

HOFFMAN BIRNEY

KUDLU





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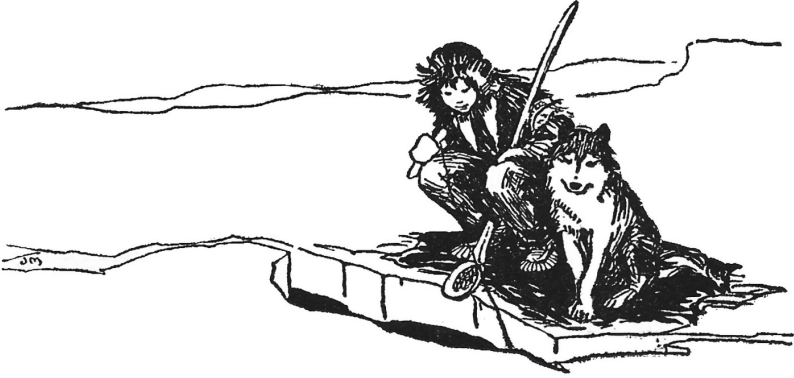
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CHAPTER I



KUDLU GOES FISHING

THE boy was fishing. He was squatting on his heels on a square of sealskin he had spread beside a long tide crack where the icy water of the Arctic Ocean showed as black as ink against the white rim of the sea ice on either side. Beside him, close to the edge of the sealskin, there crouched a furry gray dog with sharp-pointed ears, a long square muzzle, and a plummy tail which he carried curled high over his back. He was watching, with eyes of golden yellow, every move that the boy made. Now and then he whined nervously, walking to the boy's side and nuzzling against him before returning to his place at the edge of the sealskin mat. The boy's name was Kudlu, and he called the dog—which had been given him for his very own when it was a tiny furry puppy—Lak.



Although it was still early in the afternoon, the sun was already low on the horizon. It looked like a great yellow ball—not round, but shaped almost like a football—sliding along the tops of the low hills that began a few miles inland from the long shelving beach.

Kudlu looked over his shoulder anxiously, estimating the time it would require for him to cross the rough shore-fast ice to the house where he lived with his father and mother, his younger brother and sister, and his grandfather, old Yuksin, the blind medicine man, at the foot of the cliffs on the eastern side of the shallow bay. It would be dark soon, and Kudlu did not like the dark. It was difficult traveling over rough ice in the darkness. It was hard to judge distances, and in the dim light of the long twilight, a black spot that looked like the shadow of an ice hummock might prove to be an air hole through which one would plunge into the icy water beneath. Lak's nervousness worried him, too. Lak had been fishing many times, and it was not natural for him to whine so much and to walk around so restlessly. Ordinarily, he settled down very quietly and waited until a number of fish had been caught,

and then he would beg for one politely and not take it until Kudlu told him he could have it. Maybe, thought Kudlu, the dog could see something that he could not, or possibly he smelled a seal in the open water.

Although he was eager to get home, he did not wish to arrive empty handed. The wind had been from the west for many days, piling the ice against the shore, and he had tramped much farther out to sea than he had expected to before finding open water where he could drop his short line. Fish were needed at home as food for the dogs, and he decided to try his fortune for a few minutes before turning back to the shore.

Kudlu was an Eskimo. His home was on the shores of the Arctic Ocean on the northern coast of Alaska. It was the last land; far beyond the gray beaches all was water, the black water of the Arctic stretching over the top of the world to the North Pole.

Kudlu did not call himself an Eskimo. He had never even heard the name. He thought of himself as an Inuit, as one of "the people," for that is what the word means. He was eleven years old, and in all his life he had never seen a tree nor any growing things other than mosses, grass, a few flowering plants that appeared during the short summers, and a sort of creeping willow, from the bark of which the old women at times made baskets. He had never tasted a vegetable, potatoes, rice, or corn. He did not know what flour was or the bread that is made from it. The only food he knew was meat, the flesh of seal and whale and walrus and bear and deer and fish. He had never even heard of such things as railroads and trains and automobiles. Not even his old grandfather, who

as a young man had traveled across the Bering Strait to the west, and eastward all the way to the Great River—the Mackenzie—and south to the land of the Dog Ribs, ever had heard of such marvels.

