for the Hudson's Bay Company, painted white with green facings and a red roof. The buildings stood about ten yards apart but were linked together by two straight lines of whitewashed rocks that created the illusion of a purpose-made path. The inevitable flagpole was situated in a neat little square in front of our home and the Hudson's Bay Company flag was flown on any suitable occasion.

About fifty yards beyond us, towards the mouth of the fiord, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had established their post of two buildings, a dwelling and a kind of storehouse. In front of their house was a little weather station, from the middle of which rose their flagpole, a much more impressive affair than ours, fittingly perhaps, because from it flew the Canadian flag, proclaiming ownership of this large arctic island.

Behind the Hudson's Bay Company post, at the back of the flat, was the archdeacon's mission house, which served both as a

home and a church, and the sealskin tents of the Eskimos were spread over the intervening space. Some distance away, we had our 'blubber' sheds which housed the equipment for rendering oil and curing hides. In that year there were three Hudson's Bay Company people, three R.C.M.P.s and one missionary, which represented one of the main concentrations of Baffin Island population.

Ooloo had been busy dishing out tea to the men and women gathered in front of the store waiting to start the morning's work of organizing the year's supplies. The people were dressed in a variety of garbs. Some wore sealskin anoraks, some woollen ones and others ordinary bush shirts. The women, who did not wish to miss the chance of earning a dollar or two, were there, carrying their babies on their backs.

Gradually we sorted the large pile of boxes into the proper places in the store. It was general practice at that time to keep two years' supply of all the more vital commodities on hand, to allow for the possibility of the *Nascopie* not being able to get through the ice. There were large quantities of tea, flour and similar items, each package being marked with the year of delivery indicated by an outfit number.

The first northern trading voyage undertaken by the 'Gentlemen Venturers trading into Hudson's Bay' was in 1668 and the original instructions to one Zachariah Gillam, master of the ketch *Nonsuch* which had been selected for the voyage, are still preserved. The orders were that the master should sail

his vessel to such places as were chosen by the traders who had come with him. He was to find safe anchorage and wait there while the trading took place. As soon as a good quantity of furs, skins and the like had been gathered together, the *Nonsuch* was to return home. Two years later, when the first trading post was established, outfit number one was sent north to be put ashore in the bay and the annual voyages had been numbered from that year onwards (1670), so that every item arriving in my first year had the number 260 painted or stencilled on it.

By the end of the day, we had stacked most of the new delivery away in the stores in the appropriate spots, the drums of gasoline had been moved to line up with the old stock, the coal piled behind the post building, the ammunition packed into its own special section and a home found for all that remained. Next morning we were able to turn our attention to the timber, which lay in higgledy-piggledy confusion beside the main store and was destined to provide two shacks for the company's two Inuit employees.

Meanwhile Ooloo had got the stove going in the guardroom and had stretched her culinary abilities to the extent of heating up a delicacy known as 'boiled dinner', which came out of a tin. The guardroom was simply furnished. The square table from which we ate our meal served for all other purposes. There were no easy chairs but several basic wooden ones. A rickety bookcase with a cupboard underneath occupied a corner by the stove. A rather splendid Victrola phonograph filled the opposite

corner to the bookcase. It had been retrieved from one of the shipwrecks, so they told me, which perhaps accounted for the haphazard selection of records, six or seven of them, varying from Mendelssohn's incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to a bloodthirsty ballad about a certain Turk named 'Abdul Abulbul Amir'.

An elaborate but not very effective radio set stood on the window ledge behind the Victrola. It seldom gave us any continuous session of entertainment without going off into hysterical oscillation. Alan was the only person who had enough patience to attempt to control the thing.

My most urgent need, those first days, was to get fitted out with a pair of sealskin boots. Ordinary shoes were not fitted to the rocky terrain, apart from being very uncomfortable. One of the Eskimos working for the company, Kilabuk by name, said that his wife would make me a pair. She duly appeared, measured my feet with a piece of string in the most casual manner possible and went home, returning the next morning with a pair of sealskin boots which fitted me perfectly. The upper parts, which came to the knee, were of ordinary skin with a few black patches sewn in to make a pattern, while the soles were cut from a larger, tougher skin from a big seal known as an *ujuk*. The boots were secured with drawstrings at the top which fastened below the knee. I paid her one dollar fifty cents, which included the cost of the materials.

Next day, Agiak, for that was her name, sent a message by

her husband (who could speak some English) to say that she was going to wash my clothes and would make an arrangement with Ooloo to use the facilities of our kitchen one day a week. I was quite pleased about this for it had not been easy to keep my small stock of clothes clean, and although I had seized every opportunity, my inexpert efforts at laundering had resulted in my garments looking decidedly dingy. What did not please me very much was my discovery, a few weeks later, that the Eskimos had also decided that I was a child and had named me simply 'The Boy'.

By the next afternoon, the ship-time sorting had been concluded and the workers lined up in the store to be paid off. As each one came up to the counter, Alan looked in the book in which the times had been recorded, to find the amount due then spread out the coins to represent the pay. These coins were imitation money, acting as dollars, half dollars and quarters, so that people could see exactly how much money they had to spend. The Eskimo would normally debate with his wife as to what they should buy, generally deciding upon food, tobacco, ammunition and perhaps something small for the children. If the women had any spare money of their own it usually went on print for a dress or some other item of clothing.

The Inuit could not earn very much during the summer season. Trapping did not start until the end of October, but before that time it was necessary to lay in good supplies of dog food, so that the hunters could devote as much time as possible

to their traps during the six-month open season for foxes. This meant that they had to be allowed quite large amounts of credit, so they could obtain supplies of petrol, cartridges and other necessities for the summer seal and walrus hunting. Each hunter was assessed according to his past record and allowed to run up a debt of as many foxes as it seemed likely he would be able to catch fairly easily during the winter.

That afternoon, Alan took me down to the blubber house, scene of much of the activity after a whale drive. The place was as unromantic in appearance as in name. Inside one shed was a rendering machine into which the cut-up blubber was stuffed to be processed into oil which was then pumped from the machine to tanks outside. In another shed, the hides were stored at one end and meat which could be used to feed the dogs at the other. The hides had been shipped off on the *Nascope*, but a pile of decomposing meat remained. This was my first encounter with high meat *en masse* and the smell was too much for me. I had to grasp my nose and retire in haste. I surmised that, as with Geordie's and Ooloo's relationship, this was another aspect of my new life that I would adjust to in time.

