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WISEMAN
ALASKA

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I.

Dear Family et al:

Since nothing very thrilling has happened during January, other than the return of the sun after an absence of a month, I shall devote this letter to making you better acquainted with some of my Eskimo friends.

Of course the place to begin is at the cabin of Big Jim and Nakuchluk, for this is the center, social, spiritual, and economic, of the native population of Wiseman. I think the economic is most important, for I can't see any other sufficient reason for Jim's immense prestige among the natives here, which makes most of them look up to him for leadership in all the important problems which confront them. He is not a medicine man: there are none in Wiseman. He is not the oldest native here: that superlative belongs to Oxadak. He is not the best musher: that honor goes to Riley. He is not the ablest hunter: Harry Snowden beats him in that respect. And of course Big Charlie and Jonas have the pretty daughters. But one thing Jim always has possessed has been an amazing amount of energy which has sent him out to the trap lines, out on the hunt, down the river hauling freight, when the other natives were idling around town. In addition, his word has always been scrupulously kept, so that the store has given him large credits. Consequently, Jim has invariably had more food, more worldly wealth in general than any of the other natives. With the prevalent Eskimo custom of potlatching, dividing up whenever one has more than the others, Big Jim has been the principle support of the entire Eskimo community. Many winters Jonas, who is perhaps the laziest man in the world, has fed his whole family of six, principally on the meat which Big Jim has shot. In addition to this economic prestige Jim is wise, kind, and without favoritism, so it is quite natural that he should be the leader, and his large, clean cabin the communal center of the Eskimos of Wiseman.

Perhaps some night, after supper and half an hour of chewing the rag around the roadhouse, I decide to pay Big Jim a visit. So I start across the town. First, down the main street, across the Wiseman Creek bridge, with yellow light pouring out on the snow from a couple of cabins to my right, and moonlight flooding the whole frozen valley of the river to my left. Then at the store I turn and cut diagonally back from the river, passing more snowcovered cabins with cheery lamplight in the windows, and also several deserted ones, looking even by moonlight very black and cold. All the while the bright waves of the aurora flicker in the sky overhead, and the stars twinkle in the thirty below air like shuttering magnesium powder.

I open the door to Jim's cache, which serves for the storage of all non-perishables as well as for a vestibule, and then open the inner door and enter the house. Jim smiles cordially and says a hearty Konnowitbitch (how are you?), and of course I reply Nakurunga (I am fine.) Nakuchluk laughs, says Alapas (it's cold), and I say Alapas apie apie (it's too cold), and then everybody laughs and they all continue with what they were talking about when I entered.

My Eskimo vocabulary is still so limited (only about 700 words) that it is quite an effort to follow the conversation at all, and try as I will, I continually lose the train of thought altogether. So I will take the easier course and describe what I observe after I repose myself on the floor, perhaps beside Cupuk.

At one end of the single room of the large cabin, which measures 14 x 32 feet, all the women are seated on the floor. Nakuchluk is working on some skins, scraping them thin with an amazing collection of homemade instruments, some iron, some bone, some obsidian. She sits with her legs straight out in front of her, her body bent forward, her head bowed over the skin on which she is working. She is a little, dried up old woman, wrinkles all over her face, but with the sweetest childish smile. All the while she works she hums, except when she breaks into the conversation, which is often.

Beside her, smoking an 18 inch long pipe, with legs also straight in front of her, sits old Utoyak, most elderly woman in camp. She is probably about 70. She is very quiet, seldom smiles, seldom even sings. Although she has lived intermittently among the Whites for a dozen years I have never heard her speak even one word of English. I think she is entering dotage, and I imagine that her mind strays most the time over the windswept tundra to the north where she wandered for more than half a century. She is the most tattooed woman in camp, with five blue lines running from her lower lip to the tip of her chin, whereas her closest rival, Nakuchluk, has only got three to beautify this part of her face.

Beyond Utoyak sits Kalhabuk, youthful mother of four strapping Jonas children, and wife of the Lazy Jonas. She is the most powerful woman I have ever known. When the store burned down four years ago, and all the people around carried out everything they could in the few minutes before they were driven out, Kalhabuk emerged several times with an hundred pound sack of flour on her shoulder and a fifty pound sack under one arm. I am sure she could lick three out of four men in Wiseman in a fight. But the test could never come off, because she is the most placid of mortals, and takes everything as it comes along in the greatest good humor, including Jonas' indolence. If you ask her why she doesn't make him work she replies vaguely: "Oh, that's all right." She exerts almost no parental authority over her children. She is simply crazy over her daughter Lucy, and would, I believe, sacrifice almost anything to make her happy. She sits there with a cynical smile on her face, unless she is laughing or yawning, and peacefully smokes her pipe.

