The Passing of Oul−i−but

Alan Sullivan

Table of Contents

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From Baffin Land to Barrow Strait
  The level ice−fields go,
From Boothia Gulf to Minto Head
  The great bergs journey slow;
By ridge and shore, by cape and bay,
  By reefs the whalers shun,
The bear and coast wolf seek their prey
  Where the blind sea ways run.

League upon league of frozen death
  The trackless barrens lie,
Speechless beneath the north wind's breath
  And the shimmering flame on high,
Where, rank on rank, the cold green fires
  Blazon the purple night,
And the guided icebergs lifted spires
  Are steeped in ghostly light.

The small brown people dwell within
  Their carven igloo homes,
Till the lost sun returns to melt
  The dark and rounded domes;
And again the bearded walrus dips
  Beneath the drifting floe,
And the sleek gray seal affrighted slips
  From his bed upon the snow.
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THE PASSING OF OUL−I−BUT

Chan−tie, the Curlew, sat on a rock near the end of Great Bear Point and gazed blankly north at the Arctic Ocean. Spring had not yet weakened the chill manacles of that rock−bound coast, and the heavy ice stretched from her very feet, but Chan−tie's expression reflected nothing of the light of the strengthening sun.

She turned her broad fat face to her mother: "Aule−lik−tahai, let us start," she said slowly.

But Kug−yi−yuk, the Swan, was old, also she was comfortable, also she was busy making the master of all Husky fish−hooks. One set of lean brown sinewy fingers held a glistening fish bone, three inches long, and the other set ceaselessly twisted a needle−pointed flint into one end of it. She bent over it, twisting and screwing, till the flint point poked through, then she looked at Chan−tie with a grunt of satisfaction. "It is good, but I am a fool!"

Chan−tie's face expressed nothing: "Why?" she said, lazily.

The old woman's eyes peered out across the level ice. Half a mile from shore a lumpy line of hummocks broke its crystalline surface, and, behind these, out of sight of the caribou that walked out to sun themselves, lifted a clump of dome−like mounds. From the height on which they sat, a brownish yellow figure could be seen; it crept slowly from one dome to another, then stooped and disappeared. Kug−yi−yuk pointed:

"That is why," she said, with a tinge of regret at her own words, "0ul−i−but lost two yesterday, and, see, I make him another."

She leaned back, and behind the film over her glazed eyes there moved something memorial and tender. It did not seem so long ago, that time when Oul−i−but had stalked into the women's quarters, and put his hand on her shoulder and said "Come." She had come, willingly and with not a little pride, for Oul−i−but was the strongest man and the best hunter of the tribe, and she had never regretted it. Now — even as the fish−hooks had dropped from his palsied fingers into the green abyss below — her mind sank into the depths of an unwonted reflection.

The sun drooped slowly, but her busy hands stayed not, whatever her thoughts. She rounded the jagged hole and pushed another bone nearly through it, pointing upward till the two made a V with the one leg shorter than the other, then she lashed the angle firmly with sinew, and punched another hole for the line. "It is finished," she said sharply, "Pi−huk−tuk, let us go home."

They clambered carefully down the smooth rocks, and, once on the level ice, Chan−tie looked curiously at her mother, "What is it," she ventured, "Will he go?"

Kug−yi−yuk's leathern face sharpened into a grim despair, "Yes — my daughter, he will go."

There was no one about in the camp when they reached it. A few lean, sharp−nosed, bushy−tailed dogs smelt at them, but, scenting no meat, set off to look for game of their own. The older woman stopped at the tunnel that led into the largest igloo, and crawled in on her knees, Chan−tie following. Within, the light spread dimly, revealing a blackened dome pierced by a small square hole through which a spot of sky looked strangely blue. Over against the wall an old man lay on a deer−skin and stared at them with blank eyes. In the middle of the igloo a hole was cut, and the clean, green water lipped its dirty edge; around and against the circular wall the floor was raised, and here fur robes and greasy deer−skin clothing lay in heaps.

Kug−yi−yuk stooped over the old man. His face was drawn like parchment, and the cheek−bones stood out sharp and white. "Oul−i−but is hungry," she said softly.

