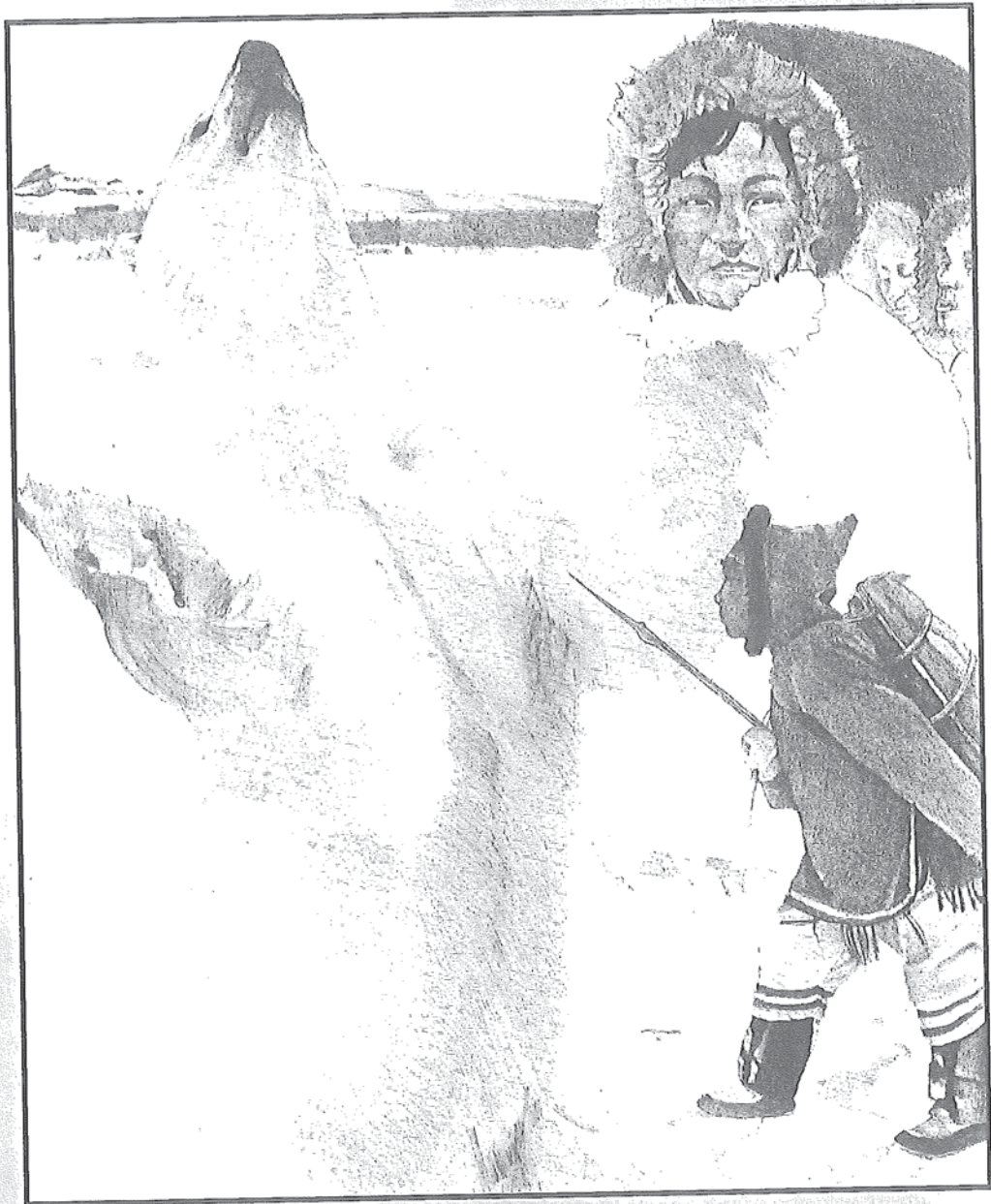


KEESH

by Jack London





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He knew how to kill bears . . .

Winters are dark in the North Pole. When the storms come winds howl across the ice, the air is filled with snow, and no one ventures out. That is a good time to tell the story of Keesh—how Keesh, from the poorest igloo in the village, rose to power and became the leader of his people. This is his story.