Between me and Kalhabuk sits Cupuk. She is about 26. She married Louis Sackett, a native from Alatna, who soon after ditched her and left for the Kobuk. Her face is homely, her back deformed, her temper rather fiery, her I.Q. low, so the poor girl has had rather a hard time picking up another man. Externally she keeps up a jolly, lively appearance, and as I sit beside her she jokes, and nudges me, and whispers about licentious dreams, but I know that underneath she is terribly depressed.

In the center of the room, facing the women, Big Jim, Oxadak, and Arctic Johnie sit on chairs. Big Jim is about 65. He has closely cropped gray hair, bright eyes, a protruding jaw with a little stubble on it. On either side of his mouth are two holes into which he used to insert ivory ornaments for the dance. One hole has all closed up, but you can observe soup oozing through the other when he eats. His clearly enunciated voice is always the dominant one in the conversation. His wrinkled forehead and a worried look in his eyes make you feel he must have known great tragedy, until he smiles when you forget everything except his sincere geniality.

Oxadak is a couple of years older. He is Utoyak's husband. He speaks hardly any English either, but is much jollier than his wife. He has a deep, base voice, in striking contrast to the high pitched voices of the other Eskimos. Arctic Johnie, his adopted son, is a surly looking native of perhaps 35 years. He seems solemn and morose, and this impression is accentuated by his very dark skin, the other Eskimos here being as light as dark complexioned Whites. He dresses exquisitely, mostly in

furs, and seems to take great pride in his personal appearance. About ten years ago he brought down his wife, Louise, from the Arctic and she refused to go back with him. This November he came in with his wife, Annie.

I sit beside Cupuk and watch them all: Big Jim and Oxadak talking in loud, guttural voices together; Nakuchluk working; Utoyak smoking her pipe; Kalhabuk smiling across at me; Cupuk whispering about the dream she had last night; all the women, now chattering together, now singing in a low voice, now breaking into the conversation of the men. Very frequently everybody in the room rocks with laughter. Sometimes Big Jim tells me in English what the joke was about. Here is one typical story, in the exact words which he used to explain it, which caused everybody to roar, made Big Jim pretty nearly break down laughing before he could finish it, and almost compelled Nakuchluk to choke. Remember that him, as the Eskimos use it, means it as well as him.

"Long time ago, me young man, six men go hunt. Take him along fish, take him along seal oil, pack them over. Pretty soon no more grub, all gone, he no last long, somebody get him little bit of flour from ship. No steamboat. Ship.

"Make camp, old man get him over close to fire all time, no one else get close. Take off parky, all time close fire. Turn one side to fire, turn other side to fire, no keep him warm. Young man fix it up, mix him flour in frying pan, no grease in it, put him on fire. Says, 'Here, old man. You all time too close fire, you hold him pan.' Old man says he no savvy make hot cake. Young fellow give it to him right away, says: 'You hold it.'

"Pretty soon hot cake burn him on bottom. Young fellow says: 'You turn him. Move him.' Hot cake no cook him on top at all. Old man shake him little bit higher, little bit higher, little more up, up, up, up, up above him head, (all the while Jim talks his whole attention is concentrated in acting out what he is telling, the old man shaking the frying pan and gradually raising it until it is high above his head, and at the same time nervously uncertain of how he should flap the hot cake over) pretty soon throw him up, pretty soon (hot cake) fall, hit him over head, old man turn head round, pretty soon he (hot cake) roll him down back of head. Hot cake stick him there on neck behind, no parky, no nothing. Everybody laugh then, old man roll down in snow, take him out. Old man no mad, he laugh too."

Stories like this, of funny or ridiculous experiences, both of themselves and their friends, form one of their favorite subjects of conversation. Hunting experiences, and especially current discussions of where the game is now are of special interest. So too are geographical discussions, how the rivers fork, where the passes lie, where the niggerheads are especially bad. But the favorite topic of all seems to be gossip, for they are for the most part very catty, and always are down on at least one of their number about whom they can't make mean enough remarks.

