



U2860 A BALLANTINE BAL-HI BOOK An Alaskan Novel

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N. C. McDONALD
**WITCH
DOCTOR**

He had never seen white men, but
he knew he had to kill them all.



A NOTE TO PARENTS AND TEACHERS:

Witch Doctor is a very religious book. Every word is told from the point of view of the shaman, the medicine man of an Alaskan Indian tribe. Unlike the medicine man in most jungle and native fiction, he is not a fake or a half-mad dealer in devilish spirits. His name is Kwak and he happens to be the most intelligent man of the tribe, with the keenest eyesight and the quickest ability to put together the consequences of his observations—and he believes in his gods.

He looks for signs in the birds in the sky, the clouds on the horizon, and he believes that the shrewdest workings of his intelligence are authentic messages from the Supernaturals. Who among you modern, skeptical readers is to say that pure intelligence is not the clearest message that the immortals send down to earth?

Kwak, the holy man of the tribe, has a high sense of his own importance. He is socially the highest in the village, but N. C. McDonald allows us to understand, as we follow the witch doctor's mind through exciting murders and shipwrecks that he deserves to think highly of himself because he has dedicated every desire of his life to his priestly profession. He lives for no other joy, eats for no other satisfaction, and every moment of his life, he is asking himself, "What have I done to gain or lose communication with the gods?"

In short, this book is not simply a fight between the first white men to invade Alaska and a desperate Indian tribe. It is the autobiography of a holy man. He is so authentically the powerful man of God, that it is not blasphemy to say that knowing him, we know something of how Moses, Joseph, St. Paul or Luther must have thought. He is an Alaskan savage who had never before seen a white man and yet this book is a fascinating study of what perhaps goes on in the minds of an Old Testament prophet or a New Testament saint.

Much has been written about the priest-king who leads his people and Kwak illustrates many of these universal motifs:

- 1) As the story opens, the witch doctor is about to be killed because a storm has kept up for many days and his people are poor and hungry. If he has the responsibility, which he and the people never doubt he has, then he must pay with his life when the Supernaturals turn against him. Yet, when he is successful, he is proclaimed as the wisest and most magical shaman under the heavens and he accepts both turns of events as only right, for the priest-king has the deep conviction that everything he does and, most important, every idea he has, is God's will and therefore the overwhelming question

is not how to stay alive, but how to live or die in exactly the way God wills.

- 2) The witch doctor sees his cleverness not as a tool to trick his followers into believing him, but as a direct proof that God has selected him. Every time one of his tricks works, he is convinced that his ritual was right.
- 3) All this high religious belief does not prevent the priest-king from being a shrewd judge of human nature and using tricks, good luck, and other people's weaknesses for his benefit. After all, who gives him his wonderful mind and who made his tricks work?
- 4) Unlike modern Christianity, but in common with most ancient religious beliefs, the Indians' God is not austere, solemn, and schoolmasterish. He is a lusty lover of jokes, perverse humor and He makes man sweat a little for his good fortune. Why is it that the Christian God never laughs?
- 5) And finally, being a priest-king might call for the highest powers of the mind and imagination, but it also means severe limitations because he must adhere to a rigid code and an almost hypnotic set of routines. Thus it is easy for those who do not share his religion to fool him completely. He is, after all, a bit pompous.

Aside from one of the most original twists on the sea and land adventure story, this book is full of juicy tidbits of anthropology to gladden the hearts of lovers of Indian lore: e.g., those long speeches of welcome or challenge that Indians are always making are not simply ceremony but are intentionally long to give the shaman a chance to size up the enemy, to observe what the other side is doing during the speech, and thus to formulate his own plans which come out not as plans but as something Father Eagle told him.

This, I stress, is not necessarily dishonesty on the part of a religious man, for one of McDonald's points is that the ideas that a clever and original mind gets by looking around him at the natural world may be the true voice of God talking to us. Even the way a girl acts in an emergency to help him out of a tight spot may be the Gods going into another body for his benefit. Indeed, understanding other people's personalities may merely be a way of understanding God's messages to us.

It is frightening to think an Indian witch doctor believes all this, but what—just what—if it is true?

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Witch Doctor

by

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"His eyes . . . her north."

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Author's Note

The big fur frenzy of the Pacific Northwest started about the time of the American Revolution. Captain Cook, nosing along the kelp beds north of latitude fifty-four forty, had come in contact with a canoe or two of Thlingits and, picking up a few beautiful sea-otter skins as presents for the home folks, had discovered on reaching Canton that Chinese merchants would part with a hundred dollars gold for a single skin.