Her husband raised himself slowly and lifted his dim eyes to her own, "I will eat now," he whispered weakly, "and then eat no more!"

"It is the end," wailed Kug−yi−yuk, throwing herself face down beside him.

Oul−i−but looked at her for a moment, his features like a mask, and turned to Chan−tie. "You have heard," he said dominantly, "I would eat."

Chan−tie returned his stare, but there was wonder and terror in her own, then she picked up a copper knife. Its blade was long and of the yellow metal that lies in lumps on the shore of Victoria Land, and its haft, a dull brown wood, was teak, from the bones of a vanished British ship.

Her father followed every movement, for Chan−tie was slow and did things with a dull deliberation, but Oul−i−but had reasons for not being in a hurry. She hacked a piece of ice, fresh water ice, from the blackened walls of the igloo, punched a hole in it and put a wooden skewer through the hole. Then she found a shallow stone lamp, of the shape that was used on the hills of Thrace two thousand years before, and into the lamp put a handful of moss, and over the moss poured seal oil. Then with flint, steel and touchwood from her fire bag, and a few short vigorous strokes, and a careful puffing of round fat cheeks, the oil rippled into a yellow white flame. Lastly, she put the lamp nearly under the piece of ice that swung on the skewer in the wall, and watched it drip slowly into a pan.

All of this Oul−i−but saw, and, tottering to the hole took Kug−yi−yule's fish hook in his trembling fingers and with weak skilfulness fastened it to a long line of twisted sinew. The end of this he passed over a forked−stick and attached it to a string of dew−claws that quivered and sounded with the slightest motion. He sat motionless. Behind him lay Kug−yi−yuk in a heaving heap, and, in, front, Chan−tie held out blubber and a bowl of water, but Oul−i−but moved not.

An hour passed. Outside, the noises of camp came faintly, dogs barked and men called — and then — suddenly the string of dew−claws trembled and tinkled. Oul−i−but snatched at the taut line and pulled nervously, and it came in through his lean fingers till below, in the green depths, the lithe shape of a salmon flashed at the end of his quivering line. Then, as the water heaved, the old arms tired. Instantly the great fish plunged, the hook parted, and the sinew lay slack in Oul−i−but's grasp.

He peered at the line and pressed it between his bony finger−tips. Kug−yi−yuk had lifted her head and stared at him from the floor, Chan−tie's eyes, big with wonder and fear, were fixed on him. He stood up very gently, drew in the line and laid it in a coil at his feet: "Bring Nun−ok," he said slowly, "I would see Nun−ok."

At the words Kug−yi−yuk wailed anew and crawled to her husband's feet, "Wait, Oul−i−but, wait. Not now."

But Oul−i−but only said wearily, "I am very tired, and I must go," and motioned to Chan−tie who got down on her knees and crawled shapeless into daylight. Then there was silence in the igloo save for the old woman's sobs, and over the lamp the ice dripped slowly into the bowl, and strange shadows of Oul−i−but's figure were thrown on the curving wall, till Nun−ok, the Bear — the son−in−law of Oul−i−but, shuffled in. He was short and broad, and the black hair lay sleek in a straight line above his beady black eyes. He knew what was coming, so waited till the old voice sounded again.

"Oul−i−but is weary. I would go as a chief of my tribe, and, since I have many years, I will go to−morrow."

Nun−ok's heart stirred within him. Thirty years ago, Oul−i−but had taken him hunting. In mid−winter he had taught him to fish, and whiled away the long darkness with tales and ancient legends of the Arctic. In the spring he used to guide him to the sleeping walrus and stand between the lad and a quick death in green water. In the summer, when the bands of caribou does came north to drop their young, it was Oul−i−but who saw that the boy fleshed his long copper knife, and so, through all the seasons of danger and ease, of plenty and of hunger, Oul−i−but walked beside Nun−ok till manhood came to the young hunter and he took Chan−tie to wife.

