

TWENTY-TWO

ARCTIC LIFE WITH BLOND ESKIMOS

Stefansson, Explorer, Tells of His Struggles for Mere Existence While With a Primitive People—Often Faced Starvation in Frozen North—Natives Wanted Most a Good Caribou Prayer—Outline of His Newly-Published Narrative.

To top back ten thousand years in the history of the human race and to live the life of the Stone Age with its people and as one of them, that is the unique experience which was given to Vilhjalmur Stefansson, the man who started the world, when he emerged in Northern Alaska late in the summer of 1912 with accounts of his four-year sojourn among unknown tribes of Eskimos and his discovery of a blond race among the dark-complexioned people of the most remote north. Dr. Stefansson is at present in the Arctic on another exploring and ethnological expedition from which he does not expect to return for three years. But with the publication of "Life With the Eskimos" (just issued by the MacMillan Company in a handsome volume replete with illustrations) he gives for the first time a full and absorbing record of life among a people of a by-gone age, a record which as he points out is not based on report, but is only a faithful setting down of what he saw and heard. As Dr. Stefansson from long contact with other Eskimos knew perfectly their tongue, and so closely resembled an Eskimo himself by the time he reached the unknown details he refused to believe him other than one of themselves, it is not likely that any highly civilized human being has ever had such opportunity to record the life of a primitive people.

Throughout the long story, there is a quality in Stefansson's narrative which identifies him so thoroughly with the simple, primitive details he describes, that the point of view of the Eskimo is unconsciously given. What Stefansson says for the most part must come from the lips of an Eskimo.

Few men save those who have by accident been thrown among a strange people, ever embraced so completely their mode of life. Stefansson set out with his small party of friendly Eskimos whom he gathered near the mouth of the Mackenzie River, living and travelling as an Eskimo. He lived on the country, intentionally taking up a precarious existence which was threatened with termination more than once by starvation. For these reasons, the things which affected his plans and life were the little things which count heavily with uncivilized people, and are hardly ever reported by well-equipped exploring expeditions which, so to speak, have ever one foot resting upon the support of a civilization behind them.

Could Not Get Matches. For instance, on Aug. 15, 1908, on the borderland of civilization, right at the outset of his journey from Herschel Island eastward to the region where he was convinced human beings lived, notwithstanding the reports to the contrary, made by early voyagers, he lost a whole precious summer looking for matches. Matches there were, and in plenty in the possession of the sergeant of the Northwest Mounted Police, quartered on the island, but the individual charged with the protection of white men in that region, looking askance on what he considered Stefansson's destitution and total unpreparedness to cut loose for a four years' stay in an unknown land. He refused to sanction such a proceeding by furnishing the necessary matches. There was nothing for it but to start for Point Barrow, which, trip Stefansson made in the whaler Karluk, which, by the way, is the vessel which he and his party chartered and have with them on their present expedition. This wrecked his plans and necessitated his spending the winter near the mouth of the Colville River, in Alaska, instead of far to the eastward, beyond the mouth of the Mackenzie, by which river he had reached the Arctic coast.

One of the accidents which came near costing the resourceful explorer his life occurred when he was on the point of boarding the Karluk, which, he luckily overtook him shortly after he left Herschel Island for Point Barrow. Dressed in the heaviest fur clothing of the Eskimos, with long hip boots of walrus skin, he was bumped overboard from a small boat and plunged head-first into the icy water. Fortunately, he grasped a rope some twelve feet beneath the surface and was dragged out with great difficulty, and welcomed on the Karluk's deck by the gruff captain with the remark that

a million, by Stefansson, who came up a few days later and viewed the belt of country several miles in width they had tramped down in a continuous trail.

Eskimo Theology. The natives about Colville River, where the first winter was spent, had a very much confused theology, having built with fantastic invention upon religious ideas received from missionaries. They felt the lack of caribou, and what they especially wanted, so they told Stefansson, was a new caribou prayer. Three years previously, they explained, they had gotten a good one from Kotzebue Sound, and it had worked admirably for two years, but during the past year its efficacy had failed. They besought the visitors for a new one, and Akpek, one of Stefansson's companions, told them that he had a "very good one," which he proceeded to teach. But the explorer, who was suffering from Akpek's inability to secure caribou meat for his own party, had difficulty, he said, in refraining from pointing out to his hosts that they would find Akpek's caribou prayer a weak reed to lean upon in time of emergency.

These Colville natives had most of them seen white men, and of course, and all had embraced a rudimentary Christianity. In some fashion there had fallen into the hands of one of them a bundle of pictures clipped from an old magazine. Some of these were ecclesiastical subjects from the old masters, and some were actresses of all nationalities. Of the former, the Eskimo explained, the knowledge of the circles around their heads that they were "Good Dead Men," meaning saints. About certain other pictures he was in doubt, and referred to Stefansson with grave earnestness to determine about as to the sainthood of its subject, was, according to the explorer, one of Anna Held, and the second was Hall of Fame, an eager circle of natives gathering to get his verdict.