Keesh lived in the North Pole a long time ago. He lived near the edge of the polar sea. He was a bright thirteen-year-old boy with a strong, healthy body. His father was a brave man who had died during a famine in the village. His father tried to save the lives of his people by fighting a giant polar bear. Keesh's father was crushed to death during the struggle. But he killed the bear, and the meat from the bear kept the people from starving.

Keesh was his only son, and he lived alone with his mother. But people are forgetful, and they soon forgot how Keesh's father had saved their lives. And since Keesh was only a boy and his mother was a woman and not a warrior, they were forced to live in the smallest and poorest igloo in the village.

One night there was a council meeting in the large igloo of Klosk-Kwan, who was the chief. Then Keesh showed how much courage he possessed. He rose to his feet and waited for silence. Then, with the dignity of an older man, he said, "It is true that my mother and I are given meat to eat. But the meat is always old and tough, filled with bones, and difficult to eat."

The hunters—both the young and the old—were shocked to hear a child speak to them that way.

But Keesh went on steadily. "Because my father, Bok, was a great hunter, I can speak these words. You know that Bok brought



home more meat than any hunter in the village. You know that he, himself, cut up the meat and shared it with everyone in the village. The oldest woman, the weakest old man, received a fair share."

"Quiet!" shouted the men. "Throw the child out! Send him to bed! No child may speak such words to warriors like us!"

Keesh waited calmly until the shouting died down.

"My mother has no one except me, and therefore I must speak. My father put his life in danger, and died, to provide food for this village. It is only right that I, his son, and Ikeega, who was his wife, should have enough good meat to eat as long as there is plenty of good meat in the village. I, Keesh, the son of Bok, have spoken."

He sat down.

He could hear angry murmuring all around him.

"It is not right for a boy to speak like that in this council," old Ugh-Gluk was muttering.

Massuk stood up. "Shall a child tell us how to act!" he demanded loudly. "I am a man! Must I listen to every child who cries for food?"

Some of the men began to shout at Keesh. They ordered him to leave. They threatened to punish him by not giving him any food at all.

Keesh's eyes flashed and the blood pounded under his skin. In the midst of the noise and the uproar, he jumped to his feet.

"Listen to me, you men!" he shouted. "I shall never speak in this council again—not until you come to me and say, 'Keesh, we want you to speak.'"

Keesh raised his arm and said, "My father, Bok, was a great hunter. I, his son, shall also go out and hunt the meat that I eat. When I return with meat, I will divide it fairly. No old person will cry out in hunger at night, while young warriors are holding their stomachs in pain because they have eaten too much. I, Keesh, have said this."

They laughed at Keesh and followed him out of the igloo, shouting at him. But Keesh said nothing more. He walked away with his head erect, looking neither to the left nor the right.

The next day Keesh went down to the shore where the ice and the land came together. Those who saw him go noticed that he carried his bow and a large supply of arrows. Across his shoulder was his father's big hunting spear.

There was laughter and much talk, for nothing like this had ever occurred before. Boys of his age did not go out to hunt, and they certainly never went out to hunt alone. People shook their heads gravely, and the women looked sadly at Ikeega, who was extremely worried about her son.

"He will be back before too long," said the women to cheer her up.

But the hunters said, "Let him go. This will teach him a lesson. He will return shortly. Then he will be quiet and meek and will know his place in the village."

But a day passed, and a second day, and on the third day there was a storm and wild gales blew and still there was no Keesh. Ikeega's face was filled with grief, and the women spoke bitterly to the men, saying that they had mistreated the boy and had sent him to his death. The men did not answer, and they prepared to search for the body when the storm was over.