III

HOUSEKEEPING ON BAFFIN ISLAND had its complications. We had a plentiful supply of canned goods in the storeroom, but fresh food supplies for the winter then had to be thought about weeks in advance. Hunting was seasonal and whenever possible we took advantage of each season to lay in a

stock for the future.

The fall was an especially good time to concentrate on winter food requirements. The plump young ducks gathered on the lakes before their southward flight. The salmon trout, fresh and firm after their summer in the sea, could still be taken on their way back to their home lake, as well as the seals, always with us, though in varying numbers. The deer often came down to feed near the coast before the onset of winter. Apart from this normal plenitude of game, there was another useful advantage at this time of year, which was that with the temperature well down, meat, birds and fish could be stored in good condition right through the winter until the following May.

Geordie had remained absent in spirit from us for a few days after the ship had gone, but Alan set about his rehabilitation with determination and succeeded in bringing him back to our world by the start of the following week, when a party of hunters came in from one of the southerly camps. They reported that they had seen deer feeding near the shoreline of one of the inlets they had passed on their way to the post. Geordie decided that it would be a good opportunity to lay in meat supplies and perhaps a few fish for the winter stock.

Kilabuk and Beevee, the two post servants, were instructed to prepare for the hunt, and then it was suggested at the last moment that I go with them as a reward for all the hard work since ship-time. The suggestion was meant kindly, and no doubt both Geordie and Alan thought I would jump at the chance of a

hunting trip, but the idea did not really appeal to me.

My recent journeyings had temporarily satisfied the explorer in me, while I felt that I had put up with enough discomfort for one year, particularly after my long spell on the draughty kitchen floor at Port Burwell. Not that my present quarters could be described as luxurious, but now that my unpacking was completed, so that my own things were scattered about the room and one or two pictures were up on the wall, it had an air of home about it. However, it seemed churlish to refuse what was obviously intended as a sort of holiday, so I took the easy way out, even managing to work up a rather spurious air of excitement about the coming trip. My box was packed with the cooking utensils, such as Primus stove, frying pan, pots and kettles under the mistaken impression that I was acquainted with the use of these things. It looked as though I was going to learn the hard way as usual.

We set off one beautifully calm morning. The hills were mirrored in the waters of the fiord and the seals coming up for air sent the ripples spreading over the sea in ever widening circles. Just down below the post buildings, an inquisitive seal popped up and dallied too long, giving Beevee time to shoot and manoeuvre the boat alongside. Kilabuk jabbed a harpoon into the body, then hauled it aboard with the attached line. Despite this short distraction, we made fairly good progress and stopped to go ashore in a pleasant cove to see if there were any signs of deer. We saw nothing of interest, so decided to boil the kettle.

Kilabuk got the Primus out and showed me in great detail how it worked. Once seen, of course, the operation is simple, but the Eskimo continued the demonstration for an excessively long time, so that a resolution formed in my mind that, come what may, I would get the thing going for the next meal and show them that I was not the complete fool they seemed to think me.

Darkness had fallen by the time we reached the cove where the deer had been reported. We had brought a fairly large tent with us, which the Eskimos now erected on a suitably soft patch of ground. We soon carried up our equipment from the boat, spread our deerskins around at the back of the shelter and formed a little section near the entrance. One of the drawbacks of northern camping is that the cooking space has to be included inside the tent, since conditions outside are seldom satisfactory, there being of course no wood with which to make camp fires.

Before anyone had a chance to forestall me, I lit the Primus, fortunately without mishap. The men cut some meat from a seal carcass and we boiled up a stew in the pot. We ate the meal sedately from plates, not the usual custom, and washed it down with a cup of seal 'soup'. My stomach had protested at the very thought but in fact it was very palatable.

Kilabuk, who had lived most of his life at the whalers' camps where his father had been employed, could speak quite good English, so after our meal we relaxed on the deerskins in reasonable comfort for a chat until the oil lamp which Beevee had got going began to flicker and splutter as the wick burnt low.

The men hoped to make a good start next morning so we spread out our sleeping bags to settle for an early night.

I was soon to learn that it is wise, when sleeping among the Eskimos, to get some sleep as quickly as possible, for they are given to extremely loud snoring. As I lay reviewing my first day of camping out in the Arctic, a noise like a slow motion electric saw broke out on the far side of the platform, where Beevee lay, then Kilabuk joined in. I lay dazed by the cacophony of sound and in the end fell asleep only through sheer exhaustion, making up for my disturbed rest by being the last to wake the next morning.

The men had already prepared the breakfast and announced their intention of setting off at once in search of the deer. I decided not to go with them, thinking that they would probably climb the hills at a cracking pace well beyond my capabilities, but after they had gone I planned a little expedition of my own, over the coastal flat towards the banks of a small river and then up towards the hills.

The climb was gradual and just around the first curve in the watercourse a long narrow lake appeared quite suddenly before me. The surface was swarming with birds, most of them, thanks to the lecture my booming friend of the *Nascopie* had given me at Pond Inlet, easy enough to identify. There were old squaw ducks hurrying busily through the water without ever drifting far from the main group, diving every so often with a flurry of feet, then reappearing with seeming nonchalance a few seconds

later. Their call, a rather melancholy ‘A-ha-ha-lik, A-ha-ha-lik’ is a distinctive part of the summer days in the quiet of the arctic islands. Close to a group of rocks in the middle of the lake, a party of eider duck were taking their ease, accompanied by a batch of pugnacious arctic terns. The terns often nest beside the milder, more long-suffering eiders, thus protecting their eggs from the predatory gull, for woe betide any gull attempting to steal eggs while the battling terns are about.

In the old days, when the Eskimos depended entirely upon their own skill and ingenuity for success in hunting, they used to hunt the ducks by ‘speed of boat’. During the summer moult, some of the birds had trouble raising themselves from the water to begin a flight. The people took advantage of this fact to pursue them in their large skin boats known as *umiaks* (women’s boats, because the women rowed them, leaving the men free to concentrate on the hunting), making the most unearthly din and practically paralysing with fear those birds that had not recovered from the moult, thereby reducing each victim to such a state that all the hunter had to do was snatch the duck out of the water.

