

Fortunes in Fur Hunting

Written for LESLIE'S by JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD 25 December 1913

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THE pursuit of the soft and furry pelts of four-footed creatures has filled volumes of romance. It has helped to make history. It has caused war, and helped to make the greatness of nations. And in its pursuits—in the lives of the fur-hunters—there have occurred, and are still occurring, incidents that seldom get beyond the trap-line or out of the wilderness, and which are absorbing in their way as the most thrilling fiction. Hundreds of men have amassed snug little fortunes along the trap-line. Each winter a few strike it suddenly "rich" by making that always hoped-for catch of black or silver fox. But I have heard of no one making as quick and as valuable a catch as that of Pierre Meuse and Adam Turner.

I was coming down from the Lac la Poudre country when I made the acquaintance of these fortune hunters of the trap-line. It was in the days of the "fish snows"—when the spring sun was swelling the poplar buds until they were ready to burst, and turning the little wilderness streams into swollen torrents. In the first days of the "fish snows" all the trappers leave their lines and go into the woods with dogs and sledges, before bare earth and rock make sledge-going impossible. But Turner and Meuse were late—at least two weeks late, and when I met them they were helping their six dogs drag their heavily laden sledge, one pulling and the other pushing. That night we camped together.

It was after we had eaten supper, and were smoking our pipes, drawn pretty close to the camp fire, for the spring nights were still chilly, that I asked Turner what sort of a catch they had made that winter.

"Good!" he said. "We've got eight hundred marten skins in that load."

Eight hundred marten! I gasped, and stared at him. He could see that I didn't believe him. If he had said three or four silver fox worth perhaps a thousand or fifteen hundred dollars—or even a black fox or two, I might have accepted his word. He looked at the half-Frenchman, Pierre, and the two went to the sledge. I followed. I at least had to believe what I saw. The sledge was packed solid with marten skins. Afterward, when they were sold, I received the actual count. There were eight hundred and ninety skins, and they brought the two trappers close to sixteen thousand dollars!

How Turner and Meuse made their catch is one of the singular stories of the wilderness. A month before I met them they were coming down to the line of rail with their winter's catch, which they valued at about twelve hundred dollars, and which was made up chiefly of lynx and fox. They were returning over a new trail, and entered a country where a great fire had swept the preceding spring.

They figured that at least a hundred square miles had been completely devastated. Nothing but the dead and blackened stumps of trees were left until they came to the heart of the burn. Here they struck a heavily timbered bit of country not more than a mile wide by two miles in length. The greater part of this was swampy, but the center was high and rocky. In this timber the two trappers made their camp one night. That night they baked fresh haddock, and after supper a good many crumbs of it were scattered about. It was Pierre who caused Turner from his sleep the next morning, and dragged him to the flap of the tent. From where they crouched on hands and knees the two men counted five marten huntingravenously for the haddock crumbs and other scraps of food.

"They were starved," said Turner, "and they didn't seem to mind the tent any more than if it was a rock." I reached for my gun, but Pierre stopped me. Then we talked the thing over, and it didn't take us more than a minute or two to understand what had happened. The fire had swept through a marten country, and right in the center it had left this big patch of high timber and swamp—an oasis, you might call it, and some of the marten had found refuge in it. That was before the breeding season, and all the young that came later kept to this timber, for marten are like red squirrels, and don't travel much. When Pierre and I went out they moved only a short distance away from us. It didn't take us long to get out our traps, and by noon we had fifty set. We baited them with haddock, and by night we had caught eighteen martens. The next day we set another fifty traps, and from then on it kept us busy night and day setting for the traps and skins. We made most of our catch during the first week, but kept it up for ten days after that. I guess we got pretty near every marten there was in that bunch of timber.

When I parted company with Turner and Meuse they each presented me with a fine pelt, to be used in the making of a turban for a certain lady.

Fur-hunting, in a way, is just like a hunt after gold. You never know when something "rich" is going to turn up with the less valuable stuff. This, of course, means in the big fur country—the Canadian north. I have proved this by experience. Three years ago I had a twenty mile trap-line which ran through a heavily timbered swamp. The lady and I used to travel over this twenty miles of trap-line on snow-shoes every other day. The "between" days I was writing a novel in our wilderness cabin. All in all, we were nothing but amateurs in the science of trapping, and according to all professional reasoning should have caught nothing but the humblest of fur things. We caught something like eighty animals in three months,

twenty or thirty mink, three lynx, four fisher-cat, and hundreds of what the trappers call "trash"—red-squirrels, chipmunk, owls, muskrat, flying-squirrels and so on. Then the lady and I took it into our heads that we could do what the cleverest trappers found it pretty hard to do—poison wolves and foxes. We rolled strychnine capsules in deer fat, and placed the capsules on high hummocks of snow and ice on several frozen lakes near us. That was when we struck it "rich." In one cold, moonlit night, when the temperature was down to fifty below zero, we got two fine silver foxes, which brought us four hundred dollars apiece.

I relate this incident just to bring me up to Bolt Morse and his wife. Morse was a young draughtsman in Montreal, dying of lung trouble. He had spent every cent he had, and his plucky little wife was selling books to keep them going, when the doctor told Morse to go up and spend a summer among the spruce and balsam of the James Bay country. Morse and his wife went, and pitched a tent on the shore of Lake Nipigon. Three months gave him back his health, and then, as a farewell tip at Wabunash told me, "The fool greediness got it into his head he could trap." Anyway, he got supplies and traps, put up a log cabin before winter came, and blazed out his trap-line. During the months that followed Morse made just the ordinary "tenderfoot" catch, worth probably four hundred dollars—an ordinary catch with two exceptions. And these exceptions! They were two of the prettiest black foxes ever captured in the Wabunash country. Both poisoned on the same lake. This tenderfoot's two skins were among the four that went over to the Royal household in London in 1911, and the pair brought Morse and his plucky little wife thirty-two hundred dollars. As the skins weighed considerably less than four pounds, they were worth literally three times their weight in gold. The lure of a diamond field couldn't pull Morse and his wife out of the wilderness now.

You can't lose the history of a black fox skin. They are so rare and valuable that every one caught goes down in half a dozen records. The most valuable black fox skin ever caught in the north has an interesting history. In the first place the fox was shot, which is unusual. The Indian who got it was called Backpine, and lives near the post up in the Ki-shikass Lake country. He sold the skin for thirty dollars and a jug of whiskey that a white trapper had smuggled in. The white trapper sold the skin down on the line of rail to a Jew "fur agent" for six hundred dollars. The fox skin went to London, where nearly all Canadian fur goes first, and was sold at auction to an agent, instructed to pay him it for the Emperor of America. He paid four thousand dollars for the skin.