The Tragedy of Wrangel Island.

An Esquimo Woman the Sole Survivor.

Five Arctic Robinson Crusoes, four white men an an eskimo woman, who were marooned on an island north of Alaska, are furnishing the latest story, and moral, of the long tragic history of polar adventure. The Eskimo woman, Ada Blackjack, was the only member of the party found alive when the rescuing expedition reached the island this fall, and it is largely her record of the affair that is now being published through The North American Newspaper Alliance. The writer, Harold Noice, was the leader of the rescue expedition, which found one dead man and one almost demented Eskimo woman in the tents where the party of young adventurers had, almost hilariously, set out to "colonize" the island two years before. The other three men of the party are believed to have perished in a daring attempt to reach Siberia, through the midwinter cold, more than a year ago. With the four men recently lost, and the eleven who succumbed on a previous expedition, this corner of the world now has fifteen dead explorers to its credit. It is called "The Death Trap of the Arctic," by Burt M. McConnell, a member of the former expedition, who explains that the attempt to colonize the island was made by the explorer Stefansson, with the idea that it eventually "would become a valuable dirigible and aeroplane base for aircraft flying from England to China and Japan, over the North Pole." Japan was thought to covet this base. The adventure on which these four young men and one young Eskimo woman set out, observes Mr. Noice, offered both the large stakes and perilous adventure of high romance. The biographer of the expedition, with the mention that the youth and inexperience of the party were largely responsible for the tragedy at the end, records that:

The expedition was nominally in charge of a young Canadian, Allan Crawford, a student of Toronto University and son of one of the Professors. The other members were Americans. E. Lorne Knight and Frederick Maurer had both been with Stefansson on a previous expedition, but Milton Galle, a nineteen-year-old boy from Texas, who had travelled with him as secretary, had had no more experience of the North than Crawford.

I can imagine just how they felt when they got to Nome: four young men bound on the greatest adventure of their lives. Allan Crawford, commander of the party, had been selected for his special ability when still a student in Toronto University. He was twenty years old, full of enthusiasm and love of adventure. In this expedition it was the romantic element which fired him. To be leader on a secret journey involving much weighty political considerations; to feel himself an explorer and scientist, carving out for himself a niche in Arctic History; to look forward to the thrill of the far North, where he had never set foot—what could fan the imagination of an adventureous young man to a hotter flame? Allan realized, of course, that his leadership was purely nominal—that Knight was the real leader of the expedition, by virtue of his former experience.

I have elsewhere pictured Lorne Knight—big, happy-go-lucky fellow that he was. He was one of those who never change, never grow up. Altho' second in command of the party he must have realized his real leadership. He was determined to impress on the boys his conception of the North—that it was such a friendly place that anyone could find food and shelter there, no matter how ignorant of conditions. He failed to realize that no sport on earth can be called friendly when man is ill-adapted to his environment or has not the means or knowledge to adapt himself.

Maurier was a young American from New Philadelphia, Ohio. He had been one of the crew of Stefansson's flagship Karluk, which was crushed by the ice in the Arctic Ocean, near Wrangel Island, in the winter of 1913. Maurer had escaped the tragic end which befell some of his comrades, and subsequently spent six months on Wrangel Island with the other survivors. At that time he had no education to speak of, but through association with the scientists of the expedition he had acquired a passion for learning. Since then he had spent all his spare hours in study. By the time he got a chance to go on Stefansson's expedition of 1921, he considered himself sufficiently well grounded in Arctic matters to take up exploration as a career. Poor Maurer had married only a few days before setting on what was to prove his last journey.

Then there was enthusiastic young Milton Galle, a ninteen-year-old boy from Texas, who had travelled thru' the country as Stefansson's secretary. And here we have the boys in Nome—enthusiastic, happy, laboring under the excitement of keeping their secret. While negotiating for the charter of a vessel—the Silver Wave—to carry them to Wrangel Island, they purchased dogs and a sled.

Usually, says Mr. Noice, in accounting for the presence of Ada Blackjack with the party of youthful adventurers, Arctic explorers take one or more families of Eskimos with them. There is good reason for this in the fact that:

The Eskimo men do the hunting, and the women do the sewing and cooking. When the expedition is to cover a long period of time, the question of sewing is especially important. The Eskimo women are experts in the preparation of skins and in the making of warm fur garments and waterproof boots, without which the explorer would be seriously handicapped. Why the boys did not take an Eskimo family, I do not know. It may have been because of expense. The Eskimos of Nome who have been in close contact with the whites since the days of the great gold stampede have acquired the white man's commercialism and a thorough appreciation of the dollar.

Apparently the boys decided to compromise, for they took an Eskimo seamstress, Ada Blackjack.

