

THE TRAPPERS—By James O. Curwood

FORTY-FIVE MILLION dollars in dividends—that's what you've got to call it; something pretty big even when you compare it with the yearly dividends declared by the Steel Trust, the Tobacco Trust and one or two others piled on top of those. It's the dividend of the wild places, unwatered and only slightly capitalized; the one thing on earth that even Nature herself has had the power to keep out of the hands of almost but not quite omniscient man, and which she scatters, like confetti, among those who are strong enough and venturesome enough to go after it. Forty-five million dollars in raw furs! It sounds big and it is big. That was last year's production, as nearly as one can figure an industry that is carried in a very loose-mannered way in account books and ledgers. Possibly it is a million or two over or a million or two under the exact figure, for even in the matter of statistics Nature has made the fur industry a little different from all others, as she has scattered her forests and her swamps and her fur-bearing seas in so many of the out-of-the-way corners of the earth that it is impossible for man to be absolutely accurate in his accounting of things.

This one industry still declaims that romance and adventure are not yet quite dead. It insists upon remaining in a class by itself. Since two thousand years before the days of Christ the pelts of wild beasts have played their part in the lives of men. For ten centuries they have helped to make history.

Fur has played as vital and as dramatic a part as gold. It has caused wars, has led to the discovery of new lands, has helped to change the map of nations—always holding forth the lure not only of wealth but of adventure, that wild and glorious freedom which brought about the first peopling of our own unknown West. And, unlike gold, it has refused to be cornered by the selected few. The Hudson's Bay Company has tried it and failed. Paris has tried it. London has tried it. All have failed. In a smaller way a Montreal buyer essayed to "corner" the muskrat's pelt and went to smash with three hundred thousand on his hands. A Paris house held up the Russian sable, and the women turned suddenly to fox; a London buyer "cornered" beaver when a beaver coat was worth five hundred dollars, and last year beaverskins sold as low as six dollars a pelt. Next year they may go to twenty or thirty. Many believe they will.

Only a few years ago the trapper in the Canadian wilds could scarcely give a lynx pelt away and was glad to get two or three dollars for it. Then woman, fickle beauty, wanted lynx; and in a twelvemonth they climbed to twenty-five dollars a pelt. Likewise, in a season or two, this one captivating directorship of the fur industry turned from seal to fox, and that year a single fox pelt sold for as high as four thousand dollars. Then she fell in love with mink; and the royal favorite of kings and empresses—the little ermine—that was once upon a time worth more than his weight in gold, took a tumble to "thirty cents" a pelt—in truth. And so, as Lord Stratheona, head of the great Hudson's Bay Company, chivalrously says: "It isn't an industry at all. It's a romance—a romance of the Lady and the Beast."

How Prices Have Gone Kiting

IT HAS always been a romance of the Lady and the Beast, as far back as history paints its pictures for us, and it always will be. It was the little white ermine and the lady—the beautiful mistress of Grosselier—who induced the first few chivalrous gentlemen, one of them the lover of a queen, to set out with swords at their waists on their quest for fur in the New World two hundred and forty years ago; and perhaps, in setting off her lover on his romantic adventure, Grosselier's lady urged him on with the pretty sentiment of a certain lovely young woman whom I had often noticed stroking and fondling her furs as though they were alive, and of whom I asked an explanation. "They're so soft and purry, and so filled with the warmth and plisten and feel of life," she said, "that I sometimes almost forget they're dead!"

This young woman—and several million others in this country today—might well go into a panic of dismay if they realized just what the next and some say the final chapter in the romance of the Lady and the Beast is to be. The head of a great Paris house told me not so very long ago that within another ten years only women of wealth would be wearing real fur, and cold facts bear out the statement. No longer can a woman buy her twenty and twenty-five-dollar mink set; she must now pay from seventy-five to a hundred and fifty dollars for a fairly good set, and on up to three hundred—and even five hundred—if she gets AA pelts from the Far North. Everything in



The Author on the Trail on the Edge of the Barren Lands

the way of fur, with few exceptions, has gone up in the same way; and even the rabbit—the little humbug—has found his place in a score of imitations. Each year the number of fur-bearing animals decreases—each year the world's catch grows from ten to twenty per cent smaller than the preceding year; but this makes no difference in Nature's dividend, for as the supply grows smaller the price soars upward, until it more than offsets the loss. Only a few years ago the value of the world's annual catch of raw furs was about twenty-five million dollars; today it is nearly twice that, with the supply only about two-thirds as large. The Hudson's Bay Company still pays its dividends, but it hands out a sack of flour for the single skin of a lynx or a marten, and not for a pile "as high as the hunter's rifle." Within the years of my own experience lynx and fisher-cat were used for leggings; now they deck beauty and royalty at coronations. Only five years ago I met two Canadian trappers who were coming down from the North with three hundred martens, worth then about four dollars a skin. That catch would now be worth seven thousand dollars. There was a time, less than a decade ago, when from the Aleutian Islands alone there were taken one hundred and fifty thousand skins of the sea otter each year; and they were cheap. Then a sea-otter craze swept the feminine world; and the women, with the peremptory demand of their pretty lips, sent ships scouring the seven seas for them—or as many seas as they could be found in. As a result, the next to the last chapter was written in the story of the otter. Last year only four hundred skins were taken from the Aleutians, with a sacrifice of a dozen human lives; and these skins went almost entirely to the cities of Paris, Berlin, London and Vienna.

