



HUNTING MEN IN NO-MAN'S LAND

Story of a Stern Chase Through the Wilds of Ungava

By R. S. BOND

"MOOCH! Now, Wolf, Mooch you."

The big wolfish-looking led-dog pressed his breast more firmly against the strap. With head bent and tongue lolling he dug his nails into the crusty snow. Behind, his six team mates, urged forward by the galling whip-lash, followed. A few moments of frantic effort and the hill-top was gained. Without waiting for the command, Wolf squatted on his haunches and gazed at his masters as if begging a word of approval for the mighty feat just accomplished. The other dogs at once began to snarl at each other ignoring him entirely. They had not been on the trail long enough to become friends, but ample time had been spent to show them that Wolf was not to be annoyed. When the journey began there had been eight dogs to the team. Now there were seven. The eighth, on the third day out, had attempted to dispute the leadership, with fatal results to himself. Now the led-dog was respected and left alone. The others could not afford to squabble with one so rough.

On the sledge behind sat two men painfully trying to catch their breath in the frosty air. Oxygen they must have to supply those panting lungs, but every intake was like inhaling a dozen sharp pointed needles. They placed their heavy mittens over their faces and drew the life-giving air through the fur, while their eyes watered, and their hair, moistened through exercise, froze in stiff little strands where it had escaped from the confines of their caps.

"Cold, ain't it?" inquired the heavier of the two. "Rather," replied his companion. "Cold, and getting colder. Thank heaven there are no more hills in sight ahead. Nor a storm," he added.

Paul Weber looked at the sky anxiously. "I wonder just what would happen, Jim," he inquired, as he loosened a frozen ball of ice from the thongs of his snowshoe, "if we ran up against a storm here in Ungava. I've been thinking a powerful lot about it these past few days up here where there's nothing but us, the dogs and snow—ever that endless expanse of snow—and I've concluded that after a good storm there'd be nothing left but snow; not even old Wolf up there, the weather-hardened old devil."

"And some day when the Gulf Stream breaks away from its channel and bathes the Ungava shores, turning this iceberg into a vineyard, Professor Somebody from Somewhere would be able to add the skeletons of two detectives, a wolf-dog and six mongrels to his collection," replied the other, breaking into Paul's flow of speech.

His listener shivered. It was all right for Jim Driscoll to make a jest out of it, but the possibilities of realisation were too great for him to appreciate the joke. "Lord," he said, as he rubbed his ears, "You get on my nerves. Let's talk of something else."

Driscoll laughed. "Don't take it so seriously, old man," he said. "We will pull through all right. Surely Cormier won't go much farther north." "If he does," he added, "he will get out of the fur-bearing country, unless he is after polar bears and seals. But come on. It is too cold for a tete-a-tete," and in a moment, answering to the cry of "Mooch-Wolf-Mooch you," the led-dog had tightened his traces and the team were bounding over the level field of white. The exercise of keeping pace with them brought a rush of warm blood to the faces of the men, and the talk of storm was soon forgotten. Every few minutes one or both would be obliged to leap on the sledge for a brief rest; then, when the north wind began to send chills down their backs, the rasping of snowshoes over the crusty snow would be heard again, with the frequent crushing of crust as it failed to withhold their weight. Some day had apparently been warm enough to form this crust and two days' journey in the rear they had been able to proceed without

snowshoes. Now, however, the crust was gradually getting thinner and thinner and if the present cold snap held out they would soon be compelled to slacken their speed as no new crust would be formed and the present thin sheet would be too frail to hold them. Luckily for them, their quarry, Cormier—Cormier, that thieving Frenchman who had six days' start of them—had passed before the crust would bear his weight, so that his trail was clear as day. Owing to their ability to cover the ground so much more rapidly, they must have nearly caught up with him. In another day, or two at most, Cormier would be run down. That is, if there was no storm to shut out the tracks. If there was a storm they would have to return defeated, if they returned at all, and of this Paul at least was doubtful.

Early that evening a deserted fur trader's shack was reached. The ashes were hardly cold in the fireplace.

"Here night before last," muttered Paul, as he sifted the ashes through his fingers. "That wood will burn longer than twenty-four hours" and he pointed to a pile of ash logs cut in stove wood length. "He made a heavy fire yesterday morning and thawed himself out before starting. And we will follow his good example to-morrow morning. Heaven knows when we will get another chance to sleep beneath a roof."

"I often wonder," said the other, as he began to prepare shavings for the fire, "why Cormier only took \$300 and left the bulk of the money in the safe. He might just as well have taken it all instead of that mere pittance. Why he must have spent nearly all of it in Fort Bacon for provisions."

