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Wiseman

Alaska

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Dear Family et al -

Thanksgiving day was quite a holiday in Wiseman. While people did not come from as great distances to celebrate this occasion as they did to exert their franchise on Election Day, while the festivities did not begin until evening and although everyone did work all through the day just like any other, still, sooner or later some 59 out of 88 people at present residing in the Wiseman district were in town and joining in the hilarity. In all this hilarity, I might add, there was not the slightest evidence that anyone was acquainted with the theoretical significance of Thanksgiving Day. The holiday meant two things: eating and dancing.

As for eating, half a dozen of the people had big dinners including one at the roadhouse to which everyone without an invitation to a private affair and with \$1.50 repaired. I was invited out to the cream of all the affairs, at Green's home, and I say this for reasons other than that we had genuine cold storage turkey and fresh canned asparagus tips. This dinner, at which only eight people were present, included among its guests all four of the chickens residing in the Upper Koyukuk, an area half again as big as Belgium and just about the size of Massachusetts and New Hampshire combined. A chicken in Koyukuk parlance refers to any female toward whom it would be possible for a normal man under favorable conditions to feel an erotic emotion. Roughly speaking it embraces every woman over ten years of age who has not gone through change-of-life or borne more than three children. The four chickens were: Mamie Green, 22, the hostess and half-breed eskimo-Jap wife of the Marshal for the Koyukuk District; Clara Carpenter, 22, white schoolteacher who has to sit out all the dances because her brother Lew won't let her dissipate; Lucy Jonas, 14, fifth grade eskimo schoolgirl, whose looks are improving more rapidly than her scholarship; and Jennie Suckik, 14, fresh from down river, remarkably beautiful, and just starting in the first grade. The women were all dressed up, which meant they wore about the clothes a girl outside would wear for a tea dance. The men were also all dressed up, which meant they had on clean flannel shirts. The conversation wasn't dressed up at all. It consisted almost entirely of banter and jocular comments and some fairly clever repartee. The meal was delicious. There were no unusual events except when Jennie, who sat beside me, accidentally skidded a turkey drumstick into my lap.

I will not describe the dance which commenced at 9:05 P. M. and broke up at 7:10 A. M., as I have already described one. Instead I will present to you the data from a little study I made. I thought it would be interesting to get a cross-section of small talk at the Wiseman balls. In order to get a fair sample I determined to dance in order with each of the 11 women who were on the floor that night and after every dance was over I would sit out one and write down verbatim the most interesting features of our conversation. As much as possible I tried to let my partners take the lead in conversation, but with some of them I was not very successful. I have placed in parenthesis the English translation

of conversations carried on in the native tongue. The following bits of conversation are what actually passed between my partners and myself from three to four o'clock that morning, as we glided around the floor of the Pioneer Hall.

(Bessie Suckik is the mother of Jennie, a Koyukuk Indian and not an Eskimo, but married to Big Charlie who is an Eskimo. She is 33, looks to be about 50, and is the best dancer in Wiseman. She has gone through many misfortunes, including the loss of two of her three children from T. B. She drinks heavily, when she can get anything and smokes cigarettes.).

Bob - Does Jennie smoke?

Bessie - No, no, nothing doing, she's not going to have bad habits like her Mamma.

Bob - Oh, so on, you don't call smoking a bad habit.

Bessie - Sure I do for little girl only 14. When she grows up then it's her business whether she wants to smoke but when she's still just girl I look after her. Whenever a child goes wrong it's her parents' fault. She can't help it, she can't be different than what the people are around her.

Bob - That's certainly true, Bessie. But what do you do when she won't mind you.

Bessie - She always mind me. I never scold her. Scolding does no good. Charlie and I, we're just as kind to her as we know how. Then she like us and there's no trouble. Maybe we spoil her but I think she's pretty good girl.

(Nakukluk is an old Eskimo, about 60 years of age, dried, inebriate, but remarkably sprightly and jolly. She has lived among the white men for thirty years without ever absorbing much of their language or their ways. She has been married three times and is at present the wife of Big Jim, leader among the Wiseman natives).

Nakukluk (beaming all over after I had swung her rapidly around three times with her feet only touching the ground occasionally)- Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee! Auriga! (Whee! Fine!).

