

Uncle Nayukuk Casual Man—Angered Auntie

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By HOWARD ROCK
Times Editor

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"I can die of exasperation on account of that man in there," said Aunt Mumangeena tensely, half to herself and half to me. "I wish something would happen to jolt him out of his miserable laziness!"

She was hurriedly loading the sled with our camping gear and I was helping. Uncle Nayukuk was in our sod igloo looking for things he could not find. He had also taken an unusually long time to dress. Aunt Mumangeena was efficiently and quickly gathering the things we would need at the Kukput River grayling fishing grounds.

Journey Begins

My aunt and I started to hitch the seven dogs for a short trip to the north beach where my father's umiak was. Mumangeena had persuaded my parents into letting us use it, but had made a promise that we would take good care of it. "We'll take good care of it and we'll bring back plenty of fish for all of us," she had promised. They had made arrangements for some young men who had gone up the river helping their families to take the umiak back to Point Hope.

Just as Mumangeena finished hitching the last of the dogs, Nayukuk came out of the igloo. "You have been a great help this morning!" snapped Mumangeena sarcastically. "If you want to ride to the beach, mother here will drive you."

I winced at hearing "mother." After all, I was a big boy of nine years old. I had been named after my grandmother and Mumangeena never wavered from calling me that, even when I became a young man of fourteen when I left Point Hope to go to school. If she were alive today, there is no doubt she would have continued to call me "mother."

I drove the team to the beach while my aunt waddled hurriedly behind. Nayukuk walked casually. We dragged the umiak down to the water's edge and loaded it, including the sled. Mumangeena had planned to stay through the month of November "so Nayukuk can trap

foxes."

Ideal Weather

It was still early in the morning and the people in the village were just beginning to stir. There was a light breeze from the southeast and the water on the north beach was calm with only gentle swells rolling. It was ideal for traveling.

A long line was tied about seven feet back of the bow on the right side to a plank seat and a brace of the umiak. The other end was tied to the team. When everything was in readiness, Mumangeena said to her husband, "you better stay with the team on the beach and I'll steer the umiak. The dogs might get tangled up."

"Let your 'mother' do it for a while," Nayukuk said quietly. I was so taken aback that I almost shouted, "Don't call me 'mother' Uncle Nayukuk!"

Mumangeena sputtered. She looked as if she was about to explode or tear her hair out.

I found myself tending to the team on the beach. The start was rather fast and I had to run holding on to the line just behing the team. I kept going like that on the soft gravel for about a mile and then I became exhausted. My endurance had not yet developed.

Easy Way Out

At my aunt's bidding, Nayukuk beached the umiak and I got on. Aunt Mumangeena made little sympathetic noises and said, "Mother, you are getting to be such a big help. That's more than I can say for that one back there."

Before we knew it, Uncle Nayukuk paddled the umiak backwards and turned it parallel with the beach and shouted, "Mush!" We had a good leader and the team responded and moved forward and the umiak with it. Mumangeena put her hands to her face. She looked as if she was about to break down and cry.

Trying Her Patience

Thus we traveled for about twelve miles until we reached the inlet leading to the mouth of the Kukput River. Once along the way, the dogs spotted a squirrel on a bank nearby and made a mad rush for it. The sudden pull of the line beached

the umiak abruptly. Nayukuk jumped off quickly and straightened the team out. He came back to the umiak and got into his position to steer. I was surprised when Aunt Mumangeena didn't say a word. Her expression told me that she was trying powerfully to keep from making an outburst.

The usually garrulous Mumangeena was very quiet. It was plain that she was keeping her pent-up emotions in check. Nayukuk was in his usual element, silent and reticent. I didn't make any noise either. I felt that if I shattered the silence, it would be too much.

From time to time, I glanced back at Nayukuk. He sat in his steering position, seemingly calm and relaxed. He smoked his pipe as he steered the umiak. He looked as if he was contented. He was a rather handsome man and he looked good, his black mustache brushing against his pipe, his hood turned down off his head.