A few years more and the sea otter, with the black and silver fox, the marten and the lynx, will be almost as forgotten as the seal; for of what avail are warships, the treaties of nations and a score of "protective" laws against woman's demand? If she wants seal she shall have seal—until they are gone; and in spite of the treaties and warships aforesaid she wanted them, and she got them. Twenty years ago the seal herds of the Pribilofs numbered over five million head. Today it is estimated there are not more than from a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand left. The year 1909 was a particularly hard one on the few that were left. Fabulous prices were offered. At the London and Paris auctions, not only the agents of wealth but the fashionable ladies themselves came in their carriages to bid for the pelts. It was a year of ruthless slaughter, in spite of the fact that the smoke of patrolling warships hung frequently over the sea about the Pribilofs.

It is estimated that, besides the older seals, fully ten thousand baby seals died during that hunting season. Last year only half as many were killed—because there were fewer to kill. In that direction woman's adventurous poachers have done their work well.

Just now there is a great demand for the common fox, for the fox, like the skunk, is a sort of Jekyll and Hyde, which travels under many guises. "Red" is too plebeian a name, so he is dyed to a glossy black and is sold all the world over for "black fox," his brother of that color being worth anywhere from five hundred to several thousand dollars. Six years ago one million seven hundred and sixty thousand foxes were caught to supply the world's market; four years ago that number had fallen to one million two hundred thousand. Then the black-fox craze swept through the cities, and the fox was trapped, poisoned and run down by dogs, until even the white Arctic fox, that was worth only fifty cents ten years ago, was almost exterminated wherever the Eskimo and Northern hunters could get after him. As a result of this relentless pursuit of the fox, his number has been cut in two during the last five years; and last year less than eight hundred thousand could be secured for the market. From two dollars a pelt the common red fox has jumped to twelve and fifteen, the "cross" to as high as a hundred, and silver and black to prices that make a single skin worth a small fortune. In the London market ordinary pelts bring from five hundred to one thousand dollars, and from that up to four thousand dollars. This latter figure is the highest legitimate price ever brought by a black fox, though it is known that an English lady of title purchased a skin at auction for thirty-five hundred dollars and turned it over to an Austrian nobleman's wife for seven thousand dollars.

"Rats" Now in Demand

IT WAS a Parisian who first saw the real beauty of the common muskrat—muskrat!—skunk! For years woman turned up her pretty nose at them and allowed the gentlemen to use a few of the pelts in coats and caps. Muskrats—and skunks, mind you! The poor farmer lads who caught them could get only a few cents apiece for them. Rats sold as low as three cents; skunks at twenty-five cents. Then a Frenchman rose from out a glory of skunk and proclaimed the "black sable" and the "river mink." Every lady in the land knows what happened soon after that. Skunk was no longer skunk. As "black sable" he became a fad. It was found that he could be turned into half a dozen high-priced substitutes, because his fur was really beautiful—though cheap; and as a result over a million and a half of his tribe were caught three years ago. Two years ago this number decreased to nine hundred thousand, last year to between four hundred and five hundred thousand. No longer is his catlike track a common sight in the snow of the barnyard and about the chicken house. Woman has "got" him. He is going—and going fast. The world could use five million skunks this year; it will have to be satisfied with three or four hundred thousand.

It is impossible to say how many million muskrats are now used annually; but they have gone from three cents a pelt to as high as eighty in this country, and a dollar in Paris and London. "Three years more," says a Montreal buyer, "and then the real famine will come, for the muskrat and the skunk, two of the cornerstones of the fur industry today, will be gone." Even the rabbit has been forced in to keep up the fading supply; and surely it takes a strong imagination to picture bunny as "white and blue fox!"