Often late in the evening Jim will bring in the bass drum, while Oxadak and Johnie will take the little ones, and then everyone joins in singing until the rafters fairly ring to the stirring music of Tunga Chunga and A Yah Yah E Yah.

II.

When Big Jim was still a young man in his native Sellawik country along Kotzebue sound, just north of the Bering Straits, he fell under the influence of the Missionaries. Their teachings became the dominant force in his life. All the complexities of nature, all the perplexity of how the infinitely varied world he knew came to be, all the fear

provoking superstitions, were simply resolved in a perfect faith that a beneficent God, not so different in character than Jim himself only infinitely greater, had created the universe for the happiness of mankind. In a severe life in which young friends were continually being carried violently to death, in which beloved parents died and apparently rotted away, it was very consoling to learn that after death everybody would be reunited in an existence infinitely happier than that on earth. "We know nothing about all this, me no know how earth come, till me learn God business. Now me learn God business, everything fine."

But Jim's religion, which eases his mind of worries, and teaches him to live a life which sincerely strives to follow the admonitions of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, is far from a puritanical one. He decries the missions which forbid the natives to dance. He likes to see people happy all the time. He drinks when he can get something, though unlike almost all the other drinking natives, he almost never gets drunk. He smokes, dances, sings, has sexual intercourse, and isn't ashamed of any of them. He doesn't even resent his wife going to bed with whomever she wills when he is away. These liberal beliefs he claims to owe to the famous Archdeacon Stuck (first climber of Mount McKinley). I imagine if Jim were asked to name the three greatest people in the history of the world he would enumerate God, Jesus and Archdeacon Stuck.

Jim's morning program when he is out in the hills is as follows: "Just get up, pray first and sing little bit. He no forget anything you pray him, God. Some people forget him pray, no help him God. White people, native people, all same (to) God. All of us just like brothers. Then me build him fire. Pretty soon sing some more, singing good morning, sing pretty hard, open him lung, feel pretty good. Me never sick, sing hard morning. Feel fine. Nakuchluk sing too."

He is entirely fearless of any of the many dangers of the North. He is so exceedingly competent that despite sixty years of wandering in the wilderness he has never seriously frozen himself, never even suffered a single major injury. About five years ago he killed a bear near Coldfoot with an axe. When I asked him if he wasn't scared he replied: "Dogs scared, me no scared. Me scared of bear, he kill me all right. Me no scared, he no kill me."

Although Jim is no medicine man, he has many practical home remedies. Here is his attitude toward boils.

"I see him boiling business sickness lots. He bust, he no all come out, he grow again. You cut him, you no clean him good, bime by he come back again. You keep him rotten all time, put on rag, put on soap, chew up sinew, put him on, keep him warm with cotton, then pretty soon he get very rotten, you clean him good knife then, no more come out. Old man, me father and me father's father all teach him that. Call him boiling business."

Which in other words simply means, wait until the boil is ripe before lancing.

Both Jim and Nakuchluk have taken the kindest interest imaginable in me. Jim says: "You know me boy, Johnie? You all same me boy." And Nakuchluk says: "Me be your mamma." So they have done the loveliest sort of unexpected things, brought me old trinkets which they took from the Arctic, made fancy gloves and fur boots for me, shown me how to make fire without matches. Especially Jim has delighted in teaching me how to talk, how to sing, how to dance in Kobuk fashion. He is a severe teacher in that he insists that what he teaches be learned exactly right. He may take few minutes to get me to say a single word just correctly. He makes me watch his lips, shows me where his tongue is placed for each sound. If I make the slightest mistake

he shakes his head and says: "No good. No good at all." But when I get it right he beams all over, as if he'd just gotten a silver fox in his trap, and he encourages me to further effort with his happy "auriga!" He had a terrible job teaching me to dance, my rythmical sense being so poorly developed, but he would encourage me with remarks like: "Learn to sing, dance together just like telegraph. Hard work at first. Pretty soon you learn him, no more hard work, fun all time."

III.