Bob - Aurigakurunga! Aulalautak tutin. (Swell! You dance splendidly).

N. - Ahee! Urunga imuklutuk (oh my! I'm all wrinkled up).

Bob - Naga, illwitch nakuruk apas. (No, you're very pretty).

Nakukluk - A'*chi-ga'! (What you say fills me with a sort of amused wonder. I do not mean to call you a liar and yet there is that about what you have told me which impresses me as being peculiar, to say the least. So I will maintain a neutral position, refusing to pass final judgment on whether you are crazy or whether nature has merely brought together a strange concatenation of circumstances which entirely transcend any experiences which have thus far given me my ideas of the respective domain of the possible and impossible).

This is the briefest translation I can make to give you the proper connotation of that immensely useful little eskimo word, a'-chi-ga'.

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Mamie Green - Isn't it a shame there, Miss Carpenter has to sit out all the dance and she wants to dance so bad.

Bob - It's all the fault of that big brother of hers.

Mamie - If he was my brother I'd tell him to go to hell.

Bob - Sure you would, but Clara hasn't got your spunk, Mamie.

Mamie - Yes, did you see the way when Miss Carpenter and me started to dance together how quick she dropped me when she heard Lew coming. The big stiff!

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Bob - Hozone zekakis (This is Koyukuk Indian dialect, entirely different from Eskimo). (You dance fine).

Jennie - He-he-he-he-he-he-he-he! (or however you spell a girlish giggle). Where you learn that?

Bob - Oh, your Mamma teaches me lots of things you don't know anything about. Do you talk Koyukuk as well as she does?

Jennie - Yes, I talk Koyukuk, but not as good as she. Papa doesn't talk Koyukuk so we speak English at home.

Bob (dance ending)- Berci. (Thank you).

Jennie - He-he-he-he-he-he-he-he!

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(Mrs. Wilson, or Keepuk as she is called in her native Kobuk language, married Ase Wilcox a white hunter about 25 years ago. She had previously borne three children to three other men. They have one son going to the college in Fairbanks).

Bob - You having good time, Keepuk?

Keepuk - Me no like it, Ase not here.

Bob - Yes, that's a shame but I guess he'll be back Christmas.

Keepuk - Me not like other womens, have good time any man. I lose Ase, I no marry again. I no want two times married.

Bob - But - why, I thought you have three children before you marry Ase.

Keepuk - Me live with other mans. Me have children with other mans. Me no marry other mans. Me only use them.

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(Kalhabuk, or Mrs. Jonas, is the mother of Lucy. She is one of the strongest people in Wiseman, male or female, also one of the most good natured, easy going and dumb).

Bob - Aulaluk, Kalhabuk (Let's you and I dance together, Kalhabuk).

Kalhabuk - Auriga. (Fine!)

Bob - Gee, what's the matter, you look all sleepy and it's only three o'clock.

Kalhabuk - Nuvuk. (A cold).

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Lucy Jonas - Look at that old man (Hughie Boyle, who suffers from palsy) how his hand shakes.

Bob - Yes, but he dances fine, doesn't he?

Lucy - No, he tickles too much when he shakes.----- When you play that game with me? (Giving her Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test).

Bob - Any time you come over.

Lucy - I come over Sunday maybe.

Bob - That'll be fine. I'll be there waiting.

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(Kobuk Mary is the wife of Bill English, white storekeeper. She started in school a year ago at the age of 47 and is now in the Second Grade. Her eight year old son, Willie, is in the Fourth Grade while her granddaughter, aged 5, is in the First Grade).

Mary - How you like Kobuk dance?

Bob - Great! It beats the white dances all hollow, there's so much more energy and feeling and action in it.

Mary - I like them both, native, white dance, all the same. But I too busy. No time dance.

Bob - Pegechuk! (No good!) you don't want to work all the time. You got to play sometime.

Mary - Long time ago I dance all time, long time ago. Now I seem work all time. Can't help it. Get meals for Willie and me, clean house, go to school, make moccasins, clean up for Joe's kids. Takes lots of time.

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(In the old days of prostitution Mabel was known as the hardest-boiled sport on the row. Now she is married to Ed Marsan. She was the only white woman at this dance).