Beyond the lake I continued my walk up the slope. The hills rose quite quickly on both sides of the valley, and ahead, in the far distance, a range of snow-covered peaks dominated the scene. Just below me, the river, trapped in a narrow gorge of rock, funnelled into a gushing fall over a short steep cliff drop, the fine white spray drifting far back enough to fleck my face every now and then.

The sun, already dipping down into the west, stretched long rays towards the snow peaks, softening the hilltops with a golden glow as though to form a link between the harsh black cliffs below and the gentle, faded blue of the sky above. The birds, calling from the lake behind me, still sounded faintly above the rush of water down the tumbling waterfall and these sounds served only to emphasize the profound silence of the gulley.

I sat on a convenient rock to eat my biscuits and survey the impressive scene. There was nothing in sight in any direction to suggest the presence of man in this valley. Quite possibly I was the first person ever to climb this slope, for it led nowhere and the deer were known to frequent the other arm of the inlet. My wandering thoughts were suddenly concentrated by a sharp cough coming from close by. To my astonishment a fox had somehow penetrated my solitude and was seated on a boulder at no great distance, calmly observing my every move.

The animal, clearly distinguishable by its ears, looked anything but white in its late summer coat, which was partly brown, partly grey, with only odd patches of dirty white. Perhaps observing my sudden interest, the fox rose to its feet and made off. Very foolishly, I decided to give chase in the hope that it would lead me to its lair.

Once started, the mad pursuit led me higher and higher up the hill, over increasingly difficult terrain. The fox did not appear to be alarmed at being chased, a state of mind which proved well justified before very long. The animal crossed a small cliff face

and sat down on the far side to favour me with a contemptuous stare, and my growing conviction that it would be best for me to give up the pursuit and go home faded abruptly.

I rushed out on to the cliff face and was half-way across before realizing the danger of my situation. The sudden realization checked my progress so that, becoming hesitant, I slipped off the narrow ledge which gave me my foothold and slithered out on to the face of the cliff which ended sharply a short distance beyond my feet. There was no further firm ground until the mass of fallen boulders down on the plain, about four hundred feet below. A slim root growing out of a small crack in the rock face held my right foot as I slipped slowly down, enabling me to press my left foot hard enough into the face to stop my slide and come to a halt in a position of extreme discomfort, suspended virtually in mid air, directly above what would surely prove to be the rockiest, bleakest burial place imaginable.

For a moment or two, my thoughts were solely concerned with the estimation of the distance from my position on the cliff to the nearest boulder beneath me and the force with which the rock and I would be likely to meet. When my initial panic subsided, I managed to give out a hoarse cry, but the effort nearly dislodged me completely, so it was several minutes before I dared make the effort again.

After what seemed an eternity, an answer came from somewhere over to my right so I closed my eyes and kept as still as possible, until at last Kilabuk came up from the far side. He

took off his anorak, separated it from the waterproof cover, then tied the two together and, bracing himself in a secure position, lowered the 'line' towards me.

Very carefully, holding on firmly to the anorak, I climbed back up the rock face. With my first movement, the root supporting my right foot broke off and, having served its purpose, fell away down to the bottom.

Kilabuk told me that they had only just returned from the hills themselves and that Beevee had gone on down to boil the kettle, which was welcome news in my shaken state.

After a short rest and a meal, I recovered sufficiently to accompany Kilabuk on a seal hunt for what remained of the afternoon. Beevee had brought his kayak on tow behind the boat and set off before us to try his luck.

Versions of the Eskimo kayak are now found in many parts of the world. Originally, the craft consisted of a light whalebone framework, covered entirely with dried, scraped sealskins sewn together, with only the narrow aperture where the hunter is to seat himself left uncovered. The kayak, pointed at both ends, is extremely manoeuvrable and the art of operating it lies mainly in maintaining the balance, for a sudden movement in any direction can overturn the craft. To overcome this loss of balance, the Eskimos developed the knack of swinging themselves right through the water and back upright again, hence the expression 'Eskimo rolle'. Wearing sealskins and moving quickly, they could do this without getting seriously wet.

When Beevee had gone, we puttered off in the motor boat. Kilabuk stopped the engine a little way out, so that I could shoot my first seal, then jabbed accurately with his harpoon to haul the carcass into the boat. All this went a long way to restore my self-respect, badly jolted by the morning incident. Between them the hunters then secured another four seals, so we had a good haul and returned home just as darkness was falling in time for me to boil up a tasty stew from my very first hunting success.

Kilabuk took a great interest in all the details of my morning adventure. As we had settled ourselves among the deerskins and the light from Beevee's oil lamp flickered up and down the tent wall, he told me that the people had a story about this kind of a fox.

‘There was an Eskimo man, who lived not far away but a long time ago,’ he said. ‘He was a bad man, and the people at his camp tried to talk to him and tell him how bad he was, but he would take no notice. He stole from his friends. He told lies, even to his own family and made much trouble. They could not cure him, so at last, the other hunters became very angry indeed and they went off together to see the *angedkok*, the man who looked after the people like the missionary does now.

‘“Unless you can do something to make this man better,” they said, “we shall have to send for the *angedkok* from another camp to help us.”

‘Now their own *angedkok* did not like this, as it would not have been good for him to have it said that his powers were less than

those of another. He sat for days in his home thinking how he could cure the wrongdoer.

‘At last he thought of a plan. Among his spirits – for all the *angedkoks* had certain spirits who would obey them – was that of a dead hunter who dwelt in the body of a fox, and the *angedkok* went up to the great black rock behind the camp to summon the fox to him. The friendly fox agreed to persuade a polar bear to lure the hunter to his death while he was out hunting, so that when he was dead his evil spirit could enter the body of one of the fox’s own recently born cubs, where he could do little harm and where he would remain until someone came to take his place. Thus, a few days later, the man was drowned while going after a bear in his kayak and the people were troubled no more with his evil-doing, though they did have more trouble than usual that winter from a marauding fox, who had somehow learned to penetrate even the most secure meat cache to steal food.’