Ike Spinks told me that I must be sure to get the story from Nakuchluk of how Peluk, her first husband, disappeared. Ike said the only way to get it really right was to wait until Big Jim was gone some night, and then go to bed with the old woman. I didn't think it was necessary to adopt such heroic measures, but I did think she might be less inhibited in telling her tale if Jim wasn't around, so I came over one evening when Jim was off to the Mosquito Fork. This is the story I got, about one quarter from her Eskimo, about one half from her English, and about quarter from Cupuk's excellent translations.

The whole trouble commenced one spring, some thirty-three years ago, when an unknown Eskimo, encamped on the tundra along the Arctic Coast, heaved a stone at his dogs who were barking. Now it chanced that the trajectory of this missile, instead of carrying it to the ribs of one of the raucous canines, collided with the skull of a passing Eskimo named Mukollik. Mukollik dropped unconscious to the ground, and his loving wife, Missonik, rushed posthaste to Peluk, who was a great Medicine man.

Please do not think I am exaggerating his prominence. I will quote you one little example of his miraculous ability, just as his own wife Nakuchluk told me about it, to prove to you his potency. "Man sick. Peluk put big bugs on him, big bugs. Pretty soon he take them off, swallow them himself, bime by vomit them up. Man get all better again, pretty soon he all well."

As soon as Peluk saw Mukollik he realized his case was very grave. But extraordinary conditions may sometimes be cured by extraordinary measures, so he prescribed this unusual treatment, that he, Peluk, should have sexual intercourse with Mukollik's wife, Nevertheless, Mukollik died.

Now Tunach, the devil, was exceedingly wrath for he did not approve of adultery with the prospective widow as a treatment for a fractured skull. So he gave Peluk to understand that he had better beware. Then Peluk explained to Nakuchluk that Tunach would surely get him if she ever let Peluk get out of her sight, that to circumvent Tunach she must always follow Peluk wherever he went. Peluk also told Nakuchluk that if Tunach ever did capture him he would try his best to get back, but that she must never allow any men to live with her or he could not return.

In the autumn of that year Peluk and Nakuchluk headed for the Arctic divide to try their luck on the Koyukuk. They crossed over at the head of John River, and food having run short, spent some time there snaring rabbits and ptarmigan. One day they spied some caribou on the hillside a short distance above them. This was rare luck, and Peluk hastened to get his gun. He left Nakuchluk to attend to the snares, but cautioned her to keep an eye on him constantly.

She watched him mount the hill, but as he approached the caribou they started to walk away. Pretty soon they disappeared behind a little hummock. He followed them, and she continued working on her snares, expecting him to reappear at any moment. But he didn't. The short December day drew to a close and still no Peluk. She spent a

sleepless night in their skin shelter, and at first daylight started out to hunt for him. But the wind had blown during the night, and Peluk's tracks were all covered over, so she saw not the faintest trace of him. The next day she set out again, looking for him, and the next day, and the next. But all in vain. Peluk had vanished as completely as the flowers of summer.

A few days later a couple of hunters from the Arctic passed by her camp. They joined her in the hunt, and slept that night in her shelter. Next morning when they went outside they saw Peluk's fresh snowshoe tracks coming almost to the shelter, and then abruptly ending. There were no back tracks. Tunach had snatched him again when he was almost to safety.

The hunters wanted her to come along with them, but she refused to go. Maybe she could still find Peluk. Maybe he would try to come back again. She would stay there without a gun, living on what ptarmigan and rabbits she could snare, and hunt for Peluk every day.

"Me look round, me look round lot, me look round every day, me no find him. Me no find him at all nothing. Every morning, me wake up, me go outside, put him ear on snow, listen, maybe me hear him come. Him no come. Me hear nothing, me hear nothing, only wind, only wolf howl, only ice break him. Me snare few ptarmigan, no more rabbit. Dog die, no nuff ptarmigan (for) me (and) dog. Me get pretty poor, pretty near me die too. Bime by sun come up, pretty soon lots people come along. Me pretty glad, me so glad me forget Peluk."

Of course they came into her shelter, men and women both, and she told them the story of her misfortunes. While they were talking they heard a sound outside, like the wind, and saw a man's shadow on the snow.

"'Ha! Peluk come home!' everybody say. Me run out, look, nobody, just black shadow. Bime by me look again, no shadow at all, nothing. Me never see Peluk again, me never see him no more."

IV.

One night when I was over alone with Big Jim, learning to sing, there was a frenzied knocking at the door. Jim opened it, and there were Bessie and Jennie, almost choked with crying.