Mabel - You don't look to be the least bit tired yet, Bob.

Bob - You seem to be holding out pretty strong yourself, Mabel.

Mabel - I'm just beginning to dance.

Bob - I haven't even begun.

Mabel - Ain't it the truth, though.

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(Selina is the wife of Riley, a young Point Barrow native whom the traders up there presented with his hibernian name. She is not yet 30 but the bearing of four kids out in the wilderness has gone so hard with her you would guess she was 45. She can't speak any English).

Bob - Riley imnech-ak tuk? (Did Riley kill any caribou?)

Selina - E! Pinneshut. (Yes! Three).

Bob - Anee, Kapkanalo Capulo illillegak polluk (My, Nellie and Capune are big children).

Selina - E! Illilligak auriga. (Yes! They're fine children).

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(Lucy Sackett started in the first grade at the age of 22 and took $2\frac{1}{2}$ years to get through it. Since then she has done finely, however, and is now starting in the Third Grade at the age of 26. Prior to her scholastic career she married one Louis Sackett who ditched her after a year and disappeared in the Arctic. Her native name is Kupuk, while she is referred to by many as Brokenback Lucy because of a spinal deformity).

Lucy - Why you no dance with me more?

Bob - So many ladies! Lots of ladies! I got to dance with all of them too or they be insulted.

Lucy - Koyukpin. (Let's go to bed together).

Bob - Kanga! Kanga! Now-lu-gigga. (No! No! I don't know how).

Lucy - A' chi ga'! Eeli-shoutli-lukpin. (A' chi ga'! I'll teach you how).

Bob - Koya runga, naga, annakabuk eeli - na-ginga. (Thank you, but no,

I don't want to learn tonight).

II

The short days are here. On December sixth half of the sun skidded along the southern horizon for ten minutes and then disappeared, not to return again until January sixth. But even without any sun the days are not as short as I had supposed. The daily schedule of light runs about like this if the weather is clear.

First color in southern sky	8:00 A. M.
Start of daylight	9:10 A. M.
Reading possible without artificial light and without straining eyes if one sits immediately adjacent to South facing window	11:10 A.M.-12:40 P.M.
Last daylight	2:40 P. M.
Last color departs from southern sky	3:50 P. M.

On cloudy days subtract from half an hour to an hour all the way around, which means you burn your light all day long. I have defined daylight as that amount of light necessary for trees to appear three-dimensional and colored, in contrast to darkness, when they are merely flat, black objects against the sky or snow. In spite of the fact that they tell you here that when the full moon comes at this time of year it is almost as bright at midnight as at mid-day, nevertheless this is an exaggeration. Objects, even by full moon, never graduate from the two-dimensional, colorless class. But it is bright enough that you can read plainly, provided you can stand the cold. One midnight by moonlight I read two pages of Mrs. Dalloway in the fairly fine print of the Modern Library.

Whenever the nights are clear there are auroras. You take them as much for granted as you would starlight outside and only become especially thrilled when there is unusual coloration to them. By daytime the continuous sunrise-sunset in the southern sky is a genuine joy whenever you look in that direction. The other afternoon, coming back from Hammond River, just at dusk, the trail swung out on a high point overlooking the Middle Fork, and there below me was a barren plain of snow stretching half a mile through the twilight to the cold-black forest. Beyond that was the most gorgeous sunset you can imagine, a whole sky warm and glowing, and everything so quiet and beautiful that I wondered what commensurate value the outside world could possibly provide.

III

But life in here is not all sunsets and auroras, as witness the case of Jack White. For 23 years Jack has been freighting in here, hauling supplies by scow in summer from Bettles at the head of power navigation to Wiseman and hauling wood and freight in winter out to the mines. Day in, day out, he has bucked weather and obstacles which would have laid most men in their graves long ago.