At that time, I knew little about the *angedkoks*, who were credited with remarkable powers and were much respected by the people, so it was not until much later that I realized that my Eskimo friend was trying to tell me that it was an evil spirit that had caused me to risk my life and not just my own stupidity.

We turned in early, but my determination to be sound asleep before the night cacophony struck up came to nothing, for despite all the exercise, fresh air and excitement, I did not drop off before the tent was vibrating with the inevitable noise. Long afterwards, it seemed somewhere in the middle of the night, I came awake

again when the rain began. The men were silent, but the heavy drops drummed steadily on the tent canvas. Perhaps because I had not done so in the morning, when death might well have been imminent, I began a mental review of my life. Somehow all the more pleasant episodes drifted through my mind. Family Christmases as children. Long summer days in the hills of home. Last days of term. The security of my grandmother's sitting room, with the long heavy curtains, the muttering fire and the clock on the wall which had been ticking and chiming since the days of her own grandfather. These thoughts, combined with the soothing background tapping of the rain, lulled me off to sleep once more.

As their previous day's deer hunt had been unsuccessful, the Eskimos decided to try once more the next morning. They had seen fresh tracks and felt certain that the herd would not be far away. I went with them this time. It did not seem likely that the hunt would be any more arduous than my efforts of the previous day, though certainly less dangerous.

The rain had ceased by the dawn and the day was fresh and pleasant. Beevee led the way. I came next and Kilabuk brought up the rear. They were evidently taking no chances on my falling over any more cliffs.

The sun came out as we set off in fine style to climb the long slope of the river gully. At the far end of the coastal flat, the land rose quite sharply and the river divided into two courses, one of which was considerably steeper than the other. The men

chose the easier route, perhaps doubting my ability to negotiate the more difficult ascent. The Eskimos had of course undertaken a summer deer hunt practically every year of their active lives. Apart from the meat, which could either be dried or cached for the winter months, there were useful by-products. Nearly everybody in the Arctic used the skins for winter clothing. It was common to wear deerskin with the fur inside next to the skin and the short-haired parts of the skin were most useful for this purpose. For an outer covering, the longer-haired parts were used with the fur outward. Short trousers of deerskin reached to the top of the boots and were tied round the waist. Frequently, the winter boots had the uppers made out of deerskin, with a light and dark pattern worked down the front, as with the sealskin boots.

The thread used for sewing these clothes and boots came from the deer sinew, with the aid of which the women could make the garments mindproof and weatherproof. The sewing was quite intricate, particularly when the skins had been cut up into sections of varying shades and made up into patterns of infinite and sometimes quite original variety. Some men wore trousers of bearskin, but these were considerably heavier and the polar bear was often less easy to locate than the caribou.

When the people went off on one of their summer hunts, the whole camp went with them, women, children and often the dogs as well. Usually, the dogs were fitted with small packs so that they could help to carry the load when the meat had to be brought

home. The speed of the party would naturally not be very great, but as soon as they arrived at an area where there was a chance of good hunting, camp would be made, so that the women and children could establish themselves while the hunters got to work.

We had not walked very far before we came to a waterfall, though it was smaller than the one I had seen the previous day. Beevee got to the top of the fall simply by heaving himself from one rock to the next, Kilabuk going after him. This method looked highly perilous, as it would obviously be an easy matter for me to slip off the rock into the water and bounce down to the bottom. However, the hunters were used to dealing with the women and children of their parties, and so had come prepared.

Kilabuk produced a length of line from somewhere about his person and lowered one end down to me, after which he and Beevee took the strain, thus enabling me to pull myself up from rock to rock and reach the top without harm.

A short distance above the waterfall, the gulley veered away quite sharply to the east. Just as he was about to disappear from view, Beevee stopped quite abruptly and motioned us back. Then he beckoned to Kilabuk and the two men cautiously climbed the bank, presumably to position themselves behind what it was that Beevee had seen.

I stationed myself behind a nearby rock and waited. Suddenly, pandemonium broke out. A fusillade of rifle fire was followed by the pounding hooves of an approaching herd of deer, which swept round into the main gulley. Their sudden appearance took

me by surprise, so that I only had time for one shot before they swerved away and charged up the opposite bank. I tried not to appear surprised that my single shot had felled a prime stag, but privately gave thanks to the school corps drill sergeant, who the previous year had given us a course of instruction in the art of sharpshooting.

Between us we had secured five deer, which would give us a reasonable load of meat and skins to take home. The two men started the skinning operations immediately and soon had the first animal ready to be cut up. The hunters worked with a smooth expertise, stopping every now and then to pop little squares of rump fat into their mouths. They chewed the fat with relish and when Beevee noticed me watching him, he handed me a piece which I accepted doubtfully, but then had to admit that it had a most palatable, nutty flavour. This is a much-prized source of fat during the winter months, often taken on the trail to be chewed during the long hours of dog-team travelling.

The Eskimos spent the afternoon in journeying up and down the hill fetching meat and skins. Before long, our camp began to look like a slaughterhouse, with skins, meat, seal carcasses and blubber scattered about beside the tent.

It seemed to me that we had been successful enough without any further hunting, but the Eskimos, their stalking instincts now thoroughly aroused, decided to make another sortie the following morning. They set off straight after breakfast, soon disappearing along the river course in the same direction we had taken the

previous day.

I didn't go with them, but pottered around the lower reaches of the river with a gaff to see if there were any fish going upstream to their home in the lakes. I had no success, so took advantage of the Eskimos' absence to make myself a cup of coffee and was enjoying this with a hunk of bannock when there was a sudden noise outside the tent. I called out, thinking it was the men come back sooner than they had intended, but there was no response.

The silence continued for a moment or two, then was broken by a sort of tearing sound interspersed with low growling. Clearly, an animal was helping itself to what it no doubt considered to be our ample meat supplies, and as it did so, an unnerving thought struck me. My rifle was outside, leaning up against the far end of the tent; the only weapon on hand was a small meat knife, not really suitable for a confrontation with a savage creature.