"My Charlie dying," Bessie wailed. "He coughed up blood, he's bleeding from the lungs, come quick."

Then she and Jennie started back on the run to their tiny cabin, about 50 yards away, and Jim and I followed. On the way, Jim made a very practical division of labor. He said: "Me make praying business, you give him medicine."

And so it was arranged. When we got inside the cabin Jim immediately flopped down on his knees, and, with bowed head, commenced an earnest prayer for Charlie's recovery. Charlie was sitting at the edge of his bed, bent over an old butter can which was used as a cuspidor, and now and then spitting out a little blood. It was a slight hemorrhage, and on the spur of the moment I could think of no medicine to give him except to have him lie down, as quietly as possible, and to loosen everything tight about his clothing, which was almost nothing. When these simple operations were completed I joined Jim on the floor, and helped with the "Amen" in which Jennie also joined, but Bessie shook so with sobbing she could not enunciate a sound.

I have never seen such a picture of complete, woebegone misery as Bessie presented. You would have thought she was watching her husband and daughter being burned at the stake. No, it was worse than that, for in such an event she would perhaps have mercifully fainted. Now all she could do was stand and howl and shake, with a look like a woman of ninety on a face which chronologically was only 33 years old. After a while, when the bleeding had stopped, she managed to splutter out a few phrases.

"Oh, my poor Charlie.---- Why did I ever come to Wiseman. ---- If Charlie dies I rather be dead. ---- That's how I lost my two little children already. ---- Marie was sitting right besideme sewing. ---- All of a sudden she started choking. ---- Whole lot of blood come up, just like this. ---- In a few minutes she was dead. ---- I wish I was never born. ---- I wish I was in Bettles. ---- Oh, my poor, poor Charlie. ----

Then she would lay her head on Charlie's chest and just sob again, until I would have to impress on her that it was essential that Charlie be kept quiet.

Meanwhile Charlie took the whole matter with stoical indifference. He wasn't the least bit excited about the blood, assured Bessie that he felt a whole lot better since he had coughed it up, that the cold which had been bothering him for two months would now be cured in no time. He said to me, with philosophical resignation: "Funny thing, my Bessie. Me get sick, anyone get sick, she act just like crazy. She love me too much, I guess. Funny thing."

And Bessie, with great heaving of her breasts, sobbed out: "I can't help it."

V.

After that evening I came on exceptionally intimate terms with the Suckiks, as they call themselves for that is Big Charlie's Eskimo name, and the last name which the whole family has adopted. Bit by bit, I have picked up both their biography and their philosophy.

Big Charlie was a native of the Kobuk country, where as a boy he grew up largely on caribou, seal oil, berries, and fish. In 1898, when he was sixteen, he and his father set out on an all summer's hunt across the Endicott Range to the Koyukuk. It was here that they met the first white men they had ever seen. I will let Charlie tell the story.

"First white man I ever saw down below Bettles, '98. Me and old man come over from Kobuk down head of John River. We see white thing like smoke against hill, and we go see what it is. Pretty soon we see man, look different any many I ever see. He say: 'Hello!' I don't evensavvy hello. He give me tobacco, and I smoke that fine. Pretty soon he motion like this (making beckoning motion). Then me and old man follow. Then he walk a little ways and motion again, and we follow some more. Pretty soon I says to old man: 'Maybe he want us to go with him.'

"Then we follow him, and pretty soon we see big boat in slough. We never see anything like that, white smoke coming out and everything, and we scared. But he go on board over gangplank, and pretty soon he go down in cabin, and come out with tobacco, and throw it at us. We know that, and when he motion some more we think he all right, so we come on over gangplank. Then he take us down to cabin and make motion, and long time we no savvy nothing. But then old man says to me: 'Maybe he wants us fetch him caribou skins, he give us tobacco.'

"Then he take us to other cabin, and we set down at table. I never see him table before. Funny thing. Then man come in and bring all sort of grub, set him on table. I know nothing about that sort of grub. I don't know nothing about use him fork, I no savvy plate. I no know which way to hold knife and fork. Pretty soon I eat bread and tea, I know that all right. Pretty soon white man put something yellow on bread. Pretty soon I swallow it, pretty soon it go down just like strong whisky. I feel it go all the way down to stomach, it burn like fire in stomach. My papa all scared, he try doctor me up this way with hands, blow on me. Pretty soon I all better.

