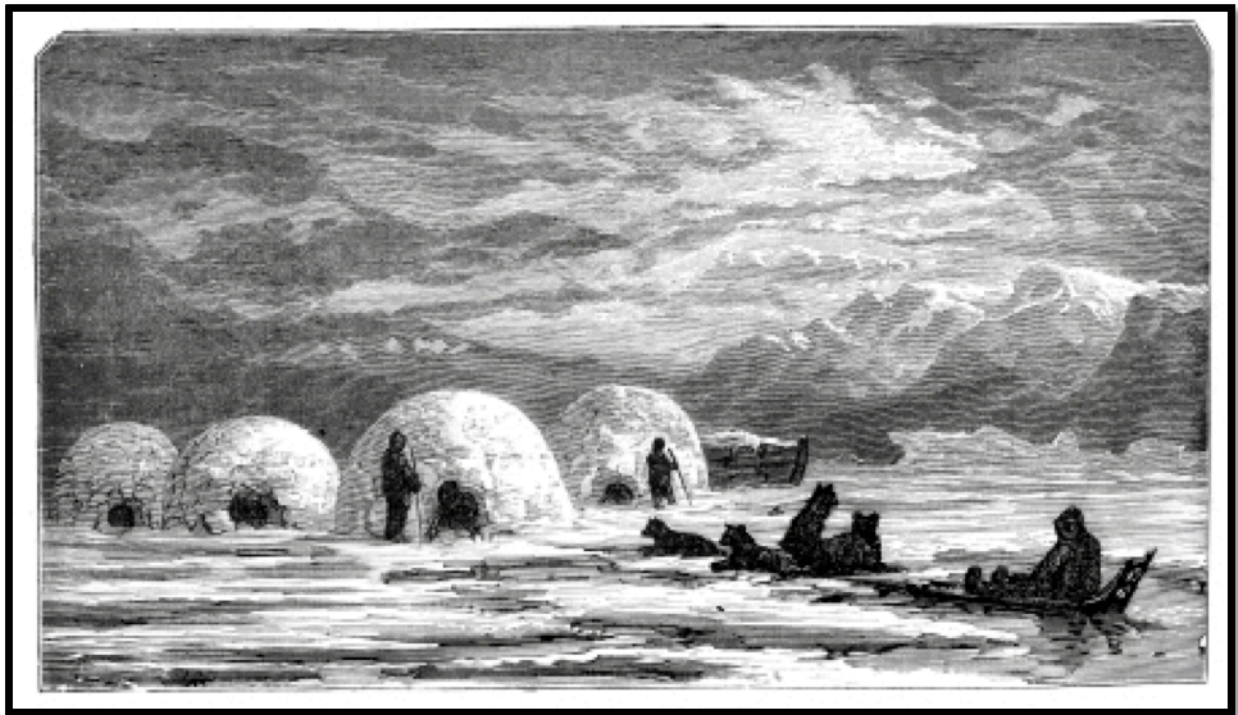


The Legend of Keesh

*Adapted By B.P. Skinner
from the Jack London
story, "The Story of
Keesh"*

How does a person who began in humble circumstances become a legend? Along the rim of the Polar Sea, Keesh lived and died. From father to son, from brother to sister, from summer when the sun does not set, until winter when the sun does not shine, Keesh's story is still told over and over again.



When Keesh's father was killed while hunting to save the village from starvation, the villagers soon forgot him. They neglected Keesh and his widowed mother, Ikeega, who shared a small igloo together. This all changed when Keesh turned thirteen. Because his father's blood ran in his veins, Keesh was bright, healthy, and strong. When the village council met in the big igloo of Chief Klash-Kwan, Keesh, despite his youth, spoke up.

“When my father hunted, he brought home more meat than any of the two best hunters combined,” Keesh explained, “With his own hands he divided the meat, and with his own eyes he saw to it that the neediest of the village received their fair share.”

The elders and onlookers jeered at the young boy; how dare one so young speak out in the council? Despite them, Keesh continued, “You speak for your wives and mothers. So, I speak for my mother, Ikeega, who should have her fair share of meat. All we get is gristly meat that’s full of bones.”