Among the Thlingits, tales of strange things seen in the mists off-shore were as old as the tribes themselves, who had memories going back to the time when the world was dark. After Cook, the tales became more numerous, and then in wide-apart villages like Yakatat and Sitka the fantasies became fact. Hairy-faced Ruskies were bringing fleets of kayaks manned with Aleuts to poach in Thlingit waters, and hairy-faced Bostons were arriving from the south to trade both with The People and the Ruskies. But it was a long time before the out-of-the-way villages had any first-hand knowledge about what was going on.

This is a very free translation of a Thlingit story never written down.

1

It wasn't that Kwak was afraid to die tomorrow. He could walk out there without hurry, his back straight, his gaze fixed on the sky above the northern islands and, passing between the two chiefs, have his head sliced off. That part of it was nothing. What was most important was to know the exact place in time when the event was to come off. If he couldn't read the signs, how could he summon the proper Supernaturals to escort him into the eternal light above the blue sky-blanket? He had not seen the sun, moon or stars for he didn't know how long, and the tides, too, seemed to have gone wild. For four long nights and the short grey days between, the shaman had been in seclusion without food or water, beseeching Northeast Woman to gather her strength and clear away the rain clouds Southeast Woman was forever pushing up the coast. Only half a night was left to drum down the storm, sing the eagle to perch and ask her to have the killer whale chase the seal and oil-fish into the passage to feed the starving villagers and, incidentally, prolong Kwak's time on earth.

His place of prayer was inside the burnt-out shell of a huge cedar snag that had been standing back of New Village since before old people could remember. The mighty stump had once been the lower half of a very giant of a tree that had lost its life in some great gale of the distant past. Now the barkless weathered trunk stood like a tall grey chimney, rising above the storm-tossed branches of spruce and hemlock surrounding it. On its broken top, on the side nearest the sea, a thick splinter like a stubby finger pointed skyward, providing a perch on which, in fine weather, a white-headed eagle occasionally alighted. This bird was sacred to the tribe below, whose upper classes belonged to the Eagle and Crow fraternities. The coming of the bird was an event

of great importance. It could be for good or evil according to his actions while on the perch, and it was Kwak's official duty to interpret those actions accurately and make predictions. There was the whole trouble—the eagle hadn't been around. The weather had been much too bad.

Since the mid-winter dances, wind, snow and rain had been booming out of the southeast, churning the waterways, uprooting trees, tearing the roofboards off houses no matter how many stones were piled on them, putting out fires, soaking everything. There had been no moment of let-up fit for an eagle's visit, no time when the fishermen could launch their canoes, and of course it had been out of the question for messengers to paddle a day's journey south to Old Town to let the Crow side of the fraternity know that the district chief, Kwak's cousin, had died after a long sickness. No one but a Crow could touch the body of an Eagle while it lay waiting for cremation to liberate the spirit.

It was Kwak's fault—he knew it. His medicine had gone bad. He had lost his power. So he had been given notice: his life was demanded in payment for the insulting damages of the unprecedented weather.

On this fourth night of his vigil, with the angry Southeast Woman still blasting wind and rain out of her bottomless basket, Kwak, worn and discouraged, was taking a brief rest from his rattle-shaking, chanting, drumming and awkward eagle-walk dance round and round his smouldering medicine fire. He had stretched out beside the coals on the hard dirt floor, circled by a ring of massive smoke-blackened roots supporting the hollow cedar trunk above him. His only covering was a tangled mop of long hair and the white, yellow and black ceremonial paint designs carefully smeared on every part of him. Yellow on his beak-like nose and small feet for Mother Eagle, black for his tribe's fraternal relationship with the Crows, and white for the spirit world. The uncut, untended hair was his badge of priesthood, the beak of a nose inherited from a long line of aristocratic mothers, his powerful neck, shoulders and chest had been handed down from endless generations of canoe-paddlers, and the short skinny legs belonged to

a people who had no more use for legs than to cross a beach.