Nun−ok had seen much of death−he had lived on the narrow edge of it for years, and many old men had departed on the way that Oul−i−but would go. So he did not mind that so much, but it also meant that the tribe would have to move, and this was regrettable, for, opposite where the grey rocks came down to the rim of the land, there was a cliff, and beyond the cliff a flat expanse over which one could drive the caribou to their plunging destruction. Therefore he knew that this summer he would not see the fat, grey, tumbling deer drop smashing on to the pointed rocks, as they had the summer before. But also remembering many things he looked long and understandingly at Oul−i−but till he caught the old man's eyes, and in them brooded the mystical shadow of mortality. So with full leadership pending over him, Nun−ok drew himself up as becomes a leader, and said, "To−morrow my father shall go as a chief goes."

The women watched Oul−i−but for a time after Nun−ok departed, for there was something in the finality of the men's speech that had answered all their questionings. He no longer seemed ancient and helpless, for was he not a wise traveller about to take the most wonderful journey of all. In the season of the year, drifting ice−fields, carefully chosen, were used to carry the tribes to their hunting and fishing grounds. That was a long journey and a slow one. But Oul−i−but, brave chief, was going on a still longer journey to still better hunting−grounds, and never before was he so sure of the journey's end. The peoples that suck at the paps of a fruitful earth are not thereby rendered brave and tender, but rather those, who, in the stark and iron−bound wilderness, wage an endless war against danger and famine. So it was that his kin turned with love to Oul−i−but. There was no more place for tears or lament, his going was settled and honour should attend him. Nun−ok the Bear, passed the word to Aiv−ik the Walrus, and Tuk−tu the Caribou, and from the naming of these men it may be seen that they were hunters all. They met as the Arctic night came down, and, ere the shimmering Aurora had reached its zenith, the last igloo of Oul−i−but took form. Twenty feet in diameter the base blocks circled, and Nun−ok stood inside, deftly locking them together as they rose with diminishing sweep.

Soon the white dome was out of reach, and he cut a block of his own and stood on it, while Aiv−ik and Tuk−tu swung their long knives beneath the ripples of red, and yellow and green that spilled out of the wonderful arch of flame overhead. There was no waste of time or energy as the igloo rounded and closed its perfect curve. Then Nun−ok cut a six−inch square hole in the middle of the roof, hewed his way out at the floor line, builded the exit and the tunnel, and, on top, stuck a gleaming walrus tusk, that all men might know that this was the house of death.

With the grey of dawn a whisper ran through the camp, and, ere morning came, the great igloo was seen, a little way apart, broad and high, with the walrus tusk glinting on its top. Then they all knew, and Oul−i−but himself tottered over and scanned it as closely as his dim eyes might, and, feeling the slow curve of its rising walls, his soul was glad, for, in his memory, no chief had gone away in so big an igloo as that. So he went slowly back and told Kug−yi−yuk and Chan−tie that all was well, and asked for the things that he had made, and found and treasured all his life.

The hearts of the women, having put away their weeping, were charged with a great desire to serve this wayfarer, and they brought, first, his copper knife and the short spear with the steel head that bit through the walrus hide and sank deep, while the haft shot up to the surface through troubled waters. Also his long steel knife that he got from the Englishman who sought the end of the earth, even though Oul−i−but told him that only death

lived there; and he had seen the Englishman once again, after blowing the snow off his face as he lay in the place of death. Then Kug−yi−yuk found his flint that came from Lind Island where Victoria Strait turns north to the ocean, and the steel and finger ring that the captain of a whaler had given him for a white bearskin.

All these things were placed beside the old man, and the women ransacked far corners and brought out new caribou robes, a fishing line and hooks, and a lamp; all new and fit for the use of the departing chief; and his fingers were trembling among them when Nun−ok thrust in his broad shoulders. "It is ready, my father."

Oul−i−but climbed to his feet, and, for a space, turned his eyes slowly to all parts of the igloo. Nun−ok and the women were silent and motionless, while, for a long time, the old man stood with lips parted in an inaudible whisper of farewell to his home. He stooped and won painfully into daylight. At the mouth of every mound grey figures stood watching his fated steps, and the wolfish dogs crouched without a quiver, their jaws gaping like spots of crimson picked out with glistening fangs. On one side lifted the black cliffs, and, to the north, the level ice blinked league after league to the place of death that the Englishman had found.