Real Task Begins. The winter of 1909-10 was spent a little farther eastward on Cape Parry, and with their landing there, as Stefansson says, began the real work of the expedition. Hitherto they had been in a country frequented by white traders and whalers and semi-Eskimos. Now all that was left behind, Stefansson felt certain lived on and near the three hundred miles of coast between their camp and Coronation Gulf to the eastward.

Things got very bad that winter during the hunts for game to the southward. Dr. Anderson was off with a couple of the Eskimos to hunt caribou on Cape Parry, and Stefansson with the others, including a woman and two children, narrowly escaped death by starvation. In December and January there were no entries in his diary, because during the short hours of daylight he was hunting caribou for their very lives. A few weeks before they had been subsisting on a diet of blubber and seal oil, and in order to satisfy their stomachs' demand for bulky food, they ate it soaked up in tea leaves, ptarmigan feathers, and caribou hair. Stefansson had found that a diet exclusively of fat made them weak, and produced a mental and physical inability to call quickly into action their surviving strength. Now on the meat of the caribou, which were skin-poor, they were faring even worse. The symptoms which they developed from the exclusively lean-meat diet were those of actual starvation. Matters were getting to look pretty serious, indeed, by January 10, but by good fortune, they encountered on the next day three Eskimos, one of whom, Stefansson says, appeared under the name of Jimmie, an Amundsen's account of his northwest passage. These gladly shared their seal oil, and for a while danger was passed.

Crisis of the Expedition. But it was a white rat of misfortune. More than half of the dogs had been lost, and the Eskimos were beginning to lose heart. "There were rats," says Stefansson, "for we had now been in the north two years, without as yet being able to make an attempt to reach the coast in which our goal was placed—the country which might possibly contain Eskimos who had never seen a white man. We both felt that my journey eastward might turn out seriously, because of the handicap we were under." Nevertheless, on March 14, Dr. Anderson left with Memorana for far-off Herschel Island, the starting point, to get the necessary supplies, if possible, from the whaling ships. Before he started on his thousand-mile sled journey Stefansson gave him written memoranda of what should be done if they had not found each other after nine months.

On April 21, 1910—just two years after leaving New York—Stefansson made the long-planned start for Coronation Sound. Although he was to stay in that remote region for two years more, making trips during that time up and down the Horton River and into the Great Fear Lake and Coppermine River country, it was during the ensuing month that he had his meetings with those unknown peoples which have made his expedition memorable.

Bad Name of Eastern Eskimos. One fairly started for the unknown, his Eskimos were overcome with thinking. The people to the east, according to the Eskimo tales, were of a barbarous, blood-thirsty race. They were called the Nagykutimut, the people of the caribou antler. And they were all strangers. It was the way all the stories of these easterners ended. "Like Cato's delenda est Carthago," says Stefansson, "they kill all strangers were the unwary words that finished every discussion of the Nagykutimut by the Eskimo Islanders."

Only with the greatest difficulty were his companions kept on the march eastward. Daily their one task was the dreaded people who "hook to themselves wives with the antlers of bull caribou and kill all strangers." Finally, on May 9, the certain presence of human beings was made evident by some driftwood on the shore marked with recent chopping. And on the next morning there was discovered in the deserted village of a time they followed the plain trail of a migrating tribe. It was decided to leave most of the camp gear on the shore so that the trail over the rough sea ice might be followed light, and Panigablik, the woman, was left behind to guard it, she being quite the coolest of his three Eskimos concerning the proximity of the unknown tribe. "If she was afraid to be left alone," says Stefansson, "she did not show it. She said she might get lonesome if we left her for more than three or four days. We left her cheerfully engaged in mending our worn footgear."

Nothing could surpass the dramatic interest of the final encounter with these strange people who for centuries have been oblivious to the outer world. The first sight was of three dark figures a half-mile apart, sitting by seal holes, waiting for the animals to rise. Approached by one of the Eskimos cautiously while the rest of the party waited behind to watch the result, the seal fisher

singled out for the experiment remained motionless, although plainly watchful until the approaching Eskimo was within a few paces. Then in terror, thinking himself in the presence of a spirit, he leaped to his feet, waving his knife, and chanting incantations to ward off evil. A long parley convinced him that the strangers were not spirits, and he consented to conduct them to the village, preceding them at a safe distance to give ample warning.

