

Arctic Survival—

ESKIMO WOMAN, TINY DAUGHTER CAUGHT IN STORM WHILE FLEEING PLAGUE

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Times Editor

(Editor's Note: At the conclusion of the last installment of the story, stricken Attungana, the head of the family, had gone into a delirium in a fearfully sudden and unexpected manner that it filled Siqvoana, and their little daughter Olaqroaq, with great fright!)

"AHYII! AHYII! I RAISED MY SPEAR AND I PAILED THE GREAT POLAR BEAR! I KILLED THE GREAT BEAR! AHYII!" Attungana raved.

The terrible outburst was stentorian — unearthly! Little Olaqroaq jumped up screaming and clawed at her mother who was bent over in a knot — consumed with fright! Siqvoana heard and felt her daughter's distress and pulled her to her belly. The mother and child held on to one another in a grip so tight that nothing would have parted them!

Attungana raved on, "I HAVE STRUCK THE WHALE! IT IS TURNING OVER! AHYII! IT IS DYING! DYING! AHYII! AHYII!"

The voice of the delirious man was deafening in the great calm of the night. It rolled in waves through the windless atmosphere — frightening to his wife and their little daughter! Siqvoana's fear was intensified by her consciousness that death was riding the umiak even though the dead were members of her own family.

Raving Subsides

Although Attungana's delirium lasted for only a short time, it seemed interminably long to Siqvoana and Olaqroaq. The terror it brought could not be measured by time. It was indelibly etched in their lives. The horror of that moonless evening never left them as long as they lived.

Attungana's outbursts began to die down. It seemed as if a great storm was subsiding. The ill man's voice faded into paroxysms of ragged breath. The uneven breathing continued for some time.

"Siqvoana — Siqvoana — Olaqroaq!" Attungana, at last, called with great difficulty.

Siqvoana could not move. Her senses seemed paralyzed. She

heard her husband but could not move. Olaqroaq was crying in her arms. She stirred in her mother's grip and this seemed to awaken the woman.

"Mother, father is calling us — father is calling us," said the little girl between sobs.

Siqvoana did not say a word, but she thought, "What strength my little daughter has and she is such a tiny girl. Her strength is giving me strength. I need it and she is giving it to me!"

She took her daughter by the hand and they slowly moved toward Attungana. The umiak rocked as they moved.

Siqvoana was startled as she noticed something for the first time — a smell of death! She had been to occupied with the immediate problems of the desperate journey — danger from the wolves — death of her children. It was here now — the smell of death. It permeated the air in the umiak. It was a shroud — an aura, unmistakable in the darkness on the breathless quiet of the big lagoon.

Attungana Dies

They were at Attungana's side now. He was breathing with great difficulty. He wanted to talk but couldn't begin. At last he began in hesitant whispers:

"The end for me is very soon now. My death is no excuse in a situation like this — no excuse, my loved ones. It grieves me to leave you to the mercies of the Chukchi without a man. But this strange disease is deadly — it is claiming me — a man who was thought to be strong."

Attungana paused. He was exhausted.

"Siqvoana," he continued, "do not forget what I told you earlier. You will need a hunter. Do not let memories deter you. A thought of me in a moon — a year — will be honor enough. You have given me a good life. You must live on — you and Olaqroaq. Our blood must flow in the veins of men and women of the future."

The anguished man paused again.

"You must — must —," He could not continue any longer. Attungana had breathed his last. The great hunter was dead!

Siqvoana and Olaqroaq did not stir. The woman was stunned — her senses numbed. Great still-

ness settled around them once again. It was even more still because Attungana's breathing could be heard no longer. The mother and child involuntarily held their breath. It was as if they were fearful to break the oppressive silence.

Alone

"Let's go back there, mother," little Olaqroaq urged just above a whisper.

She tugged at her mother's hand heading for the stern of the umiak. Siqvoana followed the little girl. They huddled close together not knowing what to do for the moment.

"We are alone, mother," "Yes, we are alone — alone —"

"I'm going to take care of you when I grow up. I'm going to do lots of things for you."

Siqvoana was silent for several moments. She was trying to keep from breaking out in sobs.

"I'll take care of you," Olaqroaq continued, moving closer.

The mother steadied herself and answered, "I know you are, my daughter. I know you are."

"When are we going to be home, mother?"

"We should be home by midday tomorrow, maybe later, little one."

"We are way out in the water, aren't we?"

"Yes, we are." Siqvoana rose and involuntarily reached for her paddle. She suddenly remembered that she had dropped it in the water when Attungana's voice thundered into the stillness. It gave her a start. She then remembered that there were other paddles in the umiak. She moved forward past her dead husband to get one.

