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The Last Chapter in the Romance of Fur

Showing how the cost of fur will increase

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

THE day of romance—romance of the old sort, of pirate-infested seas, of peril-ridden lands of gold, of strange and unknown countries filled with the lure that has drawn men from the beginning of time—has rapidly passed away. It is followed now by the romance of iron and steel, the romance of invention, of progress, of a civilization that is fast crushing out the last vestige of the primitive and adding each day new chapters to its own marvelous achievements. It seems like a fitting decree of fate that the oldest and most romantic of all the industries of man, with the exception of his earliest fight for food, should be the last to die. There is something of pathos in it, especially when it is pointed out to one as it was pointed out to me by Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal, head of the great Hudson's Bay Company, who said, "The last chapter in the romance of fur is being written. It has been a glorious story—a GLORIOUS story."

For three thousand years the pelts of wild beasts have played their part in the lives of men. For the last ten centuries fur has played an important part in history. It has held out the lure of romance—of adventure and gold. It has caused wars, and has led to the discovery of new lands. Fur hunters have done more exploring than any other one class of men. 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 around the world in crazy craft, and gave us our first knowledge of the Pacific coast from Alaska to California. When, away back in 1670, a wandering and adventurous Frenchman by the name of Groselier fired Prince Rupert's imagination with glowing tales of a land filled with priceless furs, and a little company was formed with a capital of $50,000, he did not dream that his wild project meant the opening up of a country almost as large as the whole of Europe and the beginning of an adventure

which was to run through centuries. It was this little company of "gentleman adventurers" who formed what is to-day the Hudson's Bay Company, the greatest landed corporation on earth—something which will remain for all time in history as a cenotaph to the tremendous part which the furred things of forest and mountain and sea have played in the fortunes of men.

Last year the raw fur industry of the world amounted to forty million dollars. Next year it will be fifty million, and the year after that the figures will be larger still. Five years ago it was less than twenty millions. Yet in spite of these figures—in the face of the fact that the fur-treasure of the world is increasing in value each year, and will continue to increase for perhaps another decade, the furred things of the earth are fast becoming extinct.

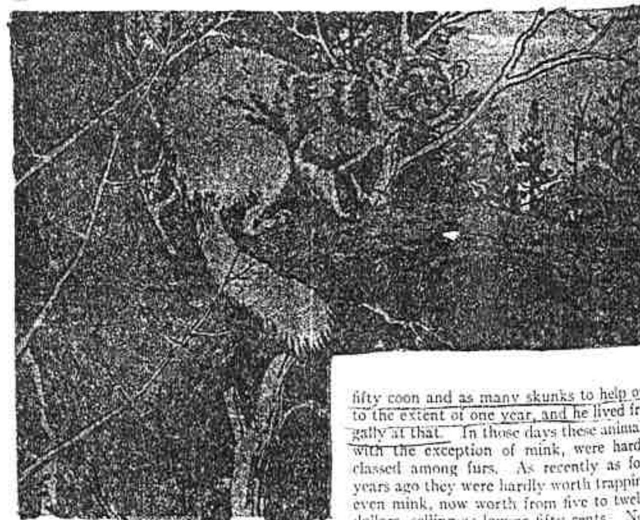
A year ago a big London fur buyer, whose business amounts to over a million dollars annually, said to me, "Within another five years only a very few people of moderate means will be buying furs. Only the wealthy will be able to afford those furs which are cheapest to-day, and even the muskrat, whose pelt sold for five and six cents a few years ago, will be prized as a luxury."

Ten months did much to verify this fur dealer's statements. Within that time raw pelts advanced from twenty to one hundred per cent. A Montreal dealer who purchased 80,000 muskrat skins at twenty cents per skin a year before sold them in London for seventy. A month later they had gone to eighty. Two months later they were bringing a dollar. In a single season the value of the world's annual production of fur leaped from $25,000,000 to over $40,000,000. I had just come down from my last trip to the Barren Lands, where I had spent eight weeks among the far northern fox hunters, when word was passed from post to post and from trapper to trapper throughout hundreds of thousands of square miles of Canadian wilderness that a fur famine had struck London and Paris, the fur centers of the world, and that from Winnipeg, Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal both the "Independents" and the agents of the big companies were making fabulous offers for pelts. On my way up I had seen fisher-cat sold for six dollars. When I came back they were selling as high as twenty. Red fox sold at five, and they had jumped to ten and twelve. Five-dollar mink had gone up to nine and ten dollars, thirty-cent ermine to a dollar. Lynx, which only a comparatively short time before sold as low as two and three dollars a skin, were worth from twenty to thirty, and the poor little muskrat, humbugging the world over as "river mink," had suddenly become one of the elect, and was wanted by the thousand at prices ranging from forty cents to a dollar. A few months blotted out "cheap furs" so suddenly that even the old fur companies were taken by surprise and found that they had lost fortunes by not holding their supplies for a few months longer. The fur famine had arrived.