Later, I will let Ada tell her own story of her connection with the expedition. She was twenty-three years of age and, like most Eskimo women, was married when she was a mere child. Already she had had three children, two of whom had died and had divorced her husband. She had been brought up in the mission, spoke and wrote English, and was a Christian. She knew little more of the life of the Arctic wilds than the boys themselves, yet it is undoubtedly true that without her help they would have perished before they did.

The departure from Nome was accompanied by a good deal of mystery, records Mr. Noice, for "the wise heads of Nome either refused to believe them when they announced their destination of Wrangel Island, or were skeptical of their chances for success." The boys' real purpose, of course, was "to occupy Wrangel Island in the name of King George and run up a British flag," but "they said they were going to make their fortunes trapping," even tho' Nome surmised that "no one of them had ever set a trap in his life." For the next two years, they were pretty well forgotten. Then the relieving expedition, financed by Mr. Stefansson and headed by Mr. Noice, approached the Island. At length, records the writer:

A low cliff loomed on the starboard side—the cliff which formed the northern boundary of Rogers Harbor. Here, we had been told, we would find the boys. But, perceiving no signs of human habitation, we concluded that the party had not been landed there. It was after we had sailed away again that we discovered what was to prove the forerunner of tragedy. Ten miles farther on we came on an abandoned camp and there found a bottle, half-buried in mud, containing a claim to ownership of Wrangel Island in the name of King George, and signed by the four men of the party. This proclamation was dated September 16, 1921. There was nothing to give a single clue toward solving the mystery of what had befallen the party since that date.

Then on again, through the fog, until, in the early morning of August 20, as our boat was creeping along the shore, a shout went up from our Eskimos. They were pointing to a figure, dimly visible on the beach. I rang down full speed astern, to stop the Donaldson, then put off in a umiak (a walrus-hide boat) with a crew of natives.

As we drew near the island, I saw the vague form was that of a woman. She came wading through the shallow water to meet us. I knew at once that it was Ada Blackjack. Her face had the look of a hunter. When I shook her hand I knew, without any telling, that she had had a hard time. It was the hand of a fighter. She was dressed in furs, a snow skirt over her reindeer parka. Slung over her shoulder was a pair of binoculars. As she pushed back the wolf-skin fringe of her reindeer hood, I saw her eyes—incredulous, startled, almost dazed.

Her first question confirmed my worst fears. "Where is Crawford, and Galle and Maurer?" she asked in slightly broken English. And when I told her that I had just arrived from Nome and expected to find them all on Wrangel Island, she choked back a sob and said: "There is nobody here but me. I am all alone. Knight, he died on June 22. I want to go back to my mother." With that, she swooned and tottered forward. As I caught her in my arms, she commenced to sob like a little girl.

When I had brought her aboard the Donaldson and given her a cup of coffee, she revived and was able to eat some breakfast.

Taking only Ada, I paddled to the beach in one of the umiaks.

It was a dismal day. The fog, a ghostly shroud, hung over the sordid disarray of broken boxes, and all but hid the two flimsy tents.

Ada pointed to the larger of them. "Knight—he dead man now—him stay inside over there. Better we go first to my tent." And she led the way up the graveled beach to her own little home.

Beside the entrance was a small canvas boat, crudely built but apparently seaworthy; as we paused to examine it, Ada pointed with pride to her handiwork. "After Knight die and birds and seal come I work hard to make a little boat so can get anything I shoot in the water. But only use it maybe two times when wind blow it away out to sea while I sleep. Then I cry all day and next day and next day, then I say to myself no use to cry any more and then I make this one, and now tie it up after every time I use it."

Ada's tent was torn; it hung from a crude framework of drittwood which she had erected after Knight died. In front of the entrance was a little cupboard made of boxes, where she kept her ammunition and field glasses.

I followed her in. To the left of the door stood an old stove, rusty and fire-eaten, a little pile of firewood beside it. She had made that stove herself, out of empty kerosene tins. A battered tea-kettle sat on top of a small box—a box containing all the food she had—a little hard bread, a few pieces of dried meat; that was all. Against the rear wall of the tent she had built a sleeping-platform of drittwood and empty crates, covered with reindeer skins. Two guns, one a twelve-gauge shotgun, the other a thirty-forty rifle, hung suspended from a rack over her head. It was cold in the little tent, and through the rents in the canvas, mist and fog drifted in. Such was the habitation in which this girl had slept, eaten, hoped and waited—praying that help would come.

She busied herself in lighting a fire while I sat down on a box and looked about me.

"I sorry I can't give you any good thing to eat, but I make a little tea," she said.