Jack is noted alike for his generosity and his vindictiveness. Many a poverty stricken prospector has had all his supplies hauled for nothing by Jack when he rightly could have charged several hundred dollars. But if

Jack ever gets it in for you, then beware. He never forgives and one of his chief joys seems to be getting revenge. To this end he doesn't care how much of his own effort and money he may have to sacrifice. A few years ago one of the freighters on the river had his best horse disappear. The Marshal suspected Jack of having shot the horse, which filled Jack with the most virulent enmity. One day it was reported to the Marshal that a large hole had been dug and freshly filled in on Jack White's ranch. "Aha", thought the Marshal, "I knew Jack killed the horse and now he's trying to hide the remains." So he took two men and the three of them worked half a day digging up the hole which was very deep. When they finally reached the bottom they found, instead of a horse, a large log on which had been tacked this note: "Damn Fools." Jack must have spent at least a whole day of hard work just for the sake of causing this irritation.

Jack is a great monopolist. His ambition ever since he came to the Koyukuk in 1908 seems to have been to get complete control of freighting on the River. Every time some other freighter went out of business he would buy up all his old scows and machinery for fear someone else might start in freighting with them. He owns every cabin along the river for 70 miles from Bettles to Coldfoot. He probably has paid \$30,000. for junk of this sort which has now virtually no sale value. But he has complete control of the River, there's not another freighter on it. Only, alas, Wiseman has declined so in recent years that there isn't enough freight left to make money for even one man.

No one in the Koyukuk can ever remember observing Jack follow advice. He often does very ridiculous and costly things just so that no one will think he was acting on another person's suggestion. He can outcuss any man in Wiseman, which is natural considering that he worked around lumber camps from the time he was 12 years old until he came to Alaska in 1901 at the age of 27. But strangely enough for a person with lumberjack rearing he never plays cards, dances, smokes or drinks.

A few years ago he married Igar Minano, sister of Mamie Green. They lasted together about one year. Jack's attitude toward women is that they were created to be man's slaves. Consequently, he became exasperated when Igar, who was only a girl and loved dancing better than anything else, wanted to go to the dances.

"I told her," he once said to me, "that if I didn't have to dance she certainly didn't. I gave her everything she could possibly ask for: all the food she wanted and credit at the store which she never in God's world had before and a dog team and fine cabins to live in." He became furiously jealous if she ever smiled at another man. He went away from her for long periods, perhaps a couple of months, while freighting on the river and expected her to stay home alone without ever going out to visit. Since Igar divorced him he has taken it out by branding the whole Eskimo race as completely degenerate in every moral and mental characteristic.

Shortly before Thanksgiving he came up river with the right side of his throat all swollen. Somebody advised him that he'd better do something about it to which Jack replied that he wasn't going to let any god damn little swelling on his neck interfere with his plans. Two days later he could hardly swallow so he sent for help.

The three local doctors are: (1) Jack Hood, who is one of those practical quacks, who pick up all their knowledge of medicine through careful observation and a little sporadic reading. He is supposed to be almost infallible in predicting when someone will die, probably because he makes such a vaticination for everybody who is at all ill; (2) Vaughan Green, who was nurse and first aid man for three years at the old railroad hospital in Nenana; (3) Minnie Wilson, who was a trained nurse in Salt Lake City before she came to Alaska to enter into a career of prostitution which eventually sloughed off into marriage.

Now Jack White had no faith at all in Jack Hood. Minnie was seven miles away with her husband on Emma Creek. Vaughan was suffering from a heart attack. So I was called in. The diagnosis was plainly quinsy. I prescribed hot applications for the outside and saline gargles for the inside and castor-oil for the bowels and a slop bucket for the sputum.

But Jack kept getting worse and the quinsy, instead of breaking in three to seven days as the books told us it should, dragged on for more than two weeks. Vaughan got better and came on the case; we sent down to Emma Creek for Mrs. Wilson. It was necessary to have someone with Jack all the time so practically every white man in town contributed hours to this unpleasant task as well as cutting Jack's wood, carrying his water, caring for his horse and dogs. But still he kept getting worse. His throat had swelled up so he couldn't swallow anything but ice water. None of us felt competent to make an incision down there. We wanted to send him out to Fairbanks to the hospital but the weather remained so continuously abominable that no airplane could come in. Vaughan wirelessed for advice to the doctor at Ft. Yukon and he recommended exactly what we were doing.