"I have thought of that, too," replied his companion, "but what I wonder at most, is why we are fools enough to risk our lives in this frozen wilderness for a \$300 man. For myself, I'd rather pay the money out of my own pocket and get back where a fellow can have a feeling of warmth once in a while."

"Who wouldn't," exploded Jim. "Why nobody would take this trip for a paltry \$300. But we've just got to round up this Cormier. The Bank of — is the Old Man's standby in slack times and we can't fall down on a case for them."

"Well, say we report him dead, and refund \$300 supposed to have been taken from his shack."

"And have him turning up at Chicoutimi next spring to queer us forever with the bank? Not much. No, Paul, it's up to us to 'Mooch.' We can't return without the Frenchman."

In the morning the sky was dark and threatening. They were not weather prophets enough to be sure of a storm, but that lowering sky looked dangerous.

"Perhaps we had better camp here until it's over, if it's going to come," advised Paul, but the stronger spirit hustled him into his furs, and once again the crunch of the crust was heard under foot. "If it's going to snow that's all the more reason for haste on our part," reasoned Jim. "With Cormier only two days ahead of us if still travelling, but more probably only a few hours ahead, safely home, I am not going to run a chance of losing the trail." And his word was law.

By noon they had reached Little Whale River, striking it south of the western portion of Clearwater Lake. Contrary to their expectations, the trail led them toward the east in the direction of Seal Lake. After a three hours' camp, during which time the trail never deviated from the river for more than thirty yards, they had it figured out that Cormier's camp was on the river or possibly on the shores of Seal Lake. "At most we can't be over

seventy-five miles from there," remarked Jim. "Even if a storm does catch us we have only to follow the river and we will find his shack."

Paul did not reply. Every few minutes he glanced nervously over his shoulder toward those billowy clouds coming from the north-west. He shivered when a slight stir of cold, biting wind struck the back of his neck, and half an hour later glanced apprehensively at a tiny crystal snowflake that had dropped on the sleeve of his coat.

"I guess it's coming, Jim," he announced, showing him the sparkling particle, alongside of which its exact duplicate now rested; at least it looked like a duplicate although no doubt a microscope would have shown a great diversity in the formation.

"Let it come," replied his matter of fact companion, but nevertheless he glanced around at the approaching clouds, and his voice had a different ring to it at the next command to "Mooch." For the first time the wolf-dog felt the sting of the lash, which he acknowledged by a show of gleaming teeth and a lunge forward that whirled them over the snow at a quickened speed. The crust had vanished now and the travelling was harder for the dogs so that the men were able to keep pace with them without so frequently resting on the load.

By dusk the mercury had dropped several degrees and small particles of frosty snow were falling all around them. A forced night march was thought of, but the idea abandoned. This would only increase the chance of passing Cormier's shack without seeing it.

After half an hour's shovelling a hole was dug to the ground sufficiently large to accommodate themselves and the dogs, and to allow them to build a fire. As they cooked and ate supper they glanced anxiously at the falling snow, which was now so thick that objects could be discerned only a few yards away. Already Cormier's trail was becoming faint. By morning, if the storm kept up, there would not be a trace of it.

The wolf-dog, too, seemed to feel uneasy. He stalked sullenly among his fellows, watching the falling snow with blood shot eyes, occasionally snapping as a larger flake than usual brushed his nose. His whole attitude suggested uneasiness if not alarm.

By morning a good three inches had fallen, and the storm had not abated. On the contrary it seemed to be worse. An early breakfast, quick harnessing of the dogs, and they were off. Cormier's was their only chance for safety—Cormier's, where they could be secure until the storm had spent itself.

But they had barely started before it came on in all its fury. Driven by the wind the snow stung their faces sharply every time they turned toward the north-west. The mercury continued to drop. The little thermometer on the rear of the sledge registered 30 degrees below zero at noon. Not a trace of the sun could be seen; nothing but drifting, blinding snowflakes, and the two rear dogs, bravely doing their duty in spite of the elements. It was necessary now to hold to the guide-ropes of the sledge to keep from becoming lost. If one of them should get separated from it, he would only miraculously find it again. The tall trees that skirted the river could only dimly be seen, but they served to guide them on their way. Above the roaring of the storm could be heard the frightened whining of the dogs, and occasionally the angry snarl of the wolf-dog.

By three o'clock the thermometer registered 37 degrees and was still dropping. Paul crossed over the sledge and joined the other.

"I can't hold out much longer, Jim," he gasped. "I am about all in."

Jim brushed the frost from his mustache before replying. He had looked for this for some time and