Only twice in his life had Kudlu seen White men. Those were whalers who had rounded Point Barrow and had worked their ships east along the dangerous coast, putting into the bay to trade tobacco and knives and steel tools with the Inuit for deer meat and fur clothing. One of those whaling vessels had been a steamer, and the people talked for months about how the black smoke puffed up from the stack, and how the propeller threshed up the water at the stern. It reminded them of a great whale, stranded in the shallows and lashing about with his broad tail in order to get out to sea once more.

The Inuit have never known really warm weather. Now and then, during the short summer, there are days when the people can throw aside their heavy fur outer clothing, but the average temperature for the entire year is only eight degrees above zero, which is very cold indeed. The sea is never clear of ice, the water is never warm, snow can always be found in the sheltered places, and for seventy-two days during the winter, the people do not see the sun at all. It never rises above the southern horizon, and the only daylight during that time is a sort of hazy dusk from about nine o'clock in the morning to three o'clock in the afternoon.

Not many of us would want to live in a country like that, but the Inuit—who have never known anything more comfortable—are happy there. They are a cheerful and generous people. They will cook their

last bit of meat and go hungry themselves in order to feed a stranger who has no food. They hunt and fish, and during the summer they make long journeys along the coast, paddling from one village to another in big, skin-covered boats called *umiaqs*, which the women paddle while the men, children, and dogs all lie in the bottoms between the seats.

Even during the winters, they find plenty to do to keep them busy and happy. The women cook, tan the skins of seal and reindeer, and make the heavy fur outer clothing and the underclothing of soft buckskin. The men hunt—when hunting is possible—and spend long hours in the Singing House, where no women or children are permitted to enter. There they sing songs and tell stories and brag about the hunting they have done. The children have their games, too. They make little playhouses out of snow, they put harnesses on the puppies and teach them to draw toy sleds, and sometimes they all get together and sing songs, just as the men do in the Singing House. Here is one of the songs which the children sing when they dance on the ice under the light of what men call the aurora borealis—the northern lights:

*Kióya ke, kióya ke,
A, yana, yana, ya;
Hwi, hwi, hwi!
Tudlimana, tudlimana,
A, yana, yana, ya;
Hwi, hwi, hwi!*

The Inuit live in small villages, ten or a dozen families together. The men join together in hunting and fishing, for food is the most important thing

in their lives. Even the small girls and boys are accustomed to hard work. They fish and snare birds and search the beaches for pieces of driftwood to be used in the building of houses, for firewood, for the framework of boats, for spear shafts, and for the thousand other uses that can be found for wood in a region where there is no growing timber.

Kudlu's family, however, was living alone. They had been left behind late in the summer, when the other families had gone inland to hunt the reindeer. After the hunt, which continues for many weeks, all the people would return for the winter to the village, which was some sixty miles east of the bay where Kudlu's family was now living. That bay was a famous hunting ground, and all the people had camped there through the summer while the men hunted whale and walrus.

Ordinarily, the entire tribe would have gone away together to the region of treeless hills, nearly a hundred miles to the southward, where the great herds of reindeer ranged. It happened this year that Kudlu's mother had not been well, and on her account—as well as for the old blind grandfather—it had been decided that they would stay behind. The other men of the tribe had helped Kudlu's father, Anoru, in building a fine house into which the family moved from the skin tents in which they had lived during the summer. Anoru and Kudlu fished and hunted for the family. Later on, before really cold weather set in, they would journey eastward along the shore and join the rest of the Inuit at the regular winter village.

KUDLU

“Not more than once in a long lifetime does the shore-fast ice of the Arctic break in such a fashion and roll inland.”

Happy to be fishing with his dog, Lak, young Kudlu has no idea the disaster that is about to befall his Inuit village. As a rare ice storm devastates his family home, Kudlu arrives to find that his father has injured himself. Although he is just eleven years old, Kudlu knows the responsibility of keeping his family alive now falls to him. He sets out on a long, dangerous journey—determined to bring food and aid to his family. *Kudlu* is an exciting, adventurous, and heartwarming peek into the fascinating lives of the Inuit and the challenges they face living in the extreme North.

