

Tragedy of Wild Animal Life

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

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It was on the edge of a big "burn" that we came upon the first chapter of that morning's story, written in the freshly fallen snow. We were in the heart of the Canadian wilderness, and our trap-line (along which we had set sixty traps, several deadfalls, and a dozen poison baits) ran for fifteen miles through thick swamps where we baited for lynx, the fisher-cat, mink and ermine, and over strips of "barren" and the frozen surfaces of lakes, where we dropped our strychnine capsules rolled in deer-fat in the hope of capturing a wolf or fox. We had scarcely left our cabin when my comrade of that winter in the forests, who wore short skirts, snowshoes, and her hair in a long braid, called my attention to the tracks a little distance from the line of our trail. A big white hare had started across the "burn" shortly after the snow had ceased falling the previous night, and a fox had taken up his trail.

We always gave up our plans for an hour or a day to pursue these "stories written in the snow," so we followed. It was a short story, reminding me in its completeness and tragedy of one of Guy de Maupassant's masterpieces. The hare, probably with the approach of dawn, was making his way across the quarter-mile open to the opposite timber; and the fox was after his breakfast. There was no haste on the part of the fox. His footprints were close together and the end of his brush had trailed a smooth groove in the snow behind him. Cunningly he was giving his prey plenty of time in which to snuggle in some warm cover for the day.

But in the edge of the farther swamp another character was waiting to take a part in the nature-drama. A big white owl saw the hare—waited—floated silently up into the gray gloom of the dawn, and then descended like a shot upon its unsuspecting victim. It was an easy victory. And the feast was half over when the fox saw movement in the snow ahead and slipped up as quietly as the owl had dropped from out of the sky.

The whole story was there when we came up. Words could not have told it as it was written in the bloody snow. The hare had died easiest; but the owl had fought.

beaver is the sixth party, for he is the otter's victim. But he never fights—unless to build strong fortresses for his own protection can be called fighting. The white man says that he builds dams so solid that only dynamite can destroy them because he knows no better. But the old Indian hunter will tell you that the beaver is wiser than the fox, and that his dams are built like castle walls to hold back the otter.

I traveled a hundred miles through the Thunder Bay wilderness to see the results of an otter and beaver feud. The beaver, to the number of fifteen or twenty, had dammed up a stream and had thus formed a lake fully two

hundred yards in width, in the edge of which were built three houses, the largest about eighteen feet in diameter. I slept in this house, entering through a hole chopped in the top. It was as dry as a bone, the floor and walls of

trappers of the North many thousands of dollars a year, for when one or the other finds his enemy in a trap it is pretty safe to say there will be no fur left for the trapper. A steel trap usually kills the ermine it catches, but this does not

protected until the water falls; and then, if it is warm or moderate weather, the panic-stricken beavers hunt over the breach and repair it. In this instance of the Thunder Bay colony the otters' work was done in January, with the temperature forty degrees below zero. The water fell so rapidly that the beaver houses were soon high and dry, and all the water that remained was the trickling current of the little stream that had been dammed. The intense cold froze the wet bed of the lake; the great sheet of ice taved in; it was impossible for the doomed beavers to gather the soft clay and the necessary twigs and pebbles for their repair work; the broken ice and a fresh snow blocked the passages to their food; the interiors of their houses were no longer kept warm by the encompassing water. A few terrible days and nights and cold and starvation had done its work. Otter work in a "round" of waterways, passing the same point every ten days or two weeks. When this pair of feudists returned a fortnight later, there were ruin and desolation where had been life and happiness in the beaver world. There was not a beaver left alive. But the murderers paid the penalty, for the trapper who first discovered their work of destruction built a "shoot" for them in a narrow part of the little stream, and caught them both.

The warfare of the mink and the ermine is more open. They are brigands both, wilderness pirates who prey upon all other flesh and blood that they have the strength and skill to kill; and they are the two bravest animals in the forests. The mink is three times as large and three times as powerful as his little ferret-like adversary, but the ermine has the advantage of quickness. In single combat the ermine is almost without exception the victim, for he is such a brave and bloodthirsty little rascal that discretion is never the better part of valor with him. He will always fight—and fight until the end. This feud costs the



THE TRAGIC END WHICH AWAITS THE FUR-BEARING ANIMAL

A trader's "factory" in the Canadian Northwest, with \$10,000 worth of pelts being classified for shipment to the markets of civilization.

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head lay a dozen feet from its crushed and torn car-cass, from which half of the breast had been eaten. All of the hare was gone but its head and feet and fur. After the fight and the feast the fox had continued on into the swamp. The day after this we found a poison bait missing from a snow pyramid we had built in the middle of a small lake. We followed the tracks and found a dead fox half a mile away. The lady insists this was the real ending of that story in the snow.

I doubt if there is a more fascinating sport than studying the life of the wilderness on freshly fallen snows. Only then can one come into intimate touch with the wild things. And this cannot be done to its greatest advantage on the early snows that closely follow the hunting season. It must be in the dead of winter, when all animal life is at war with itself—when the desperate fight for food changes even the natures of the wild things, and extreme hunger drives both birds and animals of prey to deeds as thrilling as any that could be described in the lives of men.