The Shroud

The umiak rocked with her movements creating wavelets that radiated in series of rings around the skin craft. Siqvoana seated herself at the stern and began to paddle. The turmoil in her had subsided. Her little daughter had once again given her the will to go on, the strength she vitally needed in the tragic situation.

The small woman directed the umiak toward the north shore of the big lagoon. The great calm continued. If this stillness had occurred during normal times, it would have been welcomed. But as a setting for the tragedy that

overtook the Attungana family, it was a shroud that enveloped the umiak of death!

Land is Comforting

Siqvoana was surprised how far out they were from shore. She felt utterly alone on the wide expanse of glassy water. She began to dig her paddle into the water energetically not knowing exactly why. She could see the long low hill to the north where she used to pick berries.

After a long while, the umiak finally came close to shore. Siqvoana felt a comforting feeling within herself. She was close to land now. She felt the urge to debark and plant her feet on the ground — to feel the earth beneath her. But she mustn't as yet. She must push on and get to Tikiaq as soon as possible.

She wondered how soon. She was tiring. She was beginning to feel pain in her muscles. She would soon be very tired. Each stroke of the paddle was now torture to her arms and back — all of her body.

Hungry Girl

"Mother, I'm getting very hungry and very sleepy," little Olaqroaq said.

"There is some dried caribou meat in the bag by you, my little one," the mother replied.

"I don't want to eat in the umiak, mother."

The tired woman welcomed her daughter's statement and without a word she turned the umiak shoreward. The bow scraped on the sandy beach and stopped.

Siqvoana picked up the seal skin bag of food. She took her daughter's hand and led her to the bow taking care not to step on the dead members of the family. She got off and lifted the little girl on to the beach.

As they were getting off the boat, the woman noticed that the smell of the dead was stronger. It would become overpowering in the hours ahead. She had failed to take this into account. She had been too occupied with the immediate and urgent matters.

Siqvoana took the oogruk hide tow line from the bow of the umiak. She took the end of it, picked up the bag of food and walked up the beach as far as the line allowed. She tied it around her waist. She did not

want to take a chance of the umiak floating away.

Lost Appetite

Olaqroaq had followed closely at her mother's footsteps. She didn't seem to want to be too far away from her mother. They sat down on the sand and the little girl sidled close to Siqvoana. "You may eat something now, my little girl."

"I'm not hungry now, mother," the tiny girl said miserably, "but I'm very sleepy."

It was plain that little Olaqroaq had been affected by the smell of death in the umiak.

"You may go to sleep now," the mother answered.

Signs of Despair

The tiny girl laid her head on her mother's lap and she was asleep at once. Siqvoana put her hand on the shoulder of her daughter and pressed gently. It was a gesture of love — great love for the only offspring she had left in the world. Tears welled in the mother's eyes.

"How brave you are, my little daughter — how brave you are," the woman whispered. "What will the future bring us? What is there in store for us?"

The small woman sat there on the beach for a long time. Olaqroaq was sleeping soundly and she didn't want to disturb her. She kept wondering about the future. She didn't want to feel hopelessness but it was creeping up on her — and with it — the signs of despair! She fought these feelings in her mind but they persisted and threatened to possess her.

Siqvoana tried to think of other things to try to shut out the feeling of despair. She began to wonder about Tikiaq. What was happening there? Has the terrible plague hit the huge village? The traveler from Kivaliniq was there. He had stopped before going up the Kukpuk River. Were her relatives and friends safe?

In thinking about these things the little woman had forgotten about her tiredness — her exhaustion. She suddenly felt it. She knew it was well over midnight.

She looked down at the umiak. It looked dark — still — silent in the darkness. There lay her children — her husband — all dead!

"We used to be so happy," she whispered. She convulsed with emotion — tears streaming down her face.

A Breath of Wind

A breath of wind hit Siqvoana's face. It was from the west. Without thinking about it, she gently lifted her sleeping daughter's head off her lap. She laid herself on her side facing the little girl and moved close. She tried to sleep but found herself wide awake.

After a long while, Siqvoana did fall asleep. Just before she did, she noticed that the breeze had increased.

The Smell of Death

"Mother! Mother! Wake up, mother!" "What's the matter, Olaqroaq?" Siqvoana answered with a start.

"I can't stand that smell. The wind is blowing it to us," the little girl said.

The woman was wide awake at once. The wind had shifted to the south and the umiak was directly in its path. She rose to her feet, took her daughter's hand and picked up the food bag. They moved westward away from the stench. It was still dark. Siqvoana did not know how long she had slept but she judged that it must not have been too long.

Signs of Storm

"My little one, I think a wind-

(Continued on Page 11)

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