

**KAK,
THE COPPER ESKIMO**

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I The House That Kak Built

CHAPTER II Kak's Hunting

CHAPTER III Strangers

CHAPTER IV Bears

CHAPTER V Queer Tales

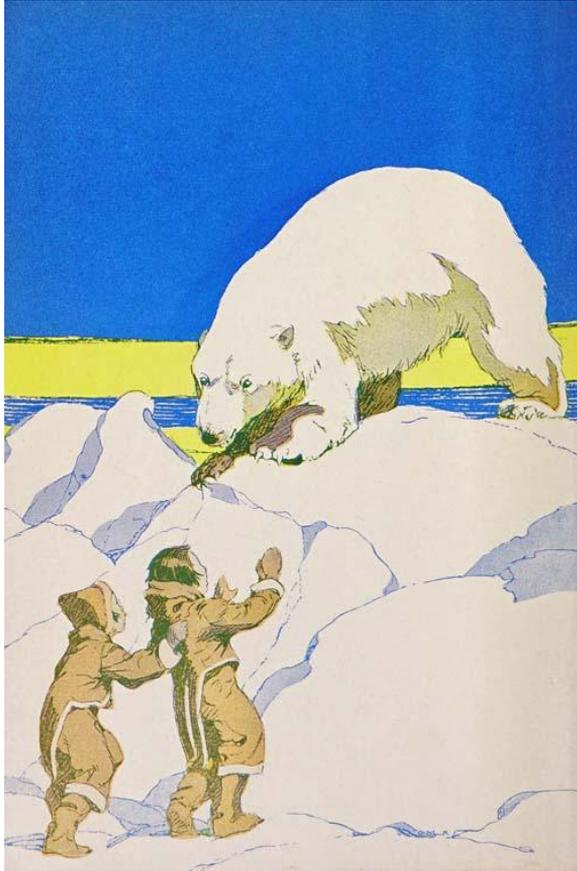
CHAPTER VI Summer Travels

CHAPTER VII Twenty-four Hours of Sunlight

CHAPTER VIII Indians

CHAPTER IX Missing

CHAPTER X Homeward Bound



THE BOYS STARED INTO HIS WHITE FACE

To
CONRAD DE WAAL, JR.

KAK, THE COPPER ESKIMO

CHAPTER I

The House That Kak Built

KAK was an Eskimo boy who lived in Victoria Island in Canada. He belonged to the Copper Eskimos. This name does not refer in any way to their complexions as “red Indians,” but is given because the people make all their knives and implements out of copper. As far as looks went Kak was quite ordinary—a short, muscular fellow, with brown hair and gray eyes, and a skin about the color of white boys’ skins at the end of the summer holidays when they are tanned. But his clothing was very different from ours, being made entirely of fur.

Kak was not counted a poor boy though he possessed very little. Eskimos do not go in for possessions. They are a migratory people, always moving from place to place, and so learn to get on with a small amount of gear, as we do in camp life. Kak was contented and had no cares. He never had to make up his mind whether to play with his meccano, or his electric train, or his radio. He was entirely ignorant of such things and yet not a bit dull. He found plenty of sport up there in the Arctic to keep him merry and bright. First of all his parents owned so little they were never worried about taking care of things; with nothing to do but kill a few animals for food and fuel and clothes they were as gay as children, always laughing and joking from morning to night. The boy could scarcely remember a day that was not full of fun and laughter.

In the winter they lived in a snow house. You would think it must be cold inside a snow house but it was not, because their large lamp burned in the house all the time and kept it cozy and warm; so warm that Kak usually skinned off his coat and shirt as soon as he came indoors. He did not come in often during the daylight, for he enjoyed the cold outside, and he was a singularly independent lad, doing just what he pleased. That is the Eskimo boys' compensation for not having toys: they are allowed to do as they like. In the morning Kak did not get up till he wanted to. He did not have to wash his neck, nor mind his table manners, nor go to school; and he was never, never sent to bed. You see as there was only one room in the whole house the family had to be jolly all together all the time. In the evenings when the grown-up folks sat around telling stories and singing songs, Kak stayed with them, and so did his little sister, Noashak. They sat up as long as they possibly could, and when the sandman came and shut their eyes in spite of them, they toppled over asleep wherever they were, and somebody tucked them in between fur blankets.

Kak, whose name means the top of anything or summit, as of a mountain, was twelve years old when he built his first house by himself. It was a horrible experience which he will remember all his life.