It will be interesting to note the conditions that this famine will bring about during the next two or three years. Millions of women are as yet unaware of what the great fur dealer I have quoted above describes as "the mine that is about to explode under their feet." It cannot be said, however, that they have not had some warning. The woman who bought a mink muff for twenty dollars five years ago pays sixty for the same grade of article to-day; she will pay from seventy to eighty for it this coming season—a hundred or more two years from now.

These statements are not made at random, but only after the closest personal investigation of the fur situation as it exists to-day, and after a long acquaintance with the great fur companies, buyers, and trappers. But a few facts are necessary to show at what a ruthless pace the slaughter of fur animals has gone on during the past decade. It was not long ago that 150,000 skins of the sea otter were taken from the Aleutian Islands each year. To-day there are LESS THAN 400 skins taken annually. Ten years ago sea otter was a popular fur; to-day it is worn only by the royal blood of Europe. Even American millionaires find it almost impossible to get a share of these four hundred pelts, caught now at a sacrifice of twenty human lives a year in the teeth of wild Alaskan gales. Five years from now the sea otter, which once haunted the cold northern seas in hundreds of thousands, will be as rare as the black fox, which is itself nearing extinction. With the sea otter has gone the seal. Twenty years ago it was estimated that seal herds of the Prybiloffs numbered over five millions. To-day, in spite of international treaties for their protection, there are not more than 150,000 seals on the islands! About 10,000 skins were taken last year, and so relentless was the slaughter on account of the princely sums offered for the fur that 10,000 baby seals died during the season, chiefly of starvation because of the death of their mothers.

The glossy little wood marten is dying out. Four years ago I met two Canadian trappers who were coming down from the upper New Ontario game regions with 300 marten, worth then from four to five dollars a skin. To-day they are worth twenty-five dollars, and half a dozen are a big "catch" for any one man in a single season. Five years ago 1,760,000 foxes were killed to supply the world's market. Three years ago the number had fallen to 1,200,000. Last year less than a million were caught. From two dollars a skin the red fox jumped



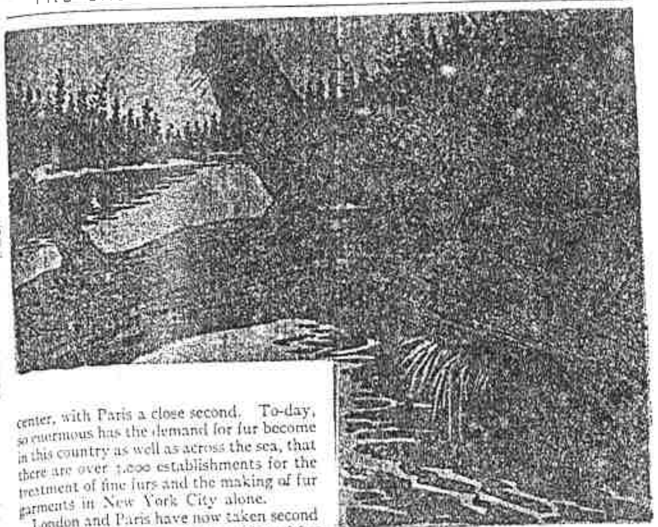
to twelve; the "cross" fox from twenty-five to as high as a hundred, silver and black fox to prices that made their skins TEN TIMES THE VALUE OF THEIR WEIGHT IN GOLD!

The silver and black are now so rare that they are "bid" for only by dukes and duchesses, the rulers and the heirs of kingdoms and empires. Seldom does one sell in the London or Paris markets for less than from $700 to $1,000. A year ago one pelt sold for $4,000. In this same way are going the black sable and the little white ermine whose pelt has been worn in the robes of royalty for more than seven centuries. It was not long ago that 100,000 skins of the black sable found their way into the market each year. Last year this number had dwindled to FIFTEEN THOUSAND!