The current in the inlet was swift and it made irregular waves. Nayukuk got off and got behind the team and helped pull while Mumangeena steered. When we reached calm water in a small bay, we beached the boat. Nayukuk loaded the dogs in the umiak and we paddled across the small bay close to the mouth of the river and landed on the north bank. Nayukuk unloaded the dogs and arranged them.

There was smooth ground for a lengthy distance up the river but Mumangeena said, "You better stay with the team from here on."

"I'll do that when we get to the high banks," replied Nayukuk.

Aunt Mumangeena didn't say a word but she gripped the gunwhale of the umiak hard.

After going about a mile, we reached a deep, narrow channel with rocky beaches on each side of it. The current was swift and the dogs ashore were pulling hard. Nayukuk and Mumangeena helped the team by paddling.

Death Fight

All of a sudden, the dog to the right of the tandem next to the leader pulled toward the water and disorganized the team.

We didn't know whether he wanted a drink of water or wanted something he saw on the beach. It was a fatal move for him.

As soon as it happened, the leader spun around, fangs bared and pounced on the dog. The dogs behind rushed forward and joined the fight. In seconds, there was a wild melee of fighting dogs. It started with loud growls. As it progressed there was no longer growling and all we could hear was loud breaths of the viciously fighting team. It meant only one thing—a fight to the death. Dogs reared, each one closing its terrible fangs on the other's neck or ear.

The dogfight stopped the progress of the umiak, of course, and the swift current made it difficult to handle. The current caught the bow and swung it outward from the shore. Nayukuk worked frantically and tried to head it toward the beach. The current against the umiak pulled the fighting dogs into the water but that did not deter the fierceness of the battle. Blood began to run down the current from the fighting dogs. Rasping breaths issued from bared fangs.

Battle Stopped

Aunt Mumangeena began to scream, "Get the umiak on the beach! Get the umiak on the beach!" Nayukuk worked frantically but with little success. Mumangeena kept shouting. It seemed an incredibly long time when Nayukuk finally nosed the umiak toward the beach. When we got to the shallow water, he jumped and ran splashing to the battling dogs. He took his paddle with him and started using it at once. In a minute or so, he splintered the paddle to bits but the dogs kept fighting. The water around them became red with blood. The belly of one of the dogs had been ripped open.

When the splintered paddle was no longer effective, Nayukuk grabbed rocks and started to throw them at the maddened dogs. He knocked one of them unconscious and soon afterward had the dogs under control.

Aftermath

The fight had taken its terrible toll. The dog that had disorganized the team did not get up but he was still alive. He laid in shallow water which was red now with his blood. The vicious fangs of his team members had literally torn him to a terrible mass of slashes and cuts.

Nayukuk cut the trace and pulled the mortally wounded dog out of the water. He went back to the umiak and said quietly, "He will never heal from his wounds." He got his rifle and went back to the dog and shot it.

Mumangeena got off the umiak and sat down on the beach. "We needn't have lost that dog and he was one of our best," she said. Her voice broke and she wept. My eyes blurred with tears. I also liked the dog. He was friendly and playful and he had been something of a pet to Mumangeena and me. He

was also a hard worker.

Horse Stolen

The team had gotten into a hopeless tangle during the fight and it took Nayukuk a long while to untangle them. Soon we were ready to get underway once again. There was no need to prod Nayukuk to attend to the team on the banks. He took to the job without comment and did it diligently. He had "locked the door after the horse was stolen" to be sure, but he did his work well and for several hours.

It was about 8 o'clock in the evening when Mumangeena shouted, "Let's camp on that beach ahead of us for the night."

Back to Normalcy

Nayukuk plodded ahead without seeming to hear but when we reached the beach, he stopped the team and pulled in the umiak. The dogs were tired and we had been traveling for more than twelve hours. We set up a small tent and Mumangeena fixed our evening meal. When it was ready, she said, "Mother, go tell your uncle to come and eat."

When the meal was over she said to Nayukuk, "You take off your mukluks so I can dry them for tomorrow."

She had begun to talk after a day of oppressive silence and the atmosphere became easy. She was on the way to becoming herself again after the day's ordeal and it was good.

"We have a hard day ahead of us," Turning to me Aunt Mumangeena said gently, "mother, you better go to bed and take a good rest."