My visitor was obviously wasting no time in getting down to its meal, which it consumed to the accompaniment of an increasingly ferocious munching, growling sound, which did nothing to quiet my rising panic. Once or twice there was a lull, which made me hopeful that the animal had departed, but a few seconds later the meal was resumed, with what seemed to be redoubled energy and noise.

The difficulty of explaining to the Eskimos my apparent inaction while our hard-earned meat supplies came under the fierce attention of a thief at last drove me to take action. As I

stood up, silence fell, but my hopes that the creature had been frightened off were soon shattered as the noisy feeding sounds began again. I crept to the door, suddenly flung it open, then slammed it shut again. Except that a piece of the door fell off, this achieved nothing, for the noise continued unabated.

There was nothing for it but bold action, so, feeling anything but courageous, I opened the door again, stepped briskly outside, and forced myself to peer round the corner of the tent.

I had never before seen a wild animal at close quarters, except behind the bars of a zoo, so the sight that met my eyes both horrified and fascinated me. The most enormous creature was sitting on its haunches, tearing blubber from a handy seal carcass and clearly not at all pleased by the interruption. The bear, for there was no doubt as to the identity of the thief, looked hard at me and it took all my resolution to stand my ground in a sort of eyeball to eyeball confrontation.

I had no plan in mind, and do not know how the situation would have been resolved, had not the bear, having completed his inspection of me, slowly shaken its head, dropped quietly on all fours and loped away. I just stood there and watched the great animal wander off, without making any attempt to get my rifle and shoot it. There was something about the casual indifference in the rear view of the bear, moving without haste in its chosen direction, that left me standing and gaping after the thing until it disappeared behind a pile of rocks.

Shortly afterwards the hunters returned. They had not come

across any more deer, but when they heard about the bear, they rushed off immediately to try their luck but were too late to catch up with it and lost its tracks somewhere in the rocky ground at the entrance to the gulley. Somehow, although the bear had given me an anxious quarter of an hour, I felt relieved that it had not met its death at our hands.

As we had been reasonably successful with our hunting, we now decided that it would be wise to head for home, before the weather deteriorated, for it was apparently most unusual to experience long spells of fine weather during the fall. We loaded the meat, skins and blubber into the boat before dark, so that our catch would be safe from any more roving beasts, while we would also be saved a delaying job in the morning.

The night was cold and frosty. We rose early while the stars were still bright, determined to get a good run home in daylight if possible, and after we had breakfasted the men did not dally. The tent was packed up and taken down to the boat with all our other possessions. No time was lost, so that as Kilabuk was turning the flywheel to persuade the sometimes reluctant engine into life, the dawn was just streaking the sky along the ridge of high eastern hills.

Despite our good start we did not fare too well, for by daylight the night crispness had gone out of the air and the clouds were jostling angrily along the northern horizon. It was no surprise when the wind burst down on us as we came out into the open to cross the mouth of a nearby fiord. We made very slow

progress, for the further we moved out to sea, the worse the conditions became. We could not turn back, since that would have meant contending with a following sea, which might have been dangerous with our heavily loaded stern.

We approached a black, desolate island half-way across the open stretch and eventually came into sheltered water. At the far end of our tiny harbour, a natural path led up between the boulders. We unloaded our tent and the cooking utensils, carrying them up this path for some distance until we came out on to quite a pleasant, short plateau, where the men at once erected our shelter and I attended the Primus stove.

I had by now firmly established myself as chief cook, the main advantage of this position being that, within limits, one could choose the menu. After our cold anxious morning it seemed to me that we deserved a 'special', so I fried some deer steaks in butter. It cooked a little like beef, red and juicy, and though the meat was a trifle tough, at least it was a change from the inevitable seal. My friends made no comment, eating their food in silence. Perhaps they would have preferred a seal stew.

The weather did not abate during the afternoon, as we had hoped it might, so we brought up the sleeping bags and skins and prepared to camp until the storm died down. Shortly after darkness, our lantern began to flicker as the oil ran out. The reserve can of oil and the candles were still down in the boat, somewhere among the skins in the stern where they would not be easy to find in the dark, so we settled in for the night, in the hope

that the weather would have moderated sufficiently by morning for us to make another early start. Our hopes were not realized, for when we woke before dawn the booming wind told us that we would not be travelling that day.

During the morning we fetched enough gear from the boat to make ourselves as comfortable as possible, which was just as well for by the afternoon heavier clouds had rolled up and the wind was fairly slapping the rain and sleet into the walls of our tent. Beevee lit his lamp and Kilabuk told me more about his people and how they had made the best they could of the limited resources of this wild country.

Before the Europeans came, and indeed for quite a long time after they had arrived, the Eskimos lived mainly in tents, of either deerskin or sealskin, during the summer months. The fur was generally removed from the skin before drying and scraping took place, and by the time the women had finished and sewn the skins together with deer thread, they had a waterproof tent that allowed a fair amount of light to penetrate to the interior. There was no wood in the country, so whalebone was commonly used to support the tent, which was usually quite low and often sloping gently back in the direction of the prevailing wind, so that when the gales came, the storm swept over the top of the home rather than buffeting into it.

Another of my fellow passengers on the *Nascopie*, an archaeologist, had told me that in the distant past the people had made their houses of stone and whalebone, packing the crevices

with earth and mud while covering the top with various kinds of skin. The ruins of these houses were apparently fairly easy to locate, because after a family had left one of them and the roof fell in, the earth gradually covered the remains where they stood, leaving the outline visible for centuries, though less and less clearly as time went by. My friend had been an expert at finding these old homes, sometimes up to a thousand years old, from the smallest clue. A slight variation in the contours of a slope was sufficient to set him digging, and more often than not he was rewarded by the discovery of some old discarded tool or implement, still lying where the owner had thrown it when he shifted camp all those hundreds of years before.

So far as one could tell, the internal arrangements of the house had not altered greatly down the years. At the back of the dwelling, the sleeping space was spread with deerskins, on which the women sat during the day and where the sleeping bags, also of deerskin, were unrolled at night. At each end of this space, in the homes of the better hunters, a woman tended a seal-oil lamp, which provided warmth for the home and for cooking, beside lighting the house.