So he passed through the watching tribe to his last home, and Chan−tie and Kug−yi−yuk spread the robes and others brought food; deer meat from the last great hunt of last summer, and walrus flesh of the day before, and long strips of soft, delicate blubber; fish stiffened in the frost, and leaves of the tea muskeg that they had got from Yellow Knife Indians near the Bay. The hunting had been good all winter and the traveller was glad of it; for, when one is going to the best country of all, it is much more comfortable to leave one's tribe in a state of happiness and plenty than in misery and want.

Then his friends trooped in with kindly words, trooped in till the place was carpeted with small, round, brown men, whose quick narrow eyes swung restlessly from Oul−i−but to the meat. So the feasting began, and they ate as do those who need neither fire nor water for existence.

He watched them−these friends, tried and true. He did not touch flesh. His figure was tense and rigid, his eyes more blind than ever, but within moved memories, stirred into life by this parting feast and the faces around him. The women had gone, for this was man's business, and Kug−yi−yuk's devotion was at an end. Thus the hours passed till the eating ceased and the gaze of his guests turned toward him, and all fear and regret and doubt fell away; for the gods of the silent places had spoken to Oul−i−but.

"Unwak, the night has come for me," he said, slowly rising and surveying them with uncertain vision, "and I have asked you to come and eat, that I may say good−bye. I go on a long journey, but at the end will be your friends and mine, who have gone already. But before I go, I would speak of myself that you may remember Oul−i−but, the Shining Ice, that was so long your chief."

Nun−ok, still sucking at a strip of blubber, got up; but Oul−i−but waved him down. "The time will be when you will do all the speaking even as I do now."

The ring of copper−coloured faces swung toward Nun−ok and, as the beady eyes glanced sidewise at him, the whites of them shone lustrous between their narrow lids. A little murmur, half amused, half indignant, ran through the igloo, then Oul−i−but's tired old voice creaked on:

"It is well that you should remember that I was your chief — that I made this tribe brave and strong." He hesitated a moment, and then shouted weakly, "Who was your greatest hunter?"

The brown men swayed as they sat, and called back "Oul−i−but."

"Who was your strongest man?"

Again the echo thundered, "Oul−i−but was the strongest."

"And now who was the bravest?"

"Oul−i−but," the answer came, but not so certainly as before.

The old man peered from face to face and said bitterly, "Will any come with me on my long journey?"

A hush fell in the igloo. It was as if the black−eyed men were suddenly petrified, and in the silence could be heard the women's voices outside, calling to the dogs. Oul−i−but's thin lips lifted, showing the rusty teeth and shrunken gums within. "Now — who was the bravest man?"

The still circle twitched into life and the black eyes gleamed. "Oul−i−but," they answered, and this time with no uncertainty.

"I have told you that I am going to see our friends. They will ask about you. What shall I say to your first wife, Aiv−ik?" A grin flashed from man to man. Aiv−ik was troubled, but they knew he must answer. He dared not send word that this second one was either better or worse than the first; he feared trouble at home as much as

he did angering a spirit.

"There is nothing to tell," he said sulkily. "I will wait and carry the word myself."

Oul−i−but nodded wisely. "And for my part I will say nothing save what you would have her know. There is a word, however, for yourself ere I go. I bid you change your throwing of the spear. It is well to remember that from your kayack two spears' length is enough. On the ice the foot tells when it is firmly placed, but you throw from your kayack as from strong ice."

Aiv−ik, not a little angered, got up quickly but a growl rippled round the silent circle, and Oul−i−but turned to Nun−ok and his trembling arms went about the man's broad shoulders.