The "signs of the change" are now at hand in another way, and as a consequence never in history will the women of the world be "up against" a greater assortment of substitutes in the fur line than during the coming seasons. On a Michigan stream the writer trapped for two seasons to secure funds to assist in paying his way through college. It took 1,200 muskrats, 400 mink, fifty coon and as many skunks to help out to the extent of one year, and he lived frugally at that. In those days these animals, with the exception of mink, were hardly classed among furs. As recently as four years ago they were hardly worth trapping, even mink, now worth from five to twelve dollars, selling as low as fifty cents. Now muskrats, squirrels and rabbits are being caught literally in millions to take the place of the better class of furs.

In all of the long list of shoddy "imitations" that face the buyer the rabbit is the greatest sinner of all, but the muskrat is good; and even though he sells for mink, or, dyed to a perfect imitation of marten, brings a fancy price, he is gold at the bottom, and wears well. Skunk has long had his own way in the world, and has traversed it almost unmolested, but last year NINE HUNDRED THOUSAND of his kind were caught in the central and northwestern states. In the growing scarcity of other furs that of the skunk, which can be used for a dozen or more high-priced "substitutes," has come into such demand that skunk-farming will very soon become an industry instead of an experiment.

The world's prosperity and its rapid increase in population are, of course, the chief causes of the extinction of fur. As recently as ten years ago the people of the United States were not counted among the great buyers of fur. Now the majority of women among ninety million people are purchasers of fur of one kind or another. Five years ago London was the world's greatest fur



center, with Paris a close second. To-day, so enormous has the demand for fur become in this country as well as across the sea, that there are over 1,000 establishments for the treatment of fine furs and the making of fur garments in New York City alone.

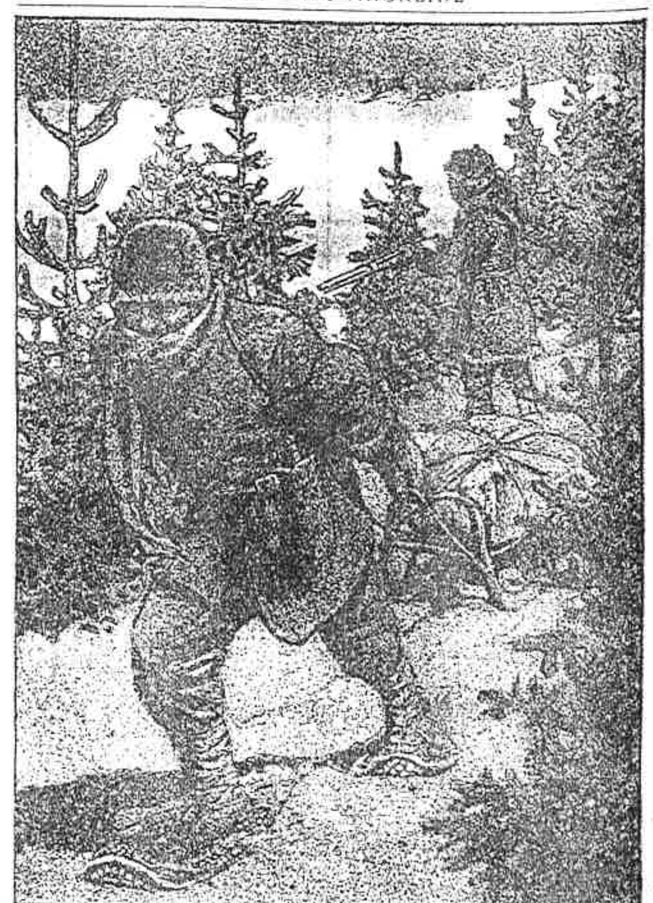
London and Paris have now taken second and third places in the actual making of fur garments, though London handles more raw fur than the other two combined. Last year the value of New York's "finished" output was nearly $70,000,000, and fully sixty per cent. of this was represented by the furs which a few years ago were considered almost worthless.

The marshes of New Jersey and Delaware furnished four million muskrats. The trappers of Maine contributed 300 bears, 600 otters, 40,000 foxes, 100,000 skunks, and over a million muskrats. Hundreds of thousands of farmer boys throughout the United States began trapping the streams and lakes about their homes, and the increased prices brought THIRTY MILLION muskrats into the market. And still the price went up—from thirty cents to forty, from forty to fifty, and from fifty to eighty! And in spite of this—in spite of the fact that trappers the world over, from the vast frozen regions of the Russian fox and ermine country to the dense swamps of Louisiana and Mississippi, were striving to fill demands as never before, fur-makers all over the country were compelled to go out of business, or add other industry, because of *lack of material.*

"Three years will clean out the cheaper class of fur," said a Montreal buyer to me, "and then the REAL famine will be at hand."