Curiously enough, it is during these months—chiefly December, January and February—that the feuds of the wilderness break out in all their fierceness. Hunger and the ceaseless hunting of life for life seem to stir up the vengeance and animosities of animal life. Each winter it is so, as every trapper in the big northern wilderness will tell you. Feuds between men may smoulder down and die, but between the furred and clawed feudists of the North there is never a truce during these months of cold and hunger. And I have yet to find the exception where one kind of animal carries on a feud with more than one other species. These wilderness feuds, like those of the Tennessee mountains, are mostly "family affairs." For instance, the deadly warfare between the mink and the ermine is so old that it plays a part in Cree and Chippewayan legends, and these animals are of the same family. The fisher-cat hates the lynx, and the lynx the fisher-cat; and the otter is a deadlier enemy to the beaver than man. Other animals may fight, but they do not stalk and deliberately murder. The wolf is the ancient enemy of the bear, and a dozen times I have seen where a pack has followed bruin for miles. But in spite of printed stories to the contrary, I have never been able to discover where a fight has actually taken place between them, for the bear has a habit of turning in a way that sends his tormentors scattering before they ever get within reach of his claws. Bucks will fight, and the big bull moose have their mighty duels, but it's chivalry and the "gentler sex" that moves them, and not hereditary hatreds. The real feudists are the ermine, mink, lynx, fisher-cat and the otter. The

interior being of that curious waterproof cement manufactured by the beavers. Directly up through the center of the floor was built a round tube, like a chimney, two feet in diameter and with its top rising four feet above the floor. Before the beaver were destroyed by their enemies, the water rose just high enough about their houses to fill this "door" to within a foot of the top. The beaver, to enter his house, dove under his home, came up through the tube, shook himself at the top, and clambered down to his dry floor and cozy nests. Here the temperature never reaches the freezing point, even in the coldest weather, and Mr. and Mrs. Beaver and the young people enjoy their winter immensely, for these are the months of holiday and feasting. All during the summer the workers of the colony have been cutting poplar and birch and other trees with succulent barks and have "anchored" their supplies at the bottom of the lake. Winter is their time of rest and re-joicing, unless enemies happen along. One of these enemies is the man with his dynamite sticks; the other is the otter.

In this instance it was the otter who came—a pair of them. They struck the lake-bed runways of their ancient enemies—furrows or roads running in and out among the sunken and anchored treasures of food, and probably investigated up to the very "doorways" of the beaver castles. Instinct, and never experience, tells the otter not to pursue his enemy into his home, for in fair battle on a solid footing a single beaver would tear half a dozen otter into shreds—his razor-like teeth and great strength making him more than the equal of the average dog. In the water he is comparatively slow, while the otter is as swift as a fish; swifter, in fact, as he must catch them in order to exist. So in his feud with the beaver the otter uses strategy and not brawn—if taking a mean advantage of an enemy may be called by that term. And yet he is less unfair than the trapper with his dynamite, for he gives the beaver at least a ghost of a show. Foot by foot he searches along the base of the beaver dam until he discovers what he believes to be a weak spot. Then he does what a lumberjack with his ax and pike could not do—works a hole straight through the lower part of the dam. Usually his work is unde-

keep the marauding mink from tearing the dead carcass literally to pieces. That same trap seldom kills a mink; and when an ermine comes along and discovers his foe a prisoner and handicapped by the trap, there is always a battle royal—which three times out of four ends with the ermine victor.

Not long after we had trailed the fox and the hare across the "burn," we were passing over the same trap-line one day when from ahead of us we heard the shrill and piercing scream of a mink. I have heard a mink's scream from a distance of a quarter of a mile. Trappers have told me they have heard it a mile away. This particular mink who emitted the cry was a prisoner in the next trap-house two or three hundred yards ahead of us. We came upon him quietly, and were rewarded for our caution by a spectacle which is common enough in the wilderness but which is seldom witnessed by human eyes. An ermine was battling a big mink who was caught in the trap by one of his fore-legs.

We crept up behind a log and were spectators of the fight from a distance of not more than twenty feet. Then it was that we saw there were two ermine. Both were circling around their feudal enemy in movements so quick that we could scarcely follow them. Then one darted in squarely and bravely from the front, and at almost the same instant, as swift as a lightning flash, the second ermine sprang in from the side and fastened his needle-like fangs in the mink's neck. Again the mink emitted that piercing scream, and for perhaps fifteen seconds it was impossible to say who was getting the worst of it. Both ermine then darted out of the mink's reach. Twice—three times—they darted in to the battle, but at the end of the third onslaught only one of the ermine leaped back. The other had a deadly hold on the mink's throat, and kept it. Seeing the advantage the second ermine returned like a flash and got a throat hold. In two minutes more the battle was at an end.

It would have been easy to have killed both of the ermine, even with sticks, for they were so excited and infuriated that they paid but small attention to us when we revealed ourselves in time to save the mink's fur from mutilation. They darted about almost under our feet, squeaking like excited and fighting mice, and even when I picked up the mink one of them clung tenaciously to a foot of his dead enemy. They had won their right to live, and we drove them away before we reset the trap. But our effort to save them both was futile, for when we came over the line two days later one of them was in the trap—dead.



THE GRAY FOX, FULL OF CUNNING
Even in captivity, the fox often outwits his captors; the utmost diligence is necessary to prevent their escape from the fox-farms.



SOMEBODY'S BEAR-SKIN RUG
Every wild animal has one or more mortal foes; the bear need fear none but man, the cleverest of them all.