The oil lamp consisted, as it still does when used, of a slab of soapstone, scooped out to form a shallow dish, which was tilted slightly and filled with small pieces of whale or seal fat. Along the front of the dish, a strip of moss was carefully laid to make a wick, which, when lighted gave off sufficient heat to melt the fat behind, causing it to flow into the bowl, soak into the wick

and keep the lamp burning.

It was the woman's task to see that the bowl of the lamp had a good supply of blubber and to keep it poked forward evenly, so that the whole wick would burn smoothly to give maximum light and heat. The cooking pot or kettle hung over the lamp, fixed in position by various methods according to the type of house in use. The condition of the lamp was one of the tests of the ability of an Eskimo housewife that one could apply immediately upon entering a home.

Kilabuk told me that our island refuge had never been used as a campsite because it was very small and the tiny harbour which we had entered was the only shelter from the open sea. There had been quite a large camp, however, on the mainland opposite, at the entrance to the fiord, and the people had used the island as a burial ground.

The rain stopped before darkness fell, so I decided to go out for some exercise and get my bearing. At the far end of the island, a walk of about a mile over rough ground, there was another small flat area, similar to the one on which we had camped. Along one side of the area there were piles of rocks, which had the appearance of having been placed there deliberately.

Among the boulders and stones I came across a rusted mug which had practically disintegrated, and one or two other things so decomposed as to be virtually unrecognizable. This was probably the burial ground, for the Eskimos buried the personal belongings in the grave alongside the body. The hunters had

their knives, spearheads and like possessions placed with them, as well as their drinking mugs and other essentials. Women had their sewing materials and trinkets that they must have treasured during their lives in the grave with them, and children had the toys with which they had played.

I wandered about this grim spot for a while, then blundered over a shallow hole filled with bones, and though these might well have been the relics of animals, they gave the place a scent of death and myself an uncomfortable feeling that I was desecrating somewhere better left in peace.

Great care had to be exercised when burying the dead so that the spirit did not become separated from the body. For a spirit angered in this way might bring harm to the camp. The spirit was thought to remain with the body for a short period after death, but a hole had to be left among the burial rocks, so that it could come and go at will to enable it to find another home.

A spirit recalled to guard a child through infancy had to be treated with proper respect. Thus, if a man's father returned to watch over a grandchild, the baby had to be assumed to be a mature person, able to make its own decisions as to how to behave, or what to eat. The parents could not punish the child simply because it did not defer to their wishes, but were restricted to the giving of advice or offering persuasive argument in an attempt to control its behaviour. If the family became angry because of disobedience, the guardian spirit might easily become offended and leave, which might cause the child to

suffer a serious misfortune or even to sicken and die. When their offspring reached young adulthood, the parents could begin to take them in hand, for by then it was thought that the spirit with which they had been born would take over guidance, so that it no longer mattered whether the guardian left or stayed on in a secondary role.

The desolation of the little graveyard seemed in keeping with this island of grim black rock, and fitting for the final resting place of the people who had led such a hard and comfortless life.

In this area of Baffin Island, the Eskimos had been in contact with English and American sailors for seventy or eighty years. Cumberland Gulf had attracted the early whalers as a suitable base from which to hunt, and there is no doubt that the impact of these hardy men, with their new equipment for hunting, was very considerable indeed.

Previously, the people had been stuck in a more or less Stone Age period of development, caused not by lack of enterprise but rather by the harsh nature of their existence. The materials for making more efficient weapons were not obtainable in their country, while the climate was unsuitable for food production. The simplest fluctuation of conditions could mean the difference between life and death, for they had no means of controlling the variations of wind and weather.

With such implements as they had, they developed an art in hunting and a patience in enduring, without which they could not have survived. To these men, with such rudimentary possessions,

the first whaling ships must have appeared as veritable Aladdin's caves of undreamed of treasure. The knives of steel. The guns that thundered death so fast that the eye could not follow. The little sticks that gave a flame. The pots and pans. The food that was not meat or fat or fish. The cloth and clothing not made of furs or skins. There was no end to the wonders of these ships, for nearly everything they used was new to the Eskimo people.

Very gradually life became a mixture of the Stone Age and the modern. The new equipment cost money, more than most people had from work or trade. First of all, the lance and bow gave way to the rifle, but the whalers had nothing to improve upon the lamps that the Eskimos had always used, nor did the homes of skin or snow give way to wood or canvas for many decades, though only in the most distant and remote places do the people still use the skin tent and snowhouse today.

Without crops of any kind to give them flour or cereals, the Eskimos depended entirely upon being able to kill the wildlife of the country for food. By far the most important single item was seal meat, raw, boiled or frozen, fresh, high or putrid, it mattered not. Every particle of the seal except the bones was utilized. The skins for clothing or tent making, the fat for heating or cooking and the meat for food.

According to the season or place, other food was sometimes available. Fish from the river, sea and lakes. Ducks and geese. Walrus and polar bears, though the dangers of hunting either of these powerful antagonists without a rifle were considerable, and

from the stories of the old days, it was certain that few hunters of any account did not have some scar from an encounter with a polar bear.

To the limited food variety, the whalers at once added flour, and though the people could not always afford to buy it in the early days, it came high on their list when they had anything with which to trade. Tobacco also became a much sought-after item of trade for both men and women.

Unhappily, in those days the sailors brought disease as well, in particular tuberculosis. There does not appear to be any record as to when this illness developed among the people of the Arctic. Explorers of the mid nineteenth century speak of them as suffering from the 'bleeding sickness'. The only certain thing is that the first germs were brought in by the men who came from the south.

Nowadays the scourge has been brought under control, but in the days before the Second World War, the Eskimos had no defence against its ravages. Circumstances were such that a family of five or six had to exist closely together in the very restricted space of a tent or snowhouse, without cleanliness or hygiene. They used the same drinking vessels and spat thoughtlessly on the floor of their homes.

Once introduced, the disease spread steadily, even in this land where habitations were so widely separated, for it required only one hunter to travel further afield than usual for the plague to infect a new community, until there was hardly a family on Baffin

Island that did not have at least one sufferer.

We did not wake early the next morning, perhaps because we had not really expected the wind to have dropped sufficiently to enable us to cross the remaining stretches of open water, so we had a pleasant surprise when Beevee returned from a morning inspection of the conditions. He told us that the weather was calm enough for us to resume our journey.

