

THE
CHRISTMAS
REINDEER



THORNTON BURGESS

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by

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Contents

1.	Tuktu and Aklak	3
2.	Kringle Valley	8
3.	Tuktu's Soft Heart	13
4.	Whitefoot Goes Astray	18
5.	Lost in the Fog	23
6.	The Awakening of Tuktu	27
7.	The Great Mill	31
8.	The Good Spirit	36
9.	The Chosen Deer	41
10.	Tuktu's Happy Thought	45
11.	Tuktu Tells Her Story	49
12.	The Deer People	53
13.	The Wilful Young Deer	58
14.	When the World Was Young	63
15.	The First Reindeer	68
16.	Little Spot and Tuktu Dream	72
17.	Tuktu and Aklak Have a Secret	77
18.	The Round-up	82
19.	The Christmas Story	87
20.	The Great Temptation	91
21.	Attacked by Wolves	95
22.	The Christmas Invitation	99
23.	The Christmas Vision	104

Dedication

To the beautiful faith of childhood, the perpetuation of a charming fable, and to a world made better by the Christmas spirit, this little volume is dedicated.

THE AUTHOR



WHITEFOOT GOES ASTRAY

CHAPTER I

Tuktu and Aklak

TUKTU was a little Eskimo girl. Tuktu means caribou. She had been given this name, because only a few days before her birth, a relative named Tuktu had died; and as is the custom, this name had been given to the baby. She was well named, for caribou were to have much to do with her life. On the very day that she was born, Kutok, her father, had killed a caribou when food was greatly needed. That year, for some unknown reason, caribou had moved from their usual feeding grounds, and Kutok and his family had had to depend almost wholly on seal and polar bear, and these had been none too plentiful. So this caribou had brought great joy to the home of Kutok. In the days following, he found the caribou back in their old feeding grounds. Later, Kutok was to become a herder of reindeer, and the reindeer, you know, are first cousins of the caribou. So it was that Tuktu was well named.

Aklak, her brother, bore the name of the great Brown Bear. Aklak was two years older than Tuktu and gave promise of being like his father—a mighty hunter.

Already he had killed his seal and none knew better than he how to snare the ptarmigan. In the summer he and Tuktu gathered eggs when the waterfowl came north in untold thousands for the nesting. Whatever Aklak did, Tuktu tried to do.

While the children were still small, their father had become a herder of reindeer, and the little folk spent much of their time with the deer. They helped herd them. They did their part at the annual round-up. In the spring they hunted for stray calves that had lost their mothers. Both learned to drive deer to a sled.

During the long winter nights, the herders often gathered in Kutok's house, and there they told stories while the children listened. There were stories of hunting, stories of adventure, stories of many strange things. But the story that Tuktu and Aklak liked the best of all was that of the chosen deer of the Valley of the Good Spirit. This was especially true of Tuktu. She used to dream of that wonderful valley. And whenever she saw the Northern Lights, the Aurora, shooting up high overhead, she would wonder what would happen to any one who might stray into that valley, for it was said that it was from this valley that those lights came.

At last there came a time when she and Aklak actually were to live for a week or two almost on the border of that valley. Do you wonder that she tingled clear to the tips of her fingers and toes with little thrills of anticipation, excitement, and perhaps just a wee bit of

fear? It was the fulfilment of a promise that their father had made them, that, when the deer moved over from their summer feeding grounds to the Valley of the Good Spirit, they should go with him to keep watch from a distance.

Even Aklak was excited, though he did his utmost not to appear so, and trudged along behind his father as if visiting the Valley of the Good Spirit were an everyday affair. All day they traveled. That is, they traveled what would have been all day where you and I live. It wasn't all day there, for you know way up in the North there is no real night in summer.

At last they reached the hut in which they were to live while the deer grazed on the hills of the Valley of the Good Spirit. This hut was a very rude affair, built partly in the ground and partly on the ground. It was of wood and stone with a skin roof and a long entrance passage. While not as big and comfortable as the house at home, it was the sort of thing these children were used to and it was quite good enough.

That night after the evening meal, Tuktu begged her father to once more tell the story of the Valley of the Good Spirit and of the chosen reindeer. "Why is it called the Valley of the Good Spirit?" she asked.

"Because," replied Kutok, "a wonderful and good spirit lives and moves there."

"Has any one ever seen him?" Aklak asked.

"No," replied Kutok, "none but the deer people, and

of these only the chosen ones ever go down into that valley. But we know that a good spirit lives there, for always the deer that graze on the hills about the valley are safe from the wolf, the bear, and all other enemies. They do not need to be watched. There need be no herder here, were it not that it is well to know when the herd moves out, for then the summer grazing is over. It is a good spirit, for is it not true that every year eight deer are chosen and the next year returned to us the finest sled-deer in all the North? The Good Spirit dwells there and with him live many lesser spirits, who do his bidding.”