"My son will be a great chief and the tribe will grow strong and follow where he leads, and I would speak because you are the new chief. It is easy to go first, and the paddle is like a duck's feather in your hands, and the kayack sings under you when you kill the fat black seals. And it is easy to be wise and brave when the caribou cover the plains like moss, and the salmon and trout feed in the shallow water. All this I have seen long ago before you were children, and my heart is weary with remembering. But when the ice closes up tight, and Un−orri the north wind blows, then the caribou go south to the land of little sticks, and the sky is no longer dark with the goose and the swan and the big grey ducks. The walrus moves slowly along the bottom of the sea, and only his nose is beyond the water of his blow−hole when he comes up to breathe. Nun−ok, the bear, walks abroad, and he also seeks food, while the she−bear lives and starves beneath the banks of snow that she may bring forth her young. Then also come hunger and the sickness that takes men in their sleep, and then it is that you must remember that you are a chief."

"Even as my father," said Nun−ok, looking at him steadfastly.

The bent figure straightened, and a glimmer lit the fading eyes. "You have spoken. Not till you give yourself for the tribe will you have the heart of a chief."

Nun−ok stooped and fingered the string of dew−claws that lay with the rest of the traveller's gear. "Tell us of these before you go," he said thoughtfully, swinging them into a tinkling rhythm.

The quiet circle leaned forward, imperceptibly closing in. The black eyes grew blacker and brighter, like little sparks of diamond flame in which glittered the lust and fury of the chase.

And into the frenzy of their thoughts dropped Oul−i−but's voice, old, cracked, and weak, but broken and burning with the memory of that great hunt.

"It was a long time ago, before my people came down the narrow water that leads to the big sea where there are no holes in the ice. It was the middle of the winter, and the rest was as I have told you — famine and sickness. Un−orri blew for many days and the ice was thick, and a great white bear came and walked round our igloos and we could see his footmarks at the doors, for he too was very hungry. So, on the third day, the father of Aiv−ik and the father of Tuk−tu went out to kill him, for I was very sick and could not hold my spear. All that day we waited, but they came not, nor heard we any noise of man or bear. So, in the morning of the fourth day, the mother of Tuk−tu, being very hungry was also brave, and walked out to see, and came to a big hummock that was north of the camp. There she saw the father of Aiv−ik and the father of Tuk−tu lying with their faces in the snow and their shirts torn and bloody, and between them sat the bear, biting at the point of a spear that stuck out of his side. The bear looked, but did not move, and kept on biting at his wound; and she ran very quickly and told me."

Here Oul−i−but's voice rose and grew louder and stronger, and cast away all semblance of age or weakness or the death that awaited him. "I spoke to the spirits and told them that my tribe had need of me, and asked them to take away my sickness and give me strength again. Even as I spoke the strength came, and I rose up, and my back and knees and arms were well again, and I bent my spear with my hands, which no other man has done or can do. So I went to meet the bear."

"He saw me," the old voice rang on, "and he was still biting at his wound; so I called: 'I have come to kill you, and I will give your skull to the dogs.' Still he did not move, so I said: 'It is a rat and no bear that I see;' and then he looked at me, and the blood of my friends was on his breast and head. He was very big and thin, and his eyes were small and red. He came very fast, and I put the butt of my spear in a little hole in the ice, pointing the blade at the blood on his chest, and when he turned to strike my side I turned also the spear and he ran on it, till it went into his breast as far as my arm is long. So the spear broke in his body, and I struck with my dag till he died with his mouth open to slay me."

The passion died in the old man's tones, the force of them dwindling as he went slowly on. "We drew him to

the igloos, also the fathers of Tuk−tu and Aiv−ik and the tribe ate the bear and I gave his skull to the dogs."

"And my father?" said Aiv−ik.

"And mine?" put in Tuk−tu.

"The tribe was large," whispered Oul−i−but painfully, for his strength was going fast. "Also it was very hungry. We killed no more for many days — but we ate not their spirits, which I shall soon see."

Tuk−tu and Aiv−ik regarded each other silently. It was true — he could not have eaten their spirits.

There fell a hush, and the brown men looked at Oul−i−but. Beneath them, almost imperceptible tremors palpitated through the ice, as the blind tides set in toward the land, and, even as they looked, the weight of his years fell on the old man and he grew immeasurably aged. None of them spoke for they knew what would come next.

