

THE WILD DOG OF CAUCOMGOMOC

By Charles Boardman Hawes

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Late on a dull day in November, old Gordon Low stumbled on the lonely cabin of the nameless trapper whose lines ran over the Caucomgomoc country; he found the man at the point of death, and cared for him all that long, dark night.

Outside the door, from sunset to sunrise, crouched the dying man's great, gaunt bloodhound. With the first light of morning, the creature whined, scratched the boards of the door, and slunk into the room. The dog thrust his cold nose into the old trapper's fevered hand; he put his two paws on the side of the bunk, and raised himself so that he could look into the unseeing human eyes. For a long time he stared in dumb-brute agony of grief, understanding what it all meant as well as if he were human and Gordon Low turned to the window, with something akin to mist blurring his vision. After a long silence the gnarled, old, white-bearded man in the bunk rose on his trembling elbow, and flung a long arm round the dog's neck, drew the beast's face close to his own, and held him a full minute with the failing strength of a great love.

Afterward, Low tried to feed the dog. He sought to win the animal's confidence, but the bloodhound was afraid of him. With bared teeth he crouched before Gordon's extended hand, and growled deep in his throat. He stood by the door, and whined. When Low crossed the cabin to open the door, the bloodhound sank on his haunches in the corner, ready to fight to the last gasp. When he found that the man did not attack him, he darted into the open, turned for one brief glance at the dark windows, and leaving behind him the silent cabin with its dead, swung into a long lope that carried him swiftly over the birch-clad hill until he became a mere moving speck in the leafless forest. Thus the masterless dog passed into the wilderness.

Two days later they carried the trapper's body up the hill, above the banks of Caucomgomoc Stream, and buried it, with a prayer and a verse from the Scriptures. Human mourners were few; there were the minister from the distant village, three men from the lumber camp, who came in the name of a brief friendship, and old Gordon Low; but a silent shadow, slipping through the silver birches and the spruces, watched it all, with dark, deep eyes. When the preacher was starting down the trail to

the village in the gloaming, he looked back at the solitary grave, and saw a tall, lank hound standing in mute and sorrowful guardianship over the new-turned earth.

Time and again in the winter that followed, men from the towns or the logging camps caught sight of the hound in underbrush or distant thicket, usually silent and far away. They held him in the same awe in which they had held his master; for there was something sombre and threatening in the creature's attitude when, with drooping lips, and great head hung forward, and staring eyes deep as night, he gazed down from the high hills at some passer-by on the long, snow-covered roads below. Once three men traveling on foot heard behind them in the forest that never-to-be-forgotten voice, resonant, vibrant, like a great bell booming up from the valley, a voice that drew nearer and ever nearer. The men knew that the dog of Caucomgomoc was on their track. They ran from him as if a fiend were at their heels; but always that voice trailed them over the ridges, through the valleys, until, looking back, they saw the lean bloodhound, with his nose to the ground, rapidly drawing nearer. When the men, who had no weapons, began searching frantically under the dead leaves for clubs, a deathly silence came over the woods. But the dog did not attack them. The men, looking up at the hill above them, saw him standing there, fixing them with malevolent gaze; they fled again, in a strange fear.

No one knew a reason for fearing the dog. So far as was known, he never had attacked a human being. Perhaps it was his expression—his fearless, challenging stare—that frightened men. Perhaps it was the mystery that attaches itself to the name of bloodhound. They had feared the rangy, bell-throated beast from the day when first he came to Caucomgomoc, but when his master died they feared him more; he had gone wild, he was a menace to the entire countryside, they said—all except Gordon Low.

At midnight, men in the distant camps heard the creature's hunting cry, and, turning restlessly in their blankets, told one another that the hound of Caucomgomoc was out that night. Sometimes, at high noon, scattered choppers in the mountains shuddered and drew closer together, when, from over waste stretches of land, rang the hollow baying of the bloodhound, faint, and small, and far away. Some said he was hunting with the spirit of his lost master; some, that he was a devil incarnate.

Gray-haired Amos Nieben, the Indian, tapping his forehead with unmistakable meaning, quoted an ancient tale of the Abnaki, about a hound of supernatural powers, in days long past, that had tracked a man forsworn across the wilderness to the very gates of Quebec.

While the winter passed, and spring came in with the rush of white water in the rips, the fame of the lost hound spread, and he became known from the Abol to the Allagash as the wild dog of Caucomgomoc.

One May afternoon, in the village store, where half a dozen men were loafing in their accustomed places on meal sacks and nail kegs, Gordon Low laughed at the stories they were telling, and declared, impulsively, that he would like to own the dog.