Thus it was that Kutok told the children of what you and I know as fairies, and elves, and gnomes, and trolls. Eskimo children know nothing about these little unseen people. To them, all are spirits.

“Have you ever looked down into the valley?” asked Aklak.

“No,” replied Kutok. “It is not well to be curious. I am content to stay here and wait for the deer to move. So must you be.”

“What would happen if one should venture down into the valley?” asked Aklak.

“That no man knows, for no man has ever been so bold as even to think of doing such a thing,” replied his father. “My son, be wise with the wisdom of your elders, and be satisfied. None but the deer folk ever enter that

valley and these, only the chosen ones. We will stay here and from a distance watch the herd.”

“If it is such a good spirit,” thought Tuktu, although she didn’t venture to express her thought aloud, “why should any one fear to go down into the valley?”

And she was still wondering as she fell asleep.

CHAPTER II

Kringle Valley

FOR the greater part of the short Arctic summer, the great herd of reindeer had grazed within sound of the waters of the Arctic Ocean lapping on the beach. More than two thousand deer were in that herd. They were not all Kutok's, although all were in his charge, for he was chief herder. Only about two hundred of the deer were his, as shown by the ear-marks. It was in deer that Kutok was paid for his services in looking after the great herd, which was owned by white men. With the approach of the long winter, the deer would move inland to winter range, and Kutok and his family would return to their permanent home.

For several days before the opening of this story the deer had been uneasy. They had done more or less milling. This means that they had gathered in a great body, the outer members traveling in a large circle and trotting tirelessly most of the time. Kutok knew the sign. "They will soon seek the Valley of the Good Spirit," said he to the other herders who assisted him. That very afternoon, the herd, as if at a signal from

some wise old leader, began to move inland. In a short time, all the deer but the trained pack animals, which had been fastened, had disappeared.

It was then that Kutok had taken Tuktu and Aklak to the hut not far from the entrance to the Valley of the Good Spirit. It was the greatest event in the lives of these two little Eskimo folk, for always they had heard this valley spoken of with awe that was almost reverence. Now perhaps they might be permitted to see the wondrous colored mists that were said to rise from it.

Kringle Valley was the name by which it was known to the white men, none of whom believed in it, for none had ever seen it. But to the Eskimos, it was, as I have already stated, the Valley of the Good Spirit. Did they not know that on its gentle slopes wild grasses grew in such abundance and such richness as could be found nowhere else in all the North? Were not the hillsides carpeted with wild flowers until they glowed in patches of brilliant color? You see, even the Arctic has its summer. It is a short summer, but a wonderful summer. Up there above the Arctic Circle there are days when the sun does not set at all and the number of days during which the sun does not set increases as one goes North, until at the North Pole there are six months and five days of continuous daylight. When the sun does set for a few hours, the twilight is so brilliant that it is difficult to think of the day as having ended when the sun disappears.

Kringle Valley is a valley of mystery. No man as



KUTOK WATCHING THE HERD

yet has been privileged to enter it. No man has even looked down into it, save from a distance. It is said to be filled with a soft many-colored mist, which is neither of dampness nor of smoke. The Eskimos believe it to be the birthplace of the ever-changing, many-colored lights of the Aurora. Only the herders of the reindeer, which yearly seek pasturage on the hills about the valley, have ever ventured near enough to see even from a distance the curtain of many-colored mist.

Around the winter firepots the story is told to the children of how every year just before the great herd leaves the valley, the deer gather at the upper end, and, there for a time, mill.

There is no fear among these milling deer. As they trot tirelessly in a huge circle, there is a constant shifting, until in turn each of the bucks has made at least one circuit in the outer ring. Thus each has a chance to show his full strength and beauty. From time to time as at a signal, one of these trotting deer leaves the circle and stands motionless just without the curtain of colored mist. When eight have been thus chosen, they disappear in single file in the mist of the valley, while the leaders of the great herd at once start the southern migration, and the herders know that no longer will the deer feed in Kringle Valley until toward the end of another summer.

And the herders know, too, that when the winter round-up in the corrals is made for the yearly count,

the eight best sled-deer in all the herds will be missing. They will be the ones which vanished in the shimmering mists of Kringle Valley. And the herders whose deer have so disappeared will rejoice greatly. They will be counted as being blessed above their fellows. They know that their deer are not lost. They know that when once again the great herd moves to Kringle Valley, they will find there the eight deer—fat, sleek, well-cared for. They know that these deer thereafter will never mingle with the herd, but will be for as long as they live the finest sled-deer in all the world. So it is considered good fortune if, after the herd leaves Kringle Valley, one's deer be found missing.

CHAPTER III

Tuktu's Soft Heart

THESE were happy days for Tuktu and Aklak. Tuktu's only duties were to cook meals for her father and brother. An Eskimo girl learns these things very young and Tuktu had been well taught. Aklak spent most of his time hunting. Their father did little but sit for long hours smoking and watching the distant hillsides where the reindeer grazed above the Valley of the Good Spirit. These were lazy, happy days and Kutok was making the most of them, for the summer was nearly at an end and he knew that when the herd moved there would be little time for lazing.