"Stay four days, pretty soon I like white man's gun. He show me bullets, 30-30, and I think he too small to kill anything with. I think his gun bum, no go for nothing.

"Us fellows no savvy white language for long time. Pretty soon we find native boy, he savvy quickly, he tell us few words. Then we know few words, pretty soon we learn real quick."

The year before Charlie came over from the Arctic, Bessie was born somewhere down the river near the mouth of the South Fork. Her people were Koyukuk Indians, and she had the childhood which most Koyukuk girls must undergo of terribly hard labor before she was ten years old, packing huge loads of wood, working on the gee-pole, curing the meat which the men cooked. I have heard the life of the Koyukuk girls described by a white man who has lived a great deal among that race "as part way between how we treat our children and our dogs, but a whole lot nearer the dogs."

When she was still a tiny baby her father, Big William, had taken sympathy on his brother, Big Betas, who had just lost his only child, and had given Bessie to him and his wife to raise. At eleven she went to work at the roadhouse in Bettles, and for five years she stayed there, waiting on tables, helping in the kitchen, dancing all night long, drinking heavily, smoking, giving the men who stopped there frequent sexual gratification. She learned there, both the white language and the white customs.

Meanwhile Big Charlie had prospered exceedingly well in the Koyukuk. He was strong, energetic, intelligent, lucky, and made good money, mining in the summer; trapping, hunting, and freighting in the winter. He was scrupulously honest, and the old Northern Commercial Company often trusted him with the transportation of several thousand dollars in gold. At one time he had over $2,000 deposited at the Northern Commercial store, which was something absolutely unprecedented among the natives. He made his home in Bettles, living right next door to Bessie's home.

In the spring of 1913, shortly after the breakup, Charlie was starting out for a summer up the John River. As he was about to shove his boat off, Bessie came down to say goodbye. She had liked him very well for years, had come to think of him as a big brother, in fact called him brother. When she came down this morning Charlie said jokingly: "Don't you want to come along with me up John River?"

"Sure", she said instantly. She went right home to get her things, and left with him that day. They must have spent a very happy summer together, judging by their frequent fond recollections of little incidents. They returned in the autumn by way of the North Fork and Wiseman, where they were officially married in the white manner.

During the next four years they wandered all over, mining, hunting, trapping. Three children were born to them, and they were very happy. But in the spring of 1919 all of their children developed severe colds, and the oldest and youngest died within a few weeks.

This broke them up completely. For weeks they did nothing but bemoan their fate. They never again seemed to develop their old energy. Thereafter, Charlie never would do any work at all as long as there was something left to eat in the house, and he kept putting off things so consistently that the other natives got to nicknaming him Tomorrow Charlie. Bessie, who can make the most beautiful beaded moccasins, rarely indulged her art, except under the pressure of necessity, and spent most of her time dancing, loving Charlie, and fondling Jennie, the one child left her.

Today time has worn off much of their misery, and they are generally an exceedingly jolly family. They are continually joshing you, and they all have a hearty laugh. But they still remain as lazy as ever, making their living just as much as possible from handouts which the whites, who are mostly very fond of them, frequently give.

They are both passionately devoted to Jennie, who is 14-1/2 years old, and exceedingly good looking. Bessie shows me the magnificent bead work she can already do, Charlie points with pride to some drawings she has made. Both stress what a very good girl she is. Both delight in telling stories of her precocious remarks, just like any white parents. For example, when she was five she had asked her papa: "What make ptarmigans so wild? Do you think maybe little mice chase them all the time?"

Charlie asked amazedly: "Who told you that?"

To which Jennie replied saucily: "Don't ask too much question."

After nine years they still are made all happy, just by recounting that tale.

As I have said, they love to joke. Here is a typical conversation.

Bessie - This is some old shack. Look at the floor there.

Bob - Don't you get your feet all full of slivers when you get up in the morning?

Bessie - Sure, my big toes are just full of them. That's why I don't come up to dance anymore.

Bob (advancing with open knife)- Take off those moccasins and I'll amputate your big toes. Then you can dance again.

Bessie - You don't get fresh to me or I'll burn your whiskers off.

Jennie - "Where's the coal oil, Mom.

