

Bonds of Partnership

By H. Mortimer Batten

THE Land of Little Trees was a region with a bad name among trappers. To begin with it was so far distant from the last outpost of civilization that only the hardest travellers and the best woodsmen had ever penetrated it, and even given all those qualities which a trapper should have, the risks of a long trail are many.

Then there was something strange, almost mysterious, about the Land of Little Trees—so many good woodsmen had been lost there. There was Tommy O'Neill, for instance, one of the hardest trappers the northland ever knew. One spring he had returned from the Land of Little Trees with a veritable fortune in the way of choice furs. Next season he went again, but this time he did not return. Of the many who followed him, believing that fur existed there in vast quantities, a few returned broken by the hardships of the long trail, but many did not return.

Ben Claren and Rupert Inglis were victims to the fur fever. They, too, believed that there was wild life in plenty away back in the Land of Little Trees. All one wanted was a proper outfit for the long journey, and a fortune awaited any trapper who could survive the winter in this region. Thus Ben and Rupert sold out their claims, invested the sum of their worldly possessions in the necessary gear, and turned their faces northward for the unsurveyed land.

When they got there, winter had settled in grim earnest, and it took but a few days to knock together a central cabin, plan out their trapping lines, and build a few outlying shelters. But as the days passed the two men became silent as the bitter disappointment dawned upon them. They had cast their die, risked everything on the success of this season's trapping. They had toiled northward, and the perils of the southward journey still awaited them, and behold—there was no sign of life in all this vast wilderness. Not a living creature stirred, not a print was visible in the snow. Day after day the traps lay untouched, and perhaps, most serious of all, was the fact that the men were depending on their rifles for food, and there was no game to be had.

"I'll tell you what, Ben," observed Rupert after many days of it. "We were two all-fired idiots to make this trip! Our best plan is to get out right now—while we've sufficient grub to see us back."

Ben was usually highly optimistic, but now he was thoughtful. "I don't mind shifting camp across the divide," he replied, "but I ain't keen on throwing up the sponge. The game in these parts seems to migrate. One year a certain valley may be full of fur, but the next year there ain't never a sign. If we hit out across the divide we may hit a region where the fur is."

"Or we may not," stolidly replied Rupert. "I ain't no believer in this shadow chasing."

"What's wrong with you, then?" "Well, I'm thinking about the good men who have gone out in this country. My belief is that, like us, they struck no game. Then, like you, they fancied they'd find it across the divide. They went following on that way till one day they found themselves without grub enough to see them home, just as we shall do if we don't watch out."

Rupert's belief was well founded, and well Ben knew it. Neither of them were men to give in prematurely, however, and they decided to travel south-west rather than lengthen the trail by travelling north.

Next day, at dawn, their whole outfit was loaded on the sled, the dogs harnessed, and away they went down the shadowy creek, both full of hope that they would strike game eventually.

The shadows of dusk found them still on the trail, and just as they were searching for a camping ground, something mysterious happened. A huge grey bird, almost the size of an eagle, suddenly swooped over the dog team, its powerful wings sending a cold gust down on to the men's faces. It alighted on the snow only a few yards ahead of the team and remained there some

seconds, almost invisible against the snow. Then silently it rose and vanished.

"Gee-wizz! What was that?" cried Ben.

Rupert was muttering hoarsely between his lips. He was "real scared," as Ben put it. "I don't like them devils," he stated. "The Injuns call them Ghost Birds. They're a sure sign of bad luck." "Get—with your fairy fables!" scoffed Ben laughingly.

"Fairy fables or not, I ain't the only man who don't like them. You ask Factor McGery. He's no old woman. You'd find him quit any trail after he'd seen one of them brutes about!"

"Who told you so?"

"The Factor himself. He was travelling once with a Jesuit priest, and one of them lighted on the sled. They couldn't drive the brute away, and it got on the Factor's nerves so that he turned back—alone. The priest went on, and by Jingo! they could find nothing of him or his dogs next day, only the sled upturned in the snow!"

For some moments Ben was silent, then he said: "The dogs is tired. We'll make camp right here. What you want is a dose of hot ginger."

"I ain't making camp till we get clear of this spot," answered Rupert gruffly. "We'll go right on for another hour."



Wounded soldiers enjoying Christmas in hospital. Father Christmas, at St. George's Hospital, England, lights his cigarette from a wounded soldier's

Ben cursed his partner's superstitions, but did not argue the point. It was of no use arguing when Rupert got the blues. They went steadily on, and as they went the dogs began to behave strangely. First one, then the other, would become tangled in the harness, and with every gust of wind the whole team would come to a dead stop. The leading malamute was all fangs and bristles—the coarse hair along his spine was standing straight on end.

"Seems I ain't the only one who don't like ghost birds!" observed Rupert grimly. "Them dogs is near scared silly."

Both men stopped, and in the gloom they stared at their team. The leader was standing with head erect, ears acock, and as they watched him he uttered a frightened snarl.

"He can see something you and me can't see," muttered Rupert. "I tell you, I don't like it. It's blame queer."