Tuktu roamed about picking the flowers that grew in such profusion, and also hunting for the flocks of young ptarmigan, for she dearly loved to watch these pretty "Chickens of the North." Not for the world would Tuktu have harmed one of them. Not for the world would she have told her brother Aklak how she felt when he brought in ptarmigan and other birds for the cooking-pot. But despite the fact that she ate them and enjoyed the eating, there was all the time in her heart

a wee feeling of sadness, for Tuktu's heart was the loving heart.

Aklak was a good herder and had a way with the deer which some of the older herders might well have envied; but there was no one among all the herders or their families who could go among the deer as freely and unnoticed as could Tuktu. It was as if she held some strange power over the deer people; as if they had accepted her as one of their own number. She could approach the most timid and nervous among the wilder members of the big herds. As for the sled-deer, they might balk and strike at others, but never at Tuktu when she harnessed them. She loved them, every one, and seemingly they knew it.

So it was that Tuktu found her playmates among the wild people, who were not wild with her. Many a time had she stroked a ptarmigan on the nest. Many a time had the Arctic Hare fed from her fingers. The sea fowl paid no attention to her. Love has a strange way of making itself felt among the wild folk, and the soft heart of Tuktu was soft because of love.

So it was that when she found the home of a Blue Fox, about the entrance to which four half-grown little foxes were playing, she did not tell her brother. Each day she would steal away and sit by the entrance to the den, taking with her bits of meat for the little foxes. How she loved to see them roll and tumble about her feet. Sometimes two of them would get hold of the same

piece of meat and then there would be a tug of war. Tuktu's eyes would dance and she would laugh softly. And then, when one little fox had succeeded in pulling the meat from the other, she would give the loser the extra piece which she always had for that purpose. And a short distance away sat Mother Fox, grinning happily.

While she picked the flowers and played with the foxes, and now and then mothered a young ptarmigan that had been lost from the flock, she dreamed of the Valley of the Good Spirit. It seemed such a little distance to the brow of the nearest hill overlooking that valley that she couldn't help but wonder what she would see if she should climb up there. But not once did the thought of really doing it enter her head. It was enough for Tuktu that it was forbidden. It was not that she was afraid. She knew that her father was afraid. She knew that Aklak was afraid. She knew that they regarded the Good Spirit and the valley where he lived with reverence and awe. But Tuktu was not afraid. It was enough for her that the Valley of the Good Spirit was sacred and not to be approached by other than the deer people. So, no matter how great her longing to look down from that hilltop, the thought of actually trying to do such a thing never entered her wildest dreams.

She would sit for hours looking over toward the valley and wondering what the deer folk saw therein. Now and again she could see the deer moving on the upper hills. Once as she was watching them, she said



softly—for she had a way of talking to herself: “I wish I were really a Tuktu—a caribou.”

“Why?” asked Aklak, who had stolen softly up behind her, just in time to hear what she said.

“Because then I might go into the Valley of the Good Spirit and I might even be chosen by the Good Spirit. Who knows?”

Aklak laughed, but it was a good-natured laugh. “It is the reindeer, not the caribou, who go down into the valley,” said he.

“But the caribou go too,” replied Tuktu quickly, “for only this morning I saw a band of them heading that way; and after all the reindeer are but tame caribou.”

“You saw a band this morning!” exclaimed Aklak excitedly, for all that morning he had been hunting for caribou and had not seen one.

Tuktu nodded. “Yes,” said she. “And Aklak, I’m glad you didn’t see them. I am glad they have gone where

you cannot follow, for I would not like to have a caribou killed here so near to the Valley of the Good Spirit.”

Aklak opened his mouth for a quick retort, then thought better of it. Perhaps after all Tuktu was right. Perhaps it were better that there should be no killing of the deer folk so near the Valley of the Good Spirit. He remembered that not even the wolves, nor the great Brown Bear for whom he was named, ever killed there.

CHAPTER IV

Whitefoot Goes Astray

THE two pack-deer with which Kutok had moved up near the Valley of the Good Spirit had been kept fastened, each with a long rawhide line. But Kutok well knew that should they be allowed to go free, they would be likely to join the herds over on the hills above the valley. So they were kept tethered by long lines, and each day were moved to a new grazing ground. Sometimes Kutok attended to this; sometimes Aklak.

It happened one day that both Kutok and Aklak had gone hunting. Tuktu was not at all lonely, for loneliness is something that Eskimo folk know little about. Had she not the two deer for company, to say nothing of the little foxes with whom she played daily? It was nothing new for her to be left alone while her father and brother went hunting. It was Aklak who had moved the deer to new grazing ground just before starting that morning. Two or three times Tuktu wandered over to pat them and pet them, as was her habit. When she became sleepy, she lay down for a nap. It was when she awoke from this that she discovered one of the deer



AKLAK GOES HUNTING