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ROMANCE OF THE FUR TRADE: THE COMPANIES.

GOLD and furs have colonised the Americas. Wherever they were to be found or sought, Europeans have subjugated or exterminated the native races. In the quest of gold the Spanish conquistadores led the way in the torrid south, and De Soto in his hunt after the fabled El Dorado found a grave in the waters of the Mississippi which he had discovered. He was followed by Raleigh and the English adventurers who went to Guiana on the same bootless errand. The gains of the later gold-seekers were great, and they enriched the world at the cost of cruelties and sufferings unspeakable. Since Pizarro pillaged the Incas and Cortez freighted the galleons with the treasures of the Montezumas, down to the shooting at sight in the mining-camps and gambling saloons of the Far West, the gold-hunters have always held lives cheap, indifferent to their own and careless of those of others. But perhaps the great fur trade has been at least as lucrative, and there is a broader variety of wild romance in it. Certainly it has done more for civilisation and exploration, for it was the making of the great Canadian Dominion, as it opened up America west of the Mississippi to settlement by the States of the south and the seaboard. From the first, the fur-hunters have pursued a gainful but desperately speculative traffic, in the face of unparalleled hardships and perils. As the capitalists who financed the trade staked their hopes of fortune on contingencies they could neither foresee nor control, so each separate career of the retainers in their service was one

of suffering, cheered and enlivened only by adventure. Familiarity with death became second nature. For the fur-bearing animals were to be found only in regions of lonely desolation, stretching northward towards the Arctic circle, where the musk-ox barely got a living in the winter by scraping for lichens beneath the snow; or, farther to the south, in a wilderness of mountains and waters, swarming with hostile savages, who fiercely resented their intrusion, where they scaled stupendous ranges, threaded gloomy gorges almost impracticable, or in frail canoes followed the course of rivers raging over an alternation of shoals and cataracts. We say nothing now of the rigours of the northern climate, though sometimes, so far south as the Saskatchewan, the temperature falls to -62° , or 94° of frost—and the blast of a blizzard is sudden death.

It was the French in Canada who originated the fur trade. We must own that France has had ill luck in colonisation: she did much in days when her population was more redundant, and she has some reason to be jealous of British successes. We shouldered her out of India, when, with the genius of a Dupleix, the result of the struggle seemed a toss-up; and after Montcalm had fallen gloriously on the Heights of Abraham, we entered into the fruits of her spirited enterprise in the Canadas. Colbert and other French Ministers at home, with such statesmen as Talon and the Marquis de Frontenac, when sent abroad to administer the great transatlantic colony, saw that the Indian traffic must be the foundation of its