Lying there, Kwak's mind went back over the four nights of failure searching for technical mistakes in his performance. He could think of none. It must be some influence from outside. Maybe there was a bit of truth in the rumor that the young slave girl in his grandmother's house was making medicine against him. Nonsense! Sparrow's twitter! The story that the girl was a witch had probably started among the other woman-slaves who hated her because of the airs she put on. Kwak had seen her many times go swinging down the main path back of the line of driftwood that meandered between the house fronts and the row of totem poles facing the cove. Slaves and even commoners would step off the trail to let her pass, and she would go by them nose in the air as though there was a bad odor about. Her errand might be the simple thing of telling the first person she met that the queen wished to have her light canoe brought to the front door so she could get into it and be carried down to the water's edge and set afloat. But no, the young thing wouldn't deign to speak to anyone below the rank of noble. She, on such an errand, usually went straight to the queen's daughter who had married a Bear named Long Look and delivered there whatever wish the queen had expressed. The queen's daughter was really in charge of the girl but had gladly loaned her to her mother, because she kept the queen entertained with fantastic stories and because her husband Long Look was too prone to be entertained by them, too. There were a lot of upper class men, thought Kwak, who seemed to be soft in the head about her.

He shifted his body slightly to avoid a cold drip from the inside wall of the old shell that creaked and groaned in the blasts tearing unabated through the tree tops outside. Peering up through the smoke-blackened tube, Kwak could see no sign of coming dawn in the dark disk of sky above. "Could it be," he thought, "that the Raven has captured the sun again, and we are at the beginning of another world darkness? What wrong have we done?" Gazing up into the dark he recalled again every utterance and gesture of his three-day ceremony.

All were correct, but there had been no answer. Never before had he fasted so long without seeing a way out. He scratched himself under the arms and sat up. The coals, red in the ash of his medicine fire, gave no illumination whatsoever. Reaching out in the dark and feeling between the root-columns of the snag, the shaman fished out two thin slivers of cedar from a pile of kindling stored there. Placing their ends among the hot embers he blew on them until a flame blazed and the sticks ignited. With these stuck in a crack of the wall for light, he pulled a carved and painted chest from a hole beneath a root, and removing its well-fitted lid rummaged down through the magic paraphernalia stored there—bundles of feathers, bits of fur, bones, packages of herbs wrapped in fish skin or bark and tied with leather or cedar fiber thongs.

His exploring fingers touched something cold and hard, and recoiled violently as a wild scream filled the place, sending Kwak in one bound over the fire to the exit where he was halted in his flight by the bearskin flap buttoned tightly across the doorway. "Shame on you," he told his quaking body. "Steady yourself. What a disgrace you'll be to yourself and your tribe if you act that way at your execution. Calm yourself . . . you'll be fed and watered before long. Quiet now, and let us think. It comes to me that we have had an answer here."

Breathing hard, Kwak eyed the chest standing open under the flickering light of the tapers. "She screamed when I touched it! Southeast Woman screamed when I touched it. She has it working for her. From right there in my box comes all the trouble."

One of the tapers burned out, and the shaman, in a half-panic at being left in total darkness with his discovery, feverishly built the dying fire into a light-giving blaze and then with a quick movement slammed the lid down on his box of magic and pushed it back into its hole. "But that's no good," he thought. "Light or dark, sealed up or not, THE THING works against me and my people."

Snatching up a bird-shaped rattle he shook it vigorously to confuse the spirit of THE THING while he

chanted a prayer of thanksgiving for the revelation of the source of his people's misery. But in the middle of his prayer he collapsed onto the dirt floor from utter weariness and the heat of his new big fire. "You're a weak thing, Kwak—you disgrace me. Think, Kwak, think!"

Lying there with the sweat of exhaustion streaking his painted skin, his ears tuned to the roar of the gale, his eyes staring into the darkness above, he tried to force his mind to recall every bit of history connected with THE THING. That was the People's name for it—THE THING. The slave girl called it an *Oss-soo*. It was supposed to be a luck piece, something to touch to a halibut hook or to the point of a harpoon before taking to the hunting canoe. It had circulated from hand to hand among the nobility of both villages for the past year and had proved itself to be of little value. It was that slave girl—now the queen's pet—who had bought her way ashore with it in the first place.

She had appeared one day in Old Town and offered it to the chief, representing it to be strong with magic power. She had traded it for protection and some decent food, saying that she'd been kidnapped from her Sitkan village by Hairy-faces—Bostons—and she was sick of living in their floating village and had to have some ooligan oil and dried salmon or die of malnutrition. She explained that THE THING's foreign name was *Oss-soo*, and said that Kap-tan, head chief of the voyaging tribe, had depended on it for everything. He had kept it fastened over his door and used to pat it and talk to it before going into a new village to trade. He would ask it to bring him sea otter skins, and it always did.

