

The Spear of the Eskimo

Concerning What Probably Befel Young George Street, a Trailsman from Ottawa



This is the Crean exploration outfit in which George Street, probably speared to death by Eskimos at Bathurst Inlet, got his first acquaintance with real trail life. Street is the second figure from the left.

THIS is the mere outline of a simple big story, which somehow manages to corral into its lineaments the drama of the north. The task of civilizing Canada by furposts and mounted police stations, by transcontinental railways and new towns, has been mainly peaceful.

But once in a while we have had violence. The rebellions of '71 and '85, and the melodrama of Almighty Voice are three of the impressive episodes in an amazing conquest of a new country, changing it from barbarism to civilization. That the story has been so nearly devoid of scalplings and massacres is due first of all to the admirable feudal system of the Hudson's Bay Company, still epitomized in the Canadian High Commissioner, Lord Strathcona; and to the yet more marvelous personal system of the Northwest Mounted Police.

The work of the mounted police has made most of the serious, big literature of adventure, first in the west, then in the far north. Only a few months ago, the newspapers were alive with a hugely simple tragedy on the trail from Ft. Macpherson to Dawson, when four police were frozen to death in a blizzard. While that story, month by month and post by post, was struggling over long trails and frozen rivers out to the world of telegraph wires and railways, another tragedy was swiftly enacted in the land of the Eskimos—and it was many moons from the time of the midnight sun of 1912 till the midnight sun of 1913, before that story became known to the newspapers. At the present time a patrol of police is on its way from Hudson's Bay to Bathurst Inlet to investigate the certain spearing to death of H. V. Radford, an American explorer, and the probable killing in like manner of young George Street, B.A., of Ottawa.

THE story at present somewhat vaguely outlined by word of mouth from the incoherent jabberings of Eskimos, occurred at or near Schultz Lake, on the trail from Chesterfield Inlet to Bathurst, on the shores of the Arctic. The report of Akulak, an Eskimo, says that the killing of Radford and Street took place at Bathurst. It does not matter. The narrative is one of those oddly tragic and sublimely simple things that have begun to come into our northern literature since the restless vanguard of our civilization left the already conquered great west and shifted to the north. The triangle of great tragedies now has its angles at Athabasca Landing, Herschell Island and Fort Churchill. The wildest of this great silence-land of huskie dogs, wolves and ice igloos are the scattered territories of the Eskimos, who are still the mysterious lords of the north, as the mound-builders once were of the great west. The Geological Survey, of Ottawa, is collecting a vast amount of information about many tribes of Indians. We are yet in the A B C stages of learning about the Eskimo. Two expeditions are now on the way to the farthest north of two Eskimo regions: Stefansson to Victoria Land and R. J. Flaherty, representing Sir William Mackenzie, to Baffin's Land, north of Hudson's Bay. Both these men have already

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brought out much information about the Eskimo, most of which has not been given to the public.

The outlines of the Radford-Street story, if worked out to the full, contain much that has been suggested by these travelers. We are particularly concerned with the part of the story represented by young George Street, of Ottawa. The facts about



A picture of young George Street, with his hand on the wheel of a waggon on the famous Portage La Loche, between the headwaters of the Churchill and Mackenzie Rivers.



Street poling up the swift current of a river in Northern Alberta. He is in the bow of the canoe.

Street related here were given by a man in the Dominion Lands offices, who knew him on trail.

It is certain that Radford, head of the expedition, was speared to death by inland Eskimos after an altercation about how to hitch huskie dogs. It is almost certain that George Street was speared to death by the same band when he was attempting, with his rifle, to rescue his companion from the natives. That happened in June, 1912. The story dribbled out from post to post and igloo to igloo in June, 1913. The informants are Eskimos who, by this chain of postal communication, trace it back to alleged eye-witnesses of the tragedy.

Street was in no way responsible for the affair. He was the victim of the blind Fury that casually seizes these quiet, inoffensive people when they consider themselves treated unjustly. He was a young man who, before he graduated from Ottawa University and football, became famous for feats of physical strength and endurance. In a hand-to-hand tussle with Eskimo dog-men he would have been a bad man to handle. When a lad of seventeen, after a siege of typhoid, he was a packer on the trails of the National Transcontinental. He carried 200 pounds, the normal tump-line load for an old packer.

HIS first trip west was with F. J. P. Crean, exploring in north Saskatchewan for the Department of the Interior. Says his companion on that expedition:

"I, who travelled with him for two years, know that he was always willing to overload himself to save his companion if the latter showed signs of giving out. I remember once on the last load of a portage, his collecting all that remained. Soon after starting he overtook a weaker individual in distress and relieved him of an extra case, then, without a rest, covered one and a half miles with 247 pounds (actually weighed at the time) on his back.

"As a driver of dogs, Street usually was allotted the slowest team and the heaviest load, because he could be relied upon to get through.

"The excellence of his work induced Mr. Crean to take him north with him again in 1910. This trip was to last two years, and we see Street, now about 21 years old, about 5 ft. 5 inches in height, and weighing 190 lbs., working as hard as ever. A day or two rest in camp never suited him; he wanted to be off on a trip—the harder the better—though at that time he had not the gift of absolute sense of direction in the bush. He was cool and capable, and was never liable to the panic that seizes some people who lose the trail; and was always carefully training himself that he might become a first-class woodsman."

It was about Christmas that H. V. Radford, American explorer, reached Smith's Landing, on the Slave River. He wanted a guide to accompany him from Great Slave to Chesterfield Inlet. Street volunteered, as Canadians have done more than once for foreign explorers in their own country. He knew little of Eskimos, though a good deal about dogs. Radford made him liberal offers. Street was too young to refuse. Radford, however, was not an ideal travelling mate. Above all things on a trail it is necessary for a man to keep his temper. Tragedies have often been caused by a man's nerves giving way in solitude and hunger; some outbursts of temper, even a casual remark that stings for days when there is nothing but the monotony of the trail to make a man forget.

The party made Chesterfield all right. It was on trail from Chesterfield to Bathurst that the real trouble arose. The two white men were in company with a band of inland Eskimos on their way back from trading with the coast bands.

It was a simple matter. The Eskimos were hitching the dogs. An Eskimo knows dog as no other man does. He lives with dogs. Igloo, dog, harness, whip, fate, long trail, hunger, cold, ice—these are his main conceptions. The world's greatest explorers, Amundsen, Nansen, Peary, have all been glad to do just what the Eskimo told them on a journey. Radford was not a big enough explorer to estimate the real character of these peaceful people and to know how dangerous they might be if aroused by wrong treatment.

In his foolish anger over a dispute caused by dog-hitching, Radford kicked an Eskimo. The native speared him. The Eskimos are terrible spearmen. They are able to kill flying geese by hurling spears, and walrus with the hand-flung harpoon from a kayak. They got Radford. They filled him with spears. Young Street, the only white man left, seized his rifle. He was impetuous. He tried to save his companion. He was probably speared also. There is still hope that he was not.

The story is sublimely simple. But in its primitive outlines it is almost great. And it is one of many stories the details of which do not always reach the newspapers.