

## The Pursuit of the Elusive Forty

James Oliver Curwood

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James Oliver Curwood, like Rex Beach, was born in Michigan (1878) and, like him, became an immensely popular writer of fiction. After seven years of newspaper work he resigned to devote himself to literary pursuits and wrote twenty-six books of adventure in the North Woods between 1908 and his death from blood poisoning in 1927. He became a foremost authority on the northland and his novels of "God's Country," as he called it, include *The Courage of Captain Plum*, *Kazan*, *The Grizzly King*, *Nomads of the North*, *The Valley of Silent Men*, and *The Alaskan*. He spent several months each year in the wilds, and was an active worker for national wildlife and forest conservation.

We called the mountain paradise in which we found ourselves "Ptarmigan Plain," and made arrangements to camp there at once. This was in early October. During the preceding six or seven years I had hunted almost everything that could be called game in the Canadian wilderness. I had shot moose and caribou in the bush country; seals and walrus along Hudson's Bay; musk-ox on the barrens, and polar bear up on the Roes Welcome, where the Arctic ice crashes down into the big bay in the spring break-ups. But never had I found a game paradise like this that we entered in October. My companions were Jack Otto, of Fitzhugh, Alberta—the best known guide, packer, and grizzly bear hunter in the Canadian Rockies—and Dr. I. F. Burgin, of Delta, Colo. From Fitzhugh we hit out on a trail of our own north and west, beyond the Frazer. So far as was known, not even an Indian had been in that country for thirty years, and two days in from the end of the line of rail of the Grand Trunk Pacific we began to see big game, chiefly mountain goat and sheep. Five days in we struck a country of green and rolling valleys, where every slope was torn up by grizzlies in their burrowings for the little brown gophers. In this country we shot five grizzlies during the following seven days. On the evening of the day we entered Ptarmigan Plain we first saw the "Elusive Forty."

It was in the middle of the afternoon that we took off our saddles and relieved our pack-horses, and pitched camp. We were at the head of the big valley with towering, snow-covered mountains sweeping in a semi-circle to the left of us. Half a mile to our right was the other range. We had not stopped for dinner, so our "supper" was ready at 4 o'clock, just as the last of the sun was flooding the craggy side of the big mountain on our right. Otto was facing the sun-flooded mountain and was just about to bite into a chunk of hot bannock when he paused, and stared. Burgin and I turned to follow his gaze. Then we all faced the mountain.

I have seen a herd of 10,000 caribou sweeping across the barrens, but that herd was far less impressive than what we now saw on the mountainside, probably half a mile away, though the distance seemed less than half that. In one place the backbone of the mountain was free of snow, and glistened a reddish black in the glow of the sun. And slowly over that sombre ridge that split the sky far above the timber-line there filed a herd of mountain goats. They came Indian fashion, one after the other, their snow-white bodies showing like moving snow-

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balls against the darkness of the mountain. One after another they continued to come, while we sat as motionless as rocks, and when the file ended Dr. Burgin had counted forty-one, and Otto and I forty. In a thin white line—never for a moment breaking the file—they moved along the bald cap of the summit, descended for a hundred yards down a precipitous slope of shale, and then followed a ledge along which, a few days later, we found it too venturesome for a man to travel. Before they disappeared we crept to our hunting glasses, and had a look at them at closer range. There were half a dozen magnificent heads in the bunch.

It was too late to think of stalking that night, so we rolled up in our sleeping bags, prepared to be on the hunt soon after dawn. We were a little late in our reckoning, and the sun was tinting the snow-covered peaks to the west when we finished breakfast and began the ascent of the mountain. We were sure that the goat feeding-ground was just over the range, and so we divided our force. I had hunted with various kinds of big game rifles, and had brought with me into the mountains two light .22 caliber Hi-Power Savage rifles. When climbing after goat and sheep every ounce additional weight soon begins to tell on one, and these guns, with the tremendous muzzle velocity of 2,800 and a fall of only six inches at 300 yards, I had found particularly effective. Dr. Burgin took one of these, and I the other. Otto carried a 303. We gave Burgin half an hour start, so that he would have time to swing well to the left. Otto set out fifteen minutes ahead of me, so that all of us began the ascent of the mountain at about the same time.

By my watch, it took me just one hour and fifteen minutes to reach the black cap over which the herd of goats had appeared the previous evening, and I was almost exhausted. But the sight that met my eyes when I crept above the last rocks of the ridge was ample reward for the strenuous work. Three or four hundred yards below, the mountain slope bulged out into a narrow plateau, free of rock, and with a velvety covering of grass. Within long rifle-range of me the herd was feeding. Fortunately, having the wind in my favor, I saw that it was possible, by making a detour, to bring myself almost on a level with the herd, at a shooting distance of 250 yards. It took me thirty minutes to accomplish my object, and then I realized that my first fire would turn the entire herd in Dr. Burgin's direction. So I picked out the best heads in the bunch through my hunting glass, and waited for Otto to have his chance, and begin firing. Meanwhile Otto was crouching behind a rock 400 yards from the herd, waiting for me to begin firing, as he knew that I must be very close to the game. I don't believe that for a moment the wind shifted, and yet, all at once, the herd took alarm, and the particular head that I had selected for my target came thirty yards nearer, and stood gazing straight in my direction. He was a little better than 200 yards away, and at my first shot he fell like a stone. It was about the first time I had ever seen a goat go down without a kick, for both goat and sheep will carry a lot of lead—a tough bull sheep standing next to a grizzly. I got another head before the herd was out of range. This was not because of good marksmanship, though running goats at 250 and 300 yards are not easy marks. I aimed at one of the big fellows, but the bullet went a few inches high, and struck a smaller fellow a few yards on the other side. Meanwhile Otto's .303 was cracking up the mountain, but nothing resulted, because of the long range. Otto and I both ran down into the little plain, and waited for Burgin to begin shooting. Very soon we heard the sharp crack of his .22 Hi-Power, and we began racing in his direction. Fifteen minutes later the doctor met us, panting and gesticulating.

"Where are they?" he gasped, the moment he met us.

He showed his astonishment, as he stared beyond us.

"The whole bunch came back toward you!" he exclaimed, in a second breath.

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"I saw them not five minutes ago when they came over that bulge. Now—where in Gawd's name—"

We were all staring now. The goats had not taken to the mountainside, or they would have been plainly visible. We ran to the edge of the plain and looked down into the deeper valley beyond. There was nothing in sight. The entire herd had disappeared as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed it. We climbed 100 yards down from the plain, and then returned more mystified than ever. Suddenly Otto gave an astonished cry, and pointed.

Over the bare summit which I had descended only a short time before, the last of the herd was disappearing.

"Now, what the devil do you think of that?" asked the M.D.

Otto grinned.

"They fooled you, Doc," he said. "Let's have a look at this bulge over here."

We found that the thirty-foot rise over which the doctor had seen the herd disappear was split in the middle by a narrow dip of five or six feet. The shrewd instinct of the goat leaders had told them that they were between two deadly fires, and instead of going down into the valley, which would have exposed them to further fire, they had swung up the dip and were among the big masses of rock not 100 yards away when the doctor rushed past them to meet us.

That's why I remember them as the "Elusive Forty."