We bustled about to get everything ready for departure, though it turned out that we need not have hurried ourselves, for as we came down the short track to the boat we saw that the bow was resting firmly on the shore. The craft was so tightly aground that all our efforts to free it were unavailing. There was nothing for it but to sit and wait until the tide rose high enough to float the boat off again. The Eskimos had developed the virtue of patience to a degree seldom seen among Europeans. No doubt this was forced upon them by necessity, for in a world where survival is difficult enough, even with the help of the rifle, hunting success often came only after long endurance.

The Eskimos came also to possess a shell of resignation, enabling them to suffer, with apparent equanimity, any hardships that might arise. This resignation often became a source of irritation between them and their southern companions when hunting or travelling together, for in such a situation as we now found ourselves, with a shrug of the shoulders the Eskimo would say, 'Ionamut' ('It can't be helped'), and settle down to wait, while his companions become increasingly agitated.

Although the sun had come out the wait seemed interminable, but at last the tide did come up, the boat floated free and we set off on the second part of our journey. As we had lost half of the day, we did not attempt to reach home in one go, aiming instead for an inlet within range of an afternoon's travel where some of Beevee's relations lived.

This was the first real Eskimo encampment that I had encountered. We rounded a headland quite suddenly to reveal twenty-odd tents perched precariously on a narrow strip of flat underneath a very solid-looking cliff – the first consideration in selecting a campsite of course being for the people to place themselves as conveniently as possible for hunting purposes. Just down below the flat was a small, well-sheltered cove, on the shores of which the men had beached their kayaks. The skin tents, the summer homes, were of varying sizes but of the same general design as those in use all over the Arctic at that time, not only along the coastline, but also in the occasional areas where the Innuits were inland dwellers.

As Kilabuk had told me, the skins had been treated to reduce bulk and to allow as much light as possible to penetrate through, though in some cases the seal intestine, of near transparency, had been used as a window let into the skins. At this time the homes were mainly of two kinds. The first, by far the larger, had a long ridge pole down the centre with supports at either end, while the other was obviously suited to poorer hunters, who would not have had either enough skins for a larger dwelling, or enough fat to

keep such a home warm. This second lot was of a conical style, rather like an Indian teepee, but not very roomy inside.

We made for the largest home in the middle of the camp, but coming so quickly in from the fresh air, the smell nearly overpowered me, compounded as it was of a strong mixture of decomposing meat and unwashed bodies. Had I not feared to offend my welcoming hosts, I would have asked Kilabuk and Beevee to set up our tent somewhere on the edge of the camp. In fact, as I discovered later, the curious actions of the *kudloonas* seldom offend the Eskimo, who has learned to accept the peculiarities of the strangers' conduct.

I soon accustomed myself to the odours and settled down to examine the native home. The most surprising thing about the 'house' was that it should be the abode of so many people. There were four adults seated on the platform and four children playing on the earth floor near the entrance. Right round the edges of the interior were spread the bags and boxes containing the worldly possessions of the family – clothes, sewing outfits, tool boxes and other oddments. The sleeping space was covered as usual with skins, while along the front edge a row of stones had been laid to form a separating line from the kitchen and work space. That this was the home of a good hunter was clear from the two large, brightly burning oil lamps, for only the more successful men could afford to burn oil on this scale. The family were also well clad, while the bedding skins looked new and clean.

Crouched on one side of the platform was a very ancient

woman. Her face had been tattooed with some indistinguishable design and she looked to be about a hundred, though she was probably not more than sixty, which is an advanced age for the Inuit. The old lady was in charge of one of the lamps. Her method of looking after it fascinated me. She had a pot full of fresh seal fat from which she would cut little pieces to pop into her mouth, where she apparently 'milled' the blubber, spitting it out as oil into the dish of the lamp, presumably without mixing it with any of her saliva, for the lamp did not splutter.

This reminded me of one of the first warnings given to me regarding Eskimo hospitality, in the form of a story about a new R.C.M. policeman a year or two previously. It seemed that this man, out on the trail with his Eskimo driver, was welcomed one night into a family home in much the same way as I had been.

Once he had settled in, he was offered a plateful of what appeared to be a rather tempting, creamy mixture which he ate with such relish that his host asked him if he would like some more. The policeman passed over his plate for replenishment, whereupon the hunter spoke to the old woman sitting in the back of the tent, who promptly reached into a container she had by her, pulled out a length of deer fat and cut it into small pieces, popping the bits into her mouth. The traveller watched in horror as the old woman spat the pre-chewed fat on to his plate, his stomach protesting so violently at this revelation of the nature of the delicacy he had so much enjoyed that he had to rush out of the tent.

Kilabuk gave the lady of the house one of our seal carcasses, and considering the limited cooking facilities available, the hunter's wife prepared the meal in a surprisingly short time.

The men dug chunks of meat out of the pot, trimming the size with a knife, and put them straight into their mouths. The ladies used a women's knife called an *oolu*, which consisted of a semi-circular blade with a handle attached that was used, apart from cutting up the food, for all sorts of work on skins. There were no plates and fingers served as forks or spoons. Kilabuk made the tea, producing biscuits from our supply, so everybody had a good blow-out, for the Eskimos seldom pass up the opportunity of having a hearty meal, especially when the *kudloona's* limitless supplies are at hand, though they are themselves generous with their food, always sharing whatever meat may be available.

Since there were to be six adults and four children crowded together for the night in a comparatively small space, it did not seem likely to be a very peaceful time, but anxiety about the possible noise did not in the end concern me as much as it might have done. Before we retired, the hunter's wife held out her baby over a pot to relieve itself, which it did in no uncertain manner. Not until I had composed myself for sleep did I realize that the pot in which the child had done its business was the same one as had been used to cook the stew. I lay awake considering the implications of this discovery for a long time, but finally fell asleep, taking cold comfort from the thought that it is only possible to die once.