The anger of the men boiled. Keesh was ordered to leave the council with no dinner and was promised a beating. Keesh’s blood pounded in his head and his eyes flashed. “Take this, you men, as my last word. My father, Bok, was a great hunter. When he was alive, he made certain that no widow or child ever cried at night because there was no meat. Today, many go hungry while you, the strong men of the village, stuff yourselves with the best meat.”

The next day, Keesh was seen leaving the village with his father’s enormous hunting-spear and bow, and an ample supply of bone-barbed arrows. The villagers whispered to one another—it was unprecedented that a young boy should go hunting alone!

After several days, Keesh still had not returned. His mother, grief-stricken, assumed the worst. Just when the men were preparing to mount a search for his body, Keesh strode proudly into the village, fresh-killed meat draped across his shoulders. He dispatched the other hunters and their dogs to where the rest of the mother bear and two half-grown cubs lay slain. Keesh and his elated mother ate their fill.

The village was abuzz with gossip. Everyone wanted to know the answer to the same question: how had young Keesh conquered a mother bear and her cubs? Even the smallest child knew that a mother bear is three times more dangerous than even an ice-bear. There were some who were suspicious of Keesh, and thought he used magic to slay the animals. Others were simply mystified. Regardless, over time, he gained popularity and respect, and people came to count on him to bring meat to the village. There was even talk of making him the next chief.

As for Keesh, what he wanted for himself and Ikeega was a huge igloo, bigger than the chief's. Hunting was Keesh's first priority, so he told the other men of the village to make him an igloo more magnificent than the others. Keesh's new prosperity earned Ikeega status as the village's first woman, and all other women went to her for advice and wisdom.

Ugh-Gluck, like some others, was tormented by young Keesh's hunting victories and fed up with taking orders from him. Ugh-Gluck confronted Keesh, "You've been charged with dealing with evil spirits to help you hunt."

Keesh recoiled. "How can that be? The meat is good. Are you just envious?"

When the council met, the men decided to spy on Keesh while he was hunting. Bim and Bawn volunteered to follow the boy on his next expedition and report back.

Two days later, the spies returned, brimming with excitement over what they'd seen. The council convened to hear their tale. "We saw with our very eyes how Keesh followed close behind a giant he-

bear,” said Bim, in awe. “Then he got perilously close, so the bear rose up on his hind quarters and took after Keesh. As the bear was chasing him, Keesh dropped a white fist-sized ball on the ice. The bear swallowed it up. Keesh dropped more balls behind him as he ran, and the bear ate those, too.”

“After a while the bear stopped running and started clawing at his own stomach, hobbling across the ice, howling and squealing in awful pain,” stuttered Bawn.

“Witchcraft! A charm!” accused Ugh-Gluk.

“For the entire day we followed Keesh and the suffering bear. I’ve never seen anything like it,” said Bawn, amazed.

“And then?” Klash-Kwan asked. Bim and Bawn told him how they left Keesh skinning the bear.

While the men spoke in council, the women hauled in the meat of the bear Keesh had killed. A message was sent to Keesh to ask him to go to the council. “Tell them I’m too tired and hungry. My igloo is large and comfortable. Ask them to come here.”

Minutes later, the elders sat in order of rank and respect in Keesh’s comfortable igloo. Klash-Kwan spoke first. “So, we received information about your manner of hunting. Is it witchcraft?”

“I’m just a boy,” Keesh explained, “I’m ignorant of these things. I’ve devised a way to kill the ice-bear with ease, that’s all. It’s *headcraft*, not witchcraft.”

“Would you tell us how you do this? Can any man do this?” asked Klash-Kwan, not convinced.

“Any man can do this.” Keesh finished sucking his marrow-bone and rose to tell the group of his clever hunting tactic.

“It’s really quite simple. You take a small chunk of blubber and make it hollow. Into the hole goes a sharp whale bone. Another piece of blubber is fitted over the bone. Then, you put it outside where it freezes into a tiny ball.” Keesh explained that when the bear eats the balls of blubber, the fat melts, exposing the sharp ends of the whale bone. “The bones tear at the bear’s insides, and make him terribly uncomfortable. He cannot eat, he cannot drink, he cannot sleep,” Keesh said with a smile. After days without being able to eat or drink, the bear makes easy prey.

The council was satisfied and amazed by Keesh’s story. And this is how Keesh rose from being an insignificant boy to becoming the head man of the village, and long as he lived, no one cried at night because there was no meat.