The years of 1911–12 will practically see the extinction of the beaver, and in the whole story of fur there is not a more pathetic chapter than the one which describes the passing of this human-like of all the earth's furred creatures. The "close" season, which for years has protected beaver in the Canadian wildernesses, ends with 1910. During these years of safety he has become quite numerous again in the northern wilds. His home once more enlivens the quiet streams; his wonderful works of engineering meet one in every day's travel of the solitudes. Even before the close season ends the last great slaughter will begin. And in this slaughter the last of the beaver will have no chance, as in the chivalrous days of yore, when hardy adventurers and Indian fighters caught him in crude traps, and stalked him with guns, and a half of the time found themselves outwitted and beaten in the game. To-day the beaver is BLOWN UP!

A stick of dynamite is placed in the roof of his house, and he is destroyed without warning, without a chance to fight



THIS PASSING OF THE OLD ROMANCE OF FUR IS MARKED NOT ONLY BY THE PATHOS OF THE FURRED THINGS THEMSELVES, BUT BY THAT OF THE WILD AND PICTURESQUE LIFE OF THOSE THOUSANDS OF WILDERNESS PEOPLE WHOSE CENTURIES OLD VOCATION MUST GO WITH THE THINGS WHICH GAVE IT BIRTH

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for his life—destroyed with his whole family, young as well as old. And if, by any chance, one member of the "household" of eight or ten should escape, he dies a few days later, for his home is gone, and without a home the beaver in winter is like a fish thrown upon ice instead of into water. Next year will see a great catch of beaver. But it will be the LAST catch, and a little later the beaver, like the buffalo, will be only a thing of romantic memory.

"The Last Great Trapping Ground"

THIS passing of the old romance of fur is marked not only by the pathos of the furred things themselves, but by that of the wild and picturesque life of those thousands of wilderness people whose centuries-old vocation must go with the things which gave it birth. There is some comfort for the lover of the wild and what it holds in the thought that at least in a great part of the far Canadian wilderness the picturesque fur-hunter will never, like the *courier du bois*, quite die out. In a country one-third as large as the whole of Europe railroads and civilization will never go. This vast wilderness region, long described as a "waste," stretches from the coast of Labrador, through Ungava, skirts Hudson's Bay and swings north and west to Mackenzie Land and the polar seas.

It is a land where for six months out of the year man's life is a bitter fight against deep snows and fierce blizzards—against hardships of all kinds, starvation, and a cold that reaches sixty degrees below zero and which is so "dry" that one may freeze almost to the point of death without being aware of especial discomfort or pain. It is a country of countless "ridge mountains," of dense, snow-stunted forests and great swamps, of unmapped waterways and great stretches of treeless barrens, impenetrable to all but the hardiest and bravest spirits except during the warm months. It is, as Lord Strathcona says, "the last great trapping ground." Out of this trapping ground there has come a constant stream of treasure for nearly two and a half centuries. Last year, according to Canadian export figures, this treasure amounted to $2,710,822, but no credit was given for the enormous home consumption of raw pelts. The actual catch was worth at least $5,500,000. The coming season will see $7,000,000 worth of furs caught in Canada, in spite of the fact that the actual number of skins will be at least a quarter less than a year ago, when the lives of BETWEEN THIRTY AND FORTY MILLION WILD THINGS WERE TAKEN that Milady of civilization might have her furs.

Some time ago I asked a beautiful young woman why she loved her furs, which I had often noticed her stroke and fondle as though they were alive, and she said, "They're so soft and purry, and so filled with the glisten and warmth and FEEL of life that I sometimes almost forget they're dead." It was something of this sentiment, expressed by the mistress of the adventurous Groselier two hundred and forty years ago, that induced a few chivalrous gentlemen with swords at their waists to set out upon their first hazardous quest of the little white ermine in the far nothern wastes, where the lover of a queen and five gentlemen besides died in the venture. It is this sentiment which has moved millions of women since that time, and it is the sentiment which makes a thing of fur a more intimate part of them to-day than the most beautiful jewel. And yet not one woman in a hundred knows the real story of the fur which she wears.