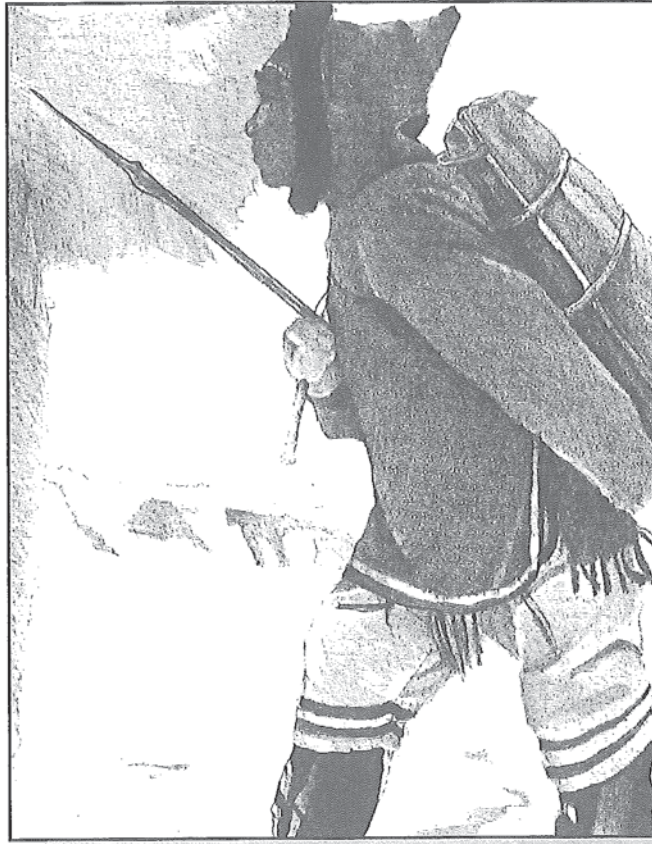
Early the next morning, however, Keesh marched into the village. But he did not return in shame. Across his shoulders he carried some fresh-killed meat. And when he spoke, it was with authority and pride.

He said to the men, "Take some dogs and sleds and follow my path for a day. Eventually you will find much meat on the ice—a bear and her two cubs."

Ikeega was overjoyed, but Keesh said simply, "Come, Ikeega, let us eat. After that I shall sleep, for I am weary."

And he went into their igloo and ate a great deal, and then he slept for twenty hours.

At first there was much doubt and discussion. It is very dangerous to kill a polar bear, and it is three times as dangerous to



kill a mother bear with her cubs. The men could not believe that the boy Keesh, all by himself, had accomplished something so incredible. But the women pointed out that he had returned with fresh-killed meat on his back, and this was a powerful argument. So the men finally departed, grumbling, and saying that even if it were true, he had probably not cut up the carcasses¹ into pieces. In the North it is very important to do this as soon as the kill is made. If not, the meat freezes so solidly that it cannot be cut, and a three-hundred-pound bear, frozen stiff, is a very difficult thing to put on a sled and haul over bumpy ice. However, when they arrived at the spot, they found not only the kill, which they had doubted, but that Keesh had cut up the carcasses exactly the way a hunter should do it.

Thus began the mystery of Keesh. It was a mystery that deepened and grew with the passing of the days. On his very next trip Keesh killed a young bear, and on the following trip he killed two large bears. Usually he was gone for three to four days, although it was not

1. *carcass*: the body of a dead animal.

unusual for him to stay away for a week at a time. And Keesh always went alone, for he did not wish to have company on these trips.

The people were amazed. "How does he do it?" they asked one another. "He never even takes a dog with him, and dogs are such a great help too!"

"Why do you hunt only bears?" Klash-Kwan asked him one day.

Keesh gave him a very good answer. "Everyone knows that there is more meat on the bear," he said.

But people in the village also talked about magic. "He must know magic," some of the men said. "Perhaps he hunts with evil spirits, and the evil spirits help him."

But other people said, "Maybe the spirits are not evil, but good. You know that his father was a mighty hunter. Is it possible that his father, somehow, helps him to hunt? It is hard to understand. Who knows?"

Still, his success continued, and the less skillful hunters were often kept busy hauling in his meat. Keesh shared the meat fairly. As his father had done, he made sure that the weakest old woman and the frailest old man received a fair share. As for himself, he never took more than he needed. Because of this and his ability as a hunter, Keesh was looked upon with great respect. There was talk about making him chief after old Klash-Kwan died. They hoped that Keesh would come to the council again to speak, but he never did, and they were ashamed to ask him.

"I wish to build an igloo for myself," Keesh said one day to Klash-Kwan and some of the hunters. "It should be a large igloo where Ikeega and I can dwell in comfort."