There was certainly something ghostly about it—the great silence of the surrounding bush, with its pitch black shadows across the pure white snow, the unusual behaviour of the dogs, while fresh in the men's memories was the startling appearance of the Ghost Bird. "See your grandmother!" growled Ben. "They've caught wind of something you and me can't smell. That's what's troubling them."

At that juncture their conversation was cut short by a strange sound that floated across the forest stillness. It seemed to come from all round them—from nowhere in particular. It sounded

like the cries of a vast multitude of children, coming from afar off, and fading gradually into silence.

"What did I tell you?" remarked Ben triumphantly. "It's them brutes what's frightened the dogs."

"Maybe it is," Rupert replied. "But anyway, I'm going to build a fire and make camp right here."

"Best plan too," Ben agreed. "But I tell you, I'm a mighty glad to hear them wolves, and to see that ghost bird, which is evidently following them. You don't find them brutes in countries where there's no game."

"Very likely not, but they ain't the best of neighbors for that. The wolves up here ain't the same kind as you find round the mining camp. They haven't learnt the meaning of guns. They're dangerous."

The two men drew their sled into the shelter of the timber, and lit a fire under the leeward side of it. "Your nerves are wrong, partner," Ben observed. "What you want—"

But the sentence was cut short by a terrific hubbub in the dense timber somewhere along the slope behind them. It was so sudden that Ben spilt his coffee. The dogs began to huddle round the fire, restlessly creeping from place to place.

Then followed the familiar "Yap-ah! Yap-ah!" of the hunting pack in full cry, the sound ringing along the timbered slope with a thousand echoes.

Ben quietly got up, one hand on his

ghosts shot silently from the timber on the near side.

Instantly Ben realized his danger. The wolves could smell and see the caribou, and in their headlong rush they would not recognize him, as he stood over it, from their natural quarry. He threw up his rifle and brought down the first of them, but the rest came on without pausing. As Rupert had said, they did not understand rifle fire. Ben fired again and again, each shot with effect, shouting as he fired, but still they came on. He stepped back, swinging his rifle, club fashion, prepared to clear a circle. Several of the famished brutes fell upon the caribou at his very feet, but the rest came on straight at him.

It was one of those terrible moments through which every man lives, I suppose, and which he never forgets. As though in a nightmare, Ben beheld the lean and sinister forms leaping towards him, saw the flash of their pearl white teeth and the cruel gleam of their green eyes, but he stood his ground, prepared to fight like a Britisher.

And fight he did, though as he himself put it, they were on him like a load of coals. Next moment he recalled his partner. "They've got me, Rupert!" he cried. "You look out for yourself!"

Rupert may have been a bit of a pessimist, eager to take no unnecessary risks, but he was far from being a coward. He could not see what was taking place, but he knew all—just as well as if he had witnessed it with his own eyes. First came the rifle shot and the triumphant shout from Ben. "Ah," remarked Rupert to himself, "you may have felled the deer all right, but you aren't through with it yet, my son."

Rupert took up his snowshoes and his rifle. Then came the first shot at the wolves, followed by several in quick succession. Rupert slipped on his snowshoes, and stooping low, his rifle almost touching the surface of the snow, he shuffled into the gloom on the trail of his partner. And scarcely had he gone when that desperate cry rang across the stillness—"They've got me, Rupert! You look out for yourself!"

In the northland the bonds of partnership are as strong as the bonds of brotherhood. Rupert was a level-headed man, accustomed to thinking before he acted, and in going to his partner's rescue he must have known that he was going out to almost certain death. Yet his courage never wavered—indeed, nothing would have held him back. Away up the creek he could hear ghastly sounds of worrying and snarling—could hear his partner fighting desperately for his life.

Rupert ran up to within twenty paces of the dreadful scene. Ben was sitting in the snow, his hunting knife in his hands, and the wolves had evidently learnt to respect him, for they were trotting round in a wide circle. But even as Rupert caught sight of them they closed in to finish the struggle.

Rupert did not rush madly into the fight. He quietly stood his ground, and raising his rifle, he fired. Then he fired again and again. Coolly and deliberately he picked off the devilish brutes one by one, advancing step by step with every shot. At the sight of that cool, upright figure, hailing death among them, the courage of the brutes wavered. As though at a given signal they formed pack again, left their meal, and came straight at him in massed formation.

Then it was that Rupert's magnificent courage won the day. Had he wavered, had he stirred a foot to left or right, they would have been on him like a swarm of devils. But instead he stood his ground, pumping lead into the uncanny mass with clockwork regularity. Down went the leader with a howl, but the rest came on undaunted. They rushed up to within four paces of him, then the whole pack wheeled, dashed by, and fled on into the gloom of the waterway.

Rupert hurried to his partner's side. "Have they finished you, Ben?" he asked anxiously, groping over his friend's limbs.

Ben groaned. He was evidently in great pain, and Rupert saw to his horror that the clothing was almost torn away from his lower members. One arm and one leg were badly mangled, and he was unable to stand.

Just at that moment a fresh hubbub