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THE LAST GENTLEMAN ADVENTURER

By Edward Beauclerk Maurice

Houghton Mifflin. 416 pp.

As the Great Depression deepened in June 1930, Edward Beauclerk Maurice's widowed mother could no longer sustain herself and her four children in England. Off they sailed to try their fortune in New Zealand, all but 16-year-old Edward.

Maurice was isolate from the start. His siblings were already born when their father died from a gunshot. Maurice arrived six weeks posthumously.

The Last Gentleman Adventurer is posthumous as well. As it was being set in print, Maurice died at 90.

A foreward by Cambridge, Mass. essayist Lawrence Millman, author of *Lost in the Arctic*, draws Maurice's life into focus. The ensuing narrative forms the author's vivid and charming elaboration.

A Hudson Bay Company recruiter visiting his boarding school persuaded Maurice not to accompany his family to the South Pacific but to sail the North Atlantic and become a clerk in a Canadian Arctic Circle trading post. Their trade consisted mostly of silver fox, in high fashion and great demand. Before white men came, Millman tells us, the Inuit used fox furs "primarily to wipe their babies' bottoms"; now they could trade them for the requisites of life: tools, cloth, food and rifles.

For several years, Maurice's contact with the outside world would be limited to a supply ship visiting once a year, to dock for only a few hours.

So youthful that the Inuit called him "Boy," Maurice had a humility and more open mind than most Europeans and soon fit well among his Eskimo neighbors. Like Huck Finn, a sound heart helps him rise above the values he'd been taught.

"My school," he relates, "had imbued in me the feeling that dealing with the native peoples was a sort of 'white man's burden.' . . . an attitude of lofty paternalism, remembering always that the black, brown or yellow peoples were really little more than children, to be treated with kindly, patronizing patience." As other Europeans look on in fear he will become part of Eskimo culture, Maurice comes to admire that culture and to quickly master the Inuit tongue.

He learns their religious tenet "that everything and everyone had a spirit" and so was laced into a divine unity. He learns the history of Inuit contact with the outside world. Some was helpful, as English sailors helped them rise above a Stone Age culture; some pernicious, given the native vulnerability to new diseases, especially tuberculosis.

As the Inuit contribute to Maurice's maturation, he gives back as well. His aid to a starving village results in his being renamed Issumatak for "One Who Thinks." He teaches them English games like 3-legged racing and stories like "Snow White" whose line "Who's the fairest of them all?" intrigues the women, as do the clothes in magazines, suggesting to Maurice their desire to be part of life in the wider world.

His most crucial aid occurs when an epidemic strikes. One day a boy comes to Maurice to report the death of one hunter and grave sickness of another. Soon, many are dying. At first, the fatal illness is ascribed to victims having ingested rancid whale meat.

Eventually, the contagion subsides. The following year it returns, probably an especially perilous influenza, dividing the camp into the dead, the dangerously ill and those well enough to attend them.

In a land where house calls by a medical professional can make the patient wait long enough to build the house, the only option other than a tribal shaman was Maurice and a bottle marked “Dr. Parkinson’s Painkiller” lying in a medicine chest. Maurice’s ministrations throughout this ordeal form one of the most poignant passages in the book.

Here, too, his youthful morality gets its most problematic test. He’d never been alone in a room with any woman but his mother and sister. He’d taken to heart his childhood instruction that sex was for marriage and marriage was forever, so he’d abstained thus far from the transient pairing several Inuit women seem open to. Inuit culture viewed marriage differently. Where death seldom lies far beyond the campfire, people live in the here and now. If a hunter would be gone long, his woman could live or lie with another. If the domestic workload grew too oppressive, a woman might help select an assistant wife to share work and bed. Inuit believed not in monogamy but “shared relationship,” though it had to be “orderly, agreed and not promiscuous.”

We know from Millman’s foreword that Maurice did eventually take a “country wife,” so the mystery lies in whom. We suspect at first the “fine-looking girl” Nyla who helps him tend the sick, but soon we focus on Innuk, newly widowed by the epidemic. Maurice eventually pairs with one for a duration they both understand will be dictated by circumstance.

One circumstance grows increasingly ominous in F.D.R.’s fireside chats that Maurice can hear whenever he secures batteries for the wireless. In 1939, Maurice leaves the Arctic to join New Zealand’s navy during W.W.II.

At war’s end, he returns to England to live the peaceful life of a village bookseller for nearly six more decades, seldom to travel again. His only book persuades us he’d already had a lifetime’s worth of adventure.

The key to this narrative’s spell is Maurice’s restraint. In a land where you store food in the freezer by leaving it outdoors, there’s no need to augment. Nor does he romanticize. We see how a mealtime guest eats stews seasoned by being cooked in pots Inuit babies use as potties.

Having kept a diary, Maurice evokes his Arctic in vivid detail. The Northern lights’ “new beams rose into the empty spaces twisting and twining together like slithering snakes.” Innuk graciously eats an offered doughnut “though the expression on her face would have done credit to one of the early Christian martyrs on his way to the stake.”

As on some daVinci canvasses, we see no brush strokes here. We see a resourceful, compassionate young gentleman relating the adventure of a lifetime.