The reception given Stefansson and his two Eskimos at that village is of striking interest, as described by him. Every man, woman and child was outdoors as he drew nigh, and the whole crowd came running towards him and his comrades. As each came up, he would say: "I am So-and-so. I am well disposed. I have no knife. Who are you?" After being told our names in return, Stefansson's narrative continues, "and being assured that we were friendly and that our knives were packed away in the sled and hidden under our clothing, each would express his satisfaction and stand aside for the next to present himself. Sometimes a man would present his wife or woman, while a few of the best houses in more hurry to be presented than were the men, for they must, they said, go some way to their houses to cook us something to eat."

"Half a dozen small boys were sent home to as many houses to get their father's snow knives and house-building mittens. We were not allowed to touch a hand to anything in camp-making, but stood idly by, surrounded continually by a crowd who used every means to show how friendly they felt and how welcome we were, while a few of the best houses from bullocks set about erecting for us the house in which we were to live as long as we cared to stay with them."

The long story which follows of a sample day spent in the midst of the natives in which these people lived out their primitive existence, Stefansson and his comrades were entertained at each house in turn, and while their hosts were piled with questions, neither he nor his Eskimos were annoyed by questions of any kind by the strangers of the North whom the explorer describes as the best-bred people he has ever met.

The Blond Eskimo.

In the dances and celebrations given to mark the pleasure of Stefansson's advent, songs were sung, which startled him by their resemblance to ancient Norse sagas. The first singer, too, with his slim fingers, a suggestion of blondness, and his thin, high nose, was of the blond race. Stefansson, he says, of the last Scandinavian colonists of Greenland. Also his hosts refused to believe that he was other than a member of a neighboring tribe, such as the one to the eastward, members of which they said were quite as blond as he, filled him with the keenest anticipation. The village of this neighboring tribe. There he received in much the same fashion, with perhaps more reserve and dignity. Stefansson says that his one Eskimo, the faithful Naktuslak, was thunderstruck by the appearance of these light-complexioned beings. The explorer's own feelings he thus describes: "That morning when the white men and boys of the village stood before me in line on the ice in front of their huts of snow and skins, I knew I was standing face to face with an important scientific discovery. From childhood I had been familiar with the literature of the north. I knew that here a thousand and there a hundred men of Scandinavian and English descent had disappeared in the northern mists, to be hid by them forever from the eyes of Europe; and when I saw before me these men who looked like Europeans, in spite of their garb of furs, I knew that I had come upon either the last chapter and solution of one of the historical tragedies of the past, or else that I had achieved a great mystery, of which these men are like Europeans if they are not of European descent."

And there, indeed, Stefansson left his mystery. He lived and hunted and starved with the Eskimos, and he grew to regard them with affection and respect, and he foresaw with uneasiness the fate which is about to befall them when other white men, traders, and missionaries shall have followed in his footsteps. But he does not undertake to come much nearer to the mystery of the white men of the north, contents himself with pointing out how the lost colonists of Greenland might have, with practical advice, reached a point so remote, but there is no evidence and no record to sustain even this hypothesis. On

the trip he is at present making through the same region and farther eastward, he may add sustaining facts to his tentative theory. In the meantime, the existence of this light-complexioned race among a people of Mongolian strain, is as unexplained as when Stefansson returned to civilization with the news of the discovery.

On April 1, 1912, he started from Point Barrow for Langton Bay, which for three years he had called home, although spending little time there. Arrived there on June 13, assisted by a whaler, he waited for the annual visit of the revenue cutter Bear, in which he sailed to Nome, where he gave out on Aug. 13 the first details of his experience. Three weeks later he was in Seattle, and the controversy over the so-called "Blond Eskimo" had begun.

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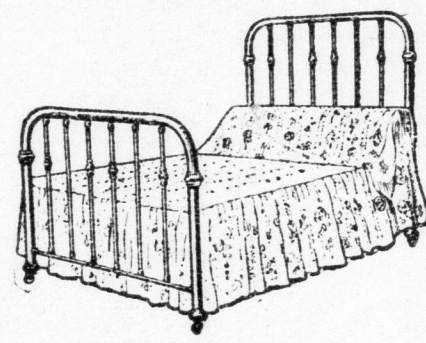
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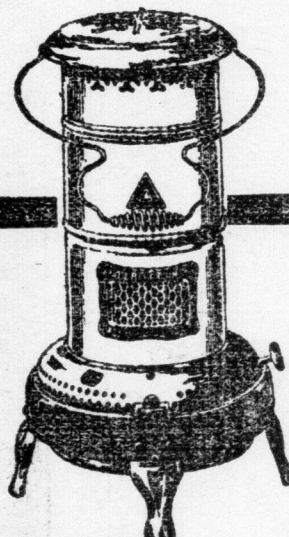
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