As recently as eight years ago, when the writer first began his journeys into the northland, one struck the great fur country as soon as he crossed Lake Superior. From there it ranged to the Arctic sea. Less than a decade has brought about a tremendous change, and now one travels a hundred miles farther north before he enters the "last great trapping ground." From this great trapping ground comes seventy per cent. of the better class of furs worn by the American woman and her Canadian sister.

In a vast desolation one-third as large as the whole of Europe there is no railroad, no white man's village, and its population is less than that of the Sahara Desert. In its center is Hudson's Bay, the great "ice box" of the North—nine times as large as the state of Ohio. Over this vast territory at distances of from one to three hundred miles apart are scattered the Hudson's Bay Company's posts and those of its French competitors, the Reveillon Brothers. In most instances a post consists of nothing more than a company "store," the factor's house, and two or three log cabins. Except during the months of the trapping season these are practically the only points of human life in a country that runs two thousand miles east and west and from two hundred to eight hundred north and south.

During the summer months the venturesome explorer from civilization may travel

in his canoe for hundreds of miles without seeing a human face, savage or white, except at these posts. He is, in fact, in an empty and voiceless world. Now and then a canoe may slip quietly down some stream toward civilization, bearing a dark-faced factor, a tawny half-breed, or an Indian. But for the most part he smells no smoke but that of his own camp-fire and hears the sound of no ax but his own in the hundreds of miles he traverses "between posts." For from three to five months the fur country is left to itself. It is "breeding." The wild things along stream and lake, in mountain and swamp, scent now in vain for the smell of man and travel again their old haunts without fear, multiplying unmolested, while in a thousand cities and towns fashion is calmly planning the things into which it will turn these pelted creatures a few months hence.

The Trapper

ABOUT the posts there is life. With the first warm days of spring the Indians, half-breeds, and the few white trappers begin to desert their wilderness shacks and assemble about them. Summer is the forest man's playtime, the carnival days of his wife and children, and the nearest post is their "metropolis"—as well as their home. For weeks the post is a place of wild and tumultuous life, filled with the laughter of Indian and half-breed women, the joyous tumult of little brown children, and the quieter pastime of the men. The Indian trapper is a natural spendthrift. He is "flush" with money at the beginning of the warm season, for he has just sold his winter's catch. He decks his wife in the gaudiest cloths and beads that he can buy, and for a time he has a wild and glorious "spree"—without the firewater, for the Great Company prohibits that. He buys every trinket that takes his eye, in spite of the factor's constant protestations that he should save money for his winter's supplies. He gambles on dog races and foot races, on the chance of his wife shooting straighter than another squaw, on the weight of his papoose, on his ability to "clean up" on some other buck in one stunt or another. And his wife is as enthusiastic as himself, and both laugh as good-humoredly when they lose as when they win. There is no fighting, no ill will, no cheating. As one factor said to me, "They're a lot of good-natured, care-free vagabonds—and the best sports that live."

By midsummer there is probably not an Indain or a half-breed at the post who has any money. His "bank account" in the Company's ledger is gone. His wife's gaudy raiment is faded and in tatters, his children run about half naked, and he is at last, from every apparent point of view, an absolute wilderness vagabond. But his light heart still beats within his ragged breast, and he is as happy in poverty as in wealth; and his wife is as happy; and his children are as happy, and their lives go on without a cloud. But from this point on they are a care and a problem to the Hudson's Bay Company, which for two and a half centuries has been the "great parent," as the Crees say, to these picturesque forest people. In the days of their poverty the factor furnishes them with necessary food, short allowances of tobacco, and other absolute necessities. These are the "gifts" of the Company, its expression of faith, good will, and love—and its children are not "charged up" with what they receive.

With the first chill winds that come down from the northern sea life changes at the post. A new spirit replaces that of the carnival of indolence and fun. The centuries-old passion for the trap-line and the trail enters again into the fur-hunter's blood. He is a new being, and there is a new activity about his tepee. His wife and children are busy from morning until night in making tough winter garments from the skins of caribou and moose, while the lord and master bends every energy to get together his season's supplies. It is here that the Company shows its faith in him by giving him "credit" to the extent of from fifty to three hundred dollars. If he returns with a good catch of fur, he pays this debt. If he is sick or has a poor season, and does not bring back enough skins to liquidate his debt, the Company accepts what he has to pay and strikes the WHOLE from its ledger. Its policy is never to hold the fear or worry of a debt over a trapper's head for a longer period than the one season. A NEW debt may be contracted then, but the old one is never again referred to. In nine cases out of ten the trappers will each bring in fur amounting in value to several times their loans, so that while the Company may lose in one instance it profits in nine others, and the chances are that the unfortunate trapper who has made a poor catch will redouble his energies the succeeding season.