Jack's pain was so great that for days he didn't sleep for more than five minutes at a time. I remember one night when Mrs. Wilson and I furtively slipped him a morphine shot, furtively because Mrs. Wilson who had lived for 21 years amid Wiseman gossip was afraid of the talk which would go the rounds if it became known we had given Jack dope. He got a good night's rest, which seemed to bolster greatly his failing strength. But he was still so weak he could hardly even swear. He would moan: "If I could only get a little sleep;" or "How many times I've laid down here in the evening, stretched out here until morning, all sleep." I would think grimly of Lady Macbeth as I sat through the long evening in that rusty, messy cabin, most cheerless looking place in the world for a sick person to lie.

Sometimes he would ramble back to his childhood days, nearly fifty years before. "I remember, just in dusk of evening, when the buckwheat was flowering, how the deer used to come down to feed." ----- "We'd go up to those wild, burnt mountains back in the Alleghenies every summer with baskets and baskets and boxes, all full of food, stews and chowders and mince pies and everything, and there'd be miles and miles just thick with blueberries, blueberries, blueberries, and we'd pick all day long and eat and laugh and have a good time all night." It was all said in a low, droning, yearning voice such as a man who had just lost a wife with whom he had lived for half a century might recall their honeymoon.

On a Wednesday at eleven in the morning, while Jack was at his worst, old Nakukluk came in to see him. She placed her two hands on either

side of his neck and then forced them towards herself, as if she were pushing against a great weight. Then she blew violently on her hands. After that the process was repeated. On Thursday at the same hour she came back again and went through a long prayer. Jack was so disgusted he threw a pillow over his head. That afternoon Nakukluk met Clara Carpenter. Clara commented on how sick Jack was. Nakukluk replied confidently: "He very sick all right, but me think he get better tomorrow."

Sure enough, on Friday at exactly eleven Jack's quinsy broke inside the throat with a stench which nearly drove him and his nurses to distraction. The pus drained out rapidly and in a week he was so much better that Mrs. Wilson went home. His profanity coefficient increased steadily. For the benefit of my medical friends, who may some day be stranded with a similar patient without any thermometer, I will present in Table 1 the results of a little study I made.

Table 1.

Relation of profanity and physical condition in illness of Jack White

Date	No. of Profane and Obscene Words per Minute	Physical Condition
Dec. 3	1.8	Desperately ill
Dec. 4	0.3	A tossup between life and death
Dec. 5	2.7	Quinsy breaks.
Dec. 6	4.1	Much better.
Dec. 7	7.3	Out of danger.
Dec. 8	9.6	Greatly improved.
Dec. 9	8.4	24 hr. nursing schedule discontinued

Measurements were made in the evening around eight o'clock for a ten-minute period. Normal for Jack had previously been accidentally determined as 8.2 words per minute. I would suggest that for the effective use of this method for diagnostic purposes it will first be necessary to have the patients calibrated when in normal health. For this reason I would like to urge the establishment of a Public Profanity Clinic where these vital data may be obtained.

But all was not over yet. The day after Mrs. Wilson went home Jack's neck started to swell on the outside. In two days there was a protruding lump about the size and color of an apple. The inflamed area extended all the way from his breast bone to his ear. By this time the weather had cleared up. We urged Jack to send for a plane right away and go where he could get proper treatment.

But now there was another obstacle. Apropos of a dispute over the payment for a fence, it was reported to Jack White during his illness that Mabel Marsan had said: "I hope the son-of-a-bitch dies." I won't pass judgment on whether she really said this or not. For nearly a week

Wiseman was divided good naturedly (except for a few of the principals) into pro-son-of-a-bitch and anti-son-of-a-bitch factions, with no final decision reached. But Jack had no doubts and he was going to get even at any cost. The Marsans had been occupying one of his cabins. He had the Marshal (Vaughan) serve dispossession notice on them requiring them to vacate the premises within ten days. It was during this ten day period that his relapse occurred. We were very much afraid that in Jack's weakened condition general blood poisoning might set in. So we pleaded with Jack to let us send for a plane immediately while the good weather lasted.

Jack was adamant. Nothing in God's world would get him to leave Wiseman until he had made sure the Marsans would be driven from his house.

I said: "Surely, Jack, you wouldn't let a little revenge interfere if it was a case of life or death."

Jack replied: "I'd drive those god damn bastards out of that house if I knew I was going to die the next hour."

Finally, however, his neck became so frightfully painful he gave Billie Burke his power-of-attorney and ordered the plane. The same day the storms commenced again.