“Own him!” chuckled a French trapper, who had come down for provisions. “Ho, ho, that is a ver’ good joke! Listen,”—his voice dropped to a whisper,—“that is no real dog. No! That dog has a demon in him. He would eat you in the night. He would eat children in the village. It is not safe to talk so of a demon dog. Once he followed me down Caucomgomoc Stream. I heard him yowling high in the hills. I ran, I ran faster, still came that yowling fiend of a brute, *wo-o-a-ow*, so! *Sacre!* I ran—behind me the dog, before me my cabin. I reach the cabin, I slam the door, with my rifle in hand I open the window—he is gone. Always he is gone when there is a gun; therefore he is a demon dog, else he would be shot.”

Gordon Low flared up angrily. “Yes, it’s mighty glad I’d be to own that hound!” he repeated. “There’s no such other dog in all the country!”

“Thanks be for that!” cried another speaker. “If there was such another dog, it would be no place for men!”

A woman was hurrying up the road. Gordon Low watched her quick steps, saw her blue apron blown back by the wind, her brown hair tossed in wisps about her face, and recognized his son’s wife. She was coming to the store.

As she stood on the threshold the men turned, and Low felt himself unaccountably frightened by the unnatural pallor in the woman’s face. She looked quickly round the little group, into the shadows behind the meal sacks, and cried, “Where’s my little Ned?”

Gordon’s heart thumped, and he rose slowly to his feet, but Austin, the storekeeper, stepped forward. “Ned’s all right; he rode up to the camps with Bill Nichols early this afternoon—Bill’s toting in Johnston’s supplies.”

“Bill Nichols, that rattle-brained scamp!” the mother exclaimed. “Here I’ve hunted the house over for the boy!”

“Well, here’s Bill. He can speak for himself,” Austin said, and pointed at a jolting wagon sled that was coming down from the woods. The driver sat, calm as Buddha, in a flour-barrel chair, with the reins over his knees; he was sound asleep.

Bill Nichols woke from his dream to find Mrs. Low shaking his arm.

“Neddy?” he said, with a gasp, and stared at the empty sled. “Neddy? Why—why—he must have fell off!”

Night was approaching. The sun barely peered over the top of Russell Mountain. Johnston’s camps were ten miles away, in the Caucomgomoc country, and eight-year-old Ned Low was alone in the wilderness. They told his mother that he could not be lost on the road. They told her that a child of his age could not travel far enough from

the road to escape a searching party, if he tried. They told her that the boy would find his way home unaided, and they almost calmed her fears. But Gordon Low knew, better than anyone else, the devious windings of the tote road through grassy meadows and thick alder growths, the pathless wastes of marsh, and bog, and beaver dam that lay through all the Caucomgomoc country. And he knew his little grandson's determined spirit, the dogged will, so like his own, that had led the boy, young as he was, to roam over hills and valleys round the village. The old man's cheeks were gray, and his brows were knotted in a dark frown.

Assuring the woman that the child was probably not a mile from the village and would soon be found, twenty men, armed with guns, horns, and lanterns, set out on the long road under the darkening pines; but ahead of them all, at the swift stride for which he was famous, marched Gordon Low. Two hours later, the grandfather, trail-worn and weary, stumbled into Johnston's camps. But not a person in Johnston's camps had seen Ned Low. What Bill Nichols had been too much afraid, or too much bewildered, to confess, was revealed now—Ned had been lost on the outward trip.

At that moment, although the grandfather did not know it, the boy's father had just reached home, and, frightened by the news that met him at his door, was starting, supperless, on the winding trail. When the other men, with swinging lanterns and gleaming gun barrels, came up through the alders into the camp yard, Gordon Low was turning back on the road.

The searching parties gathered in the moonlight, which was just beginning to sift through the pines, and looked across the dark waste of evergreen, over the swampy, marshy lowlands through which they had passed. The boy had been lost, Bill Nichols admitted in tearful contrition, before the team had reached Johnston's camps. For at least five hours Ned had been wandering in the maze of slashings and roads, and streams, and bogs. As they stared into the night, despair settled over the group, for there seemed to be very little that they could do. They turned back, calling, calling, calling; they wound in and out of old clearings and forgotten roads, plunged into swamps, and spread into a great net of swinging lanterns and shouting men. Slowly the hunt wound toward the town, hopelessly, doggedly persevering. An hour passed, an hour and a half. The father came up into the circle of swinging lanterns, and knew, without asking, the sad truth. The net grew wider and wider. It spread into marsh and bog hole, cedar tangle and spruce barrens, all without avail.

For another weary hour they worked back through the wilderness, searching every thicket, and calling, without answer.

Suddenly Ed Low, the father, held up his hand. "Stop!" he cried. "What's that?"