Then, faint and trembling, he said, "I go before, but we shall meet again. I am old and very weak, but where I go there is food and rest and happiness. Remember me, for I am very weary and would say good−bye."

The nearest man rose, put his bands on the traveller's shoulders, kissed him on mouth and brows, and, stooping, crawled out of the igloo, and, after him, came another and another, kissing the dim eyes, caressing the bent figure, till there was only Nun−ok left. And last, the new chief held the old one closely to him for a moment, gazing earnestly into the withered face, expressing courage, affection, hope, and farewell — all these in a mute understanding way. Then he looked about and saw that the remnants of food were properly placed, that the fishing line was in order, that the deerskin robes were dry and comfortable.

Now the moment had come when Oul−i−but should not see any more of earth, and Nun−ok caressed him for the very last time. "I will remember, my father," he whispered, with his arms around the old man's neck, then he, too, stooped and disappeared. The traveller stared at the mouth of the tunnel. It threw a patch of reflected light that spread with soft radiance in this fine new igloo of his. Then the patch changed and lessened, and the igloo grew darker; and soon it took strange irregular forms and vanished altogether, till he looked up and caught the pin−point of a star through the six−inch hole overhead.

Nun−ok had crawled out into the centre of a little crowd, and, since a chief must serve a chief, he had silently placed the blocks that sealed the igloo for ever. Also he found that the women had packed the tribe's possessions in sledges, had harnessed the dogs, and men and women alike waited his command.

The Arctic day had dwindled, and in the north flashed the first banners of a great Aurora. Whatever of darkness there was, seemed luminous, and away southward, to east and west, loomed the black cliffs of Great Bear Point. There were no shadows of a storm, and the ice lay before them clean and hard.

Now the spirit of a chief is one worthy of reverence. It was, therefore, the custom of the little brown men to travel for a day and a night in order that it might not be hurt or soiled in its passage by sound or sight of mortals. Furthermore, since the weight of their life bore heavily on them, and distress and hunger were brothers to all, it was written that one hungered or in danger might use the igloo of death. He must, however, make sure that the spirit was gone, and then the robes, the flint and steel, and all that was there might be used with reverence and care. If he had wherewith to pay, he should pay, but, if not, he should bless the spirit and depart, leaving all things in order.

At a sign from Nun−ok they drew off a little on the first step of their journey, then the sledges and the little people halted in an irregular curve, their faces toward the igloo. For a moment there was a silence as of death. The great Aurora blossomed into a fiery spray and rippled into a marvellous riot of life, beside which the winking stars looked pale and thin. Gusty waves of colour trembled through it from end to end, while it shot forth spears and arrows and battalions of light, that seemed to drown and engulf everything in the purple sky. The tribe saw it, but noted not, save that it spoke of troubled weather; they were waiting for a sign, and presently the sign came.

Nun−ok raised his hand, and there floated across the stark ice to Oul−i−but the farewell call of his people. It was the cry of those who face danger to one who has fought his last fight, the voice of the fear and courage and mystery and love that broods in the hearts of the men of the far north, and it rang sharp and clear up toward the stars, and it drifted into the igloo of Oul−i−but. "Good−bye," they called. "We shall meet again. Good−bye, Oul−i−but, good−bye."

The old man raised his head at the sound of it, for he was still watching the place on the floor where the patch of light had died. These were the last voices he should hear on earth. For a little time he would mark the trembling of the ice and the press of the north wind past his igloo.

He would catch a few fish, and eat and rest, and then he would go to sleep, and not notice anything any more till he woke up in the far country among his old friends. But this last call must be answered, so, with effort and failing strength he climbed on Nun−ok's block and put his mouth as near as he might to the hole in the roof, and sent out his soul in one last word to his people.

Faintly it lifted, for the end was not far away. Still fainter it came down the wind, where waited the black−eyed fur−clad men, while the black−nosed bushy−tailed dogs lay on the snow and bit at the ice between their toes. At the sound of it, they called again, more clearly, more strongly, and then stood motionless for the answer.

But all they heard was Un−orri, the North Wind, talking to himself, as he came down from the land of the white death.