Bessie - That's right, we sprinkle a little coal oil on them, touch a match, and, zing, it goes.

Meanwhile Charlie sits and chuckles, and the rest of us all laugh.

Although they are on good terms with all the natives of Wiseman, they and Harry Snowden alone remain aloof from the potlatch, and the custom of keeping continual open house. "I feel all sick if I can't be alone some time," Bessie says.

In religion they are even more unique, for they are the only ones who don't go to the prayer meetings which Jim conducts periodically. Both Charlie and Bessie are

agnostics. When you ask Bessie what she thinks will happen after she dies, she just shrugs her shoulders. Charlie is a little more verbose on the subject, though no more plain.

"Long time ago, before you're born from mamma, you don't know. Then you born from mamma, you do know. After you dead pretty hard guess what happen. You guess, I guess, all same. All us fellows know, he dead and buried and leave him there. All I know, I want to have as much good time I can when I live, no worry about when I dead."

He is very tolerant on the subject of belief.

"Long time ago, even before white man come, native have story spirit leave body, go other place. Good thing to believe, I guess. Got to believe something. Belief don't hurt nobody."

As for himself: "I no believe nothing I no see. Other natives, they see devils and spirits and all sorts of people that really aren't real. I no see nothing ever. Maybe so, but I no believe it."

About the relation of man and wife they both talk frequently. Charlie says: "Too bad husband, wife can't always die together." Subjectively, he remarked: "My Bessie, me, just like two kids together. Have good time together all the time, never fight."

Bessie's comment on him was: "I think Charlie's the most wonderful man in the world. He's always good natured, never gets angry about anything. I'm not that way at all. I tell person just what I think of him, fly right off the handle."

One day, when Charlie was still in bed, Martin and I dropped in for a visit. Bessie was combing her heavy, black hair, which reached to her waist.

"Are you a barber?" she asked Martin, laughing.

"Gee whiz, you ain't going to cut your hair. You look fine as it is."

Bessie laughed some more.

"Don't worry, Martin," she said, "I'm not that crazy yet. There's no sense in it."

"That's the way I feel about it. You're real, old fashioned woman that way, and the way you love Charlie."

"Sure, I'm old fashioned woman. If you no love husband, what's use to have husband at all."

"Doesn't that make you jealous, loving him so?"

"Of course! The two got to go together. Where you has no jealousy, you can't has any love."

Charlie doesn't believe in the marriages so prevalent in Wiseman, of a man in the late thirties or forties wedding a girl in her early teens. "Old man, young girl marry, no good. He wants sleep all time, she wants dance all time, they can't be

happy that way. Young man, young girl marry, they have same laughs together, same jokes, same troubles, same happy, same everything, then they get along fine all the time."

His advice on courtship was this: "Me tell you Martin, any time you like him girl, you no go after him. No good, that kind of girl for man. You want him girl, him go after you, him all right, that kind. Long time ago me young boy, me savvy girls plenty."

He believes in the essential sameness of the human race, both as regards place and time. "All over just the same: some people fine, some people no good, some people just like dog, no heart at all. Native, White, Arctic, Koyukuk, Yukon, Outside, all over, all the same. Long time ago, maybe one man meet other man in woods, kill him with bow and arrow, long time ago. Today some man all same, only maybe they scared to kill because Marshal arrest them, otherwise all same."

Their attitude toward child education is frequently discussed. It can be summed up in one short remark of Bessie's.

"I never punish Jennie. Charlie and I never spank her in our lives. If she do something wrong I just tell her it's not nice and she don't do it any more. Punishing children all the time is no good. It just makes them mean."

VI.

I had planned to write you about Harry Snowden, lone wolf among the natives here, only Eskimo old bachelor in the Koyukuk, who maintains that if "young kids get married together, all same cat, scratching and fighting together all the time." I wanted to tell of my visits to the igloo where three Arctic families live together, and where upon entry I am immediately knocked down by four little kids who can't speak any English, but who delight in stroking my whiskers, riding on my back, and generally clambering all over me. Especially I wanted to write of the great fight between Arctic Johnie and his beautiful wife, Annie, which caused the latter to leave her husband and set up an independent household for herself and children, as well as breaking the entire native population except the neutral Suckiks into two fiery factions. But I have already drawn this letter out to an indefensible length, so I must reserve those tales for personal narration to any one interested.

BOB.