However, the romance of the Lady and the Beast does not begin with the raw pelts in their bales or the finished product in the furrier's warehouses; and woman, as she toys with her silky treasure, probably dreams but little of the real heart and soul of the romance that has come down through the centuries. And yet between them there is that touch of affinity which gives the story of fur its prettiest touch; for she may love her diamonds and her silks and satins and rare laces, but it is seldom with the warmth and sentiment that goes with her love for her furs. In more ways than one her whims and feminine fancies have helped to make the history of the world, but never more picturesquely than her demand for fur. It was the beaver that lured men from the St. Lawrence to the Mississippi, and thence to the Rockies—opening up a continent. It was the sable that drew the tribesmen of Asiatic Russia across to far Kamchatka; and the sea otter that led the Spanish and the English all round the world in crazy craft, giving us our first knowledge of the Pacific

Coast from Alaska to California. And it was the little ermine that opened up the Far North of the New World.

That Far North is today the world's last great trapping ground. From the shore of Lake Superior to the Arctic Sea, from Labrador to the country of the Athabasca, centuries of men have lived and died in the pursuit of fur—the heroes of this romance of the Lady and the Beast; and it doesn't take a strong imagination to see it in that light. It is a country of splendid wildness and of grand defiance to man; a country fully one-third as large as the whole of Europe, into which railroads and civilization will never go. Reaching from the coast of Labrador south of Ungava, the southernmost line of this wilderness—which will remain a wilderness for all time—runs just north of the Height of Land, below James Bay, and swings north and westward through Mackenzie Land to the polar seas. It is in many ways the most desolate country in the world as well as the most picturesque and romantic. Great areas of ridge-mountains, torn and twisted upheavals of past ages, filled with cavernous streams and thousands of rock-bottomed lakes, cover unexplored thousands of square miles. Country penetrable only by dogsledge and snow-shoes in winter and by canoe in summer reaches out to vast wind-swept plains, tenanted by only the most venturesome trappers, who brave the wild Arctic blizzards in pursuit of the northern fox; and these barrens, in turn, give place to great swamps, thick forests of small timber and to other great areas of caribou-haunted muskeg. Basking in warmth and sunshine in summer, this breeding-world of the rarest furs freezes into the death-chill of sixty and seventy degrees below zero in winter, keeping human life down to that terrible point just halfway between existence and annihilation. Since the beginning of known time, man and Nature have been at war in this *terra incognita* of the fur-seeker.

In the whole region of Ungava, a country eight times as large as Ohio, there is a population of less than two thousand, half Eskimo and half Montagnais, Nascaupics and Crees. In a country a hundred and fifty miles wide, and running entirely round the eastern, southern and western shores of Hudson's Bay, forming a territory of three hundred thousand square miles, there is only one human being to every hundred square miles; and most of this life is centered about the hundred and odd posts of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Revillon Brothers Company.

When the North Begins to Thaw

WERE it not for these posts, life would soon cease to be in this Northland. It is vastly more untenable and hazardous than Alaska or the Yukon, for man has been able to bring towns and industries to those regions of gold, and steamships carry the fortune-hunters to their shores; but once in the unbroken wilderness of the North man's life hangs upon two things—the pack on his back and the posts. Perhaps if woman could see the story of fur as it actually begins, and the wild and half-savage force that is working out its life for her, she would find still more of that feel of life in the furry things she wears!

It is spring. The slush snows are growing soft underfoot. From the south there come the soft breaths of air that set the poplar buds swelling; the wilderness awakens into new life; the air is filled with the song of rushing waters—and to a company's post, where each spring for two hundred years may have witnessed this same scene, the forest people come trailing in with their second catch of the season. The first catch was brought in just before the holidays, but then the hunters remained only long enough to



Two of the Author's Companions and Guides—Indian Trappers

barter their furs for supplies and credit, and hurried back to their trappings again. With spring it is different. Now begin the holiday months of the wilderness people. Indian and half-breed trappers bring with them their wives and children, their dogs and summer tepees. The few white trappers move in with their families. For hundreds of square miles about the wilderness is emptied of all human life and the post becomes a metropolis. For a few days there is great business activity. The furs are sorted, classed, purchased and credited to account, and the company's supply store is a scene of wildest excitement and jubilation. The Indian trapper is the greatest spendthrift on earth and as free from care as the fish in the streams. If he has made a good catch he is rich. He decks his wife in the gaudiest raiment he can find and throws his money round like a millionaire as long as it lasts, in spite of the company's constant warning for him to be more careful; but he knows the company cannot get along without him and that it will care for him when he is a beggar, as it has done for two and a half centuries. So he has his fun, and his wife and his children help him. He is a great sport as long as he has a dollar of credit or a package of tobacco in sight. He will wager with the other bucks on anything—from a dograce, a footrace or the flight of a stone to the ability of his squaw to beat some other squaw in a feat of marksmanship. There is no fighting, no quarreling, no whisky. I have seen a buck lose his dog team with a good-natured grunt. It is a mighty good Indian who is not "broke" by midsummer; but that doesn't worry him. He expects to be broke about that time, and from then on he is taken on credit by the company—but only for absolute necessities, food and tobacco. He begins to get worn and ragged. His wife's gay raiment drops away and by

August his children are half naked. He might work at odd jobs for the company, but he won't; for during these summer months he is a gentleman of leisure and it is almost an insult to ask him to be anything else.