It wasn't long before the fire was burning brightly and the tent warm. Suddenly, and to my intense surprise, a gray cat slid out from its hiding-place behind a box and stept sedately over to Ada, who grabbed it up in her arms, caressing it, talking to it. Vic—for that was its name—had been Ada's only companion since Knight's death, and she told me she believed she would have gone insane if she hadn't had Vic to talk to.

Then, as tho' she were some one newly awakened from a nightmare, she began, in a slightly dazed fashion, to tell me of her life on the island; how she had cried when the boys started for Siberia, leaving her to nurse Knight. Then the long weary days of illness, when she, as well as Knight, had been so weakened by scurvy that sometimes she had been unable to go to her traps, and was barely able to chop wood and nurse her sick companion. Her voice choked as she told me how glad she was when spring came. "My, I was so glad, I just sit down and cry when I see the first little snow buntings come from the south in the spring—but Knight he—was pretty sick then—and all he could eat was sometimes a little soup—and by and by—I—I could not save his life—no matter how hard I try—he die—and then me and Vic we move over here in this place."

When I asked her about Crawford, Maurer and Galle, she only shook her head, and said: "I don't know—much—how they went away. When they was loading up the sled I was inside the tent, crying, and then after they go, it blow wind with plenty snow drifting, and I think they get lost, or may be break through thin ice, but every time before I go to sleep I read my Bible and then I pray to the Lord Jesus to make them come back safe, and then when I see your ship I so glad, and I think you have those with you, and they are not lost, but now I guess they are gone all right, and I won't see them any more."

Noice, at length, went over to the other tent, the one where Lorne Knight still lay, lifted the flap and went inside. Ada followed, he writes, and—

We made our way through the litter of discarded belongings. I have never seen a more disheartening sight. Rusty trunks, tin boxes, boots, mittens, socks, knives and files were scattered in disorder over the grounds, mixed with torn pieces of deerskin, now soggy and smelling of mold from long exposure to the rain.

Half-way through the clutter, Ada stopt. Her lips drooped and her eyes filled with tears. I could see that she did not want to go again into Knight's tent, and told her to go back and wait for me.

At the door I had to stop to remove a barricade of boxes which Ada had put there to keep out marauding animals. On the threshold I paused. At the right of the door, on a narrow canvas cot, lay Knight's body, his head protruding from the deerskin sleeping-bag, just as it had been when Ada closed his dead eyes two months before.

Prepared as I was, it was still impossible to realize that this parchment-covered skull and inert skeleton could have once belonged to that happy, careless young giant who was the comrade of my early exploring days.

Here, as outside, all was confusion, disorder. The dirt floor was littered with books and magazines. Tattered volumes from the Harvard classics and crumpled periodicals of ancient date were jumbled together with unwashed dishes and soiled clothing. It was a place which must have been the abode of despair long before death came. Across the room was a second canvas cot, in which Ada had slept during all those months when Knight lay slowly dying in his bag. There was a rusty stove in one corner. The stove-pipe had toppled down, tearing a long rent in the canvas. Beside Knight's cot I found his diary, and sat down on an empty cartridge box to read it, my back to the cot, for I wanted to shut out the worst of that gruesome scene.

The most heartbreaking thing about the whole tragedy, says Mr. Noice, is the fact that, in all probability, the gruesome climax might have been prevented. His report runs:

Reading the diary record of the though I were watching a man walk-though I weer watching a man walking blindfolded toward a precipice, and were powerless to stop him. Almost to the last, the boys failed utterly to realize the dangers of their predicament.

Summer over and the sealing more or less of a failure, the fate of the party now hangs on the walrus hunt. Six walrus would have saved the situation. Six walrus should keep five persons alive and entirely free from scurvy for an entire winter. They would also provide ample food for the hungry dogs.

The ponderous, black-skinned creatures of meat and blubber weigh upwards of a ton. When a man is living off the country, he will eat five pounds of meat a day. Except for the chances of eggs in the spring, when the eider and crowbill ducks and the snow geese return from the south, he has nothing else upon which he can count.

Contrary to the belief of the civilized world, when a man thinks he jeopardizes his health if he eats a mutton chop twice a day, the men of the North have demonstrated that they can remain perfectly healthy indefinitely on a diet exclusively of meat.

Scurvy develops, not from the lack of vegetables, but from the lack of fresh food of any kind. Vitamin A, which is the scurvy preventive, is found in either fresh meat or fresh vegetables.

There is nothing in Knight's diary to indicate that the boys realized how desperate their condition would be if they failed to get walrus. They saw the walrus swimming in the water, but believed they must wait until they could catch them on the ice. Because they had neither a skin boat or a walrus harpoon, they evidently thought there was no use trying.

With sufficient ingenuity or experience they could have made themselves a boat of seal-skin, and harpoons might easily have been fashioned out of bone or scrap-iron.

(To be continued.)

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