The way to build a snow house is to cut big blocks the shape of dominoes out of a hard snowdrift and set them up on edge in a circle, leaning them inward a little toward the center. You must carve the first block diagonally in half so that its back makes a hill for the second row to run up on; and when you have started properly you can keep on building one row above the

next, going up and around like the red and white on a barber pole, and always leaning them inward till they just naturally meet at the top, where you sometimes poke a very small hole for ventilation. The finished dwelling is a beehive of snow—awfully cold snow which has frozen together safe and solid in a surprisingly short time. Next you dig a long tunnel through the drift and a hole in the floor of the house, and that is the way you go in and out, like rabbits and foxes burrowing to their dens.

A family will occupy this sort of house only about three weeks; for the heat inside melts the snow walls, and as they cool off somewhat every night they turn gradually to ice, and the house grows colder and colder (for ice is much colder than snow) till the owners decide to have a new one. A few houses are magnificent with windows, ice windows, which being troublesome to make are carefully removed and placed in the next house when it is built. Even if the Eskimos continue to live in the same place they will build a new house every few weeks. When they are too careless to bother about windows, plenty of light filters through the white walls; and while the house is occupied the lamp is always burning brightly inside.

Kak did not live very long in his first house. He spent only one night under its low dome, and felt very glad indeed that he did not have to stay there a second night. The way of it was this:

Taptuna, Kak's father, was going seal hunting with a neighbor. These neighbors, who were the only other people living within ten miles, had used up all their supply of blubber. Now blubber is the fat part of seals out of which drips the oil for the lamps, and as the lamp is the Copper Eskimo's only means of warming

his house and cooking his food, this was a serious situation. In his need the neighbor came to borrow from Taptuna, and begged him to help hunt seals. Taptuna readily agreed, for he was a kind-hearted man; so they started out early. But seal hunting through the ice is slow and difficult, and the first day they failed to get any. The next morning, however, while crossing a sandspit, they discovered the remains of a dead whale, half buried in drifted snow and earth. It must have been two years old at least, and the bears and other animals had eaten most of the fat; but Taptuna and Hitkoak hoped by cutting off parts of the outside flesh, which would make good enough dog feed, to strike an ample supply of blubber underneath. So they abandoned the hunt and fell on this free gift, eager to get all they could and that at once, for sled tracks in the snow showed other Eskimos knew about the prize.

They worked all day, not stopping to drag the meat home but piling it up chunk on chunk, only to find by evening that some crafty bear had clawed under and scooped away the very store of blubber on which they were counting. It meant they must hunt next morning and *must* catch a seal without fail.

Both men hated to waste the heaps of frozen whale flesh which had given them all the work they wanted to hack off with soft copper knives. Copper will not make nearly so sharp a knife as steel. Taptuna and Hitkoak, sweating after their labor, wished they had stopped about noon, harnessed the dogs, and sledged home some of this good food. It was too late now, and tomorrow they must hunt. Oil for the lamps was more necessary than dog feed. Until they killed a seal the neighbor would go on

borrowing blubber from Taptuna, and it was already past mid-winter so he had not much left for his own family.

It looked as if their effort over the whale was going to be a dead loss; but the older, wiser man promised to sleep on the question, and next morning, when Guninana was boiling their breakfast, he said:

“Kak, my boy, while I am watching the seal hole to-day, you may harness both dogs to the sled and go to the carcass over yonder and bring home some loads of whale flesh. The young bear I killed will not last forever, eh? And it is well to lay in food while the laying’s good.”

Had Kak been an English or American school-boy he would doubtless have mumbled, “All right, dad,” and gone on eating his breakfast without giving any visible sign of his thrill. But an Eskimo never learns to disguise his feelings, so Kak grinned all over his round face and cried:

“Bully! Bully! Me for it! Do you hear, Noashak? I’m to drive the team.”

And he began to dance and jump about and was so delighted and excited he quickly pulled on his fur shirt and his topcoat of reindeer skin, and dashed out to pat young Sapsuk, his favorite dog, and tell him what a fine day they were going to have together.

His mother gazed fondly on her son’s brown head as it disappeared through the hole in the floor.

“Is it not too much for him?” she asked doubtfully. “Will the boy be able to find his way?”

“Yes, he will be able to do it just as well as I. Kak is a smart lad and has plenty of sense; besides, they have only to follow the trail we broke last night.”