But after coming among the People, THE THING had deteriorated—so they thought. They'd attributed no *evil* power to it, however—hadn't blamed it for the sickness and poverty that followed, nor for the death of the New Town chief who was still waiting for his burial. Chief Rattling Pebbles of Old Town had had THE THING in his possession for some time. He'd had it with him at the dance of the winter solstice, given by an up-river town of the Eagle fraternity, but he hadn't let on till the dance was over and Old Town and New Town People

were voyaging towards home together, keeping their canoes bunched when travelling, and camping together when stormbound, for safety from marauders.

Kwak's mind skimmed over the events of that trip. It was the second stop; night was coming on dark and cold. Cook fires flared, flattened and smoked in the wind. Food supplies were low, canoes light, babies fretful, mothers cranky. Chief Rattling Pebbles had settled down beside Kwak who was sitting alone in the shelter of a hemlock, away from the firelight.

"Of all the potlatches I ever attended," he said, pulling his knees up under his chin and his rain cape down over his bare feet, "that was the worst. Five days steady paddling to get there, three of them against fast water, and what do we get? Nothing! That scaly-legged freshwater chief had the gall to call that a potlatch, yet he didn't give out enough stuff to keep a squirrel through a mild winter. And those lousy drummers! Did you notice them at the Dance of the Salmon?—the section of the left was beating out *Hunting Goat on the Peaks* while the boys on the right plugged away at that sad rhythm *Rabbit Time Has Passed*. It would have made me vomit if they'd furnished enough food for my belly to work on."

"You seemed to be doing all right," said Kwak. "At one time there I saw you gulp down enough fish oil to last an ordinary man a moon."

"Doing all right? Why, I was cleaned out. What was the matter with that damned medicine of yours?"

"Let me remind you," Kwak had said coldly, "that your lower rank doesn't permit you to speak of my art in that manner. You'll pay for that."

"No offense intended, your Honor, but you know in that final game I almost lost my shirt. That bunch of up-river pirates got away with four male slaves, five cargo canoes, and two hundred Chilcat blankets. What were you doing at the time—beating the wrong drum?"

"Jokes are all right in their place, Brother-in-law, but yours—if it is a joke—isn't funny. If you needed magic in your game so badly, where was that trickster your village is supporting? Where was he all this time?"

Flying wooden birds, or sleeping under water for the duration of the dance?"

"Oh, I wouldn't derate him, your Honor. He's young and learning fast. He goes in for cures more than you do. He's out in the woods now, gathering roots so they'll be in good supply for the spring sickness. He says he has no time for recreational dances. No, I wouldn't call him a trickster. He's all right."

"If he's all right he should have sense enough to put a warning into that thick skull of yours about that double-tongued girl you're keeping at your place. I've told you before and I'll tell you again—this is a prediction—if you insist on keeping that clapper-mouth around, eating in the back of the house like one of the family, doing nothing while other women are working, the People are going to continue in bad luck, and you may lose your life. I see this clearly."

"Nonsense. You've been listening to your sister squawk. She's got it into her head that I'm going to potlatch her family heirlooms for a bride's price to the girl's family up north. I have no such intention. One wife is enough for me. The girl irritates me by speaking our language with a Sitkan accent. I'm merely teaching her to speak proper Klinkit. At the same time I'm picking up considerable Boston talk. She knows a lot of their words—she lived for a time with a Yank-Ke tribe where there is no winter. It's a land beyond south named *Sandwits* Island where all the Boston villages are located. I'm learning all their words so if any Hairy-faces show up around here I'll be prepared to board their *brig* and understand what's being said *on-deck*."

"Brother-in-law," Kwak had said earnestly, "a great chief whose mothers have guarded the purity of the Klinkit tongue since before the last ice age should not let those filthy foreign words pass his lips. He shouldn't even think them. If any outlanders should come into our country, my advice is not to talk or listen but cut off their heads before they slip the entire country out from under our feet. I say this because their character and practices have been revealed to me."

"Doctor," Rattling Pebbles had replied with a laugh, "you and your sister speak with one tongue. Like

you she hates all things foreign. She even tore down that little trinket of the *Kap-tan's* I'd hung over the door and hurled it at the girl, telling her to go back to the lice that hatched her. If the Bostons *do* come she'd like to put their heads on poles and use their bodies for rollers when we land our war canoes."

"My sister is a very level-headed woman, and you'd do well to heed her advice. By the way, where's the *Oss-soo* now?"