"Yes," they nodded.

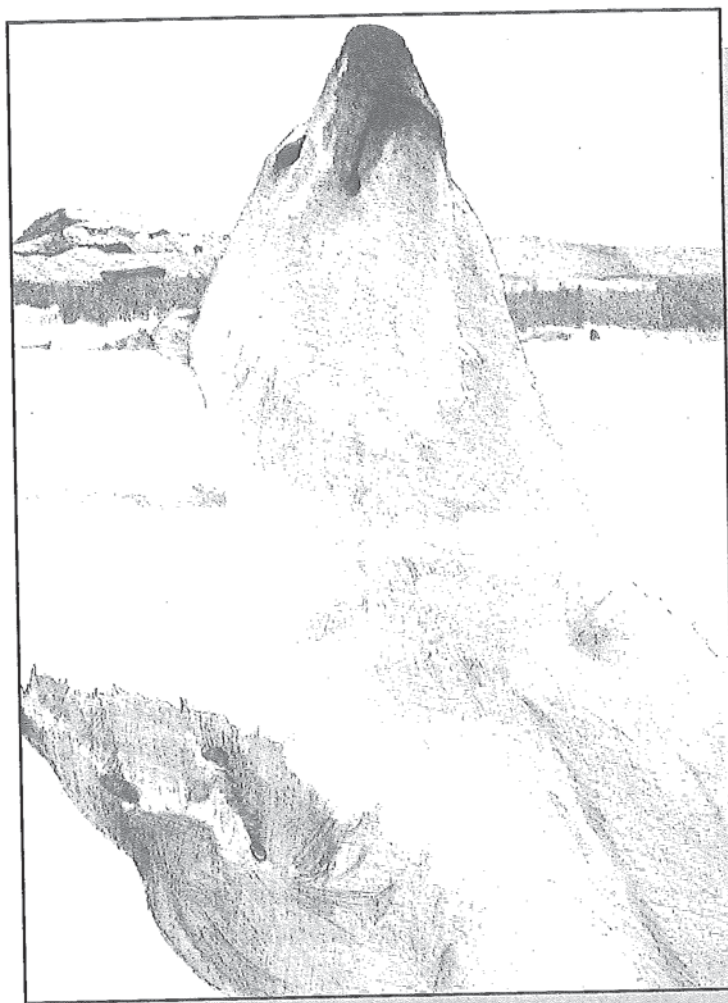
"But I have no time. My business is hunting, and it takes all my time. So it is only right that the men and women of the village who eat my meat should build me my igloo."

The igloo that they built was very spacious. It was even larger than Klash-Kwan's igloo. Keesh and his mother moved into it, and it was the first comfort she had enjoyed since the death of Bok. And because of her wonderful son, she came to be looked upon as the most important woman in the village, and the other women visited her to ask for advice and to be guided by her wisdom.

But it was the mystery of Keesh's marvelous hunting that was the main thing on everyone's mind. And one day Ugh-Gluk spoke to Keesh face-to-face.

"People say," said Ugh-Gluk, in an unfriendly way, "that you have some magic power, that evil spirits help you when you are hunting."

Keesh answered him by saying, "Isn't the meat good? Has anyone in the



village ever become sick by eating it? How do you know that magic or evil spirits are involved—or do you say that because you are so envious of me?”

And Ugh-Gluk went away feeling very embarrassed.

But in the council one night, they discussed Keesh for a long time. Finally, they decided to spy on him when he went out to hunt, so that they could learn his methods. On his next trip, two clever young hunters, Bim and Bawn, followed Keesh. They stayed a good distance behind him and made sure that he did not see them. They kept an eye on him and on everything he did.

Five days later they returned, eager to tell what they had seen. The council was hastily called and Bim began to speak. He said, “Fellow warriors, as you ordered, we followed Keesh. We followed him very slyly, so that he was not aware we were behind him. In the

middle of the first day, he saw a large bear. It was a *very* large bear."

"I have never seen a bigger one," said Bawn.