So Guninana, who thought her tall, active husband the best judge of everything in the world, beamed on him and said no more.

Kak was keeping up a fine game with the dogs. He was so overjoyed he could hardly stand still a minute. This seemed the greatest event in his whole life; not only had his father trusted him with a man-sized job for the first time, but it was the very job he loved best. Kak would rather harness both dogs to the light sled and drive like the wind than do anything else in the whole Arctic. He was so proud of his task and so anxious to do it all by himself, that he waited and put off and dilly-dallied about starting till his father had gone. Of course Taptuna observed this, but he understood. He thought: “The boy will be tired anyway when he has fetched two loads, so there is plenty of time.”

“Get busy, my lad. Kill meat while the light lasts,” he called for farewell, and waving his harpoon toward the already crimsoned horizon, trudged off leading the neighbor’s dog.

Kak loitered yet a little gloating over the prospect of his ride. He wanted golden shafts of light bathing yesterday’s trail which showed now plain as an open lead. He wanted to be able

to tear along. One fast dash to the carcass would more than make up for delay, so he fiddled with the dogs.

“Have you not gone yet?” asked Guninana, surprised, when she came out to examine her bearskin stretched on a frame to dry.

“Just as soon as the sun rises, mother, I’ll be away like an arrow. See, I am harnessing now,” Kak answered.

He was, truly. He had begun to hitch each dog to its trace at the first sound of her voice, and kept himself very busy about it.

Like all real boys, Kak did not mind a lot of extra trouble in making play out of his work. It was fun to pretend he must go on a long journey alone; so he went to the tunnel, which also serves as storehouse, and taking his father’s big snow knife, used to carve out the blocks when building, he bound it securely on to one side of the sled.

“Whatever is that for?” asked Noashak, who was playing with the neighbor girls, running up on top of the house and sliding down its smooth curve. “What is the snow knife for?”

“In case I decide to stop overnight,” said Kak, swelling with importance.

“Oh, pooh! Stay all night! Why you are only going to the whale carcass. It is no distance at all! Daddy said you could easily make two trips in daylight.”

Kak flushed. “I shall make double that—I shall make four!” he answered, hotly. “Watch me!”

As he spoke the sun's rim peeped above the long flat beach, streaking the blue-gray world with vivid gold. As if at a signal Kak let go of his team and sprang for the sled with a "Yi—yi—yip!" Instantly both dogs bounded forward. They were off!

The boy shouted, waved his arms, knocked his heels on the sleigh and beat his gloved hands together with resounding thwacks for the sheer pleasure of making a noise, as the two fresh pups raced their shadows over the crusted snow.

It was a wonderful ride to the whale. But once there Kak had to do some hard work handling the big, rough pieces of frozen flesh and piling them on the sled. Perhaps it was not a very large load when he called time and headed the dogs home; still he felt satisfied with himself, and was quite ready to put on airs; and the girls, who had been mightily impressed by his glorious start, rushed to meet his return all clamoring:

"A ride! A ride!"

"No, it is too heavy! We have much meat," Kak swaggered.

"But I want a ride! I will ride!" whined Noashak, who was a very selfish, naughty little girl, and deserved to be spanked. Now she made her brother angry.

"Hold off there! Get off, I say! The dogs are too tired. They're panting. Look at Pikalu, how he puffs and blows."

"That's your fault! You have run him too fast. I will tell father on you."

Noashak was not a bit nice in a temper. She climbed up the back of the load, and Kak cried to the other girls to pull her

down, but they only scampered away laughing; then he had to stop and go around and pull her off himself. She kicked and slapped him and climbed up immediately they started. Kak came and pulled her down again and again; but in the end he had to let her ride because she screamed and yelled so. This sort of welcome, repeated, delayed him a whole lot, yet he had brought his two loads when the far edge of the ice floe dented the sun's gleaming disk; and after that he brought one more. It was good work for a boy. He felt proud of himself and showed it, crowing over the girls.

"You guessed two, eh? And I have got in three!"

"Three! Bah! Three's nothing! You said you could bring four," Noashak jeered.

Now Kak did not like this at all. His male nature wanted to be admired and praised, even if he had accomplished less than he had boasted. Her unkindness made him feel like backing up his good opinion of himself.

"Well, anyway, three's a lot. It's more than dad expected me to bring."