"The girl has it back again. She's over there patching up a split in the bottom of her canoe. Look, it's snowing. What a mess! We'd better split up in the morning. You people follow the shore, and we'll cut out through the narrows. I'll tell you what, you take the girl and that canoe I gave her and credit them to my account. I'll have some peace in my family then, and you can put **THE THING** over your door and see what happens."

"Very kind of you to tell me what to do," the shaman had replied acidly.

When the hard trip was over, Kwak had looked up the slave girl and, after taking the *Oss-soo* from her, had rented her out to his aunt for general work. Since that time Southeast Woman hadn't let up for a moment. She had filled the skies with racing black clouds and sent Thunder Bird flying through the pelting rain to shake mountains with his voice and split trees with his flaming arrows. Whole forests had blown down, drift was washed far back into the woods, the village brook overflowed, surrounding the lodges. Kwak had become bewildered during the long darkness, unable to predict goose-go-north time, smelt-in-river time, herring-lay-eggs time.

"Think of it," he told himself now. "**THE THING** has been in the box all this time and I never for one moment suspected that *he* was at the bottom of all this. How can I destroy him?" He nerved himself. "Come on, Kwak, on your feet. Might as well have it over with now as tomorrow—if tomorrow ever comes."

And while the storm raged outside and the snag shook above him, Kwak chanted a short prayer with drum and rattle accompaniment, then changed his face

paint slightly, put on a protection hat, and covering his hands with rabbit skins snatched off the lid of the chest, seized THE THING and tossed it into the fire. Nothing happened. There lay the *Oss-soo*, a black broken circle, unchanged as a stone would be in the yellow flame. Taking a deer's shin-bone the shaman blew the fire white hot, feeding it with bits of fir bark. THE THING slowly changed in color from black to dull red but was not destroyed. Kwak blew until he was dizzy and his supply of bark was exhausted. Discouraged, he sat back on his hunkers, eyeing THE THING. As he watched, it lost its rosy color and became black again. Resting half buried in the white ashes it appeared to be in better condition than ever.

"As imperishable as a stone," thought Kwak, dismayed. "If I hurl it into the sea it may play havoc with the Fish People. If I bury it we may have earthquakes." The shaman shuddered as he felt the ground quiver at the root pull of the towering snag rocking the gale. Not daring to take his eyes away from THE THING he felt about on the ground for his protection rattle, and, his fingers discovering it, shook it by its wooden bird tail and began a chant to Eagle, asking for a solution of this problem. While he sang it came to him that there must be instructions that should have come along with THE THING when it changed owners. He regretted now that he hadn't questioned the girl more closely. But questioning would have been useless anyhow; the girl was half mad like any other adolescent female, and certainly this one who hadn't completed her puberty seclusion—if that story was true—must be more unstable than most girls her age. However, the queen grandmother was delighted with her and the endless stories she could drum up at a moment's notice. And she liked the mystery about her—that although the girl carried herself like an aristocrat and spoke perfect Klinkit (though with a West Coast accent), like a slave she wore no identifying tattoo marks as to tribe and station, and she wore no labret which she would have acquired had she been properly initiated into womanhood according to the rites of the nobles.

The red coals about *Oss-soo* whitened the ash. Kwak's chant died in his throat, his eyes blurred and his body slumped to one side in exhaustion and sleep.

2

A CHANGE awakened him. There was a great quietness about, and as he raised his head to listen a crow called and was answered. Looking up through the hollow snag he saw centered in the opening a large yellow star. A great sigh went out of him. His prayers had been answered. He knew exactly where he stood in time. It was the fourth night of the herring moon. He gave thanks, swallowed a little water and, after a time, chewed on some dried clams that he dipped one by one in ooligan oil, and while doing so fell asleep.

He was awakened by the din of a woodpecker's hammering on the outside of the snag's shell. He listened a while. Day had come, sunlight shone on the eagle's perch and the sky above was blue. "Thank you, Cousin," said Kwak, and sat up. Before him in the ash of the dead fire THE THING lay black and cold.

"Hah!" exclaimed Kwak. "You still here, *Oss-soo*? I dreamed the *Kap-tan* came for you. He'll never get you. You'll work for me now. My fire made you blush for your evil ways and will burn you again if you make trouble."

Unafraid now, he lifted THE THING from the ashes and wedged it in a crack above the door. "Sit there now, *Oss-soo*, and do good things for the People or we'll burn you some more."

As he spoke there was a rustle of wings at the top of the snag. Kwak's heart leaped. The eagle had come to perch. She was facing the ocean—a good sign—and presently dropped a note. It fell unerringly and splattered on a flat stone lying in the dirt opposite the