"But the bear did not wish to fight," said Bim, "for the bear turned away from Keesh and went off in the other direction over the ice. We saw this as we watched from the rocks near the shore. Then the bear came our way and Keesh ran after him, completely unafraid. Keesh shouted loudly at the bear, waved his arms around, and continued to yell. Then, finally, the bear got angry, rose up on his hind legs, and began to growl. But Keesh walked right up to the bear."

"Yes," said Bawn, continuing the story. "Keesh walked right up to the bear. The bear began to chase him and Keesh ran away. But as Keesh ran, he dropped a little round ball on the ice. The bear stopped and smelled it, then swallowed it. Keesh continued to run away and drop little round balls, and the bear continued to swallow them all."

There were cries of doubt, and Ugh-Gluk said that he did not believe it.

"We saw it with our own eyes!" Bawn exclaimed.

"Yes," said Bim, "we saw it with our own eyes. This continued, and then the bear suddenly stood upright and roared loudly in pain and ran around wildly, beating its paws madly against its body. Keesh ran a safe distance away, but the bear ignored him, since it was concerned only with the terrible pain the little round balls had caused inside him."

"Yes," Bawn interrupted him. "It was a pain inside him because he clawed at himself and growled and squealed and jumped frantically around. I never saw such a sight!"

"Never!" said Bim. "And furthermore, it was a very large bear."

"Perhaps it was some kind of magic," Ugh-Gluk suggested.

"I do not know," Bim replied. "I can only tell you what I saw with my eyes. After a while the bear grew weak and tired, for he was very heavy and had been jumping around violently. Finally he went off to the ice along the shore, shaking his head slowly from side to side, and sitting down now and then to squeal and cry. Keesh followed the bear, and we followed Keesh. For three more days we followed them. The bear grew weaker and weaker and never ceased crying from its pain."

"It was magic!" Ugh-Gluk exclaimed. "Surely it was magic!"

"It may well be."

Bim went on, "The bear wandered back and forth, back and forth, going in circles, so that, at the end, he was near the place where Keesh had first seen him. By this time the bear was very sick and was not able to crawl any further, so Keesh came up close to

him and speared him to death.”

“And then?” Klash-Kwan demanded.

“Then we left Keesh skinning the bear and came running back to tell you what we had seen.”

That afternoon the women hauled in the meat of the bear while the men sat in council. When Keesh arrived, a messenger was sent to him asking him to come to the council. But he sent a reply saying that he was hungry and tired, and also that his igloo was large and comfortable and could hold many men.

The whole council was so curious that all of the men got up and went to Keesh's igloo at once. Keesh was eating, but he greeted them with respect.

Klash-Kwan repeated the information that had been brought by Bim and Bawn. When he had finished he said in a stern voice, “So we need an explanation, Keesh, of the way you hunt. Is there magic in it?”

Keesh looked up and smiled. “No, Klash-Kwan, how would a boy know anything about magic? I know nothing about that. But I have figured out a way to kill bears easily. I use my mind and not magic. That is all.”

“And may any man kill bears that way?”

“Yes, any man.”

There was a long silence. The men looked at each other, and Keesh went on eating.

“And . . . and . . . and will you tell us, Keesh?” Klash-Kwan finally asked in a trembling voice.

“Yes, I will tell you.” Keesh rose to his feet. “It is quite simple. Watch!”

He picked up a thin piece of whalebone and showed it to them. The ends of the bone were as sharp as a knife. He bent the piece in half in his hand. When he released it, it sprang back, straight. Keesh picked up a piece of whale meat.

“So,” he said, “I take a small piece of whale meat like this and make it hollow. Into the hollow I put the sharp whalebone, bent tightly in half. I force another piece of meat into the hollow. After that I put it outside where it freezes into a little round ball. The bear swallows the ball, the meat melts, and the whalebone springs back with its sharp edges standing out straight. After a while the bear gets sick, and when the bear is very sick, why you kill him with a spear. It is quite simple.”

Ugh-Gluk said, “Oh!” and Klash-Kwan said, “Ah!” And everyone understood.

This is the story of Keesh who lived long ago by the edge of the polar sea. Because he used his brain, he rose to power and became the chief of his village. And through all the years that he lived, his people had enough to eat, and no one who was weak or old ever cried aloud at night because there was no meat.