"Four!" bawled his tormentor.

And "Four! Four!" sang the neighbor girls in chorus, going over holus-bolus to his natural enemy.

"You promised to bring four and you can't do it. You're afraid! You're afraid to go back again now!" adding an Eskimo taunt equivalent to "Cowardy, cowardy custard!"

They flouted him meanly, sticking out their tongues, stretching their mouths with fingers in their cheeks, making faces at him over the housetop.

“Bears!” suddenly yelled Noashak.

That was too much. It hit home.

“I am not afraid!” Kak cried, outraged. “Who says I can’t do it?”

He shot a half fearful glance at the sky. Daylight was slowly fading but it would last for a short while, and his dogs looked jolly enough; they had enjoyed more rest than running during their day’s work. If he made one grand dash back to the carcass, and only stayed to load ever so little meat, it would count the same.

“I will do it,” the boy answered boldly. “Who dares to say I cannot bring four loads? Hi there, Sapsuk! Hok, hok, Pikalu!”

He swung his team around in a wide circle and dashed away without waiting for comment from the astonished girls.

“Kak!” cried his mother from the tunnel entrance. “Kak! It is too late!”

But a breeze had sprung up blowing out of the west and whisked her voice in the opposite direction. Anxiously she watched boy, dogs, and sled dwindle to a small, black speck.

“You will come inside now, child,” Guninana commanded, ill pleased; and Noashak, humbled by her brother’s rash magnificence, and fearful of her own part in it, obeyed. The

neighbor girls ran home quickly. All at once the flat snow landscape around the two snow houses lay empty and deserted.

By the time Kak reached the whale a rack of clouds had blown up hastening the night. The earth and sky turned all one dark, cold gray. Those other Eskimos, whom he had found cutting flesh earlier, were gone; and wolves howled distantly gathering for a feed. At their dismal cries Kak suddenly felt afraid. His hands shook so that he could hardly lift the meat. He stopped and peered over his shoulder, trying to see with his bright eyes through the thickening night. He did not care a jot for wolves, they are cowards and will fly from a shout; but Noashak's last mean taunt burned in his mind. If a great white bear were to prowl out of the gloom he knew it would go hard with him and the dogs. His hands stiffened from fright and his skin grew clammy. Another long, lone howl arose inland; it seemed to run right up his spine. Kak fancied he saw a huge yellow blur moving beyond the carcass and at that his hair felt as if it were rising under his fur hood. The night turned blacker, the wind sighed icily, and fear overflowed him like water. He dropped a ten-pound chunk of meat from his petrified fingers and sprang for the sleigh calling his dogs:

“Hok! Hok!”

They were wild to be off home. At a single bound the team broke and ran, with Kak racing after them, yelling at the top of his voice to keep his courage up: “Yip—yip—yi!”—and mumbling charms his mother had taught him to scare off evil.

The dogs raced faster and faster; the howling of the wolves excited them; the nearly empty sleigh flashed over the hard

snow; and a freshening wind behind drove the whole party on. Kak, thrilled by this rush of freedom, soon forgot all his fears. He urged the team with whistle and shout, yipping and yiping like a maniac or a real boy, till suddenly the sled gave a lurch, turned upside down, and sent him flying heels over head across its runners. The dogs, jerked back on their traces, stopped abruptly, and Kak, who was buried neck and arms in a drift before you could say Jack Robinson, picked himself up, dug the snow out of his eyes and mouth, and dusted off his furry clothes.

“Ouch! Bhoo! I say, old Sapsuk, where are we?”

As if he perfectly understood the question Sapsuk sat down on his bushy tail with his long, red tongue hanging out and his breath coming in heavy pants, while Kak looked about him. They ought to have been very nearly home; but the crazy driver could see no sign of the two little white domes that were his father’s house and Hitkoak’s. At first he failed to understand. The houses dropping out of sight seemed very odd indeed. Of course dogs and people move about and get lost if you take your eyes off them for five minutes; but a boy hardly expects his home to behave in that ridiculous way. And yet, peering in every direction as far as he could, which was not far on account of the darkness, Kak did not see a sign of a house. Then gradually he began to know it was not home that was lost, but himself and the dogs. His heart sank down, down, down like a stone cast into the sea. He remembered how in his panic to get away, followed by the reckless splendor of the run, he had forgotten all about direction, had left it to the frantic team to keep the trail. Examining the cause of their accident he felt

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