To left and right ran the command for silence. The shouting died away; the men stood, with stifled breath. They glanced, wild-eyed, at each other, and at the darkness round them.

“What is it—for heaven’s sake, what is it?” Ed Low fairly hurled the words into the night.

From far away in the dark forest came the answering cry of Gordon Low, who called without knowing that they had stopped: “Can—you—hear—the—hound?” The voice echoed, and was still.

Men, leaning wearily against cedars, paled with a terrible dread; stout hearts shook with horror. At last they heard the dreadful sound.

From across miles and miles of tangled thicket and open marsh, came the clear, faint call of a bloodhound on the trail. As regular as a tolling knell, deep, mournful, and unutterably wild, came the call. With throbbing hearts, the searchers splashed through the swamp water, ankle-deep, knee-deep, waist-deep. They pressed on, shoulder to shoulder, drawn together by an unconfessed fear.

They gathered on the road, and listened to the call of the hound. It came from the south.

They ran, with bobbing lanterns; they jostled down the road, stumbling and tripping.

“The wild dog of Caucomgomoc!” they cried. “God help the boy!”

Strangely enough, they had no doubt whom the beast was tracking. They swung their guns forward, they felt the cartridges in their pockets. Ahead of all of them, at the unfailing pace of a racer trained and tried, old Gordon Low ran down the road.

The cry of the hound grew louder. They were nearing the end of the hunt, they knew, for the howling of the dog was nearer, sharper, and continued without pausing. The dog had swung to the right. The men hurried down a hauling road, stumbling over roots, stumps, and crisscrossed logs. For ten minutes they straggled on; then, with Gordon Low still ahead, they dashed from the road into the swamp. Floundering, splashing, plunging, they thrust themselves through alders and willows, leaped into a dead stream, knee-deep in mud and waist-deep in water, surged through tall grass, crossed a beaver dam, partly by moonlight, partly by lantern light—and then stopped.

It had been a night of terror, and this was the culminating moment. The shapes of trees and of men were ghostly in the wan light of the moon. The lantern bearers stood like wraiths in the sultry swamp. They were close to the dog, so close that cold fear enshrouded them! But the dog’s cry had changed! With difficulty they forced a passage through the brush, and struggled to the edge of a black bog, and stopped again. Ahead of them lay an impassable morass.

For a moment they stared across the treacherous plain; then, with a low, quivering cry, Amos Nieben threw his gun to his shoulder. As the Indian's gun barrel rose, Gordon Low swung the butt of his own rifle against it, and knocked up the muzzle, so that the bullet whined into the trees beyond the bog.

"Fool!" Low cried. "Look there!"

"But it is the demon beast!" shrieked the Indian.

There, out in the marsh, was the wild dog of Caucomgomoc struggling toward firm earth. The light was dim, and they could not see distinctly, but as he approached, they gradually distinguished something hanging from his jaws; Picking his way over the mud and through the tufted grasses, the dog came slowly nearer. The thing hanging from his mouth was a small boy, a frightened, silent child that was clinging to the neck of the bloodhound with both arms. As the bewildered men stared, not believing their own eyes, they saw the boy's arms drop, and his body sink. Plainly, he had not the strength to call; he was too far gone even to know in what place he was. But the tall, lean dog seized the child's coat between his teeth, dragged the little body through the water, ploughed on, floundered, splashed, and sank to his belly in bog mud. The hound's large eyes looked up at the searchers in pitiful appeal. Without letting go his hold on the boy's coat, he whined.

Linking themselves together in one long chain, hand and wrist, the men waded out through the mud and tufted grass.

Then Gordon Low leaped far out into the bog, caught up the boy, and passed him back to waiting hands; and then, even while he was sinking himself, lifted the bloodhound bodily from the trap; he fought against the sucking, clinging masses, fell, rose, and, helped by all who could reach him, stepped on solid earth.

The boy was faint, desperately tired, frightened, and hungry—but unharmed. The good news, borne by the swiftest runners, preceded him to the village a full hour. His father carried him through the swamps and down the tote road into the waiting town, where lamplighted windows and clustered groups of women waited; but close beside him marched the grandfather, and at his heels followed the wild dog of Caucomgomoc.

That night the bloodhound seemed to recognize a new bond between himself and mankind; he seemed no longer to fear the man who had raised him from the bog. That night he followed Gordon Low to his door. At first he was afraid to enter the house, but when Gordon called him in a low, gentle voice, he crossed the threshold in perfect confidence. And from that memorable night until the dog himself died, at the time of the great storm, years later, he loved Gordon Low as once he had loved the lonely trapper of Caucomgomoc.