With the first breath of winter the furgatherers begin to bury themselves in the vast desolation about them, traveling one and sometimes two hundred miles away from the post to their old trapping grounds. Now the thrilling work of the year begins. Smoke rises once again from the mud and stone chimneys of the wilderness shacks. The sound of the ax, the crack of the rifle, and the barking of dogs break the stillness of the forests. Before the first snow has fallen the trapper has blazed his trap-line afresh and has repaired the one or two hundred "trap houses" along it. A "line" is usually from thirty to fifty miles in length. It begins a little way from the cabin door, follows streams and lakes, goes between mountains, through dense swamps and black forests—and is so "laid out" that it brings the trapper back to his home. At a distance of about every quarter of a mile the trapper builds a "house," or shelter, of bark, boughs and bits of rotten wood, so constructed that it resembles a natural shelter, and in this he places his bait and trap.

The Trapping

FROM the moment he leaves his door to go over his line, three days' supply of food and a thick blanket in his pack-sack, a knife, a belt-ax and a rifle as weapons, every hour is filled with excitement for the hunter of fur. On his snowshoes he speeds swiftly from trap to trap, every mile of snowy forests and swamps revealing the mysteries of the wild things to him as plainly as a picture-book.

In one trap he finds a great white owl, and cuts off the beautiful wings for the wife and children back in the cabin. In the next there is a huge snow-shoe rabbit, frozen still as it had died. And then, from through the thick and gloomy balsam ahead, he hears the faint clinking of a chain. His blood leaps now, for this royal sport of the wilderness never grows old to the fur-hunter. The chain clinks louder, and he draws in quick, excited breaths as he lifts the hammer of his rifle and stares ahead. He comes suddenly upon the next house, and there is a snarling, leaping thing in the air before him, a great silver-gray furred thing, lithe and beautiful as it crouches at bay—a lynx. And a magnificent specimen, its six-inch fur, as fine as a woman's hair, crumpled and lying richly upon the blood-stained snow as it waits for the man to come within springing distance. But the hunter knows better. He aims carefully for a spot where he can sew up the bullet-hole, and fires. Only a short time from now some gently nurtured beauty of civilization will press the warmth and regal loveliness of that thing to her face, and—is it possible that a vision of this wilderness tragedy will come to her then? No more than the dark-faced hunter sees a vision of that woman's loveliness as he skins his catch and hurries on. To each is given but a part of the picture.

The forest man knows only that he has caught a "Number One, Extra" lynx, and that the Company will pay him fifteen dollars for it. His mental visions go no farther than that. He makes no effort to follow it in the great ship that will carry it to Paris or London, where it will be sold at great profit; nor to the furrier's shop, nor to the dainty girl or the society matron in New York who will pay $150 for that same fifteen-dollar lynx—in an "imported" muff. He goes on, keyed to higher excitement, until the end of the day comes, and in the first gray gloom of early night he stops at one of the three or four small log shelters which he has built for himself along the trap-line, gets his supper, lights his pipe, and reviews the happenings of the day until slumber closes his eyes.

It will take him three days to cover a forty-mile trap-line, and when he returns to his cabin at the close of the third he is welcomed by the glad cries of his children and the laughter and joy of his wife, who has a tender roast porcupine or a venison stew waiting for him. For two days after that he rests, smokes his pipe, and tells of his adventures, while his wife scrapes the fat from his pelts and stretches them on sticks. Then, once more, he shoulders his pack, and goes again upon his round of excitement, adventure and profit.

This life goes on until within a week of New Year's, when once more all wilderness trails lead to the posts. New Year's is the Christmas, Fourth-of-July, Thanksgiving and Decoration Day of the Northland combined. From the middle of December until the last day of that month sledges with the mid-winter catches of fur are driven into the posts each day, and for a week or ten days after the first great opening feast of caribou roasted whole there is a carnival of wild celebration at each of the 180 posts scattered over the continent from Labrador to the Rocky Mountains. When it is over the fur-hunters once more seek their forest cabins and the quest for Milady's silken treasures goes on.