Early in the morning, the boy who was sleeping next to me flung out one of his arms and struck me in the face. I awoke and lay as still as possible for the next hour or two so as not to disturb my neighbour. The oil lamps had gone out, but had left behind a pungent tang of burned fat, strong enough to assert itself above the continuing odours of bodies and meat. A greyish light filtered through the treated skins of the tent. Most of the others were sprawled in sleep. The small child was making soft mouthing noises. Beevee was intoning what sounded like a psalm. The owner of the home lay flat on his back, snorting every now and then. The rest of the people were quiet, but the old woman at the end of the platform was sitting up, staring into the darkness, oblivious to the noise. The hours crept on. It seemed ages before the women stirred themselves, relit the lamps and began the morning chores.

I declined the offer of another helping of stew, freshly cooked in the all-purpose pot, contenting myself with a mug of tea and a couple of biscuits from my dwindling stock.

We had a cold journey home. It began to snow soon after we had left the camp and the damp flakes drifted round our faces all the way back. From time to time the engine coughed sadly and stalled, so that we sloshed about on the water, veering with the wind, while Kilabuk huddled over the thing trying to persuade it to start up again. We seemed forlorn and abandoned, and the scene reminded me painfully of a picture that had been stowed away up in the attic at home, of some doomed vessel wallowing

helplessly in a stormy sea. Fortunately this was to the Eskimos all in a day's work and eventually we arrived safely at the foot of the bank below the welcoming lights of home.

Alan brewed a steaming pot of coffee, to the odour of which we added the fragrant smell of a splendid frying-pan hash-up, and I was soon able to recount the stories of my adventures in a light-hearted manner.

IV

I HAD LOST TRACK of the days during our expedition. Somehow it had not seemed to be of any importance what day it was. I was pleased to discover on our return from the hunting trip that it was Saturday night, and though this did not have the same significance up north as in less remote spots, it was special in one way. The Canadian broadcasting authorities used the CKY Winnipeg station, after the usual broadcast programme had closed down, to relay messages from friends and relations in the outside world to the men and women of the Arctic.

This was the only channel of communication from the south at this time, so practically all northerners spent the early hours of Sunday morning with their heads glued to their radio receivers.

Our set was of uncertain temperament. With the greatest of care and gentle tuning, Alan would bring in the Winnipeg station, often quite clearly, for a period before our programme started, but as soon as the announcer began the messages, the trouble commenced and the old set would go off into shrieking oscillation. Sometimes holding an admonitory finger about an

inch in front of the receiver would do the trick, but only so long as there was no movement, for the slightest variation of position would upset everything, bringing on the howling with renewed vigour.

I once got a message through from my mother, who had left for New Zealand during the autumn after my departure, to say that they were safe and well after a severe earthquake. This I heard quite clearly, though I had not known about the disaster. Had it not been for Alan's patient determination with this infuriating piece of equipment, we should have heard nothing at all. As it was, quite often we received at least part of the programme.

On Sunday mornings, Geordie would pad across from his bedroom into the little storeroom and bring out a tin of English sausages. They came in a very special, superior-looking tin and were as different from the ordinary sausages, which flopped like congealed sawdust out of a large can, as a tender beef steak is from a hunk of old bull walrus meat. On the morning after my return, however, we had to pay for our treat. The water supply had run low, and as all the Eskimos would be going to church, Alan and I would have to hoof it back and forth to the river to fill the tank.

Meanwhile, Geordie supervised the preparations of the lunch, consisting of juicy leg of caribou, with roast potatoes and green peas (tinned). Alan came in time to make the gravy since neither Geordie or Ooloo were competent in this department. To round things off, I prepared the peaches and 'cream'.

After our repast, we relapsed into inactivity for a while, then Alan went off to develop some photographs (using the storeroom as a darkroom) and, as Geordie spread himself very inelegantly over two chairs and fell asleep, I had a look at the books in our bookcase. The selection ranged from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* to a lurid thriller entitled *Blood Ran Down the Bishop's Face*. Heaven knew where the books had come from, probably some good-hearted soul had packed all the unwanted volumes from their library into a box and sent them off to us. In the end I settled for a year-old copy of the *New York Times* that carried a report of the great stock market collapse which heralded the terrible 1930s depression.

Early the next week, a whole campload of Eskimos came in by boat to collect their outfit for the coming fur-trapping season. There were about a dozen hunters with their families packed into two boats. This was quite an occasion, so biscuits and tea were made available in our kitchen for the travellers. As they were related to Ooloo, they were of course specially welcomed by her, though all visitors were entitled to the welcoming tea and biscuits.

The leading hunter and his family were the first to come in. The man's name was Evitook. He and his family were well dressed and prosperous looking. They wore new clothes which had obviously been made with great care by an expert seamstress, intricate designs having been worked with the different shades of the skins. The man had about him that air of easy confidence common to people possessing a professional ability of a high

order, and some of these hunters were undoubtedly highly able men. Kilabuk stood by to act as his interpreter, so when Evitook had finished his tea they came into the guardroom for him to have his say.

‘*Assioyotiddley*,’ the hunter greeted Geordie. (This roughly means, ‘It’s so long since I have seen you that I thought you were lost.’)

‘Hello Evitook,’ Geordie replied. The people had grown so accustomed to this greeting from traders that among themselves they frequently referred to us as the ‘*halloo-alloos*’. ‘Everything all right?’ asked Geordie politely.

‘We are well,’ replied the hunter, ‘but there has been much wind during the summer and we have not always been able to go hunting.’

To a trader this sort of opening sounds ominous. When the people have bad news, they lead up to it gradually, beating about the bush until they consider the manager to be in a fit frame of mind to stand whatever it is he has to hear.

‘Here the hunting has been good,’ fenced Geordie.

‘From the north this fiord has some shelter. Across the bay our inlet is open to the north.’

‘Did you catch any seals in the nets we lent you?’ Geordie was referring to the seal nets that Evitook had borrowed during the spring.

‘A few only. One of the nets was badly torn by a shark and we lacked the twine for repairs. The other we lost and have only

just found it again.'

'Then I suppose that you are short of dog food for the winter,' said Geordie, bowing as he thought to the inevitable, though there are many possibilities to such a conversation.

'No, we have sufficient meat for the dogs. In the last moon the walrus came up to the point of land just beyond our camp.'

'Good. How many did you kill?'

'We have seven carcasses and this will last us for most of the winter.'

Geordie was becoming suspicious.

'Have you damaged one of the boats?'

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