

The Ballad of the Black Fox Skin

By Robert Service

I

There was Claw-fingered Kitty and Windy Ike living the life of shame,
When unto them in the Long, Long Night came the man-who-had-no-name;
Bearing his prize of a black fox pelt, out of the Wild he came.

His cheeks were blanched as the flume-head foam when the brown spring freshets flow;
Deep in their dark, sin-calcined pits were his sombre eyes aglow;
They knew him far for the fitful man who spat forth blood on the snow.

‘Did ever you see such a skin?’ quoth he; ‘there’s nought in the world so fine—
Such fullness of fur as black as the night, such lustre, such size, such shine;
It’s life to a one-lunged man like me; it’s London, it’s women, it’s wine.

‘The Moose-hides called it the devil-fox, and swore that no man could kill;
That he who hunted it, soon or late, must surely suffer some ill;
But I laughed at them and their old squaw-tales. Ha! Ha! I’m laughing still.

‘For look ye, the skin—it’s as smooth as sin, and black as the core of the Pit.
By gun or by trap, whatever the hap, I swore I would capture it;
By star and by star afield and afar, I hunted and would not quit.

‘For the devil-fox, it was swift and sly, and it seemed to fleer at me;
I would wake in fright by the camp-fire light, hearing its evil glee;
Into my dream its eyes would gleam, and its shadow would I see.

‘It sniffed and ran from the ptarmigan I had poisoned to excess;
Unharméd it sped from my wrathful lead (’twas as if I shot by guess);
Yet it came by night in the stark moonlight to mock at my weariness.

‘I tracked it up where the mountains hunch like the vertebrae of the world;
I tracked it down to the death-still pits where the avalanche is hurled;
From the glooms to the sacerdotal snows, where the carded clouds are curled.

‘From the vastitudes where the world protrudes through clouds like seas up-shoaled,
I held its track till it led me back to the land I had left of old—
The land I had looted many moons. I was weary and sick and cold.

‘I was sick, soul-sick, of the futile chase, and there and then I swore
The foul fiend fox might scathless go, for I would hunt no more;
Then I rubbed mine eyes in a vast surprise—it stood by my cabin door.

‘A rifle raised in the wraith-like gloom, and a vengeful shot that sped;
A howl that would thrill a cream-faced corpse— and the demon fox lay dead. . . .
Yet there was never a sign of wound, and never a drop he bled.

‘So that was the end of the great black fox, and here is the prize I’ve won;
And now for a drink to cheer me up—I’ve mused since the early sun;
We’ll drink a toast to the sorry ghost of the fox whose race is run.’

II

Now Claw-fingered Kitty and Windy Ike, bad as the worst were they;
In their road-house down by the river-trail they waited and watched for prey;
With wine and song they joyed night long, and they slept like swine by day.

For things were done in the Midnight Sun that no tongue will ever tell;
And men there be who walk earth-free, but whose names are writ in hell—
Are writ in flames with the guilty names of Fournier and Labelle.

Put not your trust in a poke of dust would ye sleep the sleep of sin;
For there be those who would rob your clothes ere yet the dawn comes in;
And a prize likewise in a woman’s eyes is a peerless black fox skin.

Put your faith in the mountain cat if you lie within his lair;
Trust the fangs of the mother-wolf, and the claws of the lead-ripped bear;
But oh, of the wiles and the gold-tooth smiles of a dance-hall wench beware!

Wherefore it was beyond all laws that lusts of man restrain,
A man drank deep and sank to sleep never to wake again;
And the Yukon swallowed through a hole the cold corpse of the slain.

III

The black fox skin a shadow cast from the roof nigh to the floor;
And sleek it seemed and soft it gleamed, and the woman stroked it o’er;
And the man stood by with a brooding eye, and gnashed his teeth and swore.

When thieves and thugs fall out and fight there’s fell arrears to pay;
And soon or late sin meets its fate, and so it fell one day
That Claw-fingered Kitty and Windy Ike fanged up like dogs at bay.

‘The skin is mine, all mine,’ she cried; ‘I did the deed alone.’
‘It’s share and share with a guilt-yoked pair’, he hissed in a pregnant tone;
And so they snarled like malamutes over a mildewed bone.

And so they fought, by fear untaught, till haply it befell

One dawn of day she slipped away to Dawson town to sell
The fruit of sin, this black fox skin that had made their lives a hell.

She slipped away as still he lay, she clutched the wondrous fur;
Her pulses beat, her foot was fleet, her fear was as a spur;
She laughed with glee, she did not see him rise and follow her.

The bluffs uprear and grimly peer far over Dawson town;
They see its lights a blaze o' nights and harshly they look down;
They mock the plan and plot of man with grim, ironic frown.

The trail was steep; 'twas at the time when swiftly sinks the snow;
All honey-combed, the river ice was rotting down below;
The river chafed beneath its rind with many a mighty throe.

And up the swift and oozy drift a woman climbed in fear,
Clutching to her a black fox fur as if she held it dear;
And hard she pressed it to her breast—then Windy Ike drew near.

She made no moan—her heart was stone—she read his smiling face,
And like a dream flashed all her life's dark horror and disgrace;
A moment only—with a snarl he hurled her into space.

She rolled for nigh an hundred feet; she bounded like a ball;
From crag to crag she carromed down through snow and timber fall; . . .
A hole gaped in the river ice; the spray flashed—that was all.

A bird sang for the joy of spring, so piercing sweet and frail;
And blinding bright the land was dight in gay and glittering mail;
And with a wondrous black fox skin a man slid down the trail.

IV

A wedge-faced man there was who ran along the river bank,
Who stumbled through each drift and slough, and ever slipped and sank,
And ever cursed his Maker's name, and ever 'hooch' he drank.

He travelled like a hunted thing, hard harried, sore distress;
The old grandmother moon crept out from her cloud-quilted nest;
The aged mountains mocked at him in their primeval rest.

Grim shadows diapered the snow; the air was strangely mild;
The valley's girth was dumb with mirth, the laughter of the wild;
The still, sardonic laughter of an ogre o'er a child.

The river writhed beneath the ice; it groaned like one in pain,

And yawning chasms opened wide, and closed and yawned again;
And sheets of silver heaved on high until they split in twain.

From out the road-house by the trail they saw a man afar
Make for the narrow river-reach where the swift cross-currents are;
Where, frail and worn, the ice is torn and the angry waters jar.

But they did not see him crash and sink into the icy flow;
They did not see him clinging there, gripped by the undertow,
Clawing with bleeding finger-nails at the jagged ice and snow.

They found a note beside the hole where he had stumbled in:
'Here met his fate by evil luck a man who lived in sin,
And to the one who loves me least I leave this black fox skin.'

And strange it is; for, though they searched the river all around,
No trace or sign of black fox skin was ever after found;
Though one man said he saw the tread of *hoofs* deep in the ground.