Then comes the change—the first chill breaths of autumn, the first turning of the wind from south to north. He wakes up some morning quite sober. From a hundred cities the arbiters of fashion are calling upon him to get busy and there is that in the air which makes him respond to the call. From the pleasures of the summer his mind turns to his forest cabin and his waiting trap houses—twenty, fifty or a hundred miles away. Follow other days of business now with the company. He is outfitted, without possessing a dollar of his own. The company makes him a loan of anywhere from fifty to four hundred dollars' worth of supplies, according to the trapper's needs and his previous reputation; and late in August or early in September, if he is far north, he sets his face into the deep solitudes of the wilderness, with his wife and his children.

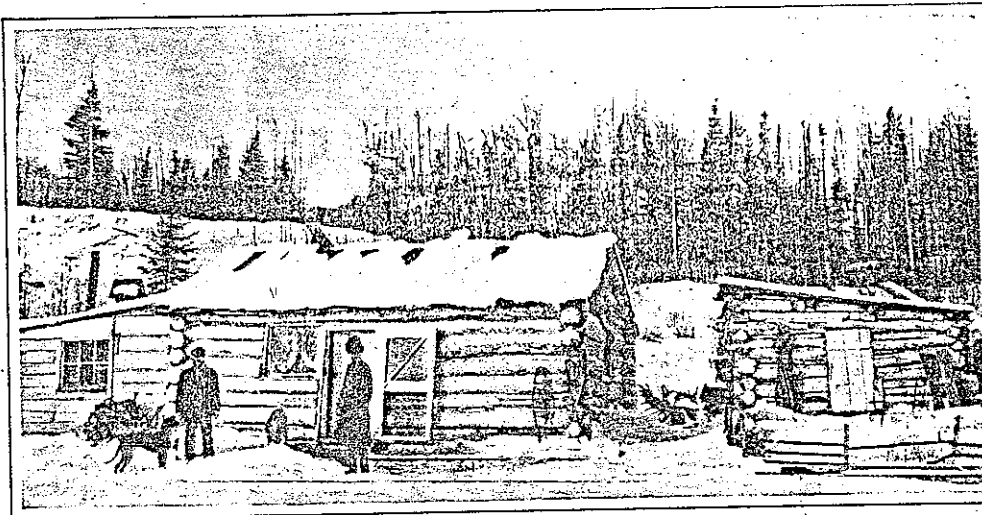
Perhaps in the heart of a deep swamp, or under the shelter of a ridge-mountain, or in the depths of a great forest, fifty or a hundred miles from the post, are his cabin, his traps and the beginning of his line. Not until early in October does the forest hunter begin to set his traps, for he knows that the longer he waits the better the quality of the fur will be. He has no fear of some other trapper catching it, for it is an unwritten law of the North that one trapper must not encroach upon the grounds of another. So it happens that the grounds of a father may be inherited by the son and by the children of that son. At one time, when the Hudson's Bay Company itself held the power of life and death, an encroachment upon another's trapping ground was as good as a death-warrant; but this has ceased to be—except in occasional instances. Yet the unwritten law is respected by all, from the trapper to the savage.

Covering the Trap Line

A LINE is twenty, thirty or even fifty miles in length, and is usually set with about two hundred traps, deadfalls and poison-baits for wolves and foxes. The line begins near the trapper's home and stretches through tracts of forest, great swamps and over wind-swept barrens, and is so run that when the trapper reaches the end of his line he is again near home. It takes him about two days to cover a forty-mile line, and he travels it twice a week, skinning his game wherever it is caught and using the carcasses for bait. When he arrives at his cabin, laden with his pelts and perhaps a haunch of caribou or moose, he has nothing to do for forty-eight hours except smoke, if he has a family. The wife and children scrape all fat from the green pelts, stretch them and do all the work about, while the trapper takes turns at smoking, eating and sleeping, and waits for the beginning of the next long jaunt over the trapline.

At New Year's all trails again lead to the posts, for this is the midwinter "big-time season," when for a week or ten days the forest people come in with their furs to square accounts and participate in the feasts and games to which the company treats them.

By the middle of January the trappers are again on their lines, where they remain until the first slush snow of spring, when they come in with the second and usually the largest catch of the season. And this time the most of them remain, for summer is close at hand. A thousand miles away the season of social triumphs and pleasures is at an end. The trapper of the North is just beginning to rush his bales of fur by canoe and dogsled to the big cities.



A Trapper's Typical Home in the Thunder Bay Country