With a plane now out of the question and the abscess well ripened, Vaughan determined to lance while I acted as nurse. Half a plateful of pus came out in the first gush and it kept on draining steadily for a week. There is now very little swelling and no pain left. Vaughan thinks that all Jack's troubles are over but I have a feeling that Jack is due for another relapse, that probably he is suffering from some deep infection of the neck which will only yield to major surgery.

There is just one more incident I would like to relate before closing this story of Jack White. One evening, while Jack was convalescing from this second abscess, he suddenly started to hunt around for something down in a wooden box which was filled with an amazing miscellany of old junk. Finally he located a dirty old money bag. He opened it and rolled a single nugget on the table.

"Look carefully at this nugget, Bob," he said. "It's worth five dollars six bits and it cost me \$20,000 and the best part of a life."

"How was that Jack," of course I inquired.

"I had a claim over in the Council country. I sunk a prospect hole and it looked so darn good the manager of the Wild Goose Company - you heard of it? - offered me \$60,000. for my ground, \$20,000. down in spot cash and the rest as royalties if they made anything. Of course I never would have gotten them but I would have had my \$20,000. I could have gone right back to Washington and I would have had at least \$15,000. left when I got there. I was stuck on a girl out there and I was stuck on a hundred acre ranch in the Methow Valley and we were going to live there if I could make \$5,000. to buy the place. But there were a couple of old bastards living in a cabin with me. They said: 'You're crazy to sell for that. Why don't you work it yourself and keep all the profits instead of giving most of them to the Wild Goose Company. You could get quarter

of a million from that ground.' So I took their advice, god damn fool, and worked the ground myself and this little nugget here is all I ever got out of it.

"Well, after that I got so disgusted I never wrote to that girl again. If I hadn't followed those old men's advice, if I'd only been living alone in a cabin, I'd have been back inside a year with a stake and a wife and a comfortable home away from this god damn freezing country. That's why I'm so god damn or'ney, Bob. That's why I won't ever listen to anyone's advice again. That's why I get so sore at any god damn bastard who puts his nose in my business."

IV

December 28, 1930.

Now I am half exhausted and contemplating a trip to the Arctic slope for a rest cure. It is in the midst of Wiseman's Christmas orgy of dancing. Christmas Eve we commenced right after a rather remarkable program put on by the ten Eskimo schoolchildren under the direction of Clara Carpenter and the distribution of presents from the Christmas tree. We danced that night from 9:00 P. M. to 5:50 A. M. On Christmas Night dancing started at 8:30 and lasted until 7:55 the next morning. The past two nights have been merely tapering off: from 8:30 to midnight on the first and from 8:00 to 11:15 the second. But New Years Eve is close at hand and that will mean another all night session.

More sensational than the program of the schoolchildren or the supper at the Roadhouse at which 41 were present or the Kobuk Dance to take part in which Big Jim and Nakukluk had been training me for two weeks, was the dancing of Anna Koyak.

Anna had drifted into town the end of November with her husband and two little children, fresh from the tundra of the Arctic Coast. She is a girl of perhaps 22. Her first husband perished a couple of years ago when out on the ice hunting for driftwood. All trace Anna ever found was his footprints leading to the edge of a hole in the ice. She fought her way somehow to Pt. Barrow, one baby on her sled, the other still inside her. At Barrow she met Johnny, her present husband and last summer they started migrating southward.

People around here say that Anna is the best looking native girl ever in the Koyukuk. I think she is one of the most beautiful girls of any race I have ever seen. Just what her race is I am not certain, because I believe there must be a strong admixture of Russian blood with the Eskimo.

Anyway, after a month's lessons from Mamie Green, Anna started to dance during the Christmas hilarity. She was a little bit clumsy still, it is true, but all the fellows in camp rushed eagerly for a chance to dance with her. All at once Mamie and Lucy and Jennie found themselves displaced as queens of the Wiseman dance floor. For all I know there may be a world war raging, President Hoover may have been assassinated, unemployment outside may have reached unprecedented dimensions, but the news of all these events would be eclipsed in importance in Wiseman by the advent of a new chicken, fresh hatched from the